

On est and the Consciousness Industry:  
A Sociological and Psychoanalytic View

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WHEN PUBLISHED

Presented at the American Psychiatric Association Meeting, Miami,  
Florida, 1976.

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Introduction

As a result of the vast technical and economic growth of the 50's and the crisis of the 60's, culminating with the politically disillusioning spectacle of Watergate, social psychologists consider many of the fundamental social referents of our society to be shaken to the foundation. God and religion were declared dead. What was considered to be patriotic and American was flipped upside down by the Vietnam War and the protest against it. Sexual mores and the institution of marriage and the family have been revolutionized. Male-female roles have been blurred. Education, process and content, have been questioned. Virtually every sacred cow has been led from its meadow of holiness and meticulously dissected or perhaps slaughtered before millions of T.V. viewers. Out of this turbulence, the American middle class has emerged with a sense of confusion about what is in fact--normal. Where are the social referents? What remains to protect us from a sense of being overwhelmed by a world which has eroded our means of knowing what's what and how to handle it?

We propose that a market for something to replace the old social referents had developed and that an industry has evolved to supply

that market. Popular psychology--referred to as pop psychology or "pop psych" has become big business and touches the lives of tens of thousands every day. Psychological awareness is the commodity, and it is sold in the consciousness industry in a wide variety of packages. The vendors are able to deliver psychological awareness on a large scale basis, and usually do so at a personal distance that is less threatening to some than conventional psychotherapy. Some of these pop therapies have been around for 25 years, for example, Scientology. Others have existed in other cultures for centuries. Transcendental meditation (TM), yoga, and Tai Chi have only recently been imported and packaged in a popularly consumable form. Most typical of the pop psychology suppliers of awareness are organizations such as Arica, Silva Mind Control, est, Liftspring and Mind Dynamics. Pop psychology procedures which have an organized group involved in training and promulgating their product includes the Alexander Technique, Bioenergetics, Rolfing, Primal Therapy, Re-evaluation Co Counselling and Otto's Developing Personal Potential Seminars.

This paper does not affirm nor condemn these organizations. It is always easy to see what's wrong with the other guy's shtick. Rather we intend to describe what we consider to be the relevant contextual, group and intra-psychic dynamic issues and attempt to

differentiate the product and result of the awareness industry from that of conventional psychotherapy. We have selected est as a highly successful pop psychology, awareness vendor organization as a representative on which to focus our analysis.

Source of Data. The authors derive their knowledge of est by personal participation in the standard training, as well as informal interviews with est graduates and officers and workers within the organization. Our experience with a few graduates extends over one year post-est training. One author is a clinical psychologist with expertise in community and family psychology and the other is a psychoanalyst in private practice and a laboratory research psychophysiological working with biofeedback treatment of psychophysiological disorders. One is interested in the interaction of the individual and the external milieu and the other is interested in the interaction of the individual and the internal milieu.

est is a multi-million dollar organization which has offices in eleven major cities in the United States. It has been in existence for four years and claims to have processed 70,000 people for \$200 to \$250 a piece. The training consists of two sequential marathon weekends totalling about 60 hours. A series of follow-up seminars, meeting one night a week is offered. The cost is about \$45 for a 10-meeting series. These seminars take up about one year. For a

detailed description of the marathon experience, an article in Psychology Today by Mark Brewer appeared in the August, 1975 issue. In all, about 170 lay articles have appeared about est. Peter Marin has written eloquently about est and the consciousness industry in Harper's magazine as an example of the new narcissism which is damaging the family and sense of community. An article in the Village Voice by Annette Duffy, seems to speak for the humanistic psychologists in lamenting that est and Arica are putting Esalen Institute, considered by many to be the cradle of the humanistic psychology movement, out of business. New Age Journal published an extensive article on the est training and Mr. Erhard. Mr. Erhard, the originator of est, apparently has had no formal training in psychology, but was successful in business as a sales manager of door to door merchandizing. He also participated significantly in two other pop psych organizations--Scientology and Mind Dynamics which he acknowledges as exerting a strong influence on him. Mr. Erhard asserts that he has studied the techniques and goals of most contemporary forms of change and put together a psychological smorgasborg of experiences that attempt to both alter the way we think about and experience ourselves, as well as the way we behave, given our particular awareness. A review of the description of dianetics in Martin Gardener's book Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science (1956) and a perusal of Hubbard's Dianetics (1950), the bible of Scientology,

strongly suggest that Mr. Erhard has modified Scientology rather than integrated consciousness techniques and various philosophies.

