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An Educational Model for Group Dynamics

The Phenomenon of an Absent Leader*

The Conception of the Project

THE THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The project from which this paper selects an episode for detailed report represents one of the lines of growth stemming from a program of exploratory studies in the dynamics of small groups inaugurated during 1946–1948 at the Tavistock Clinic and Institute of Human Relations by W.R. Bion. He (Bion, 1961) distinguishes between two levels of group activity: that of the “sophisticated” or “work” group (*W*), which involves learning and development and is concerned with specific tasks that must be met and undertaken in social reality; and that of the basic assumptions (*ba*) dependence, fight/flight and pairing, which are unlearned, primitive emotional response systems existing as cohesive patterns that alternate. The basic group organization may be in conflict with the sophisticated or *W* organization and is often unrecognized by members of the group, whose level of performance may be severely impaired in consequence. The aim of this program was to explore the use of a common method of interpretative group discussion in groups of different kinds: patient groups, student groups and staff groups. Though the method was derived from the *method* of psychoanalysis, recourse was not necessarily had to psychoanalytic concepts in making interpretations. Psychoanalytic concepts had been elaborated in the study of the individual in the two-person, inter-personal, as distinct from the multi-person, group situation. As the aim was now to explore what emerged at the level of the group, interpretation faced a new task: that of assisting a group (as contrasted with an individual) in extending its recognition of what was going on in the group situation as a whole, helping in achieving its work task (*W*) more effectively and more completely than would otherwise be

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the case. In making comments on the group's behavior, however, the member of the group in the role of social consultant or therapist could be said to proceed in accordance with psychoanalytic method in that he relied for his information principally on the relation of the group to himself in the immediate here-and-now situation.

The problems and types of stress that arose in these different kinds of group had differences as well as similarities. These differences led to more specialized models of the general method. Among those working with patient groups, there was a tendency to relate interpretation to a more directly psychoanalytic frame of reference by emphasizing the way in which each individual, as a personality, dealt with the "common group tension." This is the line of development that characterized the work of Ezriel (1950) and also of Sutherland (1985). It represents a more specifically clinical model.

By contrast, the development of what may be termed an action research model may be seen in such work of the Tavistock Institute as the Glacier Project as described by Jaques (1951) in *The Changing Culture of a Factory*. Under industrial field conditions he found that the most worthwhile discussions with the social consultant took place not so much in special meetings of an unstructured type outside the action situation as through his presence during the actual proceedings of various executive and consultative groups. Interpretation required to be related to a more sociological frame of reference and to be concerned with the ways in which roles and relationships in the particular social systems in which the groups existed were being used for unrecognized ends.

It remains to consider the experience yielded by the student type of group, in which the group met for educational purposes, usually under conditions of a seminar that gave maximum scope for free, as opposed to set, discussion. This technique may be regarded as initiating the search for a *training* or *educational* model of the method. Considerable difficulty was experienced with this type of group during the period of exploratory studies. The groups consisted of "students" of problems in human relations (industrial executives, social scientists, or practical workers in educational and community activities), prepared to examine their own experiences in a group as a method of gaining direct access to, and so increasing their understanding of, the dynamics of socio-psychological phenomena. These groups, however, tended to develop in one of two directions: when a good deal of interpretation was given the group tended to transform itself into a patient group and ask for treatment; when interpretation was restricted, the group tended merely to discuss the topic as a topic, and very little progress could be made in showing its relationship to the group. As the result of repeated experiences of this kind, student groups were discontinued, students being asked either to face taking the patient role and join a therapy group or to limit themselves to attendance at the workshop type of event. It was

not concluded, however, from these experiences that the original idea—that the student group might constitute a distinctive field of study—was necessarily invalid; rather that a suitable form had not yet been found.

The essential feature of the patient group in the treatment situation is that its task is directly and exclusively the study of its own internal tensions and relations. Its activities, so far as these concern the topics that it discusses, are regarded as meaningful only if they provide material which allows the underlying relations to be exhibited. A work group, however, in the action situation has a defined line (direction) of activity which is predetermined by its position in the social system to which it belongs. Its task is to pursue this line of activity. Its problem is that its relations may severely disturb its performance. In first approximation, the clinical and action research models can be described in terms of the different ways in which group relations and group activities are related to the task of the group. The search for an appropriate educational model depends on finding a type of task which requires a relationship between group activities and group relations distinct from that in either treatment-centered or action-centered groups.

The structure of the type of situation required may be regarded as a function of the degree of determinacy of the line of the group's activity. If the action situation is such that this is predetermined by the position of the group in a social system and the treatment situation such that it must be kept indeterminate by the therapist, the training situation may be described as that in which the group goes through the process of determining its own line of activity. In this sense, work with training groups may be related to the frame of reference of the project method in education as developed by John Dewey just as that with patient and action research groups may be related to psychoanalytic and sociological frames of reference. The relevance of the project method is that it is concerned with finding and carrying out types of concrete activity through which immediate experience may form itself into more general understanding.

If the task of the group is to find and undertake a definite project within a general field, it follows that the group will expect to meet on the assumption that its sessions will be limited—though indeterminate—in number. This assumption has a selective effect on the type of material which the group is likely to produce and therefore on the depth and scope of interpretation. If the loyalty of the social therapist is to the *W* of the group, he must take up whatever is impeding the group in meeting this *W*, however deep. On the other hand, since the task is limited, he need not take “everything” up; nor, indeed, will everything come up. Moreover, the group will have different phases—that in which the project is found, that in which it is carried out and that in which it is evaluated. The relationship of the consultant to the group changes in consequence. In the discovery phase it is more like that of a group therapist; in the execution phase like that of a contributor; while in the third phase group and