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Grounded Encounter Therapy: Its Characteristics and Process

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ABSTRACT

Grounded Encounter Therapy (GET) is a sociodiagnostic and sociotherapeutic approach for clinicians applying sociological knowledge to problems that are lodged in a social context. It is a process of encounter which allows for the discovery of essential facts and explanations grounded in the social context of the client. It allows for a creative interplay between research, theory, education and practice to produce knowledge and courses of action. It helps clients discover, determine, understand and decide on a plan of action for problem solving and for growth. This article describes the basic philosophy and some of the techniques of GET.

Introduction:

Grounded Encounter Therapy (GET) is one of the few sociodiagnostic and sociotherapeutic techniques available to Clinical Sociologists for the application of sociological knowledge to help clients to change. *The Practice of Clinical Sociology and Sociotherapy* (Swan, 1984) provides an extensive discussion of Grounded Encounter Therapy. While this approach is useful for clinicians at both micro and macro levels of intervention, it is particularly useful for those who apply sociological, social psychological and criminological knowledge, understanding and methods to problems lodged in a social context.

The *social context* refers to all of the human systems related to the presenting and real problems of the client. Included in this social context is the nature and character of the social milieu that determines (and dominates) the interpersonal and interactional patterns of the clients.

The *milieu* is the specific setting that has been created by the coming together of particular individuals in that setting, as they have tried to fit their

actions and lives together. Thus, the social context includes both the individuals and their habitual patterns of interaction, as those patterns are affected by their past history together.

If therapy is to be effective, this social context must be understood by the clients and the sociotherapist. Decisions that produce behavior have a social context. They are not solely the consequence of personality or of the unique participants in the interactions. Behavior is best understood within its context, and most human problems are best understood by looking at the clients-in-context, rather than at primarily psychological processes within the minds of the clients.

A sociotherapeutic approach allows for Grounding. Theory and therapy are "grounded" when we allow both the problems, their explanations, and the strategies and techniques for treatment, to emerge from an Encounter. Encounter is the process through which the parties are engaged in a process of social interaction in which disclosure and discovery lead to an understanding of the social context out of which the problems emerged. Grounding and Encounter, therefore, stand in contrast to more psychotherapeutic approaches which assume a definition of the nature of the problem. GET, which allows the problems to emerge along with their explanations and implicit ways for change provides a more powerful and constructive way of solving human problems, because it permits both the problem and the solutions to emerge from the interactions and understandings of the clients. The sociotherapist assists the clients in probing for information (data), in developing understanding (theory or explanations), and in deciding about new courses of action (therapy or change.) To do this, the sociotherapist must have a good understanding of relevant social theories and social processes, as well as an understanding of how to use them dynamically in the Encounter.

As a sociodiagnostic and sociotherapeutic approach, GET: a) defines a process, b) establishes the relevant content, c) generates theories and explanations, and d) provides for appropriate strategies for intervention. It is a dynamic approach which provides for creative interplay among research, theory, education, and practice. The sociotherapist brings to the process insights, understandings, and knowledge about human social behavior in groups. The therapist also brings a variety of techniques and strategies for grounding the content of the social context. This social context, in turn, is discovered in the encounter with the clients, with the aid of interpretation and situational analysis. Clients are equally involved in the process through their presentation of facts, interpretations, and meanings.

Grounding the social diagnosis is a way of collecting relevant data. As the clients and the sociotherapist encounter the social situation, and each other, data are collected, from which emerge problems, explanations of the problems, and possible directions for problem resolution. The focus is primarily on the social

situation of the client. Therapy is thus grounded in the social diagnosis and the explanations of the social system which come from the encounter between individuals, the social milieu, and the human interactions involved in them. The course of action to take, relative to the social situation and its difficulties, also emerges from the grounded encounter. It is the grounding of the theory which provides the guide to actions to be taken; the utility of the therapy stems from the definition of the problem emerging from the clients own presentation of information about the social context and the difficulties involved in it.

In contrast to psychotherapeutic approaches, which impose a theoretical explanation on the clients' problems, GET is more a process of discovery which permits the explanation of the problem to emerge. Because the therapy is always grounded, it eliminates the need to search for the type of therapy suitable to the individual's problems. Thus, there is no issue of which therapy is best for a given problem, or which therapies are most effective. The therapy that is suitable, best, and most effective is the therapy that is grounded in the theories (explanations) that emerge from the data and knowledge generated about the context of the problems through the encounter process. The same problem may have a different context for different clients, and hence would be treated differently. This is one of the advantages of treating problems within their own context. Grounding allows for quite specific knowledge about a problem to be discovered and applied. The application of general knowledge to a problem and its solution violates the relationship between the scientific (sociodiagnostic) process and the application (sociotherapeutic) process. For example, what we know about family violence should not necessarily be the knowledge used in treating a case of family violence. The knowledge to be applied comes from the process of discovery about the problem and its context. (See Figure 1).

