

TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF LARGE GROUP DIALOGUE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

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JOHN KEITH WOOD

*The act of knowing
is an evolutionary development
of the phenomenon and
not just a subjective activity of the mind*

Henri Bortoft
on the thought of
J.W. von Goethe

Large groups have obvious survival advantages over smaller ones. Improved opportunities for nutrition and security are enough to suggest that large groups would seem to have been favored by human evolution. In this regard, the British psychologist Robin Dunbar (1996), who has made significant contributions to biological anthropology, has proposed that *human language* itself evolved due to the necessity of maintaining large groups. Doubtless, large groups have played an intimate role in the evolution of the species, and continue to do so.

This chapter deals with temporary large groups that convene participants for up to 12 hours per day for a week or two with the intention of exploring a topic of interest – which most often is themselves and their relationships. To understand such an event – and more generally, the phenomenon of large groups – one must consider, among other things: the membership of the group; participants' relationships with each other, and to the group itself; where, under what conditions, for what duration, and for what purpose the group has been constituted. Also, it would help to know if one is speaking about a 'successful' or 'unsuccessful' group activity and by what criteria this characterization has been established.¹

In considering this vast subject, it may be useful to begin by establishing a notion of largeness. In dealing with this aspect, guidelines for effectiveness also emerge.

How big is large?

The specific size of any group may not be as relevant as the relationship that members have with one another and the circumstances that surround their gathering. For example, one could imagine becoming overwhelmed by a relatively small number of people, in a crowded urban labyrinth; or perhaps feeling comfortable with an enormous number, especially were the new 'Internet' promises to be fully realized.²

To address this question from the point of view of the individual, the reported counsel of Aristotle is relevant: *If a person cries for help at the center, and is not heard on the periphery, the group is too large.*

Plato is said to have answered the question of the maximum number of participants in a large group, that would be constructive for the collective, in this way: *I would allow the state to increase so far as is consistent with unity; that, I think, is the proper limit.*

I consider the intersection of these (often considered contradictory, but apparently complementary) descriptions to be all that is necessary to define, broadly, an effective large group workshop and its size.

Thus, a large group that may be effective within a series of criteria already suggested in an earlier article (Wood, 1997) would be:

1. One in which each of its members may be 'heard on the periphery'. That is, able to express himself or herself and has the possibility of being felt understood by the entire group. It is a context in which a participant's best ideas are seriously considered. This implies that one also has a responsibility (and equally important, cultivates an increasing ability) to listen to others in a like manner.
2. One in which individuals, while fully in touch with their personal identities, are also capable of operating, at the same time, in a state of consciousness in which *the unity of the group may be perceived as the most significant referent.*

Thus, participants would fight for their personal idea, for their private point of view, and then surrender it willingly for a better one that may help the group move towards its goals. Individual group members would accept their own contradictory values as well as those of others *and* integrate them for constructive purposes (Wood, 1984). If such a 'split-brain' proposal seems preposterous, one may consult the research that suggests that a normal person may relatively easily learn to read with adequate speed and comprehension on one subject while *simultaneously* writing on *another* subject (Hirst, Neisser and Spelke, 1978).

The resultant unity in its complete sense is not merely imposed by the mind. As the studies of the German savant J.W. von Goethe have suggested, 'It is the wholeness of the phenomenon itself. The unity *is* the phenomenon' (Bortoft, 1996).

Numbers

The French sociologist Gustav LeBon (1895) has asserted that the crowd is not

dependent on numbers but on the 'disappearance of conscious personality'. Doubtless there is a diminishment of 'conscious personality' in a state of consciousness that allows one to perceive the group's unity. Likewise, there is doubtless a diminishment of 'conscious sociability' in that state of consciousness which we know as isolation, a person alone with his or her thoughts. Whatever the perspective, the ideal number of participants in an effective group would answer the question, 'In this situation, how many participants who are able to actualize the best qualities of both their individual and social selves can be accommodated?'

In more recent history, 'being heard' has been emphasized when considering the optimum number of participants in a group. The American psychologist Jack Gibb (a pioneer in the development of personal and interpersonal learning for normal people in large groups) has related that in 'T-groups' in the 1940's and 50's, 10 or 12 participants would meet together and very soon someone would suggest, 'Let's break into smaller groups.' It was explained, 'I am freer to discuss and express myself with just two or three others' (see Bradford, Gibb and Benne, 1964).

In the late 1960's, I moved to La Jolla, California, and participated in the La Jolla Program, annual sessions held for some 100 participants to learn to be encounter group facilitators. There were one or two brief large-group meetings of all participants during two weeks in which the organizers had divided the population into small encounter groups of 10 or 12. They believed 'real encounter' took place in the small groups. The plenary sessions were thought of as a mere novelty (Rogers, 1970).

In 1977, at a workshop organized by the Brazilian psychologist Eduardo Bandeira that American psychologists Carl Rogers, Maria and Jack Bowen, Maureen O'Hara and I convened with some 800 participants in Rio de Janeiro, several participants expressed the desire to break into smaller groups where they imagined they would feel more intimate. Thus, the one large group was divided into five smaller groups of some 160 or so persons each. My own feeling, gazing at the people in my 'small' group, was definitely more relaxed and more trusting. The group began an encounter whose characteristics resembled those of groups of 10 or 12 in La Jolla.

Summarizing, a 'large' group was considered to number 10 or 12 to some people at a certain time and place. This figure was thought of as 'small' to other people in another time and place who felt 100 or so would constitute a large group. Later, this amount seemed small to another population in another time and place for whom 800 or so would be considered large.

Perhaps a working definition for size would be the following: a large group is one that involves a sufficient number of participants that each spends considerably more time listening than speaking. However, this number is not so great that the individual's voice cannot be 'heard on the periphery', nor does its size prevent the possibility of participants perceiving the 'unity'.

From various experiences in North and South America and Europe, I would put (for sake of discussion) the number of participants that would generally constitute a

large group at around the size of a small-town community meeting or a local church congregation: between 50 and 300, an agreeable mean of, say, 150.³

The approach that oriented the large group workshops considered here

The large group workshops and their meetings that will be considered were organized from a perspective called, 'the person-centered approach'. Both for readers who have no idea what this means, as well as for those who assume they do know, I would like to briefly state its meaning for this chapter.

The fact that the phrase, 'the person-centered approach' came into common usage around 1974, when it would be applied to a hodgepodge of activities, has obscured both its historical and, more importantly, its practical significance.⁴

Currently, the essential approach is almost universally misunderstood. Replete with category errors in its usage, the term 'person-centered approach' may denote almost anything, from a 'science', to a 'philosophy', to a 'political movement', even to a body of followers of tenets that resemble a religion. It is pursued as a 'method of counseling', as a 'professional status', as membership in a 'school of thought', and as a personal 'identity'. Anything, it seems, except merely what it is, an *approach*.

Even worse, due to the chronological development of the name, analogies suggesting that the approach is the superficial and colorful foliage of a tree whose roots are the ample and reliable client-centered therapy are abundant.

Whereas, this image should be turned upside down.

The person-centered approach may be more precisely and more constructively conceived of as the 'root' of a 'tree' whose principal 'branch' is client-centered therapy.

Other branches are student-centered education; small group encounter for personal growth; large group workshops for transnational understanding, for the resolution of intergroup conflicts and, most important, for learning (largely through large-group workshops) about culture, its formation and transformation.

