

The Study of Group Behavior During Four Decades

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Without much warning, about 40 years ago, students of human behavior developed an interest in how groups conduct their activities. This rise of attention among scholars was evident in the number and content of their publications, the creation of a communications network, and a zealous desire of some individuals in this network to improve ineffective groups before anyone knew how such improving could be done. Citizens were attracted to research on groups and some stated (extravagantly enough) that the products of this research would at last provide answers to tough problems in government and social relations.

During subsequent decades the quick growth of those early years settled down to a more measured pace and to a deeper perusal of particular topics, while scholars interested in training members of groups drew away, for the most part, from college campuses, or at least from researchers, and nurtured groups in natural settings and training laboratories. In this article we briefly review some of the main features in the history of research into group behavior, commenting on training activities only where these had an impact on empirical investigations.

PRIOR TO 1940

Before 1935 there had been little scientific effort to understand processes in groups. Research had been done on laughter in audiences and on the personality traits of designated leaders, but the only work close to current

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studies in group life were studies comparing how groups and individuals go about solving problems, a topic that remains of interest today. The dearth of earlier inquiries into group activities is not surprising when we recall that psychologists in the 30s devoted most of their attention to the study of physiology, motor skills, and cognitive processes of the individual. Social psychologists had hardly discovered their identity, and sociologists, for their part, were not yet collecting empirical data on groups.

In the last half of the 30s the time had come for attempts to explain events within organizations; several notable developments in research signalled this fact. Work on group structure and attraction between individual members (Moreno, 1934), the influence of group norms on members (Sherif, 1936), the impact of shared beliefs on the political attitudes of college students (Newcomb, 1943), and the effect that membership in a workgroup had upon the sentiments of factory workers (Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939), revealed that aspects of collective behavior, previously of interest to social philosophers, could usefully be brought under scientific investigation.

The most influential research by far in the emerging study of group behavior was that of Lewin, Lippitt, and White (1939). Their investigations of group climate, intergroup conflict, and styles of leadership (autocratic, democratic, and *laissez-faire*) made use, with important modifications, of the available techniques in experimental psychology, controlled observations of behavior, and methods of social group work. Their purpose was to expose some of the ways in which the behavior of leaders may differ and to discover how methods of leadership influence the properties of groups and the behavior of members. We should note that these investigations were not intended to make a contribution to the technology of group management *per se*. Rather, they sought to provide insight into the underlying dynamics of groups. The methods and results of the studies suggested that it might be feasible to construct a coherent body of knowledge about the nature of group life and eventually a general theory of groups. These studies had an originality and significance which produced a marked impact on the social sciences and professions. Almost immediately, associates of Lewin, and others, began research projects, most of them laboratory experiments, designed to contribute information relevant to a theory of group dynamics. The results of this work formed the core of a "critical mass" which eventually made this specialty distinctive and accepted.

Lewin's assumptions about the causes of human behavior were particularly suited to the study of group life, as he held that most of the variables determining behavior at a given time and place are extant in that setting. Past events and future ones were to be interpreted in terms of their current psychological representation. Lewin's emphasis on the forces and constraints

arising in situations led to a concentration on the here-and-now in both research and training about group life. Because such notions were especially appropriate in the developing of theory, prediction, and experimentation, they helped to generate a special style of investigation.

DURING THE 1940s

As these investigations were getting under way, the United States entered World War II and little research on groups was accomplished for 5 years or so. In 1946, Lewin, and a set of his former students, founded the Research Center for Group Dynamics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and in 1948 the Center moved to The University of Michigan after the untimely death of Lewin.

Through research done at this center, at half a dozen other centers with similar purposes in several countries, and at a number of campuses and government laboratories, knowledge about the social psychology of groups entered a period of active growth. Some of the topics studied most often in the 40s were: social pressures members place on one another within a group (Festinger, 1950), the direction and amount of communication among members (Bavelas, 1950), contrasts in the behavior of members in cooperative and competitive groups (Deutsch, 1949), the consequences of training community leaders (Lippitt, 1949), and the effects of social power among children (Lippitt, Polansky, Redl & Rosen, 1952).

