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Group Dynamics

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GROUP DYNAMICS

Definition

Group dynamics are the influential actions, processes, and changes that take place in groups. Individuals often seek personal objectives independently of others, but across a wide range of settings and situations, they join with others in groups. The processes that take place within these groups—such as pressures to conform, the development of norms and roles, differentiation of leaders from followers, collective goal-strivings, and conflict—substantially influence members' emotions, actions, and thoughts. Kurt Lewin, widely recognized as the founding theorist of the field, used the term

group dynamics to describe these group processes, as well as the scientific discipline devoted to their description and analysis.

History and Background

People have wondered at the nature of groups and their dynamics for centuries, but only in the past 100 years did researchers from psychology, sociology, and related disciplines begin seeking answers to questions about the nature of groups and their processes: Why do humans affiliate with others in groups? How do groups and their leaders hold sway over members? To what extent is human behavior determined by instinct rather than reflection and choice? What factors give rise to a sense of cohesion, esprit de corps, and a marked distrust for those outside the group?

The results of these studies suggest that groups are the setting for a variety of individual and interpersonal processes. Some of these processes—such as collaborative problem solving, social identity development, coordination of effort and activities in the pursuit of shared goals, and a sense of belonging and cohesion—promote the adjustment and welfare of members, whereas others—the loss of motivation in groups (social loafing), conformity, pressures to obey, and conflict—can be detrimental for members. Some of these processes also occur within the group (intra-group processes), whereas others occur when one group encounters one or more other groups (intergroup processes). Because groups are found in all cultures, including hunting–gathering, horticultural, pastoral, industrial, and postindustrial societies, group processes also influence societal and cultural processes.

Interpersonal Processes in Groups

The processes that take place within small groups vary from the subtle and ubiquitous (found everywhere) to the blatant and exceedingly rare. Initially, as groups form, social forces draw people to the group and keep them linked together in relationships. These *formative processes* work to create a group from formerly independent, unrelated individuals. In some cases groups are deliberately formed for some purpose or goal, but in other cases the same attraction processes that create friendships and more intimate relationships create groups.

Once the group forms, *normative processes* promote the development of group traditions and norms that determine the kinds of actions that are permitted

or condemned, who talks to whom, who has higher status than others, who can be counted on to perform particular tasks, and whom others look to for guidance and help. These regularities combine to form the roles, norms, and intermember relations that organize and stabilize the group. When the group becomes cohesive, membership stabilizes, the members report increased satisfaction, and the group's internal dynamics intensify. Members of groups and collectives also tend to categorize themselves as group members and, as a result, identify strongly with the group and their fellow group members. These *social identity processes* result in changes in self-conception, as individualistic qualities are suppressed and group-based, communal qualities prevail.

As interactions become patterned and members become more group-centered, their response to *social influence processes* is magnified. Group members are, by definition, interdependent: Members can influence others in the group, but others can influence them as well. As a result, individuals often change when they join a group, as their attitudes and actions align to match those of their fellow group members. Solomon Asch, in his studies of majority influence, found that these influence processes exert a powerful influence on people in groups; approximately one third of his subjects went along with the majority's incorrect judgments. Stanley Milgram's research also demonstrated a group's influence over its members. Volunteers who thought they were taking part in a study of learning were ordered to give painful shocks to another participant. (No shocks were actually administered.) Milgram discovered that the majority of people he tested were not able to resist the orders of the authority who demanded that they comply.

Groups are not only influence systems but also performance systems. Group members strive to coordinate their efforts for the attainment of group and individual goals, and these *performance processes* determine whether the group will succeed or fail to reach its goals. Robert Freed Bales, by observing the interactions of people meeting in face-to-face groups, identified two common core behavioral processes. One set of behaviors pertained to the social relationships among members. The other set, however, concerned the task to be accomplished by the group. These two constellations of behaviors are also core elements of *leadership processes*, for group leaders strive to improve the quality of relations among members in the group as well as ensure that the group completes its tasks efficiently and effectively.

Conflict processes are also omnipresent, both within the group and between groups. During periods of intragroup conflict, group members often express dissatisfaction with the group, respond emotionally, criticize one another, and form coalitions. If unresolved, the conflict may eventually result in the dissolution of the group. During periods of intergroup conflict, the group may exchange hostilities with other groups. Competition for scarce resources is a frequent cause of both intragroup and intergroup conflict, but the competition–hostility link is much stronger when groups compete against groups rather than when individuals compete against individuals (the discontinuity effect).

The Field of Group Dynamics

Lewin used the term *group dynamics* to describe the way groups and individuals act and react to changing circumstances, but he also used the phrase to describe the scientific discipline devoted to the study of these dynamics. Group dynamics is not a prescriptive analysis of how groups should be organized—emphasizing, for example, rules of order, democratic leadership, or high member satisfaction. Nor does it stress the development of social skills through group learning or the uses of groups for therapeutic purposes. Rather, group dynamics is an attempt to subject the many aspects of groups to scientific analysis through the construction of theories and the rigorous testing of these theories through empirical research.

Donelson R. Forsyth

See also Groups, Characteristics of; Leadership; Social Identity Theory

Further Readings

- Forsyth, D. R. (2006). *Group dynamics* (4th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
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