

## A CRITIQUE OF THE *COUPLE COMMUNICATION* PROGRAM

*by William Elder*

American society in the late nineteen forties was fertile soil for the Sensitivity Training, Self-Awareness, Personal Growth movement to take root and flourish. After a brief period of euphoria following World War I, the country was plunged into a depression in 1929 that lasted through the 1930's and was brought to an end only by World War II. That war led to more difficult years in the form of shortages, rationing, sorrow, and hard work for the war effort. With the end of the war in 1945, people were ready to look for something to make life richer.

In the summer of 1946 a leadership development workshop was held at State Teachers College in New Britain, Connecticut. By chance one evening participants sat in on a staff meeting in which the process that had been taking place in the groups was the subject of discussion. Participants joined in the discussion, and "the open discussion of their own behavior and its consequences had an electric effect both on the participants and on the training leaders."<sup>1</sup> Out of this experience grew the Training Group, a group in which there is no given structure or agenda except to experience the process of interaction as a group. This was found to be an opportunity to better understand one's ways of relating to others, communication patterns, emotional needs, ways of

relating to power, etc.

Spurred by this development there has emerged a broad spectrum of studies, groups, activities, and techniques aimed at some aspect of enhancing interpersonal effectiveness and enjoyment.

One such activity is a program called Couple Communication, "an educational program designed to improve communication between partners (married, friends, colleagues, living together, etc.) by focusing on the process of flexible and effective communication."<sup>2</sup> The program has been exported and translated into several languages and in recent years has come to Japan as part of a package provided by a computer dating service company.

With the many programs on interpersonal communication already in existence, one might question the need for one aimed specifically at couple communication. Could not a program in interpersonal communication in general help a couple communicate more effectively? Is there something about the relationship of a couple that calls for special communication skills?

I participated in the instructor training program in the United States in 1979, led groups there, and became a Certified Instructor of the program. After coming to Japan, I have led similar programs for Japanese couples ranging in age from the early twenties to mid-sixties. I have seen both the strengths and weaknesses of the program. This paper will be a critique of the program based on my own experience.

#### OVERVIEW

The program consists of a series of four three-hour sessions, preferably spread over a period of four weeks.

There is also a preliminary session, called the "maxi-contract interview" in Couple Communication terminology. This is to acquaint the couple with the overall content of the program, to find out whether the goals of the program match their needs, and to explain what will be expected of them in the program.

Briefly each session can be summarized as follows:

#### Session #1

1. Introducing the concept of an "issue"--"anything which concerns one or both partners, implies choice, and has implications for day-to-day living and/or personal/relationship growth."

2. Presenting the "Awareness Wheel," a paradigm for showing the various dimensions of awareness one has as he/she relates to a particular issue.

3. Presenting the concept of responsibility in communication by making "I" statements.

4. Practicing making statements which disclose one's various dimensions of awareness.

#### Session #2

1. Identifying one's perceptions of the partner's awareness through asking open questions--a process called "checking out."

2. Practicing a listening exercise called "shared meaning." (This is similar to what is often called the "Active Listening" exercise.)

3. Learning to set procedure (ground rules) for talking together about an issue.

### Session #3

1. Presenting four types of communication styles.
2. Practicing communicating in Style #4, which is called a "committed style." (This is the "here-and-now" communication style that is emphasized in all interpersonal groups.)

### Session #4

1. Showing how the different communication styles pull on each other, and practicing to clarify this.
2. Presenting the concept of self-other esteem (similar to the four positions presented in the popular Transactional Analysis book, *I'm OK, You're OK*), and practice in communicating from an "I count me, I count you" position.
3. Presenting and practicing how to establish a "mini-contract," which is a consciously stated agreement to work at communicating on a particular issue.<sup>3</sup>

Whether the concepts presented in the program grew out of empirical data or whether insights prevalent in the many activities within humanistic psychology were brought to bear on the needs found through studies of couples in communication, I do not know. It is true, however, that insights of Rogerian counseling, Gestalt Therapy, Transactional Analysis, and the many kinds of Awareness and Growth Groups are seen in the program. In fact, one would be hard pressed to find any new insights about interpersonal communication in Couple Communication. Its contribution lies in organizing these insights and focusing them on communication between partners.