Social Psychology of est. Regardless of its origins, if one wants to understand est from a social psychological point of view, it is essential to see it on two levels. First, what is the content of the message and secondly, what is the context of how it delivers the message. On the content level, est teaches self-responsibility, and personal power to act on one's wishes and thus, gain control of one's own life. There is also a strong push towards belief in mystical powers of the mind and an absurd extension of ultimate responsibility. This message is delivered by using a variety of experiential and informational techniques couched in an existential framework. The techniques are put together in a format that gives some participants the feeling of being led through the crevices of their mind.

On the context level, est uses the power of large group dynamics to create an environment that makes the participant feel as if they finally found the place with the ultimate answer of how to live in peace and harmony with the universe. Like Alcoholics Anonymous, est gets its trainees to admit their life is "not working", specifically, that they are "assholes", and to surrender to the pursuit of the higher power, or to "get it".

Creating a captive audience through various quasi-coercive techniques, est gets the trainees to surrender themselves to the larger group. Many of the techniques, such as sharing of experience and unconditional group acceptance, are skillfully used to create a sense of community similar to belonging to the Alcoholics Anonymous community. In other words, like A.A., est requires the trainees to "bottom-out" in order to re-experience the power within themselves. Thus, in an age where many people feel victimized by family, social, and economic pressures, est gives the trainees something to believe. The power of belief systems to move mountains does not need documentation. Belief in something greater than oneself has been a "prime mover" of people throughout the ages. est capitalizes on people's need to believe and through a series of exercises and repetitive, forceful assertions, shows the trainee that in believing in external sources for validation, you give up the power of believing in yourself. Ultimately, est could be said to teach a slick, existential, capitalistic form of belief in one's self.

We have observed that est clearly is helping many people make decisions and feel less a victim of social forces. In that way, it may enable many people to be more available to their own psychic experience. The entire est training could then be seen as a process of de-victimization, helping people to re-experience their own strength.

Examination of the process of est training reveals the creation of a double-binding message. The content of est training is that est is not the answer. On the other hand, the context of est creates a meta-message that they do have the answer. Thus, the trainee is double-bound in that the denial on one level--Erhard and est is not the answer is contradicted on the meta level by the "feeling" that est has the answer. This double-binding context further re-inforces the person's dependence on est since the message is not clear and thus can be interpreted either way depending on how the trainee needs to see est. Thus, est can be the answer to anyone who wants to make it the answer.

Viewed merely on the content level, est teaches many of the best messages of contemporary psychology, along with a somewhat idiosyncratic, and simplistic view of the origins of neurosis and character disorders along the lines of early psychoanalytic theory and Rank's birth trauma ideas. On the other hand, its manipulation of the group and its super HARD sell of a belief system is arrogant. est lacks humility, and the insistence on a "go-go" approach to life, seems to rob many people of the deeper sense of comradeship that goes along with being a part of the life process with its periodic ups and downs. est seems to encourage people to believe they should have total control over their lives rather than acknowledge that painful feelings such as confusion and frustration are a part of life.

Thus, est uses the modern interest in psychology to sell the dream of happiness ever after. Perhaps if one could take est and see it as an interesting course in an educative curriculum and take away the information on a content level and not be owned by the organization on a context level, est could be considered an addition to our society that teaches psychological awareness to many people who normally would not seek out psychological intervention. Of all the pop psychologies, est probably draws much of its popular appeal because it does not require any change in basic life style. Another important appeal of all the pop psych vendors is that their consumers do not have to assume the role of sick or patient.

Psychodynamics of est. This section will examine est and the pop psychology vendors in terms of the psychodynamics of groups, their leaders, the results produced, and the distinguishing features which differentiate pop psych and conventional psychotherapy.

A review of Freud's papers (1920, 1927) on groups and religion leaves no doubts in one's mind that the phenomena of hypnosis, merger with an ego ideal and sense of game playing, be described so well are strongly activated and utilized by the est organization. The techniques used during the course are well known and can be viewed in terms describing psychotherapeutic, personal autonomy enhancing procedures OR they can also be viewed as procedures common to religious revival meetings. Mr. Erhard and his trainers can be likened

to Christ and his apostles, Freud and the early, inner group, a general and his staff, etc. The charismatic characteristics of Mr. Erhard and other pop psych founders are unmistakably described and listed by Irvine Schiffer in his book on charismatic leaders from a psychoanalytic point of view (1973). These eight characteristics and how they are manifest are listed in Table 1.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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The ready, almost perpetual smile, as well as the evangelical spirit of zealot est graduates is understandable in terms of the of the relief from super-ego pressure in the neurotic. In the well functioning narcissistic individual described by Kernberg (1975) and Kohut (1971), such a burst of energy and well-being may be associated with the activation and deployment of self-esteem repairing defences such as omnipotence, splitting, merger, projective, and adhesive identification with the resultant successful accomplishment of manic denial of disturbing aspects of inner reality so well described by Winnicott (1958).

