The Marathon Encounter Group—Vision and Reality: Exhuming the Body for a Last Look

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The marathon group, touted in the 1960s and 1970s as a near-miraculous massed-time tool for accelerating true encounter with self and others, emerged as one form of the human potential movement with the power to influence both individuals and organizations. A melding of aspects of group psychotherapy, sensitivity training, and encounter groups, it suffered the fate of a technique grown too popular too fast without the tempering effect of sufficient scientific examination to slow its runaway expansion into a full-fledged social movement. This article combines a look at the history, development, growth, and near-disappearance of the marathon with the personal experience of the author of one of the two first dissertations on the topic.

In the spring of 1967, I received an invitation to attend a special nonscheduled session at the annual convention of the Western Psychological Association held in San Francisco. The informal meeting was organized by two California psychologists, George Bach and Fred Stoller. As the discussion warmed up, Bach, one of the nation's most prominent group psychotherapists, extolled with great fervor the merits of marathon groups. He proclaimed them to be the most direct, the most efficient, and the most economical antidote to alienation, meaninglessness, fragmentation, and other hazards to mental health in our time. Later he jumped to his feet and exclaimed, "Once every teenager has been in a marathon there will be no more juvenile delinquency; once every adult has been in a marathon there will be no more war!"

Wow! It finally had been invented! The panacea not only for all mental health ills, but also for all of society's problems. A great social movement was about to engulf the world and change the course of human destiny! The millennium was just around the corner! And, since in 1967 I was in the process of completing one of the first, if not the first, doctoral dissertations studying marathon groups (Weigel, 1968), I felt like one of the pioneering Apollo astronauts.

A while later, when presenting my research during the Los Angeles meeting of the American Group Psychotherapy Association (Weigel, 1969), I saw that George and Fred were in the audience. At a cocktail party at his home that evening, George introduced me around to his guru group-psychotherapist guests, glorified my work, and transformed me from a newbie to an instant insider. Later, well into the evening and after too many drinks and far too much second-hand pot, Fred even suggested the two of us write a book about marathons. Talk about heady! And me with the ink hardly dry on my diploma.

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This article is based on the author's presidential address to the Division of Group Psychology and Group Psychotherapy (Division 49), presented at the 109th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, San Francisco, CA, August 2001.

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What was a marathon group back then? Are they still around? Most of you have some idea, but for those who may not, let me fill you in on their core features. A marathon group has nothing in particular to do with Boston or with the dance craze of the 1920s. No, a marathon group is a therapy or encounter group that extends beyond the typical 80- or 90-min session for an extended, continuous period of time: perhaps 18, 24, 36, even 72 hr or more. Such groups are held in a setting away from distractions, where nonparticipants and outside influences won’t get in the way of the process. Unless specified differently, the number of members usually is small, somewhere between 8 and 15 people. The group is structured so that members are in constant contact with one another for the entire period, with little or no sleep. (Individual bathroom breaks are permitted, unlike the rules of the later-appearing est groups.) Most interactions are devoted to members uncovering and expressing their feelings and giving and receiving direct, interpersonal feedback. They focus on experiences in the present—the here and now. There is no other content or subject matter. All of these factors contribute to the marathon group feeling very intense and inescapable—a pressure cooker! A central concept is to use fatigue, confrontation, and intensity, in lieu of alcohol or drugs, to get past defenses and social facades and to bring about open self-disclosure and true encounter with others (Bach, 1966; Stoller, 1968a, 1968b). The marathon forces participants to come to grips with themselves and with themselves in relation to other members. The intimacy and cohesiveness generated by the marathon group make breakthroughs and insights possible that might never have occurred in more traditional groups. By the end, many participants experience the rosy glow of euphoria—a natural high. Stoller felt this excitement and elation was related directly to a feeling that says, in effect, “I have placed myself on the line before others, and they have seen something of me without my usual protection. Not only have I made it through this relatively unscathed, but people feel better about me than I dared hope” (1968b, p. 18).