The Process of Grounding and Encounter

Grounding, as a scientific and practical process, requires:

- 1) Confronting the social context of the clients, designating the social situation and the milieu of the context, and encountering the clients: within the situation, with each other, and with the sociotherapist;
- 2) Interpreting and analyzing the situation and, thus, verifying the apparent and the real problems and difficulties;
- 3) Connecting the emerging explanations and meanings with the situation of the client; and
- 4) Devising strategies for therapy.

This strategy is necessary if the theory and therapy are to have direct utility. Figure 2 illustrates this process of grounding, and Figure 3 illustrates how theory and therapy are developed for direct utility.

After deciding to see the clients, the Sociotherapist should talk with each

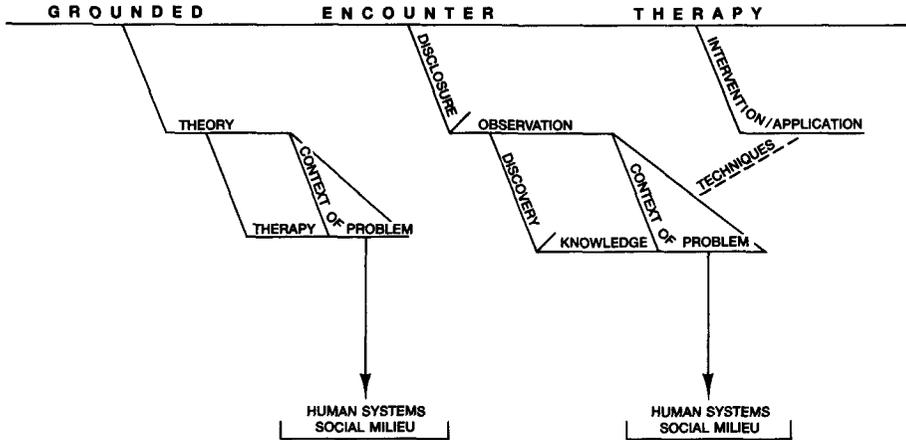


Figure 1.

