

1900

Medical Film Institute of the Association of American Medical Colleges

Type of Film: Report

Classification: MEDICINE
PSYCHOLOGY
PSYCHIATRY
Child Psychology
Psychotherapy

ACTIVITY GROUP THERAPY

16mm, black-and-white, sound, 1817 ft., 50 min.

Year of Production: 1949-50; Country of Origin: U.S.A.

Author: S.R. Slavson, Director of Group Therapy, Jewish Board of Guardians, New York; Sponsor: Nathan Hofheimer Foundation; Producer: Campus Film Productions, New York; Camera: Nat Campus.

Distribution: Columbia University Educational Films, 413 West 117th Street, New York 27, N.Y., Sale: \$150; Rental: \$10 (first day), \$5 (second day), \$2.50 (additional days.)

Accompanying Material: A study guide is under preparation.

General Statement: The film shows in a general way the indications and selection of cases for Activity Group Therapy and, by means of concealed cameras, records most impressively the set-up and conduct of the therapeutic sessions and the personality developments of a group of emotionally disturbed boys which take place during the treatment. Although the effectiveness of the therapy is strikingly proved its theory and practice are not adequately explained. On the other hand, the film provides excellent and unique material for the psychomorphological study of various types of personality disorder.

Audience: Psychiatrists, psychologists, psychiatric social workers, medical students. Interpretation by someone familiar with the technique of Activity Group Therapy is essential.

Content Description

In an introduction, the narrator emphasizes the impact which environment and personal contacts have on the development of the child's personality. On the screen, children are shown in their bewilderment as the adult world crowds in on them. Some of the personality problems which arise during the complex process of growth are described and briefly depicted. The question of treatment for such personality disorders leads to consideration of Activity Group Therapy as a means of improving emotional maladjustments by allowing children to work with one another under the guidance of a permissive adult. The choosing of a balanced group of maladjusted children for one such work group is re-enacted by the actual psychiatric case workers involved. A psychiatrist is consulted in a difficult case. Boy by boy, a group is chosen, with particular attention to three who are to be followed more closely in the film: Bob, who is excessively aggressive; Albert, who is withdrawn and a latent schizophrenic; and Henry, who is introverted, antisocial, and suffering from anxiety hysteria.

The group chosen is to meet in weekly sessions; in six out of sixty-five sessions, all of their activities were recorded by hidden cameras and microphones. From the complete film records of these six sessions, representative scenes have been chosen to show the group's progress. The therapy room is shown with its work benches, tools and recreational equipment. The therapist lays out the work materials for the session. The boys arrive singly and in groups and explore cautiously, depending on the therapist for stimulation and guidance. Henry, the withdrawn boy, arrives late and is allowed to stand apart and watch silently. After some time, he ventures to play with a ping-pong paddle and ball; eventually, he hides in a packing crate and only emerges at refreshment time. Albert is very late - he minces about, cautious and shy, attentive to his appearance, feminine in mannerisms. Bob is active and barely able to concentrate on any one activity for more than a moment. The instructor emphasizes his permissiveness by allowing the boys to dawdle before refreshments and before leaving, without censoring them.

During the fifth session, the boys are at the peak period of their aggressive development, smashing the equipment, forcing the cabinet locks, ransacking the shelves and creating as much disorder as they can. The therapist interferes when the disorder becomes dangerously violent and closes the session. At one of the frequent supervision conferences, the group is reviewed by the directors who decide that while the group's hyperactivity was a normal part of its development, Robert had shown such severe aggressive tendencies that he was proving dangerous to the group. Bob, on the other hand, although aggressive, is not considered disturbing to the group's progress. It is therefore decided to remove Robert and to replace him by an introvert.

Session eighteen reveals development in the various boys. Henry is now associating more freely and joins the group in constructive work. Bob, who has previously been censored by the group for his aggressiveness, now sticks close to the therapist, as do many of the boys, who are manifesting transference rather than dependence.

Session twenty-nine reveals further evidences of change in the boys and a more definite pattern of group behavior. The boys unlock the cabinets and they themselves prepare for the session. Albert is wearing dungarees for the first time and working with hammer and saw. He stands up actively to Bob's aggression, as does Henry. The boys plan a trip on their own. For the first time they use profanity, climaxed by Bob's telling a dirty story. The group decides Bob has gone too far and threatens to wash his mouth with soap, but gives him another chance when he promises to bring firecrackers.

Session thirty-eight is a picnic, part of a series of field trips which expand the group environment. Henry and Albert play baseball and manifest increased masculinity.

ACTIVITY GROUP THERAPY (Cont'd.)

In session sixty-five, the final session shown, Bob has leveled off and is now quiet and orderly. Albert moves with improved coordination and masculine assurance. Henry manifests self-confidence in his posture and bearing, meeting Bob at a common level. Orderliness and maturity in the entire group is evident at refreshment time.