### TERMINOLOGY PROBLEMS

Though I basically appreciate the communication skills

taught in the program, I think some of the terminology can lead to misunderstanding. This is particularly true in their explanation of the Awareness Wheel, which is basic to the program. They speak of five dimensions of awareness: Sensations, Thoughts, Feelings, Intentions, and Actions.

I find that the dimension of Sensations (They sometimes use "sensing," also) is open to misunderstanding. It is intended to refer to the objective data we experience through our five senses. However, "sensing" is sometimes understood to mean that which one intuitively feels (especially in Japanese, where the most obvious translation is kankaku, or for "sensory," kankaku teki), and that is just the opposite of the meaning intended here. Furthermore, while they make much of being in touch with the "raw sensory data" taken in through our senses of sight, touch, sound, smell and taste, they make no mention of data taken in through reading the printed word or hearing verbal messages. Yet these, too, are basically sensory data, even though the sensation is almost always immediately followed by an interpretation (Thoughts). For these reasons, I prefer to use the term "data information" for this area of awareness.

Also, "intention" can be misleading since it is really used to mean "what you want or wish in a situation, or what you would like to have happen." This is not the usual meaning of "intention." Something like "wishes" or "desires" seems more straight to the point. In fact, they sometimes use "Wanting" for this dimension of awareness.

The fact that different terms are used to refer to the same concept does not improve understanding. I have found it necessary to revise and unify terminology used in this basic part of the program.

### TIGHTLY STRUCTURED: CONTENT ORIENTED

I have a more serious criticism, however, of the basic educational approach of the program. The first thing that strikes anyone who has experience with process-oriented, experiential learning groups is how tightly structured it is. It is true that in some aspects the program is consistent with the stance of humanistic psychology. It places emphasis on the need to practice the skills presented (Just hearing is not sufficient). It recognizes the efficacy of immediate feedback on one's behavior from group members. It respects the freedom of members to choose whether to practice a skill before the group and whether to ask for feedback. However, overall I must conclude that its basic educational approach is content-oriented rather than process-oriented, and to me that means that it is not really person-centered.

To say that thorough directions for what to teach and how to teach it are given in the Couple Communication Instructor Manual is an understatement. For example the agenda format for Session #1 tells the instructor to take 20 minutes for introductions and explains a technique to help participants get acquainted and learn each other's names. This is followed by 10 minutes allotted to introducing the term "issue" which will be important throughout the program.

About a page and a half in the Manual are devoted to telling the instructor what to say and how to say it during this 10 minute presentation of "issue." To quote a brief portion:

Demonstrate what issues are by having the group brain storm a list of 10 or 15 current issues that group members are experiencing.

- a. Ask group members to volunteer their issues (concerns) from the day. Don't be critical--just write down what people say on newsprint and save the list for use later.
- b. Try to elicit a wide range of issues (topic, personal, relationship; light, heavy). You might add a couple of issues from your own life, too.
- c. Tell group you and they won't be resolving these issues in the group. Rather you will be helping them to learn a process and skills which will enable them to deal with these kinds of issues by themselves.<sup>4</sup>

Instructors are told to follow these minute directions carefully. This can be seen as a strong point in the program. With such minute directions, almost anyone with any experience at all in teaching can lead the program and attain a certain degree of results. The content is sound. If it is presented cogently and practiced as directed, it should be of some value to participants.

I think this strength is outweighed, however, by the weakness of being content-centered rather than person-centered. The program has a certain amount of information to be imparted and skills to be practiced. The way the program is set up and the way instructors are told to teach it, it becomes somewhat like a steam roller once it begins to move. One activity leads to the next, and each must be done within an allotted time. This inevitably means slighting attention to individual needs, if not completely ignoring them.