The concepts and methods in this research were radical for their time and discipline. Thus, the scientists immersed in these efforts found it helpful to organize themselves informally to work toward a common end. Researchers distant from one another created a loose network, exchanged drafts of papers, and talked about their investigations in small meetings, conferences, and visits. The formation of this "invisible college" among students of groups was not unlike the voluntary associations, described by Griffith and Mullins (1972), that arise throughout the history of science whenever a strikingly new topic is taken up by members of a given discipline. Many of the early group scholars firmly believed that the output of their research would have a wide impact toward improving democratic methods, and the researchers consciously worked toward such ends. After World War II, it was more acceptable than it is now to claim that research in human behavior would have practical value for society.

Ordinary citizens gave considerable attention to this research, and the study of group processes received as much interest in the media of those days as have recombinant DNA, toxic chemicals, tranquilizers, or the effects of computers, in more recent years. The reasons for the wide appeal of this research at that time merits detailed study someday. One can guess,

however, that the attractiveness of the work arose in part because everyone was worried then about the fate of this country in World War II and about the future of democracy as a form of government. They were inclined, therefore, to welcome work by scientists who might increase our understanding of the dynamics of governing and might suggest ways of improving its procedures. Also, there was a widespread fear, during the 40s, that dictatorships had developed irresistible methods for manipulating the minds of men. Perhaps we could learn how to oppose such pressures through research by students of groups. Not least was the wide interest, even delight, in the methods and results of experiments on small societies in the laboratory where it was shown that contrasting behavior of group members, under contrasting circumstances, could be predicted and explained. Citizens highly approved of scientists in physics and engineering during the 40s and 50s because these latter had helped in the winning of World War II. Perhaps social scientists could be as useful in problems of group life if they were given proper encouragement and support. Accordingly, late in the decade, the Office of Naval Research created a unit to provide funds for research on group behavior regardless of the work's relevance to military conditions.

One other development in the 1940s is notable. In 1947 the National Training Laboratory for Group Development was organized by the Adult Education Division of the National Education Association, in cooperation with the Research Center for Group Dynamics. This was a three-week workshop attended by professional persons from various walks of life who wished to improve their knowledge of groups and their abilities as members and managers. Because there was a limited supply of knowledge available for participants in this kind of laboratory, the teachers relied on having students learn from their experiences in small discussion groups. This procedure encouraged talk about the matters that excited them most and these turned out to be personal feelings, relations among members, differences in perceptions, and explanations for these differences. Such person-centered interaction, as we shall see, reduced regard for the study of groups. An account of these developments is offered in the book *Beyond Words* by Kurt Back (1972).

From the beginning, the founders of the National Training Laboratory had different ideas among them as to the purposes of the unit. Some of these objectives were: to teach group dynamics, to teach consultants how to facilitate change within an organization, to teach members "basic skills" of membership, to train participants in the teaching methods being employed at the laboratory, and to conduct research on behavior in groups. Because of these unlike views, the meetings of staff members when planning each laboratory were lively and stimulating, to say the least. There was no initial

interest, we should emphasize, in encouraging personal growth, mental health, or sensitivity in interpersonal relations.

DURING THE 1950s

In the decade of the 50s, research in the social psychology of groups was highly innovative and the rate of publication more than doubled, according to Hare (1976). Authors of chapters on group research in the *Annual Review of Psychology* published in 1951, 1953, 1954, and 1958 remarked that study of groups was the most lively and creative work in social psychology and provided a focus for the entire field.

