

The Intent Behind Behavior: A Study in Group Dynamics

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In this brief account of research on one phase of the group process, Bernard Steinzor of the Committee on Human Development, University of Chicago, recounts results of efforts to evaluate the effectiveness of group discussion through an analysis of what lies behind an individual's verbal expression. Mr. Steinzor points to this consideration as only one, but an important aspect of study in group interaction.

INTEREST IN RESEARCH in group dynamics is of recent origin. Activity in this field is, nevertheless, increasing rapidly. Many people who deal intimately with individuals in all types of group situations are searching for new methods to fulfill their ideals of good group life. They realize that our knowledge of the group process is too gross and meager to provide the techniques for productive group leadership.

There are theoretically oriented investigators who think that the small, face to face group provides a crucial situation for the integration of psychological and sociological concepts and for the development of an unhyphenated social-psychology. Such research groups as the Research Center for Group Dynamics at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the Commission of Community Interrelations of the American Jewish Congress, and the Classroom Laboratory at the University of Chicago have a number of studies and experiments under way which should help answer some questions in the realm of theory and practice.

VARIED ASPECTS OF GROUP LIFE

Any observer of a group in action is overwhelmed by the tremendous vari-

ety of observations he can make. Individuals by themselves are complex enough and the problems are apparently increased to almost insoluble proportions when people interact. We might make an attempt to distinguish three broad aspects of small groups and then study phases of these aspects. It must be kept in mind that these aspects are interrelated and are only identifiable as variables in a complex formula.

Every group is organized for some specific purpose. This purpose can be conceived as the problem faced by the group members. How do they go about solving this problem or problems? If it is an academic question, what analytical tools are used? If it is a group at a birthday party, what processes are employed to make the event successful?

A second major aspect of group life may be described by an investigation of the relationships of the members' personalities and the roles they play in groups. Can leadership be described in terms of some basic personality types? What features of the personality determine the way the person will function in a particular group? Can group conflict be related to contrasting or conflicting personalities? The group

worker, attempting to create an equalitarian situation, may at times vow that Joe and John don't mix because Joe is too extroverted for John.

Another aspect that has been identified is the group atmosphere. The classic study of Lewin, Lippitt, and White has made us aware of the effect of general climate conditions on the behavior of individuals. We need to know more about creating democratic as against autocratic and *laissez-faire* atmospheres. Our cultural values are certainly reflected in our small groups and these might be analyzed through examining the way we relate to each other.

A STUDY IN GROUP DYNAMICS

The research worker generally chooses a phase of the larger problem which he thinks is important since there are so many dimensions of the group process. One dimension that has been proposed as significant in effecting the interaction of people is that of the intent or purpose underlying the content of an individual's behavior. We do know that in verbal behavior people convey many more features of themselves than is embodied in the literal meaning of the words they speak. Even if we discount double talk, there still remains the literal interpretation of a statement and the inference we can make as to the purpose the person had in speaking.

As an example of research in the group process, the results of an investigation carried out by the author will be described. This study took, as the point of departure, inferences as to the intents underlying verbal behavior. The investigation is not cited as typical of research in group dynamics. But

it does indicate some issues and procedures adopted in research of this kind.

An Instrument for Investigation

In order to investigate whether deeper insights into group behavior can be attained if we pay attention to the intents and purposes of people's remarks, an instrument was devised for the measurement of the intent of verbal behavior in small groups and of the direction of such intents. Verbal behavior was chosen largely for practical reasons since it can be electrically recorded and more easily manipulated. The direction of intent indicated whether a statement was more or less involved with the self, with the group relationships, or with an objective issue. Thus categories were defined which combined the intent of a statement with the direction of intent described on a continuum of self-involvement.

Eighteen intents and three directions of intent or loci were indentified. The intents may be briefly labeled and defined as follows:

1. Activate and originate—set the pace by introducing a new factor
2. Structure and limit—define the conditions of discussion
3. Diagnose by labelling—categorical and definitive statement as to cause of a situation
4. Evaluate—qualitative and categorical references
5. Analyze—explore cause and effect relationships non-categorically
6. Give information—report in neutral manner
7. Seek information—ask question neutrally
8. Clarify confusion
9. Defend—self-justification
10. Offer solutions—give advice as to action

11. Conciliate and integrate—relating points in discussion
12. Understand—attempt to see situation the way another sees it
13. Give support
14. Seek support
15. Attack and oppose
16. Show deference—to withdraw from situation
17. Conform—obey another's command
18. Entertain humorously.

