

What Is Gained by Group Participation?

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In this article, Thomas Gordon, assistant professor in the Department of Psychology, The University of Chicago, describes a study¹ which examines the effects upon the individual of membership in a group in which free discussion is encouraged and the responsibility for making decisions rests with the entire group rather than with the leader alone.

FROM RESEARCHES with groups, we are beginning to gather an imposing amount of evidence about the conditions for effective group functioning. We are slowly getting closer to answers to such questions as, "How do groups arrive at effective group decisions?" "Under what conditions are groups most productive?" "What factors influence the morale of groups?" "What can be done to develop an action-group

or a task-oriented group?" Answers to such questions as these grow out of experiments which have investigated different kinds of leadership, different kinds of group "atmospheres," or different types of group procedures.

What We Were Looking For

At the same time, however, these researches tell us little about the effects of different group experiences upon



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the individual members of groups. What happens to the group member under various kinds of leadership or in different types of group "climates"? What takes place in him *as a person* in order that behavioral changes may occur?

It would seem important to study the "personal meanings" of a group experience to its individual members. Can we learn, for example, what a group training experience has meant to a teacher in terms of changes in her attitudes toward herself, new understandings of self, changes in her personal goals and levels of aspiration, or changes in her motivation? A tentative answer to such a question was obtained by means of a study which attempted to explore the possibilities of using a non-directive interview as a method of discovering from a small number of individuals the meanings of a group training experience to them as individuals. This paper will briefly describe this study and report some of its findings.

The study, in addition to exploring a method of examining changes in the individual members of a group, throws light on the effects upon the individual of membership in a self-directing group. Evidence has already accumulated from clinical practice in client-centered counseling and psychotherapy that "self-direction" is a crucial element in the individual's ability to solve personal and emotional problems (2, 17, 19). In addition, there is a growing recognition of the value of self-direction for work groups in industry (6, 8, 12, 15, 20), for effective learning in the classroom (1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 13), for reducing tensions from intergroup con-

flict (18), and for getting community action in programs of public health (14) and food conservation (10, 16).

GATHERING THE DATA

Non-directive interviews were conducted with each of a group of sixteen delegates to the National Training Laboratory in Group Development, the purpose of which is training in the skills of human relations and group leadership. The delegates interviewed were members of a training group which was essentially a self-directing group, i.e., the responsibility resided with the group, rather than with its leaders, for determining the content of their discussion and for solving internal problems of reaching consensus, making group decisions, setting up agenda, handling "problem members," delegating roles, and planning presentations to the total laboratory.

Interviews were conducted during the last few days of the three-week training period. The interviews were recorded. Each delegate was asked to talk about whatever learnings or understandings about himself he felt he had acquired or whatever changes he perceived with respect to himself as a group member, group leader, or simply as a person. Following this structuring, the interviewer functioned as a client-centered counselor—that is, consistently reflecting the feelings and the essential meanings being conveyed by the delegate without expressing approval or disapproval and without directing the content of the conversation.

The investigator then played back all of the recorded interviews and extracted all self-reference statements indicating the effects of the training

which the delegates had experienced. Such statements were written down, in most cases, word for word, but in some instances, in a more condensed form in which illustrative content was left out.

WHAT WERE THE RESULTS?

The sixteen interviews yielded 247 different statements which could be classified into eight major categories,

each of which contained sub-categories. Table 1 presents these eight major categories. In this paper the writer will report the sub-categories of only two of the eight major categories, "Changes in Self" and "New or Reinforced Understandings of Self." From Table 1, however, it can be seen that there were other very extensive and quite varied effects of the group experience on the individual group members.

TABLE 1
MAJOR CATEGORIES INTO WHICH SELF-REFERENCE
STATEMENTS WERE CLASSIFIED

Statements Indicating:	Number of Persons Making Statement(s)	Number of Statements Made	Percent of Total Number of Statements
A. Changes in self	12	50	20.2
B. Degree of confidence in self to change	12	38	15.4
C. Emotional or motivational impact of experience	9	18	7.3
D. New or reinforced understandings of self	14	59	23.9
E. Degree of confidence in self-understandings and self-evaluations	5	22	8.9
F. Increased clarity in goals, or levels of aspiration	3	5	2.4
G. Changes in intellectual understandings, values, skills	11	37	15.0
H. Attitudes toward back-home situation	7	18	7.3
Total		247	

Changes in Self. Statements indicating changes in self as a result of the training experience fell into five sub-categories, shown in Table 2 on the following page.