Carl Rogers's most important achievement, in spite of a long and distinguished career as a psychotherapist, may not have been so much the development of a successful method for effective psychotherapy in a particular time and place. It may have been the cultivation of this *approach* that could be applied creatively by people at various times and places, under various circumstances, in various endeavors.

The person-centered approach, briefly

This approach, this stance, this 'way of being', as Rogers (1980) eventually summarized the constellation of *beliefs, attitudes and values*, and *abilities* that were enhanced by experience, was rooted, 'not in truth already known or formulated but in the process by which truth is dimly perceived, tested and approximated' (Rogers, 1974).

Rogers (1980) *believed* in a 'formative directional tendency' in the universe. A person could be trusted to know what was best for his or her 'personal growth'.

And, given certain conditions, would move toward that goal.

He also *relied* on the implications of this belief for groups. Although, within the more volatile group activities, confidence in this hypothesis had to be regained in each experience.

Rogers's *attitude* included a tolerance for ambiguity. Keats's (1899, p. 277) Shakespeare is the model with his, '*negative capability* . . . capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'.

Also, Rogers respected the people he participated with in therapy or groups as equals in their essential humanity and attempted to meet them without pretense or design, merely as 'persons'.

He was curious about human nature and wanted to learn from encounters with others. He was also willing, within reason, *to be changed* by that experience: in the vein that the Austrian-Israeli philosopher Martin Buber (1966) had proposed, 'I felt I have not the right to want to change another, if I am not open to be changed by him as far as it is legitimate'.

Rogers's specific *abilities* were enhanced from confrontations of the aforementioned beliefs and attitudes with the phenomenon of psychotherapy; others from education; others, from small and large-group encounters.

In general, Rogers developed an ability to intensely concentrate and clearly grasp the linear, piece-by-piece, appearance of reality while at the same time possessing an *esprit de finesse*, not having to break things into parts, but being able to seize the experience so as to perceive its direct meaning and character.

In summary, each activity assumed a unique formulation of his 'way of being', which then became both a means and an end to its constructive outcome. Rogers's personal, interpersonal and transpersonal approach was the same: *He turned the best part of himself toward the best part of the other in order that something of lasting value might be accomplished that none could have done alone* (Wood, 1995).

Large group workshops

As already mentioned, since 1967 the La Jolla Program had been training encounter group leaders. To supplement the structured program of small group encounters, brief plenary sessions were held. These meetings demonstrated that it was possible for over 100 persons to speak in one significant conversation. Also, for several years Jack Gibb had been working with large groups in California that did not rely, as did the La Jolla Program, on previously organized and scheduled small groups. Instead, they were based on non-verbal relationships between participants in order to establish temporary 'communities'.

Further, it should be noted that the British psychiatrist Wilfred Bion had begun serious small group therapy work at the Tavistock Clinic in London before 1948. Then, in 1957, the able and pioneering British educator A. John Allaway (1971), wishing to find a way for his students to gain knowledge 'experientially' or, as the American psychologist and philosopher William James had suggested, 'as

acquaintance', planned a project patterned after the T-Groups, held in Bethel, Maine in the United States. Allaway at his University of Leicester and in cooperation with the Tavistock Institute for Human Relations conducted the first British 'Study Groups'.

Using Bion's theory as a basis for the work, these groups evolved through 1968, gradually eliminating activities, such as lectures, that did not provoke learning-from-doing. Following the Americans, who simulated the 'town council', the 'Tavistock Conference' eventually developed into today's well-known large-group activity. At present, these groups may fall short of his goals. Nevertheless, Allaway deserves credit for generalizing the educational nature of the activity from 'training' and 'simulation of town council exercises' toward *learning in an open ambiance of a large group*.

Later, patterned after the La Jolla Program, American entrepreneurs organized European 'cross-cultural communications workshops'. These, again, whether they appeared otherwise or not, enlisted staff members with the expectation of facilitating small-group encounters. Thus, small encounter groups were part of an implicit structure. The plenary sessions had no function other than to be a large-group encounter as opposed to a small-group encounter. In other words, a meeting where one could say what one pleased but the group took no action, one way or another. Later, these plenary sessions would decide *how and when* to divide into small groups for personal encounter, but never *whether* to divide (McIluff and Coghlan, 1993).

The large group workshop considered here

Departing from these experiments, seventeen-day-long workshops begun in 1973 (Wood, 1984) established the gathering together of the entire 'community' as the core of activities. Thus, conditions were established in order that the workshops should be designed as much as possible by participants themselves. Individually, they established their own tuition fees, commensurate with personal income levels, to pay for the costs of the program (Rogers, Wood, Nelson, Fuchs and Meador, 1986). Once face-to-face in meetings, they formulated the activities and parceled the time for them according to their desires.

Participants were invited as colleagues, not as customers, not as subjects in an experiment, not as students in training, nor as an audience for a conference. They were considered as equals with the organizers, learners in a mutual adventure of discovery. Staff members (including Rogers himself) did not hold themselves apart from community activities. They were involved as full-time participants.

An early intention of these meetings was an attempt to answer, 'How can one function specifically, locally, and privately, in such a way that personal actions would also contribute to the welfare of the community?' (DuBos, 1981).

In this endeavor, the workshops were group-centered. Therefore, the primary function of the organizers was, as agents of the group, to do what it *could not*; that is:

1. Choose the date and duration of the workshop.

2. Arrange the place.
3. State the intention of the event.
4. Invite participants.

Each of these decisions should not be taken lightly. Each has implications for the others, as well as for the outcome of the event. This will be discussed further later.

Before deciding anything on behalf of the participants, staff members asked themselves, 'Might this decision oppress or empower the person?' The convenors did not wish to make any decisions which might infringe on individual freedom, no matter how trivial the issue might seem (for example, assigning people to living quarters or allowing them to choose for themselves).

Although the organizers determined the beginning, when participants arrived and were finally face-to-face in one room, a group-centered process guided the deliberations. Thus, it was not that there was *no* structure, as some imagine, it was that the staff structured what the group could not and, when face-to-face, they structured the event together as participants.

Naturally, when necessary, the participants would alter staff decisions to conform to the group's needs as they changed. Furthermore, though convenors decided little more than the items listed above in the name of the group, they did not neglect simple initial choices, which if put before the group were likely to throw it into hopeless and chaotic immobility. Thus, instead of presenting participants, tired from sometimes long and arduous journeys, with the possibility of a lengthy and frustrating discussion about whether to 'go out for pizza' or 'send in Chinese', they simply planned the menu for the first few days. Later, the group took over this task.

Doubtless, participants and convenors alike had multiple expectations. They came for personal growth, to alter their style of living, with intentions to benefit humanity, to become effective professionally, to feel good, to see what happens, to overcome the tedium of a dull relationship or unrewarding work, for attention, to have an adventure. Individual intentions were legion. What was important was that participants would agree on a common goal: let's say, 'to explore, through direct experience in a large group, implications of the approach that gave birth to client-centered therapy'. Even though this phrase might have meant something different for each participant, 'We are all in this *together*; let's see what we can accomplish', formed the collective intention.

Organized around a collective intention, the potential for realizing 'community' was also more likely: A person's cries for help might be heard and responded to. Multiplicity in unity might be perceived.

What were the outcomes?

Depending on one's point of view, outcomes have been both positive and negative. Perhaps a more fruitful way to look at this question is not only from the private, but also from the universal perspective.

