STRUCTURING PERCEPTIONS OF GROUP PROCESS

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An adaptation of Cattell's (1948) definition of group can provide a frame of reference for the group worker to organize his perceptions of process. Cattell's article, originally addressed to social psychologists, requires some modification if it is to be a model for viewing the face-to-face group.

Cattell held that three panels, or aspects, must be taken into account in defining a group: (1) syntality traits; (2) characteristics of internal structure and (3) population traits.

Syntality refers to the group acting as a group. It is behavior or inferences drawn from behavior from which the group is perceived as acting as a totality upon its own environment or, conceivably, on the environment of other groups. The casual observer who remarks that a group is "active" or "aggressive," for example, is offering commentary about group syntality. The observer is abstracting from the behavior of individual members a sense of the group acting as an entity.

Syntality may be compared with the Gestalt principle that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Syntality, "group personality," is more than a summation of the behaviors of individual members.

The idea that a group acts as a unity is reflected in the work of group theorists. Bion (1952) described group culture; Bennis & Shepard (1956) advanced a theory of group development and Schutz (1960) saw a parallel between individual and group development.

Cattell's second panel, characteristics of internal structure, refers to the formal and informal networks which affect relationships among members.

Forming committees to mobilize and channel individual energy for the attainment of a group objective is an example of a formal group structure. Crystallized and widely accepted norms, i.e. shared expectations for behavior, such as a value for openness of communication, is an example of an informal structure.

Both the formal and the informal networks can influence syntality. A group which expedites work through sub-committees comprised of knowledgeable and compatible individuals might well be perceived as active. A group in which the norm is goal accomplishment might well be perceived as an aggressive group.

Tables of organization and Roberts Rules of Order are examples of responses to needs of individuals to develop formal structures within a group.

Group theorists have paid attention to informal structures, as well. For example, Jackson (1960) offered a schema which conceptualizes group norms; Gibb (1960) has studied the behavior of individuals as it is related to group climate and Moreno (1934) devised sociometry as a means to identify those social realities within the group which affect relationships among members.

Finally, Cattell used the panel population traits to define the average or modal member of the group. For Cattell, population traits were individual characteristics averaged.

Were the casual observer to learn, for example, that the average member of a group was more industrious than might be expected in most groups, that knowledge might help him to understand why he had perceived the group as active. Were the observer to learn that on the average members of a group had higher achievement needs than one might expect to find, that information might help him to understand his perception of aggressiveness.

Schutz's (1960) FIRO-B inventory, which purports to measure three interpersonal needs along the dimensions of behavior expressed toward others and behavior wanted from others, can be used to determine population traits and to see a relationship between those traits and group syntality traits.

Still other group theorists, perhaps not so measurement-oriented as Cattell, seem to address themselves to population traits from directions other than the arithmetical means.

Owing largely to Redl's (1942) explanation, some theorists have speculated that members' common response to one, central person is a sufficient condition for group syntality. The common response, e.g. love, is the population trait.

For example, political action groups have been known to form with the only bond uniting members their shared feelings toward a particular candidate. Remove from focus the candidate, the central person, and the group is no more.

Bion explained population traits in terms of valency, which he defined as member readiness to participate in a particular group culture. Cultures, for him, appeared to be a function of a certain valency predominating at a particular moment. When the predominant valency, i.e. the population trait of influence, was dependency, Bion saw the group acting as if its survival could be attributed to the strength of someone outside of the group. In the Bionic tradition, then, population trait refers to a common need, not typically in conscious awareness, which influences group syntality in a particular moment of group history.

Finally, another group of theorists have paid attention to member behavior, e.g. Benne & Sheats (1948), organizing these into roles designed to facilitate (1) task achievement, (2) group harmony or (3) personal service. Were member behaviors typically viewed to expedite goal attainment, one might expect group syntality traits to include aggressiveness. Were member behaviors typically viewed to be fostering harmony, group syntality could be expected to include friendliness and were member behaviors viewed to be satisfying

needs of the individual, group syntality might be seen to include the traits of hostility.

Population traits have been accounted for from four standpoints: (1) the arithmetic mean of particular characteristics of members, (2) the members' shared feelings about a central person, (3) the members' predominating feelings at a given moment in history and (4) the goal directedness of role behavior.

The group worker can use the adaptation of Cattell's three panels in two ways: (1) to organize in a consistent way his own perceptions of group process and (2) to evaluate the completeness of theories attempting to explain group process.

In the first instance, the group worker can bring group process into his own awareness by trying to identify group syntality traits. Then the worker, operating from the perspective of the group acting as a totality, can examine characteristics of internal structure and population traits in order to understand how these two panels encourage and maintain group syntality.

Essentially, the group worker, using Cattell's panels, asks several questions: How would I describe this group acting as a group? What networks and what population traits tend to support the group in this syntality?

The worker may evaluate the completeness of other theories by examining them in the light of the three panels. He will probably discover that many of these theories seem to describe syntality but tend to omit details with regard to either characteristics of internal structure or population traits.

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