Some examples may help the reader feel the personal quality and the affective tone of the delegates' statements:

♦ "Here at the laboratory I'm tackling the most difficult problems that I've had to face in my life. . . . I'm face to face with my group adjustment. . . . I almost had to overcome some of the childhood hurdles of feelings about groups that I had as a child. I always was more or less of an iso-

late. . . . It seems to me right now my own feelings are becoming very much involved and that I'm beginning to react spontaneously on the basis of what's in me, rather than as an objective professional person. . . . I have something that I've never felt in my whole life. . . . People are supporting me and helping me. Everything that I have to say—maybe not everything, but many things that I have to say—they seem to be of value to somebody. For the first time I am finding myself in group life."

♦ "As an individual, I think I have gained self-confidence from it which I have felt I lacked. I've always felt uncertainty about my ability. . . . I wouldn't have believed I would have done as much talking in our group as I did. I'm never the one to speak

up first. I've been inclined to let other people do the talking."

New or Reinforced Understandings of Self. There were more statements falling into this category than into any other, all but two of the sixteen delegates making statements indicating that the training experience had given them new understandings of themselves or had reinforced or highlighted what they had known or suspected before. Table 3, next page, shows the breakdown of this category.

WHAT DO THE RESULTS MEAN?

The Effects of a Self-Directed Group Experience. The data from these interviews indicate the kinds of effects upon the individual which can be expected when he works in groups in which free discussion is encouraged, the atmosphere characterized by "permissiveness," and the responsibility for

group movement and group progress is placed with the group members rather than with the leaders. The changes reported by the delegates in this group are not unlike the changes reported by clients following non-directive counseling interviews (9, 19). It seems that with more and more certainty, we can predict that when people are faced with a non-threatening, non-evaluative, and accepting situation in which they gradually learn they can take responsibility for their own development, they gradually begin to feel it is secure to explore themselves and to accept things about themselves which then lead to changes in their self-concept. The evidence is accumulating that individual psychological "growth" seems to be accelerated in this kind of situation, whether it is a series of therapeutic interviews, a work situation, or a training experience.

TABLE 2
CHANGES IN SELF RESULTING FROM
TRAINING EXPERIENCE

Statements Indicating Changes in Self:	Number of Persons Making Statement(s)	Number of Statements Made
1. Feel more accepted by others, more secure, less fearful, more spontaneous, less defensive of self, less withdrawn, more confident	6	16
2. Feel more accepting of others, more respect for others, more tolerant of interpersonal differences, more sensitive to feelings of others	10	19
3. Feel more accepting of own personal limitations, of own part in causing interpersonal difficulties; feel more willingness to evaluate self, more sure of own evaluation of self	5	8
4. Feel more responsibility as a group member, more responsibility to do my share and to help group by giving more freely of myself	2	4
5. Feel more need for membership in groups; feel more need for group support and approval; now get more satisfaction from group	1	3
Total		50

TABLE 3
NEW OR REINFORCED UNDERSTANDINGS OF
SELF RESULTING FROM EXPERIENCE

Statements Indicating New or Reinforced Understandings of Self:	Number of Persons Making Statement(s)	Number of Statements Made
1. I am or have been too "autocratic," desirous of power, task-oriented, impatient, insensitive to feelings of others, demanding, not permissive enough	11	19
2. I am or have been too dependent on what others think, too cautious, needing too much support and approval, afraid to disagree, too "laissez-faire"	3	7
3. I am more aware of amount and intensity of own feelings and their cause and effect; less afraid of own feelings	3	6
4. I am or have been a dodger of responsibility in a group, withdrawn, an isolate; have been a talker but never a leader	4	5
5. I am or have been putting up a false front to others, behaving in terms of false standards; not my real self	1	4
6. I know things about myself that I didn't know before; what has been learned fits in with past experience	5	8
7. Others	7	10
Total		59

Training for Skills or for Attitudes? The extensive changes in self-reference attitudes reported by the delegates raise an important issue—namely, is the development of effective skill in leadership, teaching, or supervision more a function of changes in basic attitudes of the individual toward himself and others rather than the acquisition of certain skills or methodology of "conducting groups?" Many of the delegates used the interviews to explore some of their own attitudes which they felt prevented them from becoming effective leaders, as shown in the following excerpt from one of the recorded interviews:

D: Yes—yes, I do. I think I can be sensitive to other people and know what they want. Perhaps I pride myself on my sensitivity to other people—it's an intuitive sort of thing—what would be the right thing to say now to get them into the conversation. I have had some experience with getting the non-participants actually to come in—

which I've manipulated a bit. And that sort of power frightens me because I don't want the responsibility that goes along with it. That's just come out now—I just suddenly thought of that—it's the responsibility I'm ducking.