**Historical Context**

The marathon group represents the combination of three different procedures in the history of applying group process in society. These are group psychotherapy, sensitivity training, and encounter groups. The first to emerge was group psychotherapy. More typically, we begin in the first half of the 20th century with the well-known work of Pratt, Lazell, Marsh, Burrow, and Moreno. The development of the procedures of group psychotherapy has been well reviewed (e.g., Bach, 1954; Corsini, 1957; Gazda, 1968). As psychotherapy groups evolved, they typically met weekly for an hour or an hour and a half. Their focus is to work with patients or clients with traditional psychological problems.

The second procedure contributing to the development of marathon groups was sensitivity training, or the “T” group. This approach was a product of Kurt Lewin’s research group at Bethel, Maine, beginning in 1946 and spreading worldwide as a central program in the offerings of NTL, the National Training Laboratory (Bradford, 1974; Bradford, Gibb, & Benne, 1964). Sensitivity training included principles from group dynamics, from psychotherapy, and from philosophy. They were melded to facilitate learning—learning to use increased sensitivity toward group process, increased awareness of the character of one’s own participation, and increased ability to deal with different kinds of groups in different contexts (Coghill, 1968). Sensitivity training assumed that normal adults could learn these
principles in T groups, take their learning back to their real lives, and become more effective in their personal and work roles. It was not designed for patients with psychological problems but instead as an educational process for the healthy. The learning may be accomplished by having individuals attend a training workshop that continues over several days; a less intense format calls for spreading the sessions over a period of weeks.

The third procedure, the encounter group or growth group, was emerging just prior to and then overlapping the development of the marathon group in the 1960s. Both are included in the broader social phenomenon known as the Human Potential Movement, a period of cultural revolution during which free expression was encouraged (Howard, 1970). Much of the early information about the movement came out of the Esalen Institute at Big Sur on the Central California coast, where concepts based on the principles of Maslow, May, Rogers, Perls, Schutz, and others were being implemented in a variety of workshops. The encounter emerged as perhaps the most influential and studied (Lieberman, Yalom, & Miles, 1973). It is a small group experience with an emphasis on “personal growth through expanding awareness, exploration of intra-psychic as well as interpersonal issues, and the release of dysfunctional inhibitions” (Eddy & Lubin, 1971, p. 627). Schutz viewed members of such groups as being the astronauts of inner space (Leal, 1992).

Carl Rogers had coined the term encounter group and was the most vocal advocate. He originated the approach while working with his graduate students at the University of Chicago and honed it further at the University of Wisconsin in the 1950s. Of all the ways in which dehumanization could be combated in our culture (including new religions, the “back to the land” movement, and communes), Rogers (1966, 1970) saw encounter groups as the most significant intervention. Irv Yalom has cautioned that encounter group is a rough, inexact, generic term that is inclusive of a great variety of orientations and procedures: “Encounter groups go by many names: sensitivity training groups, T-groups, human awareness groups, human relations groups, human enrichment groups, Synanon games, marathon groups, personal growth groups, sensory awareness groups, etc.” (1970, p. 340). Some are spread out in weekly sessions; others may be structured on a massed-time schedule.

Development of the Marathon Encounter Group

The combination and integration of group psychotherapy, sensitivity training, and encounter in an extended time format was the breakthrough contribution of Fred Stoller, the founding father of the marathon group. In the summer of 1963, Fred was a participant in an NTL institute held in Los Angeles that incorporated sensitivity training in a massed-time framework. He was turned on both personally and professionally to the approach and felt that the massed-time technique itself was a powerful contributor to personal change. He and a colleague at Camarillo State Hospital, Ron Waller, subsequently used what they called accelerated interaction group therapy with their patients and reported much success. Soon they applied the process to programs for drug addicts, for school dropouts, and in their own staff development.

