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Grounding Anger Management

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One of the things that drew me to grounded theory from the beginning was Glaser and Strauss' assertion in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* that it was useful as a "theoretical foothold" for practical applications (p. 268). From this, when I was a Ph.D student studying under Glaser and Strauss in the early 1970s, I devised a GT based approach to action I later came to call "grounded action." In this short paper I'll present a very brief sketch of an anger management program I developed in 1992, using grounded action. I began my research by attending a two-day anger management training workshop designed for training professionals in the most commonly used anger management model. Like other intervention programs I had seen, this model took a psychologizing and pathologizing approach to the issue. Following this, I sat through the full course of an anger management program that used this model, observing the reactions of the participants and the approach of the facilitator. Following each session I conducted open-ended interviews with most of the participants, either individually or in groups of two or three. I had also done previous research in counseling and social work contexts that turned out to be very relevant to an anger management program design.

In analyzing my notes, several things stood out. One was that the conventional anger management approach not only didn't work particularly well, but it was actually counterproductive because it unknowingly replicated the conditions that my observations and interviews revealed as the key anger variables. Almost all of the participants whom I interviewed expressed close versions of what one participant said when I asked for his thoughts about the experience, "I'm more pissed off now than I was when I started!" Some participants stayed mum during the sessions because they were court ordered and feared a negative report about their participation. Several participants reported feigning buy-in. A few, who had not been court ordered, sincerely bought in. And several, attempting to preserve their dignity, took the risk of pushing back. These approaches paralleled those I had seen in other contexts.

Most participants clearly didn't like the program's approach. When I asked them what it was they didn't like about it, their responses revealed their main concerns, which I termed "Rodney Dangerfielding." For those who are not familiar with him, Rodney Dangerfield was a now deceased standup comedian and later comic actor whose catch-phrase was, "I don't get no respect." What I discovered was that from their point of view, the anger that put them in their current situation was a consequence of the paucity of respect and power in their daily lives which led to "things never going my way." Although they were willing to accept what they viewed as their "fair share" of responsibility for anger situations, they resented what they viewed as the "unfairness" of always being the bad guy when others involved were seen as their innocent victims. The interviews indicated that they thought the program was just one more experience of these things. The extent to which their views were or weren't

accurate didn't change the fact that an effective anger management program needed to address these main concerns.

Knowing this, I developed an eight-week program of weekly 2 ½-hour evening sessions that focused on their main concerns. Before the first session, intake materials indicated that all of the initial participants had been through at least one prior anger management program, although not always completing them. This probably accounted for their glum, apprehensive demeanor at the beginning of the session. To immediately neutralize this, I began by saying, "This program is new. I've never done this before. If you were me, how would you do it?" The participants were taken aback by my question. In a disbelieving tone of voice, one of them said, "You really wanna know?" I replied, "If I didn't, I wouldn't have asked." This opened them up, giving me even more useful data. Throughout the session, participants were very engaged, animated and in good spirits. From that point forward, at the beginning of each session existing participants put newcomers at ease, doing the work of atmospherizing for me.¹

Grounding my approach in their main concerns, I devised exercises that were designed to help participants gain a fuller understanding of power and respect, how they were related, and how the participants could engender more of both in their daily lives. For example, for one exercise I proposed to participants that they think about the person in their lives for whom they had the most respect and what it was about them that made them feel this way. As they gave their reasons, I listed them on a chalkboard. I then asked, "How many of these things do you routinely practice in your life?" The usual first response, said with a tinge of ironic humor was "none." This evoked the laughter of uncomfortable insight. I then suggested, "Do you think this might be related to your problems?" That opened up what I always experienced as a wonderfully "honest" conversation, upon which I could build.

This is merely a brief, partial description of the full exercise. And, it is only one of several participatory exercises that I developed to lead participants to insights about themselves and the way they were managing their lives and relationships, and most importantly, how they could improve that. This approach and the atmosphere of the sessions generated open, animated, productive conversations in which participants dropped their defensiveness and began to seriously consider their own role in their anger problems.

Although the agency didn't have the resources to conduct a conventional evaluation study, and I have doubts about the value of such studies, there were many strong informal indicators of how well the program worked, such as consistently positive participant reviews, participants who chose to remain in the program longer than required—several years in some cases, the high level of enthusiasm and engagement of participants evidenced by the difficulty I had getting them to leave at the end of sessions, and so forth. I think the success of the program demonstrates the power of GT, as it was first depicted in *Discovery*. I facilitated the program for eight years, until my workload dictated otherwise. When I handed it over to my replacement, I shared my model with him. The program is still operational—25 years and counting.

¹ I'm borrowing this term from Glaser, as he uses it in his opening remarks at his problem solving seminars.

References

Glaser, B. & Strauss, A. (1967). The discovery of grounded theory. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.