The private perspective: Could a person's cry for help be heard?

Let us consider these workshops from the point of view of the several criteria that are often mentioned as their justification:

1. Efficacy as *psychotherapy*.
2. Means of enhancing *interpersonal relations*/an environment for *resolving intergroup conflicts* through *integrating conflicting values*.
3. Opportunities for *creative problem solving*.

1. Efficacy as *psychotherapy* (healing by the group, healing of the group)
There have been many anecdotal reports that have supported the belief that workshops were constructive on the basis of a variety of personal criteria. The few researches (Barrett-Lennard, 1977; Bozarth, 1982; Nelson, 1977; Wood, 1994b) that gathered and analyzed written evaluations from individual participants have not disputed this view. However, they have shown that although a few participants felt very good about the experience and very good about themselves afterwards, a few also did *not* feel good and reported disappointing personal experiences. The vast majority (over 90% in the Bozarth study) felt the experience to have been agreeable and regarded the learning as beneficial.

Large-group workshop experiences *can* be, and frequently are, therapeutic for some participants. Previously (Wood, 1982), I have given an example of a person 'breaking down' emotionally and becoming disruptive, threatening the safety of himself and others. Conventional attempts to resolve this crisis having failed, he and the group together, moment by moment, mutually developed a successful course of action. The creative response of the large group bore out Buber's (1958) insight: 'Only when every means has collapsed does the [truly significant] meeting come about' (p.12).

A clear conclusion that may be drawn from the discussion is that these large group workshops could not be considered as 'efficient psychotherapy'. Although the group is capable of acting in a manner that respects the security, well-being and dignity of both itself and the individual, it cannot be considered to help a sufficient number of participants in a psychotherapeutic sense, certainly not to a degree that would offset concerns about the apparently negative effects it may have on some others.

Even when the group *is* therapeutic (which it almost always is for someone), the process is not the same as in individual counseling. The most obvious difference is that the group facilitator (when one has been assigned) rarely has a central role in a participant's personality change. The large group, in this regard, functions very similar to reports of the American group psychotherapist Irvin Yalom's (1985) patients who had successfully completed treatment. When asked about the 'turning point' in their therapy, they invariably recounted an 'incident that is highly laden emotionally and involves some other group member, rarely the therapist'.

Even in a demonstration of individual psychotherapy within a large group workshop, a client may be more influenced by the group itself than by the therapist (Slack, 1985; Rogers, 1985).

2. Means of enhancing *interpersonal relations*/an environment for resolving *intergroup conflicts* through *integrating opposing values*

Conventional psychotherapy is not the only option for satisfying personal and integrative needs in the large group workshop. The group has other ways, some quite complex, to respond to this function.

'Innovative learning' (Botkin, Elmandjra and Malitza, 1979) is that inventiveness that occurs as a reaction to sudden shock, crisis, dangerous scarcity, adversity. It exposes the whole as well as the parts, dealing with multiple causes and effects as well as 'interrelationships between key elements'.⁵

If nothing more urgent than the question of how to organize time (breaking into small groups) or what housekeeping rules to establish (such as, smoking or non-smoking) is on the table, the group will occupy itself with such issues. In general, it will deal with whatever is most urgent. As long as the problems the group faces are real and not contrived, the possibility for resolution, as well as further innovative learning exists.

The following is an example of innovative learning. Carlos, a 12 year-old orphan who lived with a poor family, was not inscribed in the large group workshop. He was staying temporarily with his brother, a handyman employed by the institute which housed the workshop participants.

Some participants had reported that jewelry and small sums of money were missing from their rooms. Carlos was suspected. A woman complained that he was sexually aggressive toward her. 'Something has got to be done about this boy,' several people demanded.

A long and frequently heated discussion ensued. It involved the entire group. On the one side, the list of suspicions of the boy grew. One person said that Carlos made insulting gestures towards her. Another said the kid had a bad face. Someone else reminded the group that thousands of homeless marauders, just Carlos's age, were robbing and murdering citizens in the cities. This group of speakers concluded that the boy was a threat to the security of the community and should be immediately removed.

On the other side, some participants said that they had not found him offensive. He had been courteous with them. He even helped one lady with her luggage when she arrived. They defended his offenses as childlike and innocent, as not meant to be aggressive, merely playful, and unjustly interpreted. They argued that Carlos had no adequate supervision at home and if he remained with the workshop group, at least he would have a chance for a positive experience with responsible people.

Though some saw him as good, others as bad, the group reached the conclusion that its role was not to judge anyone's character. However, it did have a responsibility to decide what to do about participants' strong sentiments surrounding the lad and what course of action to take regarding his presence.

A few people observed that Carlos was, in fact, a member of the community and that the fair course of action would be to consult him in any decision that affected him. 'We are a family,' someone finally suggested. Around this metaphor

participants were able to rally and integrate their conflicting values. It was agreed that those who felt more intensely (both for and against Carlos's presence in the workshop) would put the group's concerns before him. They would discuss with him how they felt, find out how he felt, and try to find some solution they thought would work to everyone's satisfaction.⁶

In the meeting, Carlos said that he did not realize his behavior was frightening anyone. He was acting in his accustomed way. When he realized others felt threatened, he was willing to change. Also, he wished to participate in the workshop. He wanted to study dance with Grace; to learn massage with Laura; with Clare, to learn music and art; and with his brother, to learn to drive a car. They all agreed. He agreed to conform to the behavior which governed all participants.

Carlos stayed in the workshop. He not only abided by the consensual rules, but became an exemplary citizen. Those who previously feared him became his friends. Those who initially supported his point of view were not disappointed. In the end he made one of the more pointed observations of the group, 'This year there was lot of drama and not much adventure. I expect that next time there will be more adventure and less drama.'

- Integrating conflicting values

Every person in the community was involved in the decision-making process, including Carlos. People showed respect for each other's feelings. They were honest: their statements matched their thoughts and sentiments. They respected the dignity of each member of the community, even a 12-year-old who was not even officially registered in the workshop. And, this participation included an intention to cooperate and use dialogue to reach an intelligent solution.

In the example above, a clash of values was what really seemed at stake:

'A citizen has a right to live free from threat.'

'The group has a responsibility to protect its members and to govern the behavior of its members.'

'The individual should be free to act differently and still be accepted.'

We should not have to conform to someone else's opinions of proper behavior.'

'The community is responsible for looking after its children.'

'We should be governed by humane feelings, not by cold rules.'

'Security is more important than anyone's feelings. If people are concerned about the boy's feelings, that's their problem, not mine.'

'If any member of the group has a problem, it is the whole group's problem.'

In many conflicts that arise thusly, I can say, 'Yes,' to each side in the conflict. When I heard the members of the community call for greater security, I said to myself, 'Yes, I want security.' When I heard their opponents call for greater respect for the individual, even if it is a 12-year-old, I said, 'Yes, let's respect the lad. Give him a chance.' Why could we not have security *and* respect the individual?

The group strived for the best and surrendered to the better. Within the metaphor of 'family', a range of conflicting values was accepted. A person who favored the boy, perceived him as someone to help to improve. One who was skeptical of the boy's trustworthiness, after accepting him as part of the 'family', saw him as someone who was merely different from the run of the mill. Using a metaphor to make an idea clearer is thought to tend to convince, not on the basis of the idea's merits but, due to the familiarity of the metaphor (Bowers and Osborn, 1966).