Evidence Gleaned from One Record

Let us look at an excerpt from the first session of a group of ten graduate students. They have come together because they have volunteered to serve as subjects in the present experiment. After they are seated, the investigator tells them that he will not serve as leader but will leave the room. They are to meet without a designated leader. After some awkward preliminaries Mr. Q. states his views about democracy and suggests that the group might talk on this topic. Miss V. asks:

V: Do you mean the principles that you fought for, that the men fought for? (Seemingly asks for information—InI—a tinge of sarcasm)

(Laughter)

Q: The traditions that we have traditionally fought for the last 176 years. (clarifies himself to group—ClG)

V: What the first World War was to make the world safe for? (personal attack and challenge—AtG)

W: Do you believe we're more interested now in money and things as such than they have been through the years? (personal attack and challenge—AtG)

Z: Yeah, would you consider this a marked change from what you were accustomed to before you went overseas? (personal attack and challenge—AtG)

Q: I would consider it a marked change from the pre-war era. (Evaluates categorically—EvI)

U: Could it perhaps be that you woke up and are more aware that maybe money wasn't everything, or that your viewpoint, perspective changed while you went in the army, navy, or whatever you went in. (interprets the basis for the person's statement—AnG and also attack—AtG)

Q: That could very well be. (It would be hard to judge the intent of this statement but it would seem that he tends to support the person—SgG)

U: I think there are very few people who have any conception whatsoever of what—I mean, what their conception of democracy is—exactly what it is here today. (Qualitative evaluation—EvI)

Y: I wonder if we're talking loud enough. I have difficulty hearing you. I'm a little hard of hearing but I'd appreciate it if you could talk a little louder. (activates the group, directs them—AcG—also gives information about self—ExG)

R: I was discussing this very problem last night with a friend. It's my belief that democracy is something that cannot be preserved. That is, it's a dynamic thing and it has to be promoted, developed constantly all the time. It never remains static. And we hear so much talk about preserving democracy. As if it were something that we keep in a static condition. That is not my idea of democracy. It seems to me it's an ongoing thing that we have to keep working on and developing. (attempts to analyze and explore the issue and some of its aspects—AnI)

X: When you talk about preservation of democracy you assume also that we—that America has had democracy. There's a question in my mind as to whether we have ever had a real democracy. (a categorical diagnosis of the issue—DiI)

Comparison of Several Groups

It is, of course, not always easy to categorize human behavior. However, let us say we do our best and apply the

instrument to transcriptions of electrically recorded sessions of six different types of groups, as is done in the above excerpt. Patterns of intents and loci were derived from the categorization of the sessions. These patterns were evaluated in different ways by means of statistical techniques. On the basis of tests of significance of difference, certain conclusions were drawn about the nature of the group process as it is revealed by the intent and locus of verbal behavior. Since only six different groups were used, definite conclusions are not possible. These may, however, be summarized by indicating some implications of the findings.

► The pattern of categories for each group was compared to the pattern of every other group. Many non-chance differences were found and the differences could be related to other types of information about the groups. *This might mean that a leader should be aware of the purposes and intent with which a particular subject is approached if he wishes to create a specific type of group structure.*

► The pattern of intents and loci of any group will tend to reflect two major aspects of group relationships: *the general purpose for which the group was organized and the individual characteristics of the membership.* Such intents as solution offering and understanding and the direction of an intent seem to be more characteristic of general conditions while other categories seem to reflect more of an individual's approach to the group discussion. *The presence or absence of such categories might, then, be symptomatic of a group's deviation from the predicted or ideal process.*