The topics for investigation were those already mentioned, plus: the flow of communication in groups when members have different degrees of connectedness among them, interpersonal power to influence, the sources of coalitions, and the nature and consequences of balanced relations within groups. Bales (1950) developed a method for observing and coding comments made by participants in small problem-solving groups. His treatment of these data, called interaction process analysis, revealed the kind of remarks (questions, suggestions, agreements, etc.) that were more likely to appear at each phase in a group's problem-solving effort. This work formed the basis of what sociologists came to call the study of small groups (Hare, Borgata & Bales, 1955). It concentrated, however, on the acts and roles of individuals, and paid little attention to the group as a unit.

The properties of groups, their origins and consequences, provided, by this time, a framework for the study of group dynamics; many of the findings of research concerned one or more of these properties, such as cohesiveness, goals, or leadership. A book summarizing results of research in group dynamics, arranged according to such headings, was published by Cartwright and Zander in 1953.

Even though one could now identify a coherent body of knowledge from the results of group research, there were "islands" of findings that did not fit together well and these separated results were not included in summaries of the field. The topics given most study, moreover, were not noticed most often by readers. Nelson and Kannenberg (1976) report a correlation of only $r = .12$ between the popularity of a topic among researchers in the 1950s and the interest accorded to it in subsequent articles. Additional government agencies began to provide financial aid for research on groups: the United States Public Health Service, the National Institute for Mental Health, parts of the Department of Defense, and (later on) the National Science Foundation. In addition, grants were not hard to obtain, for promising projects, from private foundations and industrial firms. It was a lively but not a well organized time to be involved in the study of groups.

By the middle of this decade the National Training Laboratory in Group Development, which no longer had a formal relationship with the Research Center for Group Dynamics, dropped the words: “in Group Development” from its title, and moved toward independence from the National Education Association. The NTL now encouraged laboratories in several parts of the country. Most prominent among these branches was one at the University of Los Angeles, run by students of personality theory, not social psychology. These teachers fostered an emphasis on personal growth and interpersonal relations, using the group as a setting for their teaching, not as a subject of instruction in itself. They placed more emphasis on personal feelings and problems than on cognitions or information—thus the term “sensitivity training” was an appropriate designation for their style of teaching.

Comparable developments were occurring at the original laboratory as the training began to emphasize self-awareness and personal improvement rather than understanding of group properties. Critics arose, especially among psychologists and professionals in mental health. They believed activities at training laboratories engendered stress for participants and that there was little evidence the activities had favorable effects on those who experienced them. Supporters of the training defended their programs by asserting that they were doing research and teaching about group behavior, not providing counseling for individuals. It had become evident, however, that a training laboratory was not a satisfactory place for conducting basic research, as the collecting of data often interfered with teaching activities and adequate experimental controls could seldom be developed in a training group.

DURING THE 1960s

By the 60s, the study of group behavior had become an accepted sub-discipline in departments of psychology, and in places for the study of sociology, speech, social work, public health, education, and business. Technical articles in this specialty appeared somewhat less often than they did in the previous decade. The number of research publications dropped from perhaps 150 a year to 120, but I know of no accurate count of this frequency. In contrast, essays on the use of groups in education, therapy, and management increased in numbers. Many who had earlier been doing research on the social psychology of groups moved to other interests unrelated to group life, and all of the centers established for research on groups, except the one at Michigan, were gone by the middle of the decade. Sherif (1977) and Steiner (1974) assert that many social psychologists turned from the study of groups and other collective phenomena to the study of individuals during the 60s.

If this reduction of interest in groups occurred in fact, why did it happen?

Several reasons may have played a part.

1. Research on groups is more difficult than research on individuals: When groups (compared to individuals) are the units of study, many more subjects are needed, they are harder to assemble in the required number at the proper time, the costs are higher, and the design, measurement, and analyses are more complicated and tricky.

2. Concepts about group life are often too clumsy to use, too austere to attract much interest, or too intricate to test with confidence.

