video interaction

Dear Mom,

I think the commonality in groups is a powerful tool; the trick is to keep it out of reach of the psychiatrists, social workers, and manipulators, and put it into the hands of human beings. I have found that the act of sharing a group to itself is almost always a very tense, potential communal experience. People are surprised to learn that they are not alone in having squeamish reactions to their image on the screen. They are often surprised to learn that they are really saying, or, it may be argued, what they are really saying as opposed to the words they are mouthing.

The only rule I found it necessary to lay down was that the video not become an escape. Frequently people will wish to take the Portapaks out of the room and let other people play with them, or take them home and watch them. I having been using this equipment for over two years now and I still can't bear to see my sniveling pompous self displayed on the TV tube despite this fact.

When I first started working with TV, I naively could not understand the immediate hostility expressed by some of the group members. All of a sudden you are being photographed is immediately displayed on the TV screen, and when I do begin recording, I explain to the people that the images are being recorded exclusively for use by the group and not on it. They them- selves must discover how it is useful to them. The only rule I found it necessary to lay down was that the video not become an escape. Frequently people will wish to take the Portapaks out of the room and let other people play with them, or take them home and watch them. I having been using this equipment for over two years now and I still can't bear to see my sniveling pompous self displayed on the TV tube despite this fact.

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Over the past two years I have had to learn the hard way, that is, by trial and error, that sometimes situations almost always become very tense very quickly. The positive feedback which video offers seems to have the same effect on a group as that which you get providing a microphone at a loud speaker. The video image on the screen is a probe below the surface of a situation. There is a tremendous pressure to be sincere sometimes beyond the bounds of social niceties. Because you are forced to deal with your own behaviour on the screen, it is more difficult to put on an act. There is the desire, especially during the playback, to explain what you are really saying by this or that remark or what you are really feeling.

In the past, the only way a patient had to reveal himself as a living, breathing presence was by being "presented" to a room full of bearded, pipe-smoking geeks in turtle-neck sweaters—a humiliation that no one should have to endure, least of all someone with problems.

Ron Blumer

What Video Does to Groups

1) It solidifies the group. The very act of taping the group puts its members under a common stress and makes for an immediate communal experience. People are surprised to learn that they are not alone in having squeamish reactions to their image on the screen. They are often surprised to learn that they are really saying, or, it may be argued, what they are really saying as opposed to the words they are mouthing.

2) It makes people in the group more aware of each other. We all have our particular bags and video can be used as a weapon to further any particular ends that flesh is heir to. In order to achieve maximum effectiveness video must genuinely be used by the group and not on it. The only rule I found it necessary to lay down was that the video not become an escape. Frequently people will wish to take the Portapaks out of the room and let other people play with them, or take them home and watch them. I having been using this equipment for over two years now and I still can't bear to see my sniveling pompous self displayed on the TV tube despite this fact.

3) video tends to emphasize the emotional as opposed to the semantic aspects of interpersonal relations. Through the lens of a camera you can start at each other, pick up on cues that are normally (for convenience in social functioning) ignored. Face and body language are isolated on the TV screen and become more readily visible. During the actual situation they are equally important but may not be consciously recognized. Thus the video distortion takes place in the direction of what people are feeling rather than what they are saying, or may be. And the video image allows for continual and continuous self examination. My most difficult job was to suppress my own ego. We all have our particular bags and video can be used as a weapon to further any particular ends that flesh is heir to. In order to achieve maximum effectiveness video must genuinely be used by the group and not on it. The only rule I found it necessary to lay down was that the video not become an escape. Frequently people will wish to take the Portapaks out of the room and let other people play with them, or take them home and watch them. I having been using this equipment for over two years now and I still can't bear to see my sniveling pompous self displayed on the TV tube despite this fact.

4) This video acts as a probe below the surface of a situation. There is a tremendous pressure to be sincere sometimes beyond the bounds of social niceties. Because you are forced to deal with your own behaviour on the screen, it is more difficult to put on an act. There is the desire, especially during the playback, to explain what you are really saying by this or that remark or what you are really feeling.