As a result of telling his friend George Bach about this innovation, Stoller precipitated the marathon group movement. Bach coined the name marathon group, a phrase with far more pizzazz than the early monikers of massed time-limited therapy, accelerated interaction therapy, time-extended group therapy, and the like. Bach (who had been Kurt Lewin’s research assistant at Iowa before his psychoanalytic training) had experimented with weekend group retreats of a therapeutic nature but found them lacking the intensity of interaction he had an-
ticipated, presumably because group therapy sessions were interspersed with recreational activities. The concept of marathon group therapy immediately intrigued him. Soon after, Fred and George paired up to begin conducting uninterrupted group sessions outside the hospital setting. The first marathon was conducted in a rented retreat home in the Palm Springs desert. In the beginning, both were apprehensive about the potential effects of the approach, worrying that some participants might crack under the pressure generated in a marathon group. That fear proved groundless, at least for them. Indeed, the powerful impact of an experience that focused on intimacy and face-to-face encounter (instead of either exploring or explaining pathological processes, as in group psychotherapy) led to unexpected possibilities for growth and change in the members (Bach, 1970). On the basis of rave reviews from participants, and on their own sense of the importance of what had occurred, they quickly adapted the marathon approach to a plethora of new groups in a variety of settings. By late in 1963, Bach and Stoller were so enthused that they were offering training and even certification for others who wanted to become marathon group therapists, too (Bach, 1967b).

Also in 1963, the concept of time-extended groups was first presented to the psychological community by Wickland, Waller, and Stoller at the meeting of the California Psychological Association in San Francisco. The term marathon initially appeared in a presentation by Bach and Wolpin in 1964 at the American Psychological Association convention in Los Angeles and was again used by Bach, Gibb, Stoller, and Pearson in a 1965 presentation at the Western Psychological Association convention in Honolulu. From this California-based trickle, presentations on marathon groups at national and regional professional meetings gushed to a crest of 24 in 1968 as a rapidly increasing number of group leaders adopted the approach, not only in California, but across the country.

In the meantime, by 1965 these exciting new developments were being highly publicized by the media in Time, Life, The New Yorker, Saturday Review, Family Circle, Psychology Today, Newsweek, Saturday Evening Post, the New York Times Supplement, the Los Angeles Times and on ABC Television. It was through such popular print articles and television that most everyone first learned of marathon groups. The first article in a professional journal was authored by George Bach in 1966. Two dissertations were completed in 1967: Richard Lewis’s (1968) at the University of Oregon and mine from the University of Missouri (Weigel, 1968). Needless to say, our dissertations in Dissertation Abstracts aroused considerably less attention than a fictionalized account of a Stoller marathon group in Jerry Sohl’s (1967) popular novel of the same year, The Lemon Eaters, published by Simon & Schuster. The first professional book devoted to marathons, authored by Betsy Mintz, didn’t appear until 1971, although chapters in edited books had preceded it.

My Own Introduction to Groups

Having mentioned my marathon dissertation twice gives me an excuse to tell you how my own interest in groups and in marathon groups began. My original exposure to any kind of group therapy came in 1959 on the locked psychiatric wards at the Veterans Administration GM&S Hospital in Indianapolis. As a first-year psychology trainee, I was expected to co-lead a therapy group with a mixed assortment of chronic inpatients, in tandem with a tough-minded old ward nurse. She was right out of the 1975 film, One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest, starring Jack Nicholson. The book on which the film was based was written by Ken Kesey during 1959 while he was working as a night attendant at the Veterans Administration Hospital at Menlo Park. The character of Nurse Ratched...
(“Big Nurse”) was modeled closely on a real nurse on the psychiatric ward where he served.

My group experience with my own, similar “Big Nurse” in Indianapolis easily could have driven me away from group therapy forever! Fortuitously, it was more than balanced out during my internship at the University of Missouri Testing & Counseling Service by my exposure to Selby G. Clark, who happened that year to be a visiting psychologist. Selby was from Utah, graduated from the University of Utah, and later was on the faculty at Brigham Young University. It was during that period that he received his training in running process groups, first at the big NTL Institute in Cedar City and later at the Utah State Hospital with William Fawcett Hill, of Hill Interaction Matrix fame. Bill Hill later was codirector with Fred Stoller of the Group Studies Center at the University of Southern California, where in 1970 they launched and edited a new group journal, Comparative Group Studies.