3. Results of research on groups can be weak and unconvincing because it is hard to rule out noise and artifacts when measuring the varied behaviors in a group. Thus, many group researchers obtain small satisfaction from their efforts.

4. A researcher can get more help from current literature when studying individuals than when studying groups.

5. Funds for the support of social research began to be scarce late in the 60s and the study of groups did not compete well for these funds.

The fans of group dynamics dwindled in number during the 60s as their interests also moved, along with changes in social issues of the time, to topics where the study of groups was no longer as crucial. Some of the problems of group life during both the 60s and the 70s were not the kind, moreover, that stimulated theorizing about how groups effectively conduct their business. Unlike the 40s, much interesting group action was now intended to change conditions outside the group through demonstrations, disruptions, and other forms of confronting and militancy, rather than through the use of the democratic process. One cannot easily observe efforts to create social change, and thus research on such topics was done after the fact. As a result, sound theories have not been developed on these matters. "Group watchers" may have noticed, furthermore, that results from research in group behavior had not lived up to the grand expectations held for them after World War II—the world had not been changed. Also, many of the best known results of group research emphasized the bad effects of groups on their members—a one-sided view that did not arouse enthusiasm for the study of group behavior. Accompanying this shift of interest among nonscientists was a gradual dissolution of the network that had been formed among like-minded scholars. The reduction of activist fervor within this network, however, was not a characteristic of this field alone. Griffith and Mullins (1972) observed that the most successful of informal associations among scientists lasted no longer than 10 to 15 years, usually because of low scientific vitality or low distinctiveness of the members' work, and because fashions changed among supporters of research. These authors believed that a network must develop a coherent theory in order to last, and a coherence had not yet developed in the explanations of behavior in groups.

The fashionable topics for research on groups during these 10 years were conformity to group pressures, interpersonal relations between pairs of persons with mixed motives (e.g., the prisoner's dilemma), the "risky shift," and social facilitation. In 1967, Gerard and Miller remarked in the *Annual Review of Psychology* that most of the recent work on groups supported already familiar conclusions. In part, this was true.

DURING THE 1970s

In the 70s, the prime research topics were still familiar ones. Evidence for this can be seen in an account of group investigations during 1975, 1976, and 1977 that I prepared for the *Annual Review of Psychology* (1979). The most frequently studied topics during the 3 years were: social pressures in groups, the sources (not the consequences) of group cohesiveness, and cooperating versus competing groups. Less popular, but not less familiar, were: leadership, group structure, and problem solving in groups. Polarization of beliefs among members, and other cognitive processes in groups, newly attracted interest from researchers, as did research on group size, crowding, and patterns of physical distance between participants. A good degree of activity, therefore, occurred in research, even though the number of agencies, and the dollars to support the work, had declined in the 70s to much less than in the early 60s. Social psychologists began to worry about the nature and direction of their field and subfields, including group behavior (Ring, 1967; Steiner, 1974; Elms, 1975; Silverman, 1977). Finally, the use of groups for helping the "personal growth" of individuals became big business during the 70s, providing a fast service for anxious people who hoped to purchase comfort for themselves without investing in therapy.

SOME GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

Over the years, ever since research on groups came into its own, several features have typified its methods. Most investigations have been controlled experiments and a good proportion of these have used an instrument, experimental design, or procedure invented by someone else. Part of the reason for this dependence on established methods is that many graduate students, and their teachers too, cannot obtain funds for a program of studies, so they conduct isolated experiments that have a high probability of success.

Despite the preference for the experimental method, there have been surprisingly few full-blown theories in group dynamics. This says something about the difficulty in explaining collective events. No doubt many theories have been discarded because the results of research obstinately would not provide support for hypotheses developed in the theories; and

revisions in these ideas to fit the actual findings fared no better in later tests. In other sciences and in other branches of psychology, scholars may refresh and adjust their supply of ideas outside the laboratory by observing phenomena that interest them. But group researchers seldom have collectives available for such observations and show little interest in them when they are available. Indeed, the phenomena they study may not resemble anything they can notice in a natural group. As a result, theories about groups are too often long on logic and short on researchability.