3. Opportunities for *creative problem solving* (the culture and the individual transformed)

• What is culture?

Through biological evolution (that is, natural selection) our organisms have evolved instincts, needs, dispositions, that is, a human nature. Culture consists of additionally acquired behaviors and thought that satisfy the biological and psychological demands of human nature through individuals in a given group (Harris, 1989).

Natural selection takes thousands of years to bring about significant changes in an organism. Culture may change rapidly through attaining a different perspective, a new organizing idea, a new value. However, changes in a culture may not necessarily be beneficial for the biological evolution of the species. Also, it is difficult to know what changes to 'select'. Though 'conscious change' may not be easy, achieving the goal of conscious collective intention is not impossible.

• A large group workshop culture transformed by interactive dialogue
A participant confronted members of the group with a furious need to 'stage a happening'. Other participants were eager at first to support what he had proposed as a theatrical 'play'.

Although the protagonist's proposal seemed in agreement with the established group culture, many had reservations. They feared some kind of violence. In the subsequent intensely emotional encounter to clarify his intentions and alleviate their fears, a prolonged drama was lived by all. By the end of the afternoon, he announced, after deep reflection, 'I have realized something already. It has been enough. It is complete. I have got what I need, not necessarily what I had been seeking, what I thought I would need. This is it. I am grateful.'

The man followed his desire to understand himself and it took him in a surprising direction – not toward violence but away from it. Perhaps, just as other large group workshops had, this community could have handled the crisis of an 'emotional breakdown', if he had become a 'problem'. This group, however, demanded more. Participants were sensitive to the pattern of their 'community' life and its consequences to the person. In a sense, they empathically 'lived' the experience. He changed and the group changed together with him (Wood, 1984).

In fact, the very culture of the workshop had been revised. The British philosopher Mary Midgley (1978) has observed that we could not have survived as a species were we not able to be conditioned. By the same token, changing the

culture, is perhaps as natural a function as adapting to it. She states, 'When people resist and change the culture they were brought up with, they do so because their nature demands it. Conditioning fails here, because that which was conditioned is stronger than its conditioning'.

The universal perspective: Did unity emerge?

- The effect of unity

Many people become very nervous with talk of 'the group'. A psychologist friend of mine once said, 'What makes me uneasy about collectives is the realization that they don't make statements or interpret positions; only individuals do that.'

I agree with him. And I think it should be remembered that although collectives do not interpret positions, they do *create* them, the same way they make statements, by their actions. Although the group may not be an 'organism' (at least not in the strict biological sense), it is doubtless reality. For example, the United States Supreme Court has ruled, based on statistical analysis of racial distribution of employees in the organization, that a black former employee was discriminated against. Although no single individual was found to have been discriminatory, the *group* had discriminated against the individual (Time Magazine, July 11, 1988, p. 13).

To draw attention to collective difficulties, the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard is widely quoted as saying, 'The crowd is untruth'. (My friend quotes him also.) Martin Buber's (1957) reply is more precise, 'I do not know if Kierkegaard is right when he says that the crowd is untruth – I should rather describe it as non-truth since (in distinction from some of its masters) it is not in the least opposed to it'. Any warning against the group, Buber urged, can be only a preface to 'the true question to the single one'. Thus, except in specific cases where it is deserved, throwing the blame on either the individual or the group does not seem constructive.

- The perception of unity

For the individual to be aware of the group as a whole is not merely an intellectual process. It involves a different way of seeing, using the mind as an organ of perception, not merely as a computer or an arbitrator. This way of seeing is often related (though not restricted) to artistic expression. The French painter Paul Cézanne, for example, said, 'The landscape thinks itself in me and I am its consciousness' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964). Similarly, one might say that the group 'thinks itself' in the participant, allowing for global understandings.

In large groups, the properties of the whole come through the individual. As Bortoft (1996) has written, illuminating the thought of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, 'The part [individual] is a place for "presencing" the whole'. Thus, the individual is not accidental. He or she is *special*, in that the whole is shown through the individual. The whole is not a *thing*. As Bortoft emphasizes, it is more an 'active absence', emerging simultaneously with the accumulation of parts because it is *immanent* within them.

This extremely important potential of the group should perhaps be accompanied by a warning announcement. Perceiving the unity, without participants – at the same time – maintaining an adequate awareness of their personal reality, can result in 'epidemic' emotions. These may be harmful, at worst; simply a waste of time, at best. The danger of becoming overly fascinated with 'group' and losing sight of the individual, has been observed – not only in flamboyant cults – but also in otherwise constructive activities. For example, there is evidence from Tavistock-type groups to suggest that *emphasizing the group-as-a-whole, without attention to the constructive experience of individual members and without an ambience which includes empathy and acceptance may not only be unhelpful, but even harmful to participants* (Colson and Horwitz, 1983).

• More on unity

Nevertheless, the perception of unity – or better, the perception of the multiplicity in unity, may be immensely useful. Unity according to Goethe, is organized by consciousness. What is consciousness? Bortoft (1996), describing Goethe's perspective, states that, 'Consciousness has the structure of intentionality – it would be better to say that consciousness *is* intentionality'. He says that, with regard to the intuitive knowledge of nature, 'when the phenomenon becomes its own theory, we have the ontological condition that the knower and the known constitute an indivisible whole'. That is, a unity.

Thus, this knowing, what we are considering here as 'unity,' is 'an evolutionary development of the phenomenon and not just a subjective activity of the mind'. (Bortoft, 1996).

• Time out for theoretical speculation

The face-to-face, existential, large group is very old – from the beginnings of humanity. It involves various rituals which, though perhaps in different forms, still exist in present-day groupings.

The group and its rituals were important even before the appearance of *homo sapiens sapiens*. Monkeys spent (and spend) some 20% of their time grooming one another. The act of picking leaves, dried hairs, ticks and fleas from each other's coats forms influential alliances. In addition to maintaining personal hygiene, the practice induces a state of relaxation, a lowering of heart-rate and a reduction of signs of stress in participants. At the same time, participants are observing group life: who is doing what? To whom? Who is free-loading? Pulling more than his or her weight? Who is advertising what?

Dunbar (1996) thinks that language developed from early contact-calls to facilitate bonding. Gossip – which is social grooming – took the place of physical grooming in large groups. Language was needed to keep track of all that was going on within a large number of individuals. Language, in addition to facilitating 'bonding and networking', in the current jargon, has evidently also been used to formalize and manage rituals as well.

Personal opinions, preferences, experiences, thoughts, feelings. These are the

fuel of two-thirds of everyday conversation and most of all large group dialogue. In a large group workshop, through dialogue, participants express personal opinions, emotions, feelings, concerns, theories, regarding themselves and others. They clash in conversations over values, line up behind 'issues', and generally try to figure out who they are in this situation.

However, there are still other considerations. Large groups have affected consciousness itself. The British archeologist Steven Mithen (1996) thinks that in the development of general-purpose language from social language, 'consciousness adopted the role of an integrating mechanism for knowledge previously "trapped" in separate specialized intelligences' in the mind. Thus, consciousness becomes a serious consideration, not only in evolutionary theory, but in understanding *the phenomenon of large groups*.

As with physical grooming, during social grooming, by virtue of merely being together, a unique state of consciousness is induced in participants. Thus, frequently without their total awareness, participants are in 'exceptional states of consciousness' (James, 1896) in which what would be contradictory thoughts or perceptions in the 'generalized reality orientation' (Shor, 1959) may coexist in a person's mind, allowing for creative solutions to problems that would not be possible under everyday circumstances. This state is likened to that of playing a musical instrument where, 'The normal self is not excluded from conscious participation in the performance, though initiative seems to come from elsewhere' (James, 1890).