Selby taught, trained, and mentored me in running many process groups as he had been trained by Hill. Today, we’d call them Yalom-type groups. Groups were Selby’s passion: he believed in them. His enthusiasm was infectious, and soon I was looking around for a good dissertation topic on group process and outcomes. Selby saw, and passed on to me, some popular press articles on marathon groups and encouraged me to make them the topic of my dissertation. I was intrigued with this possibility but approached my doctoral chair with some trepidation.

Dissertation Research

In 1965, suggesting a dissertation on anything from the pop culture such as marathon groups was likely to draw ridicule in most stodgy, tradition-bound psychology departments. My doctoral adviser at the University of Missouri, Fred McKinney, dated from the dark ages of a History and Systems text: He had received his PhD in 1931 after studying with Carr at the University of Chicago, the enclave of functionalism. Much to my surprise, Dr. McKinney (we students at Missouri were always Mr. Weigel or Miss Smith) told me that he had become fascinated by the Human Potential Movement and was enthusiastic about my investigating some aspect of it. He would have preferred that I study another new phenomenon of the era called the “be-in,” with its music, flowers, dancing, and touching, but I demurred on that one. He was willing to settle for my running what appeared might be the first dissertation study on marathon group therapy (at least there were none in the literature).

The other members of my committee were not nearly as enthusiastic. In fact, they were appalled and upset by the topic. They didn’t want to risk the department’s good name by being associated with anything trendy or dangerous and were worried that the topic might hold them up to scorn if it hit the press. With great reluctance, they eventually agreed to approve the pioneering study but only after loading it down with a myriad of burdensome protective devices for the participants that would have drawn laughter a few years later. (All this was almost a decade before publication of The Belmont Report and the National Research Act of 1974, which established institutional review boards.)

As but one of many examples, for each of the three 18-hr marathon groups I ran in 1966–1967 I was required to have an experienced licensed group practitioner as my cotherapist. Another psychologist was to observe every minute of all the sessions live, prepared for disaster and primed to instantly phone an on-call psychiatrist who was ready and waiting to promptly whisk away to the hospital any group member who “cracked!” Based on such imposed requirements to protect the department from all potential liability, I ended up with the dubious honor of having to write what at that time was the longest PhD dissertation in its history.
To abstract the research very briefly, my study compared two groups of Oregon State University Counseling Center clients who experienced 18 hr of marathon encounter group therapy, a marathon discussion group that participated in non-self-oriented topical discussions for the same period of time, and a control/contrast group that was tested pre-post but received no treatment. All groups were co-led by a psychologist (me) and a psychiatrist (Al Straumfjord). My dog, Blue, joined us in the discussion group. Group process was assessed using the Hill Interaction Matrix (Hill, 1965) to assure that therapy actually had occurred in the treatment groups. Members of all groups completed the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (Dahlstrom & Welsh, 1960), the McKinney Sentence Completion Blank (McKinney, 1967), and an adaptation of the Jourard Self Disclosure Questionnaire (Jourard, 1964). The results indicated that there were some changes in the direction of positive mental health both in the marathon encounter therapy groups and in the marathon discussion group but not in the control group. Surprisingly, no differences were found between the marathon encounter groups and the marathon discussion group in the amount of change occurring.

Preliminary Support

Coincidentally, Richard Lewis’ dissertation study that same year at the University of Oregon used essentially the same design with couples as the group members. (Although we were completing our studies a half-hour drive from one another in Oregon, neither of us knew of the other’s work at the time.) He contrasted mini-marathon therapy groups, a parallel marathon educational discussion group (but without a dog!), and a control group that was not exposed to a marathon. Using similar mental health instruments to mine, he found nonsignificant trends suggesting that either 9 hr of group therapy or 9 hr of an educational discussion group was superior to no group experience, but he found no difference between the two treatments.

Taken together, the unexpected results of these studies seemed to hint at heresy: that spending time discussing topics in a small group for an extended period might be just as therapeutic as the “holy grail” encounter aspects of the marathon group experience. Could spending a long, uninterrupted time interacting in a small group in pleasant surroundings be therapeutic in itself, regardless of the nature of the group? If so, maybe other group leaders should consider moving ahead with caution, rather than prematurely committing themselves to the encounter activity as the therapeutic agent.

