

# COLLECTIVE

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The existence of a group for practitioners is an integral part of what we do as Radical Psychiatrists. Indeed, we do not believe that anyone can define herself as a “Radical Psychiatrist” unless she belongs to a collective.

Collective is a group of peers, which is to say that all members have equal rights. Decisions are made by consensus. Members are committed to take seriously each other's feelings and ideas, and to work consistently toward equality. While equality is the objective, we are also very clear about the ways in which we are not equal. Some of us have been practicing for twenty years, others have begun leading groups within the past year. Some of us have been the teachers and therapists of others. Some of us are older. Some collective members depend entirely on Radical Psychiatry for our livelihoods, while others have credentials and jobs in institutions. Still others have separate sources of income. These ways in which power differs are important to identify. But our goal is to share power at every opportunity, and to avoid abusing the real power we have (see Chapter 1).

## **BAY AREA RADICAL PSYCHIATRY COLLECTIVE**

Those of us leading groups in and around San Francisco meet weekly in the Bay Area Radical Psychiatry Collective (BARP). BARP is a place for us to continue to work on ourselves, our own on-going problem-solving group. At this writing, there are ten collective members, most of them leading groups or working in allied ways in a variety of agencies.

Meetings follow our standard cooperative plan (see Chapter 4): We choose a different facilitator each week, we make a timed agenda, we start with check-in, held feelings and paranoias, we do our business and (ideally) we end with strokes. We meet for three and a quarter hours, and sometimes we run short of time and stint on strokes — not a good idea! It is evident in all progressive and pioneering work, and especially in the “helping professions,” that the world at large is not generous with appreciation. Money is one medium for strokes in our culture, but we are committed to charging the lowest possible fees for our work. While clients may be warm and overt in their appreciation of our work, often their work itself supersedes our need for strokes, and it rightfully should. We are there to help them, not vice versa. Moreover, strokes from group members, while very gratifying and helpful, are nonetheless different from strokes from peers. Collective members know everything about us, all our faults and fears and problems. Strokes from them are especially empowering.

The agenda in Collective meetings has three parts: business, group work and personal work. Business consists of announcements of meetings, or new books, or interesting articles, or anything else of general concern. During group work we present questions about our practices, getting concrete help figuring out how best to help our clients. Access to this sort of “consulting” is invaluable. Each member of each group has the benefit of ten sets of experience, multiplied geometrically by the magic of creative collective thinking. Occasional discouragement and self-doubt is part of the work; to be nurtured by nine other people who know exactly how you feel and don't in the least share your down moment is an extraordinary experience.

The third part of the agenda is our own problem-solving group. We present our personal problems and get help in exactly the same way group members use group. The fiction that “shrinks” are supposed to have worked out all their problems before they “graduate” is part and parcel of the mystification of alienation. That expectation is in itself intensely alienating for therapists. It is no wonder that they have one of the highest suicide rates in the country.

## COLLECTIVE DYNAMICS

I have said that the objective in collective is to work toward equality. A common mistake we and other counter-culture, egalitarian groups have made is to confuse a desire be equal for the thing itself. As I have noted, all sorts of differences exist within BARP; indeed, it is precisely those differences which often make things challenging and interesting. Some of those differences have no impact on the distribution of power in the collective (like the fact that some of us are “old-time Marxists” and others are “New Age mystics” ), while others are highly significant (some of us oldtimers have larger and older practices, and therefore more referrals, than others who are newcomers).

Over the years, we have struggled hard with each other and learned a lot about power. The forms we use (held feelings, paranoias, strokes) have helped, because we have a common language for talking through problems. But they are not in and of themselves always sufficient. For while we are in agreement about those with power sharing it with anyone who is ready and willing to take it, in fact that process of change is often not smooth. It can be fraught with hard feelings, power plays, suspicions and anger on both sides of the power divide. Often both taking power and giving it up are more like hard labor than a stroll through a flowery meadow.