One issue always present in groups on interpersonal relationships is that participants may understand all the words of a carefully presented concept and still not grasp its

implications for their own attitudes and actions. People need time to ruminate in groups like this. Furthermore, people do not achieve insight at the same speed. If one assumes that the purpose of the program is not just to increase one's knowledge about communication between partners but to digest such knowledge so that it becomes a part of one's repertoire of interpersonal skills, it behooves the instructor to be flexible enough to wait for and walk with the participants in this process of digesting.

Another factor that calls for flexibility in the program is resistance to the program itself from participants. The program is particularly susceptible to this because some of the skills, when isolated and practiced, seem so artificial or trivial. A participant who brings some emotional resistance to the program will block here. True, the "maxi-contract" is intended to thwart this, but in reality I have found that there is always someone present who is not completely committed to the program. Granted that resistance usually stems from some problem between the partners themselves and the Couple Communication program is not the place to delve into such problems. Still, if participants are not committed to the program, little can be expected of it. The instructor needs to deal with resistance in some way. That is the "here-and-now" reality of the group. There may be several ways to do this, but ignoring it and following a pre-determined program is probably not the most effective way. It certainly should not be the only possibility open to the instructor.

#### NEED FOR A RATIONALE

The rationale behind developing (or participating in) a



specifically couple oriented communication training program is relegated to a six-line paragraph in the preface of the textbook, and there is no allowance made for dealing with this, or questions concerning it, during the training sessions themselves. The program and the accompanying textbook are heavily "how to" oriented and seem to assume that everyone understands "why." Yet the reality is that people often come with a question, usually unvoiced, about why such a program is necessary. They may come because the partner wants to attend, friends recommended it, or just because it sounds like a good thing to do. Their question of why may not be an important factor at first, but if left unanswered, it can lead to the kind of passive resistance mentioned above.

There are good reasons why a specifically couple-oriented communication program is needed. It is ironic that communication is often most difficult with the person about whom we care most. Yet it is just because that person is so important to one that communication is difficult. "Couple" implies a relationship on an emotional level. It means that the two people have some emotional investment in each other, and that investment can get in the way of communication. It is easier to be objective, to listen to opinions different from one's own, to take feedback or criticism, or to argue rationally with a person whose approval and acceptance is not so important to one. Open, honest communication always involves some risk, and we sometimes hold back from such, settling for a lesser degree of communication and intimacy, when we feel we have so much to lose if anger, conflict, or some other chasm were to open up between ourselves and our partners.

To suggest that a couple needs to work on communicating

more effectively does not mean that they are not emotionally committed to each other. On the contrary, it is the emotional commitment, the emotional importance of one to the other, that sometimes hampers communication. An explanation of this would prevent some resistance and would help encourage people to attend the program.

Couple Communication has some good techniques for clarifying issues and avoiding getting trapped in the emotional quagmire that strangles communication. Some of the techniques are quite simple. In fact, some seem too simple to be taken seriously unless one understands the problem a couple's emotional involvement can cause for communication. (An "Active Listening" response, for example, can raise the irritation level if suddenly sprung on a partner in the context of a heated discussion. Hence the need for the preliminary steps taught in this program.) If that is understood, the reason for practicing the techniques becomes clear, and the practice is more readily acceptable to people who like to know why they are being asked to do what they are being asked to do.

#### USE IN DAILY LIFE

I have encountered some resistance from participants in the course of the program because it all sounds so intentional, so artificial, so pedantic. Even if they learn to identify and verbalize their perceptions, feelings, desires, actions, etc. clearly, how does that relate to the real life of a couple? "It feels funny to always be doing that." I have to agree with these people, and I take time to deal with the question, though it is not included in the agenda.