The Marathon Group Movement: Hoopla, Epidemic, Fad, and Cash Cow

Caution was not the spirit of the times. Fanned by even more publicity in the popular press, marathon groups caught the fancy of the general public and of group therapists extraordinarily quickly. For example, Betsy Mintz, a highly respected psychoanalytic practitioner in New York City, became an enthusiastic advocate and, as I mentioned earlier, in 1971 wrote the first book on marathons. She considered encounter groups to be the greatest social invention of our time and felt that of all these groups, the marathon was the most potent form.

On the basis of enthusiastic promotions and sanctions like Mintz’s from professionals representing a variety of orientations (e.g., Interpersonal, Gestalt, Rational Emo-

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1 Al Straumfjord and I subsequently published an article describing Blue’s unique influence on group interaction (Weigel & Straumfjord, 1970). Blue was well-suited to group work: an Americanus Houndus adopted from the Boone County, Missouri, Animal Shelter, he was an award-winning obedience school graduate and a licensed minister of the Universal Life Church, Inc.
tive), the marathon approach spread like wildfire from being therapy, to being the ultimate personal growth experience, to being a full-fledged social movement. Paraphrasing Roback and Abramowitz’s book (1975, p. vii), there were marathon groups where members let it all hang out in one 24-hr emotional bath and groups that could be looked on as the salvation of couples, families, unwed mothers, in-patients, out-patients, police, prisoners, teachers, school dropouts, organizational executives, and drug addicts. There were groups for losing weight and for gaining it back; groups in which members stayed clothed and groups in which they were nude (almost ultimate self-disclosure!); and groups led by trained professionals and groups led by lay therapists and even by peer group members. Thousands across the country participated in marathons each weekend! Marathons became for the moment the fad to end all fads.

Roback and Abramowitz went on to say that all too often, leaders were “zealots whose critical faculties are constricted by their own starry-eyed evangelism” (1975, p. vii). Grandiose claims, extremism, and sensationalism not only were rampant, but became almost the hallmark of marathon group leaders. Slick brochures suggested fantastic cures. Marathons could make you “weller-than-well.” Yalom found claims about the efficacy of marathon group therapy to be mind-boggling:

Eighty percent of the participants undergo significant changes as the result of a single meeting; thirty-six hours of therapy have proved comparable to several years of conventional ninety-minute weekly group therapy sessions; the marathon group has become a singular agent of change which allows rapidity of learning and adaptations to new patterns of behavior not likely to occur under traditional arrangements, etc. (Yalom, 1970, pp. 211–212)

Yalom further contended that “This lack of objectivity and the indiscriminate embrace of the latest therapeutic fads are characteristic of the field of psychotherapy in general, and of group therapy in particular” (1970, p. 212). For leaders to assume that marathon group experiences would somehow produce changes that all other interventions had failed to accomplish smacks of the true believerism that Kuehn and Crinella (1969) felt so characterizes American tradition. As you think about it, wasn’t it naive of some leaders to expect the marathon to do all things for all people—to serve equally well for treating problems of all sorts, especially in the same group at the same time? What all panaceas have in common is the application of a single treatment to the widest possible range of unrelated conditions.

So why did leaders and members flock to marathons? Does anybody think that one remedy can cure all ills? Does anyone really believe, in other words, in panaceas? You bet! Somewhere deep in our own psyches we all dream for miracle cures. People’s gullible willingness to believe the pitch and to buy what is too good to be true should never be underestimated (Weigel, 1998). Social contagion was also a powerful force and compounded the problem. “Everybody” was going to a marathon! The 1969 film Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice, based on the Welles novel (1969), revealed that marathon groups were not only a panacea, but could also be fun and sexually provocative!