As is true in many other fields, earlier concepts in the social psychology of group life are gradually replaced by newer ideas, and these latter are stated a bit more precisely than the parent notions. To illustrate: Work on the impact of group decisions led to studies of social pressures in groups; demonstrations of leadership style moved into research on social power; research on the risky shift became work on the origin of polarized ideas in discussion; and, investigations of intragroup competition developed into ways of resolving intergroup conflicts. Although we can easily find examples like those just cited, in which there has been movement toward greater specificity in concepts, research in group behavior still suffers from an absence of useful and well-stated primary notions. Examples of vaguely understood terms used in research are: role, group goal, group structure, status, de-individuation, leadership, socialization, and social environment. In the absence of adequate precision, ideas like these cannot be manipulated in a consistent fashion in the laboratory or measured validly in the conference room. Perhaps students of groups would benefit from a return to the days when scholars worried about how to construct useful concepts; but that idea is not yet ready for resurrection, I fear.

It seems likely that the soundness of knowledge increases as key ideas in a field are more neatly defined. When concepts become more valid and more commonly accepted, new results of research will more easily be integrated into a (growing) body of wisdom. As things now stand, researchers in group life are remarkably inventive in creating new terms for phenomena that already have a perfectly useful name, thus creating more semantic confusion than need be. A number of synonyms exist, for example, to denote each of: a member's desire to remain in a group, the functions of leadership, the ends toward which groups strive, and the dimensions of group structure. Different terms, furthermore, are often used for the same definition, and a given scholar may ignore research done under a label unlike one he or she prefers even though the results of that research are quite relevant to his or her own interests. What may be worse is illustrated in a recent book where interpersonal power to influence is a primary theme. The author provides a definition of social power that is nowhere near the definition used in the studies of power she thoroughly summarizes. Thus, she brings data together to support a view that the studies do not support

at all. Clearly, the slipperiness of concepts in group behavior can lead to a lack of precision in specifying them.

A relatively limited number of topics have been explored out of the number available for investigation. Some examples of questions that have had little study, considering their importance in the life of an organization, are: Why is it so difficult to expel a member from a group? Why do groups recruit certain persons rather than others? What are the reasons for secrecy as a routine practice in organizations? Why is a modern manager met by abrasive behavior from subordinates? Why do groups set difficult goals? How can members improve the efficiency of meetings? How do organizations respond to regulations that limit their actions? One can easily think of other subjects that warrant study: changes in the properties of groups over time, why members participate in a group, the sources of conflict between groups, the contrasting effects of centralization and decentralization in a group, the origins of a group's goals, the causes of productivity in a group, or the effects of the social environment on a group. In a recent volume I have discussed a number of these issues with a view toward stimulating research into them (Zander, 1977).

Why are ripe topics not picked for study? One reason, already implied, is that investigators are busy planning and conducting experiments on more familiar issues; in fact, a researcher seldom moves to matters that are vastly different from his or her former areas of interest. Another reason is that a problem may be widely recognized as a candidate for research but it is not an acceptable topic in the eyes of potential investigators, those who advise researchers, those who edit journals, or those who provide funds for research. The problem may be well known but set aside because there are no basic data on the matter, reliable measures cannot be made of the phenomena involved, the theoretical issues are not clearly stated, or the project is too costly in time, energy, and number of human subjects needed. Such obstacles turn researchers away from matters worthy of attention.

As is often said, it is true that nothing is so practical as a well-stated theory. Such a theory can explain the causes and effects of a given event in different settings. Through results of research, people discern how best to help themselves because they identify what conditions lead to what consequences, and why. The innovativeness of research in group dynamics has been on a plateau for a few years. It will not stay on that level long when new needs and means stimulate new developments among students of group behavior.

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