Contradictory states of consciousness, such as exerting autonomy, on the one hand, and surrendering to the group thought, on the other, may co-exist. Neither loss of autonomy, nor lack of contribution in an integrative effort results. The unity, which has, to this point, remained vague, begins to be tangible. A perceivable 'it' provides guidance for those who have the keenness of sensibility to follow. The 'it' can become a context in which members may assemble the relevant parts of their own consciousness both to give themselves a clearer personal definition and an integrated relation to the purpose or meaning of the group.

Such perceptions may be more difficult to describe than to realize. The best description I have seen for such phenomena is that of Bortoft (1996). He states, 'When we see the intrinsic connections, the phenomenon is experienced as a whole, and it is part of this experience that we recognize the wholeness of the phenomenon to be part of the phenomenon itself and not added to it by the mind – even though it is experienced through the mind instead of the senses. ... We have both together: the separation and the wholeness.'

In the previous example of *group innovative learning*, this unity was being pursued. In the example of *the culture and the individual transformed*, the participants were, for the most part, focused on this unity. Thus, conflicting values were integrated in reality, if not in words.

- Anticipating the future (intuitive self-government)
Reaching a point of harmony and clear communications between participants is

often referred to as 'building community'. In the beginning of a large group workshop a committee of participants made a proposal for organizing meeting-times and activities for the first few days. Discussion of this plan, which at first was enthusiastically accepted by the majority, eventually led to abandoning the plan in favor of participants 'following their intuition'. Amazingly, participants were able to be aware of not only their individual patterns of behavior but also a pattern suggested by the 'group as a whole'. A private impulse (from the individual's point of view), shared by many, sent people to the meeting room at the same time. Participants could organize their activities 'intuitively' (Wood, 1984).

• Going beyond democracy: Participatory intuition

In another workshop (Wood, 1984), a lengthy debate about whether or not to take a 'day off' from the emotional intensity of regular meetings ended without resolution. A few days passed and participants spontaneously turned to leisure activities and no meetings were held. No plan was made, decision stated or vote taken. Not policy, but collective intention guided the group. The act, though spontaneous, was not impulsive. It was intelligent, but not strictly logical. It was a democratic process that did not resort to the compromise of voting. It seemed to represent what the American sociologist Ernest Becker (1969) called, 'An anchoring of power in as many subjectivities as there are those who fashion it'.

Quite often a conclusion is not spoken nor explicitly acknowledged. It is an aspect of non-verbal behavior and, as the American anthropologist Edward Hall (1959) has observed, it is 'in accordance with an elaborate and secret code that is written nowhere, known by no one, and understood by all'.

Sometimes a clever person will ask the group, just before adjourning, for a show of hands as to who agrees with and who does not agree with the 'decision' that has been taken tacitly. When hands are raised, the group is divided as in the beginning. Two minds are apparent. One (non-verbal) has decided on a consensual course of action. The other (voting) maintains its opinion unchanged.

Notable failures

In a recent article (Wood, 1997), I have defined what I take to be an 'effective large group workshop'. In this present chapter, I have also tried to present conditions that might lead up to such an event. My suggestions seem to me to be necessary, but not sufficient. Without considering hundreds which were not, in some 16 workshops that were carefully conceived and organized, only four would be judged effective by the criteria I have established. Though not nearly exhaustive, I would like to mention some of the reasons, in my opinion, that some were not effective.

Bad will

• The individual is satisfied; the group, not
In most large group workshops substantial individual learning will take place, but innovative group learning is more doubtful and easily obstructed. In the United

States, for example, a workshop was conducted in which a legal activist was present. In the group meetings he put forth (like other participants) his opinion. However, unlike others, he insisted on a point of view which was *consistently contrary* to any consensus which began to emerge.

This crusade, he eventually admitted, was a 'test' to see if the group could 'tolerate diversity'.

From my experience, innovative learning *needs* the expression of genuine diversity to find creative solutions. What it cannot tolerate, as this fellow proved, is consistent bad will. Following the unity in the group is a subtle cooperative venture. The group could stand diversity, but without this man's constructive participation no integrated solution could be found. Diversity was plentiful. What was missing, and was impossible under the circumstances, was creative integration.

The American sociologist Leonard Doob and his associates (1970), in a workshop using the National Training Laboratories approach to try to resolve a border dispute between three African states, encountered similar effects of bad will. The organizers reported that a participant's 'calculatedly disruptive behavior' frequently manifested itself 'most when some progress or agreement was close at hand'.

- An appearance of unity

In another workshop, a participant arrogantly announced that he intended to tape-record the meetings. Some participants accepted his proposal. Those who objected, he tried to bully into conformity. The objectors also held stubbornly to their feelings. A long discussion ensued. No decision was reached, but he apparently willingly withdrew his request to tape-record.

It seemed, at the time, a true group decision. However, later it was noticed that the man had sulked through the remainder of the workshop. In this case, the experience of one participant was not satisfactory. He did not show the necessary *humility* to abandon his motives for a mutual solution (which may have even satisfied his real desire). Other members of the group did not show the necessary *autonomy* to reopen the problem when they saw that he had become alienated from the group.

Falsely assuming that previous successful experience automatically applies in a new situation

In 1977, I first came to Brazil with other members of the Center for Studies of the Person in La Jolla to convene a large group workshop similar to those we had initiated in the U.S.A. in 1974. As a prelude to this workshop which would be held in the State of Rio de Janeiro with some 300 participants, we also convened even larger two-day workshops in three major Brazilian cities: Recife, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro.

We began in Recife, with a meeting in a gigantic sports complex. The area was arranged for a traditional academic presentation: rows of movable chairs lined up in front of a stage with a long table at which the presenters sat before microphones.

Other microphones on long extension cords had been provided for members of the audience to ask questions. There were said to be some 800 to 1,000 participants. Our plan was for each of the Americans to give a brief talk on our own interests and then to invite discussion from the audience. After only a few minutes, the lecture became tedious. Members of the audience complained that they wanted to participate.

With some misgivings, we eventually formed one large circle. We would converse. Microphones were passed hand-to-hand to whoever wished to speak. At first, the preachers took the floor: A Christian padre from the interior, a syndicate boss, a marxist sociology professor. Familiar rhetoric.

Perhaps what characterized the conversation in the remaining hours was this statement: 'This is the first time I have stood up in public and said what I feel . . . to criticize, to say what I really think.' And this: 'I haven't said anything until now, but I just have to express my joy. . . . I came here feeling so lost, like I was alone in my pain and my struggle. It's all just too big for me: the poverty of my people, the political realities of the world in which I live, the pain in my marriage, my family, my job. I couldn't do it alone . . . and now I realize that I am not facing it alone. . . . I feel strong, I feel nourished and now I can go on. Maybe this won't last, but in a way that doesn't really matter. What matters to me is that I feel it today'. (Bowen, Miller, Rogers and Wood, 1979).

For us, this was a grand success: more than 800 persons could speak in one meaningful conversation.