Popular demand fed the marathon fad, and the group leaders took advantage of it. Over the years, “to drink one’s own snake oil” has come to mean to fall for one’s own sales pitch. Robert and Michelle Root-Bernstein, in their recent book, Honey, Mud, Maggots and Other Medical Marvels (1997) call this panacea pandering. That is when the results of cures are touted to an ignorant or naive public before the data are in, before the treatment has been validated. In the case of the marathon, to prove their claims, leaders cited popular books, satisfied customers, anecdotal evidence, or their own experience rather than papers published in major journals.
It was an era of excesses. There was evidence of exploitation and rip-offs of group members by a small contingent of marathon leaders. Here I’m referring to inordinately high fees, inappropriately large groups, and what I have called \textit{ tiered group leadership} or \textit{absent leadership}. The terms refer to those leaders who multiplied profits through the practice of conducting several marathons simultaneously in close proximity, leaving training students of varying experience running each group while the primary leader (whose name had drawn the participants) circulated among them every so often. Indeed, Bach (1967a) found that “expert-poor” groups had more disruption, less tension, and less satisfaction than “expert-rich” groups.

What was of greatest importance to some leaders, psychologists or not, was not client welfare but how to squeeze the most money from the marathon while it was still hot before newer and hence sexier approaches captured the market. Maybe they had a premonition of the soon-to-emerge \textit{est} (now named \textit{The Forum}) and \textit{Lifespring}!

It was even more disturbing that a small contingent of marathon group gurus took their fame as license to seduce female group members during or at the end of marathons when their defenses were particularly down and they were most vulnerable to the power of the omnipotent leader.

\textbf{The Research Literature}

Where was the solid research supporting all the individual testimonials and anecdotal evidence from marathon participants’ questionnaires? After the two 1967 dissertations, I naively expected that there would be an immediate flood of dissertations and other empirical research following up, replicating, and examining these and other research variables on the marathon. Given the lag between the completion of dissertation research and the communication of results in \textit{Dissertation Abstracts} or in scholarly journals, it is not so surprising that a flood did not occur immediately. There was still too little professional literature to stimulate others or for them to build on.

As for dissertations, after 1967 there was a 3-year gap before another appeared in 1970. Then their number increased yearly, peaking at 17 in 1971 before falling away. A total of 47 dissertations on the marathon appeared in the 10 years from 1967 to 1976. After that the number tailed off more precipitously. Only four marathon dissertations have appeared in the 13 years since 1988.

The pattern for scholarly research articles followed the expected 2-year lag behind dissertations or presentations and approximately in the same pattern. Beginning with two studies in 1967, the distribution spiked quickly to a mode of 20 articles in 1970, reaching its median in 1974 when 54 articles appeared, and decreased dramatically and continuously ever since. Only 12 articles have appeared in the 13 years since 1988—just one since 1995. Empirical research on marathon groups as we knew them is kaput.

I have extrapolated these data from literature searches I made in 1971 and 1974, Yalom’s 1995 search, and another I conducted this past year. The relatively minor variation in the patterns observed in these searches is attributed on the one hand to our dramatically increased capability to access references since the advent of PsychInfo and other databases; and on the other to the plain fact that for whatever reason, searches performed by hand scare up some references that elude the computer. By the way, if you were to do a computer search on the marathon group, be prepared that a huge number of citations will tell you about what’s been happening at the Marathon (Oil) Group, Inc.!

What did the research tell us? Did it confirm the individual testimonials shouted to the rooftops? Did it confirm the anecdotal evidence from the follow-up questionnaires of participants shortly after their experience? After reviewing the research literature in 1971, I found that there was no real empirical support for long-term positive effects of
the marathon encounter experience. There was some commonality of findings that marathon group process differed as a function of leaders' style and expertise, and that process variables such as group cohesion occurred in unique ways in the marathon. Most of the studies reviewed were confounded by methodological flaws that subjected them to a number of threats to validity. In reviewing the literature again in 1974, I concluded that accumulated outcome research still did not support contentions that marathons produce long-term changes in participants. There was a conspicuous absence of any systematic replication studies. Writing at about that time, Yalom (1973) stated the same thing. The lack of positive results of outcome studies undoubtedly accounts for the drop in scholarly research after the mid-1970s. As George Gazda and his colleagues reminded us 30 years ago, “Backlash against a particular treatment mode can be predicted whenever interest and practice exceeds theoretically-based rationales and solid research support” (Gazda, 1968).

