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Influence, Leadership, and Social Desirability in Psychotherapeutic Groups

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Date of submission:

January 7, 1991

Date of final acceptance:

September 9, 1991

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ABSTRACT. This article concerns a study that examined the issue of leadership in a psychotherapeutic group and the correlation between social desirability and influence within these groups. A sociometric questionnaire was administered to nine therapeutic groups working under the same therapist. Six of the groups were made up of prisoners serving sentences in an Israeli maximum security prison. Members of the remaining groups were probation officers and students in a teacher-training seminary. Responses to the questionnaire indicated the existence of three types of intergroup leadership/member relationships: a popular, socially desirable, and influential leader found in the sex-offender therapeutic groups, an unpopular yet influential leader as found in violent groups, and a sociometric star with no relation to the degree of his or her influence found in the remaining groups.

THE SOCIOMETRIC STATUS, leadership, social desirability, and degree of influence of the natural group leader, the therapist, and the assigned director are extensively discussed in sociological literature (Dies, 1985; Gallagher, 1974; Hollander & Webb, 1958; Jennings, 1958; Kellermann, 1985; Kinder & Kolmann, 1976; Koomen, 1988; Lapp, 1962; Lundgren & Knight, 1977; Parson, 1985; Yates, 1976).

The individual's sociometric status within a particular group was found to be directly related to the person's degree of interest in that group, the level of emotional maturity of the group member, and the degree to which his or her efforts are directed toward attaining the goals set down and defined by the group (Jennings, 1958; Koomen, 1988; Yates, 1976). People undoubtedly tend to become "friends" with and are attracted to those who are similar to them and who hold familiar opinions and attitudes (Ben-David, 1983; Newcomb, 1961; Parson, 1985). Jennings (1958) notes that the leader of a given group can also be defined as the individual awarded the greatest number of votes by the group members. He is the sociometric star of that group. Bales and Slater (1951) claim, however, that the choice of a leader is based on universal considerations, whereas

the choice of the best-liked or sociometric star is generally based on particular ones (Parsons & Shills, 1951). Therefore, there is little chance that the two choices will be one and the same person (Hollander & Webb, 1958).

The research study discussed in this article examined the social structure of nine therapeutic groups—six prisoner groups and three civilian or noncriminal groups. The primary question posed by the research was as follows: Is there a link between an individual's influence within the therapeutic group and that person's popularity and sociometric status as a member of that group? The main tool employed in the research was a sociometric questionnaire.

The Sociometric Questionnaire

The sociometric questionnaire is used extensively as a diagnostic tool with both research and practical application. Its primary attribute is that it reflects actual behavior and the pattern of relationships existing in real situations rather than internalized attitudes and theoretical postulates (Lindsey & Byrne, 1968; Passariello & Newnes, 1988). Responses to the sociometric questionnaire require the subject to distinguish between his or her personal reference and the overall evaluation of a hypothetical situation (Bales & Slater, 1965; Burk, 1968; Silfen, 1978). The questionnaire requires definitive answers.

1. From among the group members, whose company do you like best?
2. From among the group members, whose company do you like least?
3. Which group member, in your opinion, has the greatest influence on events occurring within the group?
4. Which group member, in your opinion, has the least influence on events occurring within the group?

Questions 1 and 2 relate to the subject's social preferences, whereas Questions 3 and 4 allude to an individual's influence within the group. For this reason, the questionnaire cannot truly be defined as a classical sociometric