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Exploring Group Behavior

Donelson R. Forsyth

When I worked for a construction company in the 1970s, I spent many a lunch hour talking with the veterans about their experiences working all kinds of jobs. They had clear opinions about which jobs to avoid and which ones to seek. Avoid, they recommended, road crewing during the summer months in Florida. Keep away from “call backs,” where the boss sends you

out to correct problems caused by other employees. Seek, instead, jobs that are done in the shop or ones that required the use of heavy equipment. Such jobs were always described with the catch phrase "good work, if you can get it."

When I migrated from the world of construction and took a position as a college professor and social psychologist, I found myself on the right side of the "good work if you can get it" divide. Granted, professoring is still work. There are politics of the office, bosses who make demands, and duties that must be fulfilled. Nor is it a glamorous occupation, as Hollywood's depictions of Indiana Jones-like professorial types would suggest. But depending on one's goals and perspectives, it is a personally fulfilling pursuit. It is an elite profession that requires special training and skill, and for much of the time it feels more like a "calling" than "work," for it involves (a) learning and practicing the skills valued by the profession; (b) seeking immersion in a community whose members are similarly dedicated to these goals; (c) sacrificing time, effort, and pleasures so that the demands of the discipline are met; and (d) striving for goals that go beyond personal desires and needs and instead benefit other people and society as a whole.

This sense of satisfaction with the "good work" stems, almost entirely, from my reverence for social psychology. As an undergraduate, I displayed a dilettante's interest in many topics before I strayed—by accident—into a course in social psychology. As the professor (Dr. Russell D. Clark III) moved through the material I was thrilled that my own ruminations were shared by a vibrant, expressive community of scholars. Their view contrasted so sharply with conventional wisdom, for many people seem to return time and again to explanations of human behavior that stress personality and predilections as causes of behavior. My sixth-grade teacher, for example, was certain that each one of her pupil's destiny was already determined at the age of twelve, that our aptitudes and temperaments had already set us on our life's course. My mother and grandmother, both astrologists, similarly believed that one's outcomes depended little on the actions of others, more on the predetermined course set by the planets. Yet, here was a field that confirmed that other interpersonal and not intrapsychic events shape people's outcomes. I became a professor because that is what social psychologists become. Yet I am a social psychologist first, and a professor second.

But this detached fascination is complemented by a belief that social psychology offers important insights into many of the problems of living in the modern world: collective violence, cults, destructive obedience, intergroup conflict, mental illness, overcrowding, pollution, and prejudice are all examples. In my studies of prosocial behavior (actions that benefit others rather

than the self), my students and I find that morality is as much a quality of social groups as a characteristic of isolated individuals. Studies of our social identity model explain how individualistic qualities—traits, beliefs, skills, and so on—are melded in the self-concept with qualities that spring from membership in groups, including families, cliques, work groups, neighborhoods, tribes, cities, countries, and regions. And my studies of the functions of groups—the rewards that people gain by joining with others in a group—explain why sociability is so common, particularly in times of challenge and stress. This general approach to understanding how individualistic needs are coordinated with, and in many ways met by, membership in groups forms the theoretical basis for my analyses of how group psychotherapy can be improved.

My belief that my discipline offers partial answers to key questions facing society and its citizenry shapes not only the subjects I study but also the way I teach. When they first begin their studies, my students often think like intuitive personality psychologists: they focus exclusively on personal qualities and attributes, such as personalities, attitudes, and inclinations, and downplay the importance of the connection between the individual and the group. Eventually, though, I convince my students to join me in the analysis of social psychological issues, thus broadening their perspective and understanding of human behavior.

A science can only flourish if its findings can be taught to new generations of students. Thus I feel that my greatest contribution to the field may be the Ph.D. students who have earned their degree with me and have gone on to become professors themselves. I also hope that my undergraduate students, although unwilling to dedicate themselves exclusively to the study of social psychology, may nonetheless carry with them from my classes an appreciation of the significance of these processes.

When I was a neophyte teacher my enthusiasm for the field led me to expect my students to become “junior social psychologists.” If a social psychology edition of *Trivial Pursuit* existed, I would have used it as my final exam. With experience, however, I learned that gaining an overall view of the field was more important than learning all the specific details of the field. To help them achieve this goal, I use my knowledge of group dynamics to de-center my classrooms with small group discussions, online study groups, collaborative learning activities, and team methods.

My faith in the value of the social psychological perspective has also prompted me to support the discipline itself, not just through teaching and research, but by contributing to its infrastructure: its professional societies, its journals, and its conferences. I have organized scientific meetings and

institutes devoted to group topics, served on editorial boards, defended my discipline's perspective when serving on scientific review panels, and been active in seeking to unify the social psychological analysis of groups with the use of groups in applied settings. My concern that studies of groups were being overlooked by editors prompted me to found a journal devoted entirely to the study of groups, with the intent of providing an outlet for empirical studies of groups from a variety of disciplines.

Moving forward, I hope to continue my work examining interpersonal relations and groups; to understand how they function, sustain us when we are traumatized, and help us accomplish tasks that would overwhelm us as individuals. I admit that social psychology cannot fully explain modern society—humans' cruelties and their inhumanity, its wars and prejudices, and its horrible television programming—but I would like to think that my work in understanding social phenomena will lead to answers that will inform how we will meet the challenges that lie ahead. I am convinced that with time, research, and conceptual development, my colleagues and I will contribute in substantial ways to the improvement of the quality of life both here and abroad.