As early as 1972, Kurt Back said “When the research goes, so goes the movement,” and he suggested that the entire encounter group as a social phenomenon was at its apex and moving toward decline. I reaffirmed this position 2 years later in a presentation at the Rocky Mountain Psychological Association titled “The Marathon Group: Requiem for a Social Movement” (1977). By contrast, in his 1973 edition, Yalom had taken the opposite position, predicting that the marathon encounter would be a part of the American scene for quite some time to come. By his next edition (1985), however, he was agreeing that the marathon group had come and gone. Somehow, the marathon had been transmuted into other forms.

It was not only that backlash had contributed to the lessening numbers of individuals seeking to participate in marathon experiences (which resulted in fewer and fewer of them being conducted) or to leaders shifting their focus to conducting different types of groups. George Bach, the remaining cornerstone of marathon groups, had by then diverted his own focus toward intimate aggression and fair fight training (Bach & Wyden, 1970). The half-life of any group intervention is not long. That may be explained by a combination of adaptation-level theory, social contagion, the velocity of market faddism, and changing societal needs. The desire for intense group experiences had not lessened in the public but had broadened and shifted with regard to the type of extended-session group experience people wanted. Instead of encounter, they sought out groups with a greater proportion of education or information, affecting their feelings less than their values and beliefs.

**Back to My Own Time Line**

For all my lamenting the weakness of designs and the lack of programmatic research on marathon groups, I have to admit that my research program didn’t do much to help to solve these problems. Nor did Richard Lewis publish further on marathons after his dissertation. I ran groups regularly and taught the group psychotherapy course. A few of my graduate students and colleagues at Oregon State University and Colorado State University produced research on marathons (Hurst & Fenner, 1969; Uhlemann & Weigel, 1977; Weigel & Corazzini, 1977, 1978; Weigel, Dinges, Dyer, & Straumfjord, 1972; Weigel & Uhlemann, 1975). My own work was focusing, however, on the book about marathons that Fred Stoller and I had planned to do. We visited back and forth during 1969, with Fred leading a memorable marathon group for my colleagues and me at Colorado State. But on July 26, 1970, he died unexpectedly from a massive coronary at age 46 (Hill, 1970). The book, as we had planned it, died with him. Jack Corazzini and I made a half-hearted attempt to resurrect it, but we immediately recognized that
it was Fred’s wealth of clinical experience and his theoretical insights about marathon groups that would have made the book. Jack moved on to other projects (Weigel, 2002). What would have been my portion of the book with Fred ended up coming out as a monograph (coauthored with a doctoral student) reviewing and assessing the marathon literature, which was published in 1971 (Dinges & Weigel) as a whole issue of Hill’s *Comparative Group Studies* (later titled *Small Group Behavior* and now *Small Group Research*).

By the mid-1970s I had become more a critic and social historian of the marathon than a practitioner, as my own interests shifted from the group area to history and systems and then to consulting psychology. I subsequently left the university to join the firm of Rohrer, Hibler & Replogle, Inc. (now RHR International), psychological consultants to management (Weigel, 1988). Although the marathon group technique was used with employees of client organizations by some other consultants and consulting firms, during 12 years with RHR my own experience with marathons was limited to marathon-length corporate strategic planning sessions. These sessions often were just as long and confrontational as marathon group therapy, but they seldom generated even a hint of “the rosy glow of euphoria.”

Since I returned to the university setting in 1990, I have held positions as director of counseling centers and also for 3 years had administrative responsibility for additional student affairs agencies. My teaching has been limited primarily to clinical supervision, with little time for direct clinical practice or research. I occasionally run a therapy group with an intern, a postdoc, or a resident. When I returned to this work I tried to catch up on what had been happening with marathons. My experience was similar to that of Rip Van Winkle when he woke from his long sleep: The landscape had changed dramatically. Marathon encounter groups were almost missing from the literature.