5) Situations always become very tense very quickly. The positive feedback which video offers seems to have the same effect on a group as that which you get providing a microphone at a loud speaker. The video image on the screen is a probe below the surface of a situation. There is a tremendous pressure to be sincere sometimes beyond the bounds of social niceties. Because you are forced to deal with your own behaviour on the screen, it is more difficult to put on an act. There is the desire, especially during the playback, to explain what you are really saying by this or that remark or what you are really feeling.

Even though communal use of the camera should be encouraged as much as possible, in actual practice you will find that the camera most of the time. You must naturally be extremely alert to what is going on. If you come into a situation as an outsider and your camera will be treated like one. Participate in what is going on even while holding your camera.

One of the most difficult decisions to make, especially at the beginning, is when to play back the tapes. I have found it best to wait until something happens no matter how subtle. I tend to play it back and comment on it stressing all the time that I am not part of this; this is just my reaction to the situation and other people, particularly the participants, are welcome to comment. After several such playbacks further input should only be presented upon request. What you think is happening is seen through your own particular filter and others are going to surprise you in interpreting the same event in different ways.

It is also the case that the presence of the video is almost forgotten or ignored... which is perfectly OK. I don't think you can destroy anything which he should be trying to reinforce. You must be prepared for the possibility that video is not particularly wanted or needed in that specific situation.

Norman Bethune Levine

Who is Miss J?  

Despite itself, psychoanalytically-oriented psychotherapy is being profoundly affected by video. Before the advent of video, this is the kind of non-informative upon which decisions were made.  

"Miss J., a 29 year old white Jewish female, presented to the emergency department of our hospital complaining of her world was falling apart." She was last perfectly well three years ago, when her boy friend, F., left her. At that time she took an overdose of Seconal, and was treated overnight in the emergency department. 

The History of Present Illness goes on, followed by the Family History, Past History, Sexual History, etc.  

Who is Miss J? Regardless how complex and detailed her history is, regardless how much we know of her childhood and family, on the basis of this information this one can identify her in a room full of patients or even of "normal" people. Where is her presence (essence? soul? vibe?), that vital aspect of human nature that existential psychotherapy has rediscovered.

Although this was not intended, video delivers the person of the patient to those who play semantic games with his life story and his destiny. Video also delivers the person of the therapist who is often re- vealed on the TV monitor as considerably more fucked-up than the patient.

In the past, the only way a patient had to reveal himself as a living, breathing presence was by being "presented" to a room full of bearded, pipe-smoking geeks in turtle-neck sweaters—a humiliation that no one should have to endure, least of all someone with problems.

Here is how video has changed rounds in the psychiatric department of one hospital in Montreal. The session begins with staff psychiatrists, residents, and others, and manipulators, and put it into the hands of the psychiatric establishment. Video has been adopted by psychiatrists mainly for convenience in social functioning (for instance in discussing patients with social workers, etc., watching a tape of one resident interviewing his patient. The interview is then dis- cussed, and treatment is decided. In the case of Miss J., a patient whom I presented, the Chief Shrink asked the question that everyone was thinking while watching the tape: "So what's she doing in hospit- al?" The video presentation made everyone realize that in spite of the jargon used to describe her hyst- erical personality and "conversion reaction", the living creature on the screen was not sick. She was immediately discharged after being told she was all better. Video achieved a miracle cure! Without video she might have developed an easy dependency on the ward, and might have become one of its many addicts.

Video has been adopted by psychiatrists mainly for convenience. Although it has in rare cases been understood by the psychiatric establishment, the interactive potential has not been understood by the psychiatric establishment. Indeed, however, it has generated an existential component into the otherwise lifeless buttocks of institu- tional psychiatry. The video camera in the hands of the traditional therapist is a gun held by the wrong end.

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