What especially complicates an already difficult process is the fact that we are a small community, and that ex-teachers and therapists co-exist in a peer group with ex-students and clients. We challenge every rule of “professional distance” held dear by more conventional practitioners, because we truly believe that people who come to problem-solving groups to work on themselves are often extraordinarily talented practitioners, and that good group leaders tend to be people with a wide variety of life experiences.

Often a shift in power inside collective accompanies a joint work-project, like the running of a teaching Institute.<sup>1</sup> These shifts often appear first as interpersonal conflicts. One person becomes angry at another who is scheduled to make the most interesting presentations. She has worked hard at the administrative tasks, and wants a greater share of the public glory. On the other hand, the presenter has done this same workshop for years, and it is very popular. People coming to the Institute want to see her “perform.” She contributes to the problem by harboring some doubts about whether her colleague is experienced enough yet to do the hard work involved in this presentation.

Hurt feelings and anger usually arise from some group problem, which can be unraveled and agreeably solved with careful and disciplined attention from the group as a whole. Our tendencies to “blame” others, natural at the outset of a struggle, need to be quickly corralled into more self-critical and analytic modes. Several techniques help us in this process: our use of Held Feelings and Paranoias, our ability to facilitate meetings, our analysis of power, and our rules about gossip. (Information that is second hand must be assumed to be distorted and should be checked out with the originator; anything that is third hand or more should be ignored, because the distortions are likely to be so many.)

Conflicts can be hard on the heart. What makes them worthwhile, aside from the “idealistic” values of trudging ever onward toward greater equality and a richer group, is the material basis for our unity: our shared practice. To cast the necessity for “struggle” in terms of moralistic values is a mistake; as important as they are, those values are rarely sufficiently motivating by themselves to carry the day. If resolution is not achieved, people will leave feeling doubly guilty, or self-righteous, or defeated, or angry.

On the other hand, we have real and concrete reasons to work difficult things through. Not only do we earn our livings from our joint endeavor, but we share very strong principles which we are enacting in the world. Sometimes, in the midst of a conflict, our reasons to be together become blurred. It is always helpful — both enlightening and inspiring — to remind ourselves of what they are.

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<sup>1</sup> For many years we have held an annual Radical Psychiatry Summer Institute, a three- or four-day event that’s part teaching workshop, part community gathering, part conference for thinking through ideas.

Most of the time, though, we are not fighting. One of the most thrilling of group dynamics on the other side of the ledger is the experience of creative, collective thinking. Our weekly agenda is usually crammed with urgent questions and work, and we rarely have the luxury of time to talk through new ideas. Periodically we hold an all-day meeting, or go to the country for a weekend retreat. We invite trainees, and we have the pleasure of “making new theory,” or raising questions and spinning off each other's ideas and experiences to come up with new formulations. These discussions, too, can become competitive; we try to stay on top of our tendencies to be argumentative and over-exuberant. In general, however, some of my most thrilling times in collective have come in the course of these sessions. It is very, very rare to have the experience of a cooperative discussion of ideas which matter dearly.

Another invaluable element of collective is the opportunity it affords us to share information. Often my colleagues know something about members of my groups. They have worked with them before, or encountered them someplace else in the community. It is very common for people who know each other, who are lovers or roommates or co-workers, to be simultaneously in groups with different leaders. To pool these views of people is an enormous asset. Most clients in therapy are without a context. The therapist sees them in the most unreal of settings, in isolation from their ordinary lives. That view has great potential to distort the therapist's way of thinking about her clients (see Chapter 14). To hear about a love affair, or a fight, or a joint project from the point of view of another participant is highly enlightening. That information advances people's work in groups enormously. Our practice of “consulting” each other in this manner is very controversial among therapists. We value the beneficial results of shared information highly over more conventional habits of “confidentiality.”

Collective is one of the most concrete and striking ways in which Radical Psychiatry is different from many other forms of therapy. So integral is it to our conception of our work that it is difficult even for practitioners with twenty-years' standing in the community to imagine leading problem-solving groups without it.