**Recent Developments**

That is not to say that these groups had disappeared completely. As late as his 1995 edition, Yalom pointed out that there were therapists who regularly or periodically held time-extended group meetings, but they were a small minority of practitioners. Although in a relative sense the number of therapists conducting marathons in the 21st century has decreased dramatically, if you surf the Net you will find plenty of Web sites of group leaders who are still advertising and extolling the virtues of the marathon groups of yore. On one such site the leader notes that he was certified to lead marathon encounter groups in 1963 by George Bach and Fred Stoller, and he offers the same certification today through his own institute!

My most recent search of the literature generated articles on the two categories of groups into which Yalom felt traditional marathons had transmuted: large group awareness training (LGATs) and time-extended groups geared to a broad spectrum of special populations. All varieties are included in what are referred to as growth groups.

LGATs have lengthy, massed-time sessions that focus on philosophical, psychological, and ethical issues related to effectiveness, decision making, personal responsibility, and commitment. These issues are examined through lectures, demonstrations, dialog with participants, structured exercises, and participants’ testimonials of relevant personal experiences. Unlike encounter groups, LGATs are less open to leader differences because there is a detailed written plan that is followed with little variation from one training to another. Participants are encouraged to apply the principles and insights toward improving their own lives. The groups I’m talking about are est (and its more recent descendant, The Forum) and Lifespring, both of which use structured activities; involve several hundred or more participants and one
central leader; have specific ground rules of expected, appropriate behavior; and have a distinct dogma emphasizing personal responsibility and high levels of control over one’s own destiny.

Despite these similarities, the two organizations differ greatly in rationale and in process. The Forum, according to Lieberman (1994), relies on an authoritarian leader using the lecture format and emphasizes cognitive restructuring through challenging the participants’ belief systems. By contrast, Lifespring is interpersonally focused and provides mechanisms for interactive experiences that have some similarity to those used in the encounter groups of the ‘60s and ‘70s, but neither of these large, corporate-run LGATs should be considered a true descendant of marathon encounter groups.

Growth groups of a modified traditional marathon nature continue to serve prison and hospital populations, drug and alcohol addicts, and others, sometimes as a part of a treatment process, sometimes in lieu of incarceration. In addition, under one rubric or another, weekend retreats of marathon length are run for a myriad of other special groups. These include, for example, those with eating disorders, community leaders, cancer survivors, family members, incest offenders and incest survivors, those adjusting to divorce, survivors of abuse, and those seeking leadership training or other job-related skills. Such growth groups may or may not have some elements of encounter. Some are run by professionals, others by lay leaders.

The Future

In his chapter in Addie Fuhriman and Gary Burlingame’s (1994) Handbook of Group Psychotherapy, Lieberman wrote that the function of growth groups has not altered over five decades, though their goals and procedures have: “The desire for self-transformation is inexhaustible, begetting a never-ending supply of growth groups based on a common set of processes that are poured into differently shaped and labeled vessels” (p. 551). And for the future? He predicted “new arrangements and new structures . . . representing the same fundamental needs [italics added] for a temporary attachment, mechanisms for self-transformation, and the enhancement of living and relationships”(1994, p. 554).

The marathon encounter group met these fundamental needs for a few brief, shining moments of unlimited optimism. Would the movement have survived longer if it hadn’t sky-rocketed so rapidly and so much out of control? Are its structure and procedures valuable enough for a revival? Will perhaps another Fred Stoller or George Bach emerge to lead the way? Likely not. We are past that point. The marathon group has lost the public’s fancy, which really drove the movement. The marathon group as a useful tool survives. I think that’s enough.

Rather than trying to resurrect the movement, I believe that it is more important for us to learn from the lesson of the marathon—to face head-on what happens when innovative practices escalate rapidly and unchecked into becoming fads and thus outstrip the moderating control of serious and careful research. After all, most of us were trained as scientist-practitioners. The next time around, I hope that we will be able to exert more control over ourselves, and that we can rein in our own wishful thinking, our true-believerism, our greed, and even our egos.

Well, George and Fred, we will never know. There still is juvenile delinquency, but not all teenagers have been in a marathon. There is still war, but not all adults have been in a marathon. Too bad! I wish it all had worked out just as you so fervently believed in 1967. I wanted to believe, too.

References