I: I see. You really feel that you have these capabilities, but you are a little bit afraid of the responsibility that. . . .

D: I think that's it.

I: . . . that you would assume in using these capabilities. Is that what you mean?

D: I think that's it.

I: Let me see if I really understand that. Are you saying that if I use these skills which I really feel that I have, that will necessarily advance me or increase the responsibilities I have? Then you wonder, "Am I somewhat afraid of the—of where this thing might lead me?"

D: I think that's exactly it. I have been aware here in the group—watching what I have done in relation with the other people—I like to be the power behind the throne. I like to know that I have manipulated or influenced a person to make a statement, to perhaps take leadership—I don't want to take it. But I can say to myself, "Hm, that

was my idea. He or she is really following along nicely," but I don't have to take the ultimate responsibility for it.

It seems that each delegate was beginning to look *within himself*, at his own attitudes, as he hopes to become a more effective teacher, administrator, social worker, leader. If this actually is a necessary process, as we are beginning to believe, it would follow that effective teacher training, for example, must be as much person-centered as it is now content-centered or skill-centered. This raises the additional question of whether effective group training requires not so much that the trainer knows ideas, facts, and principles, but that he knows *people*, that he deals with the *learners* rather than with the subject matter or discussion topic.

Learning as a Reorganization Process. The interviews clearly illustrated the extent to which the exposure of the delegates to a single new idea required a shifting, altering, and reorganizing of a whole system of previously held concepts and attitudes before the new idea could be accepted into the person's cognitive organization. This reorganization often involved changing attitudes about the self, as has already been stressed. Or it involved examining and altering many intellectual ideas and concepts at variance with the new idea. In the typical learning situation it is not always possible to observe this reorganization taking place. In the non-directive interview, however, the process can often be clearly seen. For example, in one of the interviews in this study, before the delegate could understand and accept why she always felt and behaved like

an isolate in groups, she worked through all of the following:

- Her relationship to her husband
- Her need to have others feel she is important
- That feeling important must come from within—not from what others think of you
- Her insensitiveness to others
- Her uncertainty of her own judgment
- That she is forever searching for happiness
- The pattern of her behavior outside her home
- Reasons for coming to the laboratory
- That she has been living under false standards
- That she acts differently from what she feels
- That she doesn't understand people
- Her uncertainty of what people think about her
- Her dependency upon knowing what other people think of her
- That she behaves spontaneously only when she is sure of what others think of her
- That she is selfish.

Finally, and apparently only after this extensive reorganization of concepts and attitudes, this delegate saw that she feels like an isolate because she relies so much on what others think of her. And in all new situations it takes her so long to find out what others think of her that she feels insecure, lacks spontaneity, puts up a front, says things differently from the way she feels. This kind of behavior merely antagonizes the group and further increases her feelings of being isolated, thus completing the vicious circle.

The implication of this theory of learning is that learners should be given every opportunity to verbalize those related concepts and attitudes which have to undergo change if the new idea is to be assimilated by them. This

throws considerable doubt on the effectiveness of group training methods which compartmentalize what is to be learned or rely upon step-by-step teaching methods, "holding to the agenda" or "keeping on the subject."

The Non-Directive Interview as a Training and Research Tool. This study suggests the possibility of using a self-directed interview as an integral part of a training situation. The justification for its use would seem to be:

♦ its value as a method of assisting, if not accelerating, the individual process of reorganization of concepts, attitudes, and values

♦ its value as a therapeutic device to help the learner overcome resistances or work through personal conflicts produced by the learning situation.

Finally, this study suggests that the self-directed interview has value as a new tool for research. By means of such an interview, the investigator can tap a rich source of new data about the learning process and about the effects of training upon the learner.

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