Experiments in group and leadership problems give insight into the essential aspects of democratic living

The Dynamics of Group Action

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IT IS less than ten years ago that, defying hosts of prejudices, the attempt was made to proceed from descriptive studies of social relations and attitudes to what may be called “action research” on groups. It is not merely the nearness to problems of the practice which lies behind this particular interest in changes, but the fact that the study of experimentally created changes gives a deeper insight into the dynamics of group life. Even the most exact measurement of food consumption or attitudes toward food, for instance, does not tell how strong the food habits are, how great the resistance would be against changes, or how changes could be brought about effectively. Only experiments in changes can, finally, lay open the deeper layers of group dynamics.

Such action research started as a mere trickle with studying children’s clubs. It has spread to the study of such groups as the Boy Scouts, college students, housewives, and to the fields of nutrition and industry. No university seems yet to have realized the deep implications which a resolute promotion of research in group dynamics would have for every aspect of social life. But the trickle has become a creek and will become a river: We are moving toward a full-fledged experimental science of group dynamics which will include the problems of leadership and leadership training, ideology and culture, group morale and group production, discipline and group organization, in short, all phases of group life.

The various aspects of group dynamics are the most important determinants for our life, including our character, our happiness, and productivity. If someone should have failed to notice this fact, the experiments should help to make it clear.

Any experimental research in a new field at first seems to accomplish not more than “proving scientifically” what the well-experienced practitioner has known. Although, it is equally true that in a field as full of words as the discussion of group and leadership problems one can be sure to have equally experienced practitioners express opposite views. Without trying to make direct applications to education I should like to select a few experimental findings which might be of interest to the teacher.

Autocracy, Democracy, and Laissez Faire

One of the outstanding facts which has been known but which is not suffi-
ciently recognized by teachers, parents, or other persons connected with education concerns the relation between autocracy, democracy, and individualistic freedom (laissez faire). The average Sunday school teacher, foreman, or university professor alike is accustomed to perceive problems of discipline or leadership as lying on one continuum, on which lack of discipline and maximum individual freedom represent the one end and strict authoritarian discipline the other end. This conception, however, is basically incorrect. Autocracy, democracy, and laissez faire should be perceived as a triangle (Fig. 1). In many respects autocracy and democracy are similar: They both mean leadership as against the lack of leadership of laissez faire; they both mean discipline and organization as against chaos. Along other lines of comparison democracy and laissez faire are similar: They both give freedom to the group members in so far as they create a situation where the members are acting on their own motivation rather than being moved by forces induced by an authority in which they have no part.

The person who thinks in terms of one continuum has no choice but to consider democracy as something between autocratic discipline and lawlessness; he sees it as a soft type of autocracy or frequently as a kind of sugar-coated or refined method to induce the group member to accept the leader's will.

It is a prerequisite to democratic education that this concept be destroyed. The democratic leader is no less a leader and, in a way, has not less power than the autocratic leader. There are soft and tough democracies as well as soft and tough autocracies; and a tough democracy is likely to be more rather than less democratic. The difference between autocracy and democracy is an honest, deep difference, and an autocracy with a democratic front is still an autocracy.

The experiments help in many ways to substantiate this triangular relation and to clarify the rather disturbing complexity of problems by showing where the differences lie, why differences in group procedures which might look important actually are unimportant and others which look unimportant are important. It is particularly interesting to consider what might be called an efficient "tough democracy."

The gospel of inefficiency of democracies has been preached and believed not only in Nazi Germany. We ourselves are somehow surprised to see the democratic countries execute this war rather efficiently. When Lippitt’s first study (1940) showed the beneficial effects which the democratic atmosphere has on the overt character of the member, how it changes his behavior from hostility to friendliness, from egocentrism to we-feeling and to an objective, matter-of-fact attitude, the argument
was frequently presented that these results may hold in the friendly settings of a boys' club, but that the advantages of the democratic atmosphere would not stand up in a tough situation such as an industry requiring high efficiency.

For studying these aspects of democracy experiments were conducted in the fields of nutrition and industry.

Discussion, Decision, and Action

In school as well as in industry certain standards exist concerning the rate of learning or production. These standards are set up by the teacher or the management and are upheld by these authorities with a certain amount of pressure. It is assumed that relaxing the standards will slow down the work of the group members.

This assumption is probably true but it has little to do with the problem of democracy. Lowering the standards or relaxing the pressure to keep up the standards in an autocratic atmosphere means shifting to a softer form of autocracy. It means a shift from autocracy (A) toward laissez faire (LF) in Fig. 1. It does not mean a shift in the direction of democracy (D). Such a shift would involve a positive change of the type of motivation behind the action, a shift from imposed goals to goals which the group has set for itself.

It is by no means certain that production goals set for themselves by work teams, or learning goals set by groups of students, would be higher than those ordered by an authority. However, it is by no means certain that they would be lower. Whether the standards will be set higher or lower depends on the specific social atmosphere and the type of democracy created. Experiments in industry under controlled conditions show a substantial permanent increase of production created in a short time by certain methods of “team decision,” an increase in production which was not accomplished by many months of the usual factory pressure (Fig. 2). (The money incentive remained unchanged.) This demonstrates that democratic procedures may raise group efficiency.