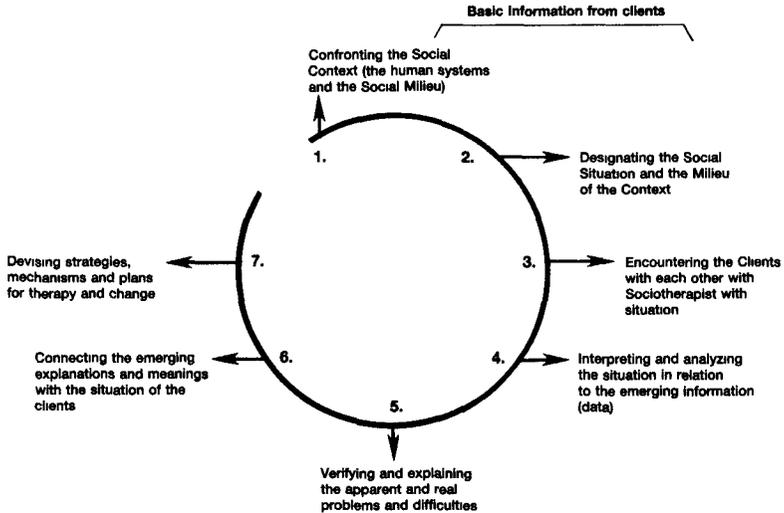


Figure 2
THE PROCESS OF GROUNDED

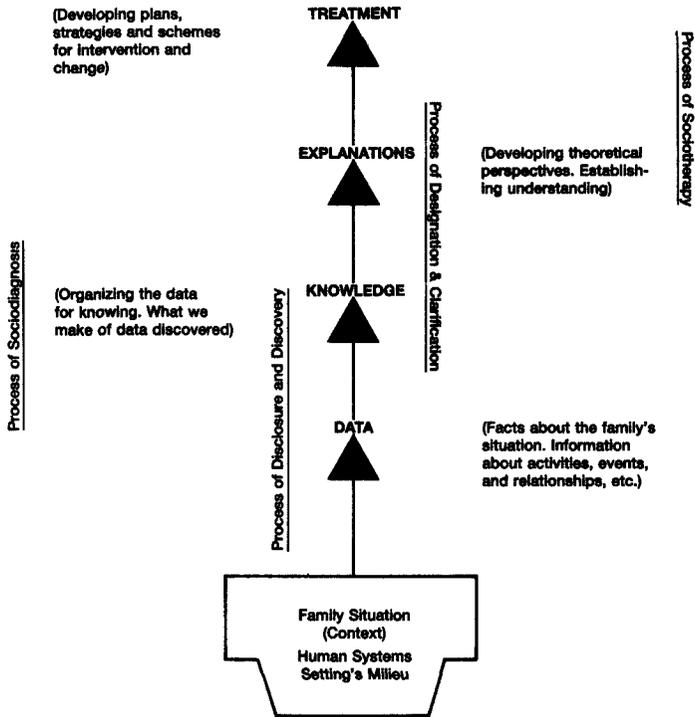


Figure 3.
GROUNDING OF THEORY AND THERAPY FOR DIRECT UTILITY

individual separately before starting the group session. Each client should be told how the sessions will be conducted, and how the client is to be involved. After this explanation, clients are invited to provide feedback. If the clients are comfortable with the approach, the encounter process is started by the Sociotherapist.

Often the encounter process is a learning experience for clients who become

involved in discovery of self, others, and their social situation. In many cases, they experience a degree of impatience with the process, and the Sociotherapist may be tempted to hurry them through without allowing them to make the necessary discoveries. If the encounter process does not help the clients identify their problems, then it has not been successful. In an effective encounter, the human systems become aware of both presenting and real problems as they emerge. The Sociotherapist does not identify them for the clients. The Sociotherapist may confirm the emerging insights of the clients, particularly when the clients are reluctant to recognize what has emerged. It is neither scientific therapy nor practical intervention to attempt to apply sociological knowledge to problems which have not emerged and been clearly identified in the process of the encounter.

During the encounter process, clients speak directly to each other on a face to face basis. The Sociotherapist starts the process, and intervenes a) when there is a point to emphasize, b) when the process breaks down momentarily, c) when something emerges which is important and requires collective agreement, or d) when there is a need for interpretation, analysis, or the assigning of meaning. The intervention takes the form of questions to either individual clients or the entire group, and requires a response on the part of the clients. Clients often report problems and difficulties they think they are experiencing. In many cases, they are partially correct. However, in GET, the sociotherapist helps the clients define the social context of the problems and difficulties they are experiencing. This ability to engage clients in defining their own problems and situations is crucial to the whole process. It engages the persons involved in social interaction for discovery and understanding.

Every problem has its own context. This is the primary context for diagnosis and treatment. However, there are also secondary contexts which are important in the sociodiagnostic and sociotherapeutic process. Care must be exercised to keep the problem in its own context and to manage multiple realities. To do this, the Sociotherapist raises questions about the alarm the client raises about the problem, the clients indication and designation of the problem, and the concern expressed about the clients definition of the problem. Examples of relevant questions raised by the sociotherapist include, "In what way is it a problem?," "How does it manifest itself as a problem now?," "Who are the actors in the situation out of which the problem emerged?," and "What is being done that attempts change, but does not achieve it?."

Resistance by clients is usually a way of managing until joint-action is established. When clients are invited to provide an understanding of their problem and their situation through definition and interpretation, they develop a sense of involvement in the process of discovery. This process of discovery, in turn, involves everyone in the social context of the problem and in the design and acceptance of solutions. Clients will assist or resist the process to the extent

that they feel they are part of it. The total picture comes from the encounter, the interpretation of the data, and contextual analysis. Usable knowledge for problem solving comes from both traditional, professional knowledge and ordinary, common sense knowledge. Therapy is grounded in explanations (theories) which are grounded in the data produced through social diagnosis. (Figure 3).

The sociotherapist must have the ability to engage the clients in the encounter, in the interpretation, and in the contextual analysis which clarify presenting and real problems. But once the parties are engaged, there is hardly any need to point out the problems and difficulties. The clients are able to do this themselves. The sociotherapist, however, must be able to see where there are blockages, and then help shift the responsibility for change, growth, and progress, from the therapist to the client. There are, of course, blocks to the determination and resolution of the problems. However, most problems within human systems and milieus are available to understanding and knowledge, if enough attention is given to study, research, and experimentation within the social context of the clients. Therapy is the process of doing and changing in the direction of knowledge achieved in the process of social diagnosis. A sense of self, others, and the situation is crucial to success in GET.