Next, we went to São Paulo where the large group meeting was held in a high-tech auditorium with fixed seats in tiers. Never mind, we thought. The space is not important (a mistaken belief from client-centered therapy where the space was rigidly controlled: two people in a closed room). The important thing is that people be able to speak personally (a mistaken generalization from our previous success). We know how to do this work. Weren't we effective in Recife? (A genuine success, but under different conditions.) Our experience has taught us that all you have to do is provide the 'opportunity' for people to converse. (However, we had not yet learned the full meaning of 'opportunity'.)

We Americans stationed ourselves in various parts of the auditorium facing the empty stage. Microphones were available on long cords. Rogers invited people to speak.

The outcome was a disaster. A colossal failure. Listeners looked at the backs of others, while the anonymous speaker's voice came as if from the clouds as it issued from the speakers on the stage. In the chaos, many people walked out and apparently never returned.

That night Rogers captured the 'living with uncertainty' nature of such activities when he wrote in his journal:

'Either I had helped launch an incredibly stupid experiment, doomed to failure, or I had helped to innovate a whole new way of permitting 800 people to sense their own potentialities and to participate in forming their own learning experience. There was no way to predict which it would prove to be'.

The morning newspaper printed its opinion. The headline read something like: *Psicólogo Faz Nada: Provoca Caos* (Psychologist does nothing; provokes chaos). Our Brazilian friends began to needle us about 'Caos Rogers', instead of Carl Rogers.

What went wrong?

First, instead of respecting the culture and meeting people 'where they are', we imposed our values and desires upon them. Had we respected the culture, perhaps we would have favored the traditional beginning: on stage, short talks, questions and answers, asking for and following participants' suggestions as to how to proceed, perhaps breaking into small groups and finally a grand plenary conversation - which is what happened on the second day.

Second, we ignored the extremely important influence of the environment. Ignorantly, we thought we could overcome ambiantal constraints with our 'principle' of person-to-person encounter.

Finally, and perhaps most devastating, we did not face this new situation as new, but tried to apply our latest 'learnings' to an event that had still more to teach us.

On the final leg of our trip, in Rio de Janeiro, we started over from scratch, though a bit wiser. We paid attention to the environment, arranging for movable chairs to be placed in a large conference room. This was not done in order to form a circle. It was done in order to *have the option*, should the group decide it wished to form a circle and speak in one conversation. We proceeded step by step, involving the entire group in every act. In this sense, the eventual success in Rio (which duplicated that in Recife) was more significant because it involved an 'informed intention'.

Pitfalls in 'modeling' an application, instead of seeking a creative experience together

In 1985, the Rust Workshop in Austria was an attempt to contribute to conflict resolution in 'The Central American Challenge', Rogers (1986) relates that 'Among the 50 participants were high-level government officials, especially from Central America, and other leading political and professional figures, from seventeen countries in all'.

From Rogers's own reports and comments of his staff:

- the facilitators remained aloof from the participants,
- because of ignorance, the facilitators sometimes offended members of other cultures,
- the facilitators tried to impose their own cultural values on participants,
- there was 'inadequate communication and inadequate understanding', between the facilitators and the Latin-Americans who were more intensely involved in trying to resolve disputes in their region.

Rogers's (1984) central hypothesis for groups was that, 'groups of individuals have within themselves vast resources for understanding and accepting their

dynamics, for reduction and resolution of conflicts, and for constructive change in group goals and behavior'. This perspective supposedly guided the workshop. Nevertheless, in this workshop there was something like one 'facilitator' for every three 'participants'. The organizers' behavior hardly showed much confidence in the group's ability to organize itself constructively.

Also, partitioning the time for small groups, big groups, lectures and so forth, further suggests the organizers distrusted the group's abilities to deal appropriately with its own urgencies.

The real problem of this workshop was that its *primary intention was not even conflict resolution*. Rogers (1984) in the workshop proposal states that, 'The purpose of this workshop will be threefold. [First], it will give the participants the opportunity to experience a person-centered approach to group facilitation to the reduction of whatever tensions exist or arise in the participant group'. To have as a *primary goal*, wanting to give people an experience of the person-centered approach, not only is contrary to the approach itself (which might more likely adopt an objective such as, 'to facilitate the exploration of conflict'), it nearly guarantees failure.

And, there is evidence that the group was not effective, even on the personal level. One of the most important Latin American dignitaries, influential in organizing the event from Central America, reportedly left the workshop 'feeling hurt and somewhat unrecognized' (Wood, 1994a).

Of course, in spite of these or other problems, it is likely that some people considered this a significant experience. That participants have different (even opposing) opinions and perceptions is not uncommon in large group workshops. The point is that a common thread is needed (either one present from the beginning through collective conscious intention or one created from urgency during the encounter) to allow the possibility to use these differences, even differences in values, to find creative solutions.

By respecting the inherent creative potential in any group and beginning with the attitude, 'Let's see what we can accomplish together, applying all our will and resources', and genuinely being willing to be changed by what occurs, organizers at least begin with the potential for an effective workshop.

Squandering human potential: Becoming a (religious) sub-culture, instead of fostering learning

There are several annual and bi-annual large group encounters currently being held. The longest running of this type was the European cross-cultural communications workshops. This model persisted for some 20 years.

Although these events were doubtless useful for many individuals – for personal growth or for political reasons – they have never to my knowledge shown significant evidence of improving cross-cultural communications, nor of being effective, as I have defined effectiveness. These workshops were largely emotional 'happenings', whose main function was reproducing themselves.

The most interesting aspect – though I do not know if it should be considered

constructive – is that such on-going workshops tend to create their own culture.

- Cross-cultural communications workshop culture

Since there were apparently no restrictions on participation in these European workshops, a great many people made a habit of attending year after year (McIlduff and Coghlan, 1993). This familial population both created and preserved a specific culture. 'Typically, at the beginning of a large group workshop', those who have participated, facilitated and organized cross-cultural communication workshops write, 'some participants speak of their experience of others who are already familiar with the "group culture", who know "the rules", the correct way to speak in order to be given attention' (MacMillan and Lago, 1993, p. 26).

The significant cultural differences that may have existed between participants were effectively neutralized in the meetings by the influence of the workshop culture itself. In considering a list of activities and conventions, suggested by Hall (1959, 1966), that differ between cultures, virtually every one (verbal communication, comfort distance between people, appointment times, odors, conventions for discussion, establishing acquaintances) is determined by the *workshop culture* and not by the native cultures of participants.

The most discussed *tradition* in these workshops (McIlduff and Coghlan, 1993) is the activity called 'fragmenting into small groups'. The consistency of this phenomenon is suggested in these statements: 'Despite an overall attendance of more than 3000 participants, the workshops have developed a fairly predictable pattern...' and, 'The "community" spends considerable time discussing the merits of moving into smaller groups, facilitated by the (at times, rather intimidatingly large) staff that has been assembled for this purpose'.

The relation between this tradition and the organizers' intentions is touched on by the British counseling psychologist Colin Lago, who has been a keen observer of cross-cultural communication workshops. He suggests that the staff group may unwittingly influence the group process solely through its constitution. Lago (1994) states, 'It could be argued that the culture of the staff team, already dominated by English and staffed by sophisticated travelers, joined together in their person-centered philosophies and working practices, successfully over-rode concerns about cultural identity, cultural understanding and patterns of culturally determined behavior'.

This ritual or stylized behavior often has the effect of preventing an effective group and thus squandering human potential. One 'first time participant' observed, 'Some experienced large group talkers were doing their thing or performing their ballet dance. It did not encourage me to trust them. Rather, I thought I witnessed people's needs becoming at times so overwhelming that they burst forth irrespective of the level of comfort or ease or trust that they felt towards the group'.