Complete, open self-disclosure is an unquestioned good

in the value system of the program. For example, in the section on Self-Disclosure in the textbook it is stated that disclosing your feelings, your intentions [sic], and your future actions can be risky, but that when you disclose these things, you are giving your partner important information about yourself. Then the following imaginary incident is given as a model:

Carl and Barbara are sitting on a dock with their feet dangling in the water. Carl says to Barbara, "There is something I've never told you. When I'm with you, I feel excited and happy. I love you. And I feel afraid right now about how you're going to react to all this, but I want you to know how I feel."<sup>5</sup>

One can well imagine Barbara saying to herself, "How thoroughly open--and how dully transparent!" If Barbara cannot tell that Carl feels "excited and happy" when he is with her, something is wrong. The fact is that in daily life we do not go around explaining our every feeling, desire, plan, or perception to our partners. A certain degree of mystery in a couple's relationship adds spice to their life together. Sometimes we like to be understood and/or accepted without having to explain our inner workings. In fact, sometimes we may feel that the issue is just not important enough to go through the steps to achieve deep understanding; we are willing to settle for less and get on with the flow of life.

To be fair, it should be stated here that in informal conversation or aside comments instructors have said that, of course, no one would use these techniques all the time. However, this sensible attitude is not seen in the structure of

the program not in the materials. It would seem to me a more desirable approach to set the program in its proper place in the ongoing life of a couple.

I think the program does have great value in helping couples communicate more effectively. When one of the partners has an issue or concern that he/she wants to discuss carefully, when partners seem to be talking past each other, in general, when one or both members of a couple senses that something is wrong with their communication and needs attention, the insights of Couple Communication can be helpful in analyzing what the problem is, and the techniques taught in the program can be helpful in remedying the situation. There are times when communication between partners calls for conscious, careful attention. Then this program has something to offer. I see it, however, as something like medicine or vitamins rather than daily fare for living.

One other concern I have is the implication that if a couple is faithful to the techniques taught in this program they will no longer fight. Communication will all become logical, clear, and intimate. That is obviously absurd. It is also unhealthy. The ability to fight is important to a healthy emotional relationship. In their best-seller, *The Intimate Enemy*, Dr. George Bach and Peter Wyden state that "verbal conflict between intimates is not only acceptable, especially between husbands and wives; it is constructive and highly desirable."<sup>6</sup> It would be tragic if a couple who attended this program and tried hard to put its concepts and skills to practice in their daily life ended up feeling like failures because they still had fights.

## EFFECTIVENESS

How effective is the Couple Communication program? As with all programs aimed at enhancing interpersonal skills, it is difficult to get an objective measure of its effectiveness. Testimonials (and the lack of them), however, do give us some indication of effectiveness. Some couples have reported a definite improvement in their communication, others have a vague impression that it may have helped them, and others say nothing. To my knowledge no one has reported a detrimental effect from the programs I have helped lead.

My impression is that the effectiveness depends largely on how much both partners are existentially committed to the skills as tools to aid their communication. Do they see the skills as just "something good for people who like that kind of thing?" Do they see themselves as too sophisticated to stop the flow of their communication and humbly go through the simple skills learned in the program? Or are they sufficiently convinced of the efficacy of the skills to go through them step-by-step when they are needed?

The above questions bring us back to the point raised earlier concerning a content-oriented versus a process-oriented approach. Participants who have had the time and opportunity to voice their objections, embarrassment, and questions are more likely to take the results of their study home with them as their own treasure. Also, the meaning of Couple Communication in the total life of a couple will probably be clarified in the course of such discussion.

I am sure that those who designed the agenda of the Couple Communication program feel that every concept, every skill, is important. There is so much to present in a limited time. If time is taken to give attention to people's anxieties,

resistance, and questions in order for them to get a real sense of ownership of their study, some content will have to be sacrificed. In my opinion, if participants become committed to the program and get a grasp of the main skills, they will quickly understand the others and will have the tools necessary to help their communication when it is in trouble.

#### NOTES

1. Bradford, Leland P., et al., *T-Group Theory and Laboratory Method*, p. 82.
2. Miller, Sherod, et al., *Alive and Aware*, p. 285.
3. Nunnally, Elam W., et al., *Couple Communication Instructor Manual*, Chapter 5, pp. 6 - 48.
4. *Ibid*, Chapter 5, p. 8.
5. Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 72.
6. Bach, George R. and Wyden, Peter, *The Intimate Enemy*, p. 17.

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