► Although groups seem to vary significantly from one another in the pattern of intents, *extreme variation of a group from other groups may be symptomatic of basic disturbances in the relationships of the group.* These disturbances may be related to the frustration a group experienced in fulfilling the purpose for which the group was established. A large number of references to the group relationships probably would be characteristic of such groups. *The manifestation of certain intents thus may be a clue for a leader that the group is not proceeding adequately in fulfilling the purpose for which it was established.*

► In the six groups studied, *the intent to understand and the intent to conciliate seldom were manifested by the group members.* The general absence of such intents may be one basis for the frequent inadequacy of the group situation for the solution of problems for which the group was established. This does emphasize the points made by such writers as Mary Follett and Carl Rogers. A high degree of competitiveness and strife, frequently characteristic of social interaction, block and frustrate efficient and satisfying outcomes. *The introduction of intents rarely expressed in group situations may radically alter these disruptive processes.*

► Two of the six groups were intensively studied. It was observed that *certain ratios between sets of intents seemed to remain constant from session to session.* The ratio of supporting and attacking may be a constant for a group which reveals the emotional climate. Another constant may be the ratio of information giving to information seeking which can be interpreted

to indicate the degree of freedom of expression in a group. Other ratios may express characteristics sensitive to varying conditions. The degree of open-mindedness gauged by the ratio of evaluating, structuring, and diagnosing to analyzing statements may be an intragroup variable. *Such factors as the type of leadership, content of the material, and degree of self-involvement of the discussion may affect these group characteristics.*

► The pattern of intents of two groups were traced for a number of sessions. Certain intragroup trends appeared which may be characteristic of many groups. In the voluntary and leaderless group, the percent of intents related to analysis and diagnosis tended to diminish while there was a corresponding increase in the proportion of the intent to give information. This may be related to the absence of a leader who might stimulate the group so that it was not transformed into a "bull session." Other trends may be characteristic of the specific factors conditioning the group's relationships. *Deviation from these expected trends may be symptomatic of factors disrupting these relationships and, therefore, the function of leadership may be the maintenance or alteration of these trends.*

► The sequence of intents of two groups were analyzed statistically. Certain significant, non-chance relationships appeared. For instance, attacking intents tended to give rise to attack as did supporting stimulate support. The structure and functioning of groups may be described by the stimulus value of intents of verbal behavior. *A successful leader may be described in terms of how he effects certain se-*

quences deemed desirable or undesirable.

► The pattern of intents for each individual was compared with the average of his group but few significant differences were evident. It seemed that *the quality of group integration may be gauged by the similarity of the pattern of intents and loci of individuals as contrasted with the group average.* A few individuals did vary significantly and it may be that factors such as the rejection of an individual by the group, as measured by a sociometric test, may effect such differences in intents.

► *When the pattern of individual intents were compared with one another, many significant differences appeared even though there were few such differences when the individual was compared with the group average.* This may indicate that individual differences in the expression of intent may be related to the freedom of relationships existing in a group. The degree of permissiveness and acceptance that exists in a group may be measured by the extent of individual differences in the purposes expressed by the members.

FURTHER STUDY IS INDICATED

This investigation was concerned with only one dimension of group dynamics—that of the intents and purposes underlying the verbal behavior of individuals. The general results have indicated that this approach uncovers a significant dimension. Further research to relate this dimension to the many others involved in the group process would further amplify the basic laws of social interaction. Research is definitely needed if we are to develop the know-how for implementing our ideals.

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A College Class Discovers Group Dynamics

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In TEACHERS COLLEGE RECORD for October, 1947, Alice Miel, a faculty member in a graduate class, describes the way in which the group studied itself. Fred Barnes, a student in that class, and now curriculum director at Peoria, Illinois, draws upon the same experience to give his personal interpretations of the class experiment. He and Miss Miel use much of the same material in their interpretation of the record. Readers may wish to refer to the article by Miss Miel mentioned above.

OCCASIONALLY a college class of graduate students is permitted to do some original thinking. And occasionally such original thinking produces ideas of interest to other people seeking better ways of dealing with old and vexing problems.

This account deals with one such graduate class. Out of sincere dissatisfaction with their ability to work effectively as a group came a number of

interesting introspective studies designed to analyze and improve the group process as they lived it.

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