Another participant related that she had joined the workshop to discuss certain issues. She was disappointed that her ideas, opinions and views were not given the same weight as others' feelings. 'Why do feelings come before these things?' she demanded to know. 'It seems that there is a tyranny of feelings here' (McIlduff and Coghlan, 1989, p. 81).

What conditions may figure in the formation of an effective large group workshop?

When evaluating large group workshops on a careful and rational basis, it is not easy to judge their value. As we have seen, they may be psychotherapeutic, but not psychotherapy. They are capable of innovative learning. But, when this innovation is 'modeled', it may be ineffective. They may be laboratories to learn how culture is formed and transformed. But when they go on for a time, they tend to create their own culture, perhaps become a religion. They may organize themselves intuitively. But when people set out to 'follow the intuitive wisdom of the group', they may create superstitions at best, chaos at worst. Large group meetings are capable of delicate consensual decisions. But if only one participant has bad will, multiplicity remains without unity.

These statements may be true for any group. We know that practically any conference or encounter will produce constructive experiences for some participants. Likewise, in some religious and similar services, unity may be achieved. To be effective, the large group workshop must achieve both. Thus, it is worthwhile to study what conditions may contribute to effectivity.

Impressions from an initial large-group experience

A first-time participant in a recent large group workshop thought it was unique because there was no power structure established beforehand, to dictate participants' daily behavior. There were no 'facilitators' or specialists of any kind to guide participants, to 'help' them understand their experience, help them to 'communicate', or to 'organize'. For this person, this represented a 'real liberty'. The 'space' of the group was open to everyone, as she perceived. And, she felt she had as much 'power' as anyone else – 'old-timer' or 'newcomer'. The strength of one's voice depended on the purity of expression, not on the intended effect, nor the familiarity of the slogans issued, nor from whose mouth it was emitted.

She was also impressed that there were no pre-established rules, not even 'norms' of behavior that she could perceive. Of course, there existed the deep-seated cultural habits that each brought, but the main objectives of the group and the values that governed them seemed to be formed largely through dialogue.

The 'plasticity' of the group was impressive. The group seemed to be what the participants, collectively, made of it. The direction seemed to be in each one's hands. Each was responsible. The sensation of equality and consideration for the best in each one, in regard to his or her 'standing' in the community was also felt to be unique (Freire, 1997).

Another one-time participant, an American clinical psychologist, is ambivalent about the value of large group workshops. He fails to see the value of such endeavors, in spite of his significant personal learning. Reporting on his experience of 20 years ago, he relates a significant impact on his life. He learned to speak when he genuinely had something to say, as opposed to merely 'getting airtime'. 'When I spoke from those moments of strong feeling,' he recently reports, 'my communications were inevitably clear, meaningful and impactful. I still rely on this learning'.

Behind the scenes: Conscious intention

The large group workshop begins when the organizers decide that they will convene it and it will have such-and-such a purpose. Their values, beliefs, intentions contribute to the constitution of the workshop by providing an 'organizing idea'.

Thus their values are not incidental. They shape the initial structure of the event. The organizers' opinions about how others should be provided for, welcomed, treated, will be expressed in their preparations. Qualities they respect, they will look for in others. Nevertheless, in the composition of the group, they will likely want diversity. They will wish for mutual respect between persons, will expect people to fight for their own unique point of view, but give it up for a perspective that will be more creative in helping the group resolve a conflict, solve a problem, learn together.

They choose the *dates* for the event. A time that is convenient for themselves and also for what they imagine would be convenient for participants. The goal of the workshop may also effect the dates chosen. Seasons, the lunar cycle, and other factors should be studied for relevance in this choice.

Then, a *place* is chosen based on knowledge of the effects of ambiance on the consciousness of human beings, including the role of space itself (Mintz, 1956; Barker, 1968), the effects of sunshine (Rosenthal, et al., 1984), of air ions (Kreuger and Reed, 1976), low-frequency magnetic fields (Brodeur, 1989) and other 'hidden factors' in creative human processes.

Next, a statement of *intention* is made which reflects all of these considerations. Finally, invitations are issued to applicants who the organizers believe share their intentions sufficiently to create the possibility for an effective large group workshop.

Collective intentionality

Intentions must be chosen and stated carefully so as to 'aim' the workshop in a constructive direction from the start. No matter how one may wish for a self-directed and creative workshop, the introduction of conflicting expectations can derail this course.

For example, in a recent carefully organized large group workshop, the organizers stated simply and precisely the intention for a group-centered meeting to be governed solely by its own necessities. However, inasmuch as the workshop would be held in a place of natural beauty, it was mentioned that certain tourist possibilities might be possible *if* a mid-week break occurred in deliberations. Though merely mentioning a possibility, unwittingly contradictory intentions had been established in a substantial number of participants. One: the group would govern its own course, based on its moment-to-moment needs. And, two: a day off for tourism would occur at mid-week.

As the expected day approached, many people began to discuss tourist plans. Since the topic of these discussions conflicted with what had been taking place in the group, they established a parallel dialogue. The face-to-face, emerging 'life' of the group ran parallel courses: one, seeking the elusive unity of the group; the other, seeking to satisfy previously established desires.

Since many people were equally divided between these two alternatives, the conflict was awkwardly resolved. A day off was taken. Although this amounted to a disruption of the emergence of a unity, a subtle 'it', that had been forming, it was not at all a disappointment, when judged as daily experience. The sight seeing groups reported very satisfying experiences; as did those who remained at the workshop site. In other words, the group *did* deal with its necessities in the most creative way possible under the circumstances. The point is, that had the organizers communicated a less ambiguous intention, a day for tourism might have come about more in harmony with the pace of the total group.

In every stage of development of the workshop, the organizers are agents of the group. Their job is to do what the group *cannot* do for itself. When the participants are finally face-to-face, organizers are no longer needed, as the group can now direct itself.

When people join the 'group', saying 'Yes' to the organizers' intentions, they begin to influence the workshop, with both an 'I' intentionality and a 'We' intentionality.

The American philosopher John Searles, whose thoughts on language and dialogue may also prove relevant to the study of large groups, has asserted that, 'Collective intentionality is a biologically primitive phenomenon that cannot be reduced to, or eliminated in favor of, something else. Every attempt at reducing "We intentionality" to "I intentionality" that I have seen is subject to counterexamples.' He explains, 'There is a big difference between two violinists playing in an orchestra ["We intentionality"], on the one hand, and on the other hand, discovering, while I am practicing my part ["I intentionality"] that someone else in the next room is practicing her part, and thus discovering that, by chance, we are playing some piece in a synchronized fashion' (Searles, 1995). Again, the sum of the parts do not make up a whole. The whole becomes evident in its parts.

When Rogers (1980) perceiving profoundly his client as a unique person also perceived 'what is universally true', it was because the individual was the place for 'presencing' the whole, not a generalization arrived at by seeing many instances. Although Rogers succeeded in this realization, many counselors do not, since they continue to look for a unity in multiplicity instead of the multiplicity in unity.

Implications for the future

What one hears most about implications of such large group workshops as described here is that they could become a device for dealing with future problems. The reasoning often suggests that facilitators could be trained to intervene in large groups and resolve intergroup conflicts, and so forth.

