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BY RONALD SHORT, PhD

THE EYE OF “I” THE EVOLUTION TO FIRST-PERSON SOCIAL SCIENCE

“If we see things differently, we see different things.”

It has been 43 years since I attended my first two-week T-Group (training group), an experience that shaped my career, my personal and intellectual life. The last empirical article about the impact of the T-Group on participants was in 1997,¹ but participants were not the only ones affected. After leading hundreds of groups, writing articles and three books, and creating the LIOS Skill-Group and, more recently, the Awareness-Group, I look back on how the T-group has changed me, our profession, and set the direction for the future of our discipline.

Because I now see things differently, I see different things.

The T-group was a crucible that challenged normal, third-party, “objective” science and opened us to a parallel world—a reality that is so close, intimate and obvious that it is invisible to most of us most of the time. Because we keep this world hidden, we unknowingly participate in, and are carriers of, a highly contagious, and sometimes fatal, *Socially Transmitted Disease* (STD). Join me to discover what I mean by this.

Do You See What I See?

IN THE NEWS . . .

In court, the mother of a 14-year-old who knocked a bus driver unconscious blamed the driver. And on a facing page, before Congress, the ex-CEO of Washington Mutual blamed the Government for his organization’s failure.

When he alerted the administration about his overly candid comments to a reporter in a *Rolling Stone* article, Gen. McChrystal said, “It should never have happened.”

After apprehending the “Times Square” terrorist in 53 hours, the minority leader of the House said: “The American people would prefer an Administration that kept this from happening in the first place, rather than bet on luck.” (Half the nation cheered. The other half said, “Duh?”)

When talking about the partisan politics in government, President Obama talked about Congress. He did not use the pronoun “we.”

CLOSE TO HOME

At one point, the LIOS graduate faculty enacted the STD among ourselves and threatened program cohesiveness in the process. This is informative because, like the hypocritical preacher, it is natural for professionals to assume: “Since I understand it, teach it and help others do it, I must *ipso facto* be doing it.” No one gets a free pass. Nobody is exempt. In fact, beware when you teach this. Teaching “Others” is a great mechanism to hide from yourself.

CLOSER TO HOME

My wife Jan was with me when I was backing up and was hit by another car that was also backing up. Angry, I muttered, “She didn’t look!” And much to my chagrin, Jan gently pointed out: “Sorry. But you didn’t either.”

Or my latest example: Skye, my 5-year-old grandson, was stomping around with a frown, clenched fists and angry. Said his frustrated mother: “Skye, have a positive attitude.” His response, pointing to his 9-year-old brother: “I have a positive attitude! He’s the one who doesn’t.”

CLOSEST TO HOME . . . SPREADING STDs

Are you, like me, upset when you read about the others blaming others while not noticing that *you* are blaming *them*?

Of course we are justified to blame the blamers because they were blaming, right?²

STD in Action

So do you see what I see? Nobody seems to cause anything. Someone or something, an “It” outside of us, does stuff *to* us. “It’s not me—it’s her, him, them. . . .”

We then leave our heads and vault into theirs to infer why they did it. This frees us from our responsibility and to spread the disease by agreeing with others who agree with us.

Of course, those blamed reciprocate. They make attributions, generalize, moralize and, at times, demonize us. Our self-christened “innocence” blinds both of us to our part in the drama that we are mutually co-creating.

That’s what makes this a *social* disease.

Whether with one other person, or between groups or nations, the combination of innocence plus “It” is doing its thing to us and creates a very predictable pattern and outcome. Here is a hypothetical illustration.

BEGINNING

On a typical evening in Seattle this cold May, you would have found my wife wrapped in a throw covering a heavy sweater and blouse, watching the news. I’d be in a short-sleeved shirt, plotting how I could sneak up to the thermostat to turn down the heat when she’s not looking.

Rather than sneak, I courageously declare, “You’ve got ‘It’ way too hot! I’m turning down the heat.”

“No! Don’t you dare! It’s cold.”