Solutions are rarely presented directly. Rather, they are discovered by the clients as they encounter and answer questions put to them by each other and by the sociotherapist. In this process, all parties are forced to think about themselves, others, and their social situation in ways they might not have considered before. By answering (actual and hypothetical) questions about themselves, others, and the social situation, clients unwittingly begin to see things differently. Clients tend to become rigid and resistant when designations and prescriptions are imposed on them, i.e. when they themselves discover alternatives they are more likely to act upon them.

Social scientists and clinicians tend to overestimate the importance of scientific knowledge, and to underestimate the usefulness of ordinary knowledge which comes from common sense, casual empiricism, thoughtful reflection, and creative observation. Because of this, there are serious gaps between social science theory, research and social realities. Knowledge to be applied in clinical settings comes from a combination of scientific methods and common sense. The grounding of therapy in the social context of the client implies that everyone and everything that are implicated in the social situation must be taken into account as understanding, explanations, and strategies for change are discovered. Knowing the social context of individuals, marriage, family, group, organization, industry, community and society allows for the emergence of new understandings of clients problems and hence for new therapies.

Goals and the Basis for Change in GET

The real goal of GET is to try to get clients to be responsible for changes. Clients must be patient enough to go through several sessions for the process to work effectively. At the outset, clients want to see and experience progress. Clients should meet with the sociotherapist several times a month and perform assigned tasks when they are not meeting with the sociotherapist. The assumption is that they are stuck, and need the sociotherapist's help to become unstuck. The encounter allows clients to gather, organize and analyze information essential to formal decision making. It also allows them the opportunity to develop the ability to work together for the demanding and often frustrating process of finding ways to get unstuck in their interactions and relationships.

The process leads to clients changing their views and behaviors. Basic to all individual and situational changes is the exercise of clients' choice. Choice is a decision or selection of action for which one should accept responsibility. However, choice is not made in isolation. A choice is made within the context of a set of values, norms, experiences, circumstances, conclusions and dispositions which the individual has acquired and assumed. Even though the individual has to be responsible for the choice made, the client often needs help in determining the nature of the choice, and the settings and conditions within which it is made and grounded.

Human beings are not determined by their past. Childhood processes do not predestine the future behavior of the human being. We are more than Pavlovian dogs who have been conditioned to respond to particular stimuli in a particular manner. Furthermore, we are not simply products of our environments and conditioning. Rather, the future holds the clues to who we are and what we are in the present. Where we are, and where we are going, is the most important dimension of the human self and the human personality. We are heavily dependent on what we choose to become. While some persons are confused, distraught, and emotionally unbalanced, most demonstrate dynamic personalities and wholeness of selves. When human beings decide to commit themselves to becoming new persons, they move towards fulfilling their lives.

Choice and Change in GET

Human beings have the ability to make choices that have the potential to transform their situations and themselves. Through these decisions, they are empowered to become whole persons. The past influences the options from which we can choose, and our background and personal history may limit what we become. However, we always have options; there are always alternatives from which we can choose. Ultimately, we are deciding beings with the freedom to will our own futures. While choices may be limited by situations and circum-

stances beyond our control, the ability to choose is always there, and is the basis for behaving, changing, and going on. Human beings behave on the basis of choices rooted in their social experiences. But the psychosocial orientation of human behavior means that choice and behavior are individual and unique to individuals. Experience is lodged in group life; individual choices are the result of a set of social experiences, influenced by group life, but nonetheless individual. Consequently, the individual must be understood through the experiences in group life which provide the social context for individual choices and resulting behavior. (Social experiences—Choices—Behavior.)

Choice is the basis of habit and establishes its strength. After the strength of habit is established, the habit gains independence from the choice(s) that established it. Therefore, changing behavior is very difficult when it has become a habit independent of the choices which established it. Nonetheless, behavior can be changed when we understand and focus on its context for intervention and application of knowledge.

When we help clients explore their situations, their problems, and their alternatives, it is important to remember that the situation and the problems are the clients'. They belong to the clients. We can use our skills and insights to be as helpful as possible, but the clients have to disclose, discover, and decide what to do. The clients own the problem. Letting them participate in discovery and in being responsible for their own problem allows them to gain and/or maintain respect in the sociodiagnostic and sociotherapeutic process. Clients should not be allowed to become dependent on the sociotherapist. By letting them own their own problems, we help them to become more confident, more capable, and more responsible for dealing with their own lives. They also become responsible for establishing joint action with others in their situation. In joint action, the concern is less with who does what, and more with what needs to be done and who is available at the time to do it. While it is preferable to have the person best suited for the action do it, if that person is not available, the task or function will need to be assumed by someone else.