There are two problems with this train of thought. First, utopian schemes are rarely successful. Radical attempts to engineer a new society have most often been disastrous.

Second, although groups do possess the creativity to deal with unforeseen problems, to prepare interventionists for what they think the future will be like is inevitably to be unprepared. The future almost always holds surprises.

Cultural formation: Following what we are creating

What do people do in large group meetings? They converse. They tell each other how they feel in the moment, how they see the world, their values, their problems, their opinions, what they regard as 'truths'. Inevitably, personalities and values clash. With good intentions and time a unity may emerge. What should be asked is, 'How does this come about?'

It has been noticed that people in a group speak not merely to those in their immediate vicinity, but also to a 'universal audience'. In the dialogue, there is already an 'it' they unite with (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969).

Considered in this light, one implication of large group workshops would be a case of Goethe's observation that *the state of 'being known' is a further evolutionary stage of the phenomenon itself* (Bortoft, 1996).

Perhaps by knowing itself, through dialogue, the human grouping may be evolving a creative capacity to deal with its necessities. In organizing a series of large group workshops, between 1974 and 1980, it was frequently noticed that each year's group (which consisted of different individuals) seemed to begin, in terms of its interests, goals, challenges, and its ability to deal with them, where the last group left off. That is, there was a noticeable evolution of learning, from one generation to the next – even though almost all the individuals were different.

This observation may be merely self-deception on the part of the organizers. But, since this hypothesis yields little advancement in knowledge, the hypothesis of *formative causation* might be given serious thought in studying implications of large group workshops.

The hypothesis of formative causation

The British plant physiologist Rupert Sheldrake (1981) has proposed the hypothesis of formative causation to account for such observations that subsequent workshops (separated by time and space with different participants) would seem to know what the earlier groups had previously learned. The hypothesis proposes that 'morphogenetic fields [analogous to other fields in physics] play a causal role in the development and maintenance of the forms of systems at all levels of complexity'. *Formative causation*, although not energetic itself nor reducible to known physical fields, supposedly imposes a spatial order on changes brought about by physical causation. It is likened to a blueprint that, though not energetic, *causes* the specific form of the house. It is not the only cause and without materials, builders, and tools, the house would not come into being.

Preserving human potential

The large group workshop may be a means for preserving the human potential for innovative learning. If the power, wisdom, creativity, whatever constructive outcome the group derives, comes from (the evolutionary quality of) *being together*, without over-controlling leaders, rules of behavior, superstitions, then, simply convening carefully organized groups, with a sensitivity for learning, may preserve human potential.

Not only would participants be learning how to 'exercise personal power', they would, more importantly, be anticipating the future, going beyond democracy with a participatory intuition, finding the healing capacity of the group, learning how culture was formed and transformed. In this and more, they would be cultivating skills (a 'way to be', perhaps) that might be useful in the future as well.

In my pastures, there are dozens of different plants, not one. The unity of Nature includes diversity. One might say that Nature values variety. It preserves potential. A sudden prairie fire (as I have witnessed) will eliminate many promising experiments. However, the unity will persist. Seeds, kept in reserve, will sprout. The pasture's continuity is guaranteed, as is the existence of those who depend on it.

Preserving human potential may be somewhat similar. If the pathways are not blocked by mental or bureaucratic structures, the right person needed by the group at the right time may step forward to provide the necessary leadership, insight, healing. Human capacities may also be cultivated. People may learn to tolerate uncertainty while immersed in mystery, awaiting with anticipation relevant facts in order to act intelligently. Or, one may fiercely fight for a personal point of view, then quickly surrender it for a more inclusive perspective that benefits both the individual and the community. The childish dichotomy between thinking and feeling gives way to turning the best part of oneself toward the best part of another so that something of inestimable value might take place, that neither could have imagined, let alone have produced alone. As the French-American biochemist René DuBos (1981) has observed, 'Nature is not efficient. It is redundant. It always uses things in many different ways, a number of them awkward, rather than aiming first at perfect solutions'.

The aim of this growing knowledge would be Goethe's, 'that through the contemplation of an ever creating nature, we should make ourselves worthy of spiritual participation in her production' (Bortoft, 1996).

Notes

1. On the subject of the evaluation of large group workshops, see Wood (1997). For a discussion of the variables in large group workshops and some of the factors that may be involved in effectivity, see Wood (1984).
2. Although they are excellent for passing information rapidly and inexpensively between people, electronic networks are not yet (and may never be) 'large groups', as discussed in this chapter. In spite of hundreds of 'participants', their relationships are peculiar. A new category of social aggressiveness is being formed around the concept of 'net-rage' (Dunbar, 1996), the tendency to become furious because one's words or intentions are misinterpreted by other correspondents who launch their own private armadas against expressions that may have been used incidentally. This suggests that we have not learned how to be and how to see with regard to this phenomenon which is worthy of careful study.
3. Present-day hunter-gatherer groups camping for the night are said to consist of 30-35 people. Groups who all share the same language (that is, tribes) are said to number 1500-2000.

Studies of primate groupings have revealed a predictable relation between the group size and the animal's neocortex ratio (the volume of the neocortex divided by the volume of the rest of the brain). This suggests that group size may have evolved by the significance. When the human neocortex ratio of 4:1 is plotted on the curve drawn with the above data, a group size of 150 persons is predicted. Large group workshops have been convened with participants numbering in all three of these ranges: 30, 1000, and 150. Each could be said to have a unique 'personality', but the indices of effectivity would have been similar.

Of additional interest are reports that excavations of the earliest farming villages in the Near East (around 5000 BC) have suggested that the inhabitants numbered around 150. This also happens to be the figure for villages of horticulturists of our day, in the Philippines, Indonesia, and South America.

Striking similarities between this kind of village life and an effective large group workshop comes from a film produced by the Brazilian cinematographer Joaquim Assis, *Ô Gente, Pois Não*. Documenting life in a horticulturist-size village in north-eastern Brazil, it illustrates almost every feature of an effective large group workshop. It is a mistake to interpret this evidence for a 'back to nature' movement. It is more valuable as evidence that human groupings already have within them a being-together wisdom which, if not interfered with, may serve the necessities of the group and the species.

4. As far as I know, the first time Rogers used this concept in print was in a journal article when he referred to 'person-centeredness' (Rogers, 1955).
5. 'Innovative learning' is opposed to 'maintenance learning' which is 'the acquisition of fixed outlooks, methods, and rules for dealing with known and recurring situations . . . the type of learning designed to maintain an existing system or established way of life'. Maintenance learning is essential to the continuation of much of civilization's infrastructure (Botkin, Elmandjra and Malitza, 1979, p. 10). Maintenance learning reinforces the values of the system it is designed to maintain and ignores others.

When values are in conflict, learning opportunities are present. For this reason values are called, 'the enzymes of any innovative learning process' (p. 40).

6. Although part of this final solution contained the well-established custom of a committee appointed by the larger body, this was not done, as is usually the case, to relieve the larger group of cumbersome discussions. The group had already heard the various sides of the problem and had experienced the 'loss of time' and circular confusion of such deliberations. Rather, the committee was formulated out of respect for the boy, so as not to paralyze him in a confrontation with a large and formidable group of adults. At the same time the committee truly represented those who felt strongly for each side of the dispute. Thus, it was a genuine confrontation of the group, not merely investigative. As the large group had thoroughly participated, it did not (as often happens in parliamentary bodies) have to cross-examine the committee's findings or second-guess its conclusions.

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