MIDDLE

We’re now in the dance of “It”s: “She . . .” “He . . .” “It . . .” “You always . . .” “You never . . .” “You don’t. . . .”

(How cold was “It” really? A thermometer would tell us. But so what? I’ve tried using that metric several times to prove her wrong—but it only makes things worse.)

END

You know where this ends. We find ourselves down a rabbit hole accusing each other. We’re both upset that the other is upset, and we attempt to change the other so we won’t feel upset.

Now notice. My original problem has vanished. The temperature doesn’t have to change. *Jan* does.

Now if I become aware, there is a Jan who may need to change. However, she is likely the emotion-driven one I am creating in my head. You know the one I mean—the Jan who “doesn’t understand . . . or care . . . or wants to bug me. . . .”

Do you see what I see? Awareness makes me accountable.

The Tyranny of “It” Without “I”

We have evolved beyond the findings of Julian Jaynes.³ Because of his consuming interest in human consciousness, he turned from behavioral research in the rat laboratory to study ancient writings. The evidence led him to conclude that prior to approximately 1200 BC, gods told us what to do when in a crisis. There was no “I.” No self. No morality. No deceit. No choice. Gods spoke. We heard. We obeyed.

We are more sophisticated about most things now. However, when we focus solely outside, we’re still “commanded” by many “It”s, which are the events, others, and situations that are doing stuff *to* us. We react, respond and obey “It.”

Without self-reflection and self-awareness, *we* are innocent, *we* are not responsible—“*It*”s are.

*The ONION*⁴

NEWS IN BRIEF

Wife Always Dragging Husband Into Her Marital Problems

HOUSTON—Banker “Rob Boy” Grelman expressed annoyance with his wife Janet Monday, saying she consistently involves him in her marital problems. “Every day, it’s ‘Oh, God, I’m married to someone who doesn’t understand me’ or ‘Bob, do you think you could pick up after yourself?’” Grelman said, “Don’t get me wrong—I have marriage problems of my own—but I don’t know what she wants me to do about hers.” Grelman added that his children, following their mother’s example, have lately attempted to drag him into their family problems.

This tendency is a huge distortion because inside, behind our eyes, *each of us is the creator, the author, star, producer, director in our very own personal drama. We are actively ascribing meaning to, and are responsible for, our interpretation of what we see outside.*

When we allow the “It” to dominate, we do so at our own peril. We not only misperceive others, we lie to ourselves.

“I” in the Social Science Laboratory

Self-awareness is the answer to the tyranny of “It.” However, in traditional third-party science, the effect of “I” (feelings, judgments, beliefs) must be omitted or minimized. This assumption was inadvertently challenged in a social science laboratory a number of years ago.

In August 1946, the Research Center for Group Dynamics conducted a workshop to train 50 leaders to deal with interracial tensions. The days were designed for role plays and conversations. The evenings were for the researchers and trainers to go over the raw data of what happened during the day.

Three participants stopped by one evening and asked if they could come in and observe.

At one point, the trainer and researcher had different observations about a participant. She became very agitated when the researcher and trainer were discussing her. “That wasn’t the way it happened at all!” Later, others also disagreed with the researcher’s opinions. Debriefing the day’s work sessions at night became the most significant training event of the day.⁵

Do you see what I see? A whole new world opened up to scientific inquiry. The relevant research questions became: How can we understand *this* meeting, *these* relationships, in *this* specific context, *here*, *right now*?

Participants became researchers. Researchers became participants. Rules changed. Thinking changed. Language changed. “I”—first person singular—entered the social science laboratory.

Different perspectives, opinions, feelings and ideas were openly expressed. The authority of Harvard and MIT scientists was challenged. Individuals learned to trust their own authority. The laboratory was no longer organized by “It” but “I,” “we,” and how we impact each other here and now.

The T-group and laboratory education were born.

The Evolution and Emergence of “I”

The T-group (training group) was at the core of the LIOS competency-based graduate program. Over the years it has been modified, with each change increasing the awareness of the “I” world.