Human beings develop a construction of reality by giving meanings to people and things. When individuals assign a meaning to something and act in accordance with that meaning, they are likely to behave in predictable ways. We interact with others on the basis of the meanings we attach to them. Individuals usually treat the meanings they give to people and things as objective facts. This process is referred to as reification (for example, our country is the best in the world, or work is honorable). We attribute a meaning to something and act in accordance with that meaning, and treat it as if it actually were fact. Social meanings are not objective facts. An understanding of how individuals learn meanings and how meanings shape behavior can facilitate change in meanings and redefinitions of the situation. This, in turn, helps Sociotherapists to help clients act in ways that are liberating. (Berger and Luckman, 1966, Blumer, 1969.)

The sociotherapist helps clients to understand themselves and their situations, to see their options clearly, and to become aware of their capability for making decisions that will transform their despair into hope, their sadness into joy, and their confusion into peace.

Basic Characteristics of GET

Human group life consists of people interacting with one another. Because they live within a group, people must necessarily fit their actions to the actions of others. It is the very nature of group life that members are embedded in a social situation (context) created by the actions of others. Meanings are socially created. Individuals respond to situations in individual ways based upon their own interpretations of reality.

The basic philosophy of GET is that real change in behavior and action is a result of voluntary action. The assumption in this sociotherapeutic posture is that the individuals or clients are entangled in a situation or behavior that they find undesirable, poorly understood, or undetermined. Once determined and understood, ways to change the behavior (or situation) will be sought. Change will either be made voluntarily (individually) or with assistance (collectively). Social diagnosis and therapy are grounded in the discovery, designations and interpretations of the social context of the clients.

What the individual and/or situation was is in the present. Nothing is meaningful, well understood, or changed without a context. Each problem has its own context in time and space. The context in the past is not the context of the problem in the present. The focus is on methodological principles for discovering essential facts about the context of the presenting problem and real difficulties and problems. The information and explanations that emerge through encounter for grounding the facts discovered results in effective sociotherapeutic actions. Goals, then, include assisting clients to gain a grounded understanding of the problems, and to decide a plan of action for growth, enrichment and change. A specific goal is to help clients develop by establishing a process for examining, determining and interpreting their behavior and their situation so they may make appropriate decisions and take appropriate actions.

The context of the setting is the basis for fully understanding the problems and difficulties faced by individuals in group life. Therapy must, therefore, be grounded in the reality of this social context. Clients and sociotherapists encounter each other and the social situation; the problems and solutions emerge. Consequently, the perceptions of everyone and everything that are implicated in the reality of the context are taken into account and explanations are sought and actions devised. The sociotherapist functions as a facilitator, implementing contractual agreements and behavioral procedures. When the contracts are completed and the behavioral programs implemented, therapy is terminated. When

an understanding is achieved and explanations are discovered, social diagnosis ends.

A wide range of techniques are used to help the therapist and clients determine, discover and plan. Clients and therapists participate equally in this, as data emerge through confrontation, encounter, dialogue with polarities, role playing, role taking, sociodrama, simulation, contextual/situational analysis, and the use of sociodrama. These techniques may be used in a wide variety of applications.

Conclusion

GET is a sociotherapeutic process in which explanations of presenting and real problems are derived from what is discovered in encounters and situational analysis of human systems and the particular milieu or social context. The sociotherapist and the client encounter this context, and changes are based upon what is discovered. Grounding takes place when this methodological approach is employed.

Once the presenting and real problems are discovered, interpretations and explanations are exchanged and synthesis of perspectives is attempted. Objectives for change are set and a contract is negotiated. Engineering these efforts and handling resistance may require modifications in treatment, switches in assignments, or changes in the tasks. Changes are monitored and impact is assessed before transfer of control and responsibility is made, although the clients always own the problems. Follow-up and termination end the social intervention.

In GET the sociodiagnostic and sociotherapeutic processes are interrelated, Theory is focused on the context of the problem, not merely on the problem itself. Explanations that emerge about the specific problems are grounded in the contexts of the clients. The process involves collection of data from clients about their situation, their explanations of the data, and the treatment of the problem. This permits the designation of the presenting and real problems, interpretation and assignment of meaning to the situation, and devising of strategies for change. The primary focus is on the context of the problem, not on the individual or group presenting it. There is a theoretical perspective drawn from the science of human social behavior, but GET does not predetermine the nature and character of the clients problem. These emerge from the process of discovery in the encounter. While many different techniques are used by the sociotherapist, they are all aimed at helping the client to discover the client's problem in the context of the social situation.

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