Only a few details of the problems, which are by no means simple, can be discussed here.

1. One should be careful to distinguish discussion and decision. A discussion might be better than a lecture for clarifying issues and bringing about motivation. However, it is one thing to be motivated, another to transform motivation into concrete goals and into stabilizing these goals in a way which would carry the individual through to the actual completion of the work. Controlled experiments under comparable conditions show that a discussion without decision did not lead to a parallel increase in production. There are indications that, even if the discussion leads to the general decision of raising production without setting definite production goals to be reached in a definite time, the effect is much less marked. An experiment with groups of housewives (Lewin, 1943) and students’ eating-cooperatives (Willerman, 1943) show that lectures as well as requests are less efficient to bring about changes in food habits than group decision. Discussions without decisions do not make for efficient democracy. On the other hand, democratic methods if properly handled are superior to requests in bringing about changes.

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2. One of the reasons why democratic methods are superior is illustrated in the study of the students' cooperatives. The students were to change from the consumption of white to whole-wheat bread. From each student was obtained a rating of his eagerness to reach the goal and of his like or dislike of whole wheat as compared with white bread. The result shows that after request the eagerness to succeed was lowest in the individuals who disliked whole wheat bread and that it increased with the degree of liking. After group decision, however, the eagerness to reach the group goal was largely independent of personal like or dislike. In other words, group decision provides a background of motivation where the individual is ready to cooperate as a member of the group more or less independent of his personal inclinations.

3. It is important to realize that these methods of changing group goals and
obtaining group efficiency are not based on dealing with the individual as an individual but as a group member. The goals were set for the group as a whole or for individuals in a group setting. The experimental studies indicate that it is easier to change ideology or cultural habits by dealing with groups than with individuals. In addition, the anchorage of the motivation of the individual in a group decision goes far in achieving the execution of the decision and in establishing certain self-regulatory processes of the group life on the new level of ideology and action (see Lewin, 1944).

Democratic Leadership

In all the experiments mentioned the problem of leadership plays an important role. As the earlier experiments show (Lippitt, 1940 and 1943), a group atmosphere can be changed radically in a relatively short time by introducing new leadership techniques. The paradoxes of democratic leadership are by no means solved; however, the studies on leadership and particularly on leadership training (Bavelas, 1942) give some information.

1. Autocratic as well as democratic leadership consists in playing a certain role. These roles of the leader cannot be carried through without the followers playing certain complementary roles, namely, those of an autocratic or of a democratic follower. Educating a group of people in democracy or re-educating them from either autocracy or laissez faire cannot be accomplished by a passive behavior of the democratic leader. It is a fallacy to assume that individuals if left alone will form themselves naturally into democratic groups; it is much more likely that chaos or a primitive pattern of organization through autocratic dominance will result. Establishing democracy in a group implies an active education: The democratic follower has to learn to play a role which implies, among other points, a fair share of responsibility toward the group and a sensitivity to other peoples' feelings.

Sometimes, particularly in the beginning of the process of re-education, individuals may have to be made aware in a rather forceful manner of the two-way interdependence which exists between themselves and others within a democratic group. To create such a change the leader has to be in power and has to be able to hold his power. As the followers learn democracy other aspects of the democratic leader's power and function become prevalent.

What holds for the education of democratic followers holds true also for the education of democratic leaders. In fact, it seems to be the same process through which persons learn to play either of these roles and it seems that both roles have to be learned if either one is to be played well.

2. It is important to realize that democratic behavior cannot be learned by autocratic methods. This does not mean that democratic education or democratic leadership has to diminish the power aspect of group organization in a way which would place the group life on the laissez faire point of the triangle (Fig. 1). Efficient democracy means organization, but it means organization and leadership on different principles than autocracy.

These principles might be clarified by lectures but they can be learned, finally, only by democratic living. The
“training on the job” of the democratic leaders (Bavelas, 1942) is but one example for the fact that teaching democracy presupposes the establishing of a democratic atmosphere.

One should be slow in generalizing experimental findings. Any type of organization like a factory, a business enterprise, a community center, a school system, or the Army has characteristics of its own. What democracy means technically has to be determined in each organization in line with its particular objective. The objective of our educational system is customarily defined as twofold. It is to give knowledge and skills to the coming generation and to build the character of the citizens-to-be. The experiments indicate that democratic education does not need to impede the efficiency in regard to the first objective but can be used as a powerful instrument toward this end. The experiment also indicates that, for educating future citizens, no talk about democratic ideals can substitute for a democratic atmosphere in the school. The character and the cultural habits of the growing citizen are not so much determined by what he says as by what he lives.

Today, research institutes on physics and chemistry are common in industry. The time is approaching when research institutes on group dynamics will be just as common for any large organization dealing with people. It is essential that a democratic commonwealth and its educational system apply the rational procedures of scientific investigation also to its own process of group living.

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