(Small “I”) In the initial **T-Group**, students sat in a circle facing other students and a faculty member. Contrary to their expectations, they were not given a task or agenda. Nobody outside of themselves told them what to do. Their faculty refused to “lead” and primarily gave theory and observations during and *after* experiences took place. The primary learning focus was a fascinating look “under the waterline”⁶ at how the group developed in the here and now.

When individuals risked self disclosure of their judgments, feelings and intentions, and they engaged directly with others, the group developed. When they did not, the group stagnated.

(Bigger “I”) After sitting through the foot-shuffling, anxiety-driven “what-are-we-supposed-to-do?” “I-don’t-like-this,” “we-need-a-task,” and “if-the-faculty-had-just-told-us” stage for the umpteenth time, I recall thinking that faculty would be more effective acting as Marine Corp Drill Sergeants, rather than passive listener-meaning-makers. Students didn’t need to fumble around to discover the importance of describing themselves, they could be directed.

Therefore, during a module at Priest Lake in October 1986, **Skill-Group** supplanted the T-group as the core of the graduate program. Students were instructed to be here and now with each other in a fishbowl design while being observed by a colleague. After a very few minutes, the group broke, and participants were given feedback by their observer. The primary learning focus was to learn from others, from different “I”s.

When the participants talked directly to each other to learn from the difference between the impact they were having and their intentions, the group developed. When they did not, the group stagnated.

(Biggest: Eye of the “I”) Building on my experiences at LIOS and influenced primarily by Eckhart Tolle⁷ and Emotional Intelligence⁸ literature, Jan and I have named our most recent modification in our own Learning In Action Technologies workshops the **Awareness-Group**. After identifying their tendencies with our *Learning in Action Profile*, participants interact and are given feedback in a fishbowl design to develop the understanding, the language and the disciplined practice of becoming self-aware in the moment—*the only time awareness and choice can take place*.

The clarity of the purpose is very clear, non-ambiguous and perceived as highly useful. This both empowers the leader and enlists a high degree of commitment from the participants.

Awareness as First-Person Science

The scientific studies about what a particular T-group did to a particular group are no longer relevant. But when we step back from all these years, we can see the immense impact the inadvertent discovery in 1946 has had on us, our discipline, our consciousness and our future.

We have accumulated more efficient methods to bring the hidden, invisible “I” out into the light. When we do, we see things differently. We see that our judgments of the other person are all about us. We see that the only time we can change anything is now. We see that therapy doesn’t fix the past, but it enables us to be present now. We shift from assuming “that’s just me,” to an awareness that “I’m creating me now.” We understand that our task is not to change ourselves, but to notice, name, and become more of who we truly are.

Our myopic Socially Transmitted Disease is highly contagious but awareness is also. As each of us practices the disciplines of becoming aware with others now, we will become the change our clients need. Immunity will spread.

The life expectancy in London during the Elizabethan Era was 25 for the poor and 35 for the more well to do.⁹ Nobody living then could have possibly imagined our current life when bloodletting was the official treatment for the “Black Plague.” What made the difference? Empirical science.

Is it possible that in the future we will look back at our passive acceptance of STD in the same way? Julian Jaynes poetically described the intimate, hidden world that has opened for us to explore:

O, what a world of unseen visions and heard silences, this insubstantial country of the mind! What ineffable essences, these touchless remembering and unshakable reveries! And the privacy of it all! A secret theater of speechless monologue and prevenient counsel, an invisible mansion of all moods, musings, and mysteries, an infinite resort of disappointments and discoveries. A whole kingdom where each of us reigns reclusively alone, questioning what we will, commanding what we can. A hidden hermitage where we may study out the troubled book of what we have done and yet may do. An introcosm that is more myself than anything I can find in a mirror. This consciousness that is myself of selves, that is everything, and yet nothing at all. . . .¹⁰ ■

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Unity grows . . . only if
it is supported by
an increase of consciousness,
of vision.

That is probably why
the history of the living world
can be reduced
to the elaboration
of ever more perfect eyes
at the heart of a cosmos
where it is always possible
to discern more.

– Pierre Teilhard de Chardin
The Human Phenomenon