The process of transforming a neophyte, out-group member into a trusted, accepted in-group member is familiar to us all. There is the invariant sequence of initial placement of self in a dependent,

tilted relationship with the group and its leader; then the acknowledgement of inadequacy and public mortification; followed by disavowal of previous belief, instruction in new better beliefs and techniques; then comes the limited public affirmation of the new system, ritual initiation and friendly acceptance by the leader or his representative, witnessed and assisted by previous initiates. During the immediate post-initiation period, there is an extended public affirmation of membership, advertisement of possession of secrets and encouragement to judiciously promote interest in colleagues and family members.

Surely, many of you have been carried along this transforming pathway with varying degrees of sophistication. Baptism and confirmation, pledgeship and initiation into high school and college clubs and fraternities, initiation into the Masonic lodge, completion of a gestalt encounter weekend, etc. are examples from our experience. You could surely think of many others, none the least of which would be Alcoholics Anonymous and Synanon initiation procedures. You may feel that we should also include graduation from high school, college, medical or graduate school, psychiatry residency or the Psychoanalytic Institute, or perhaps even psychotherapy; however, there are some significant differences between these two groups of experiences. Yes, in education and therapy one does enter a new in-group, with new

knowledge, techniques, and identity. Further, the transition is often marked by ceremony and rites of passage. What is different is:

- (a) The availability of time for personal integration,
- (b) The requirement of significant expenditure of intellectual motoric and emotional energy over a long period of time to attain the new skills,
- (c) The de-emphasis of faith and magic,
- (d) The absence of a requirement of public mortification,
- (e) The absence of emphasis on recruitment, and
- (f) The requirement of a demonstration of minimal competence in the newly acquired skills and identity.

These are ways of attaining substantial personality and ego growth versus stereotyped initiations into a new group identity which provides a greater sense of well being. Still, such a differentiation in procedure and requirements between these two types of experiences does not preclude that either type may be used or misused by individuals in all sorts of ways, both very constructive and destructive to themselves and others. As it was recently pointed out by one of the authors in a paper on the psychodynamics of successful biofeedback treatment, a therapy may "work" to the same superficial outcome, but the intrapsychic dynamics may be very different (Rickles, 1976). "So what, if it works", you may say. Well, we submit that such an attitude is not consistent with a professional's

approach to working with people, but more importantly, the long term implications of different psychodynamic modes of change are different. Placebos and transference cures have an important and legitimate place in medicine, but need to be understood and differentiated from other methods of cure.

What we have tried to show is that the social evolution of our country has created a market to support a "consciousness industry". The product of this industry is described by the vendors in terms which suggest that it is the same and perhaps better and more efficient than the services and results of conventional psychotherapy. We have tried to show that a closer analysis reveals that pop psychology vendors offer something quite different from conventional psychotherapy and that it is in the interest of ourselves, our patients and the public for psychiatrists to understand the differences and their implications.

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Table 1  
 Comparison of Schiffer's (1973) Characteristics  
 of the Charismatic Character and est

Charismatic Characteristics	est
1. A spice of foreignness	Werner Erhard (teutonic name). est (latin for "it is").
2. Some subtle stigma	Mr. Erhard, founder of est, is said to have been an "awareness cult" freak and to have abandoned a wife and 4 children.
3. The calling to public service	Mr. Erhard says he "got it" and needs to serve to let others "get it".
4. A posture of romantic polarized action against a human adversary	"Your life doesn't work because you are an asshole".
5. An aura of social station and its associated wealth	est has grossed over \$15,000,000 in 4 years of existence.
6. A diffidence of sexuality	Mr. Erhard's picture, frequently displayed, projects an image of wholesome sexuality.
7. Allure of life style innovation	"get it" and "make your life work"; stop being an "asshole".
8. A coating of hoax	Life is a "game" and you get "nothing" out of est.