A recapitulation of representative scenes from the entire film accents the development of Albert, Bob, and Henry, and a view of each of the boys, now aware of the camera, emphasizes their healthy response to group therapy.

Appraisal

Content: This film attempts to show, in a general way, the indications for Activity Group Therapy; how those cases considered amenable are chosen to participate; the manner in which sessions are carried out; and, with actual examples, how effective such therapy can be. The main body of the film is straightforward, made up of actual footage, interpreted by a narrative account of the group's progress, with particular emphasis on three boys. The physical set-up, conduct and results of the sessions are exceedingly well brought out, and in this respect, the film is a splendid source of information. However, it is not clear from the film how the personality developments are actually accomplished. The concepts and practices of therapy by group interaction are indicated in a few introductory titles but are not explained. How is it possible, for example, to change Henry so fundamentally within seven or eight short months, merely by having him play with other children? The play of these youngsters is of course not uncontrolled; but the role of the therapist, as he hovers quietly in the background, is not analyzed. The narration mentions that the therapist is permissive, helpful and, on rare occasions, supervisory; a few examples of his intervention are shown and pointed out, but he appears predominantly passive. What is going on behind his apparent passivity and what factors determine his decisions to become temporarily active are not discussed. He may represent a kind of super-ego whose authority is exerted subtly and sparingly but is none the less there. His passivity is probably a deliberate attempt to avoid raising in the boys, by overt attentiveness, unconscious fears of homosexual seduction, which would have caused the boys to reject him. The fact that the therapist's capabilities must be of a very high order is implied, but is not manifest in the film. Similarly, no explanation is given of the rationale for the premature closing of the fifth session, in which the aggression of the boys reaches a climax, nor is it indicated how they reacted to this measure and to Robert's removal. Another question which is left uninterpreted is the part which the prepubertal changes occurring during the treatment played in the remarkable metamorphoses of these boys. It may well be that some of these natural changes were not only counted on but even turned to the therapist's advantage. In any event, the question will present itself to the discerning audience at which the film is aimed and would have deserved mention of some kind.

Presentation: As far as the main body of the film - the record of the sessions - is concerned, *Activity Group Therapy* is an outstanding example of the technique applying concealed film cameras. The boys' activities were covered by three hidden cameras (one of them operated by remote control.) A complete sound film record of the six sessions was made, from which the present film was selected and edited with great skill. The visual treatment is astoundingly fluid for this type of motion picture, thanks to the multiple camera set-up and the alert and sensitive way in which the boys were observed. The cameras smoothly follow the group as a whole, as well as the interplay between individual boys, or the behavior of a single one. Sometimes, a striking detail is viewed from different angles, providing optimum observation. The visual impact is not paralleled by the recording of the boys' conversations which are mostly unintelligible; yet in many places the poor sound reproduction proved as an asset,

since most of what the boys said was actually irrelevant and might have diverted the attention from their action. And in any event, most of the sound track is taken up by the narration. Much in contrast to the superior visual reproduction of the sessions are the scenes depicting planning conferences. These are reenacted stiffly and artificially and suffer likewise from poor sound recording. Even so, the use of the actual participants in these scenes is preferable to that of overpolished and unconvincing actors. On the other hand, the effort to achieve authenticity was carried to an extreme in the decision to use the boys' actual first names. Had either Bob or Robert, who have similar problems and look alike, been given a different name, some confusion could have been avoided.

Effectiveness: This is an extraordinary film which not only impressively portrays the personality development occurring under the influence of Activity Group therapy but also gives convincing, objective proof of the efficacy of a psychiatric treatment method. Yet because of the facility with which the striking personality changes are apparently wrought, the seeming passivity of the therapist and the missing information on the theoretical and technical aspects of the treatment, there is a danger that unqualified persons might try to copy the method and inflict damage to the patients. However, much that is not fully developed by the presentation, such as the therapist's role, becomes clearer on repeated viewings. Because of its intensity of observation, the film has a tremendous touch of real life. It offers fascinating material for psycho-morphological study and for seeing the changing of personalities not observable in such clarity in any other way. From the psychiatric point of view, excellent study material is also provided by the balancing of the group with children representing effeminate, withdrawn, hyperactive, depressive and schizophrenic types.

Utilization

The use of this film should be strictly limited to professional audiences, including psychiatrists, psychologists, psychiatric social workers and medical students. An expert in the theory and technique of Activity Group Therapy should be present to provide the technical information not included in the film. Since such experts are not available everywhere, a study guide for the film would be a necessity. (It is under preparation.) In the meantime, film discussion leaders and those interested in this therapy may wish to consult S.R. Slavson's books, An Introduction to Group Therapy (Commonwealth Fund, New York, 1943) and Analytic Group Psychotherapy (Columbia University Press, New York, 1950). The complete film record of the six therapeutic sessions (see above) has not yet been released.

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Reviewed by a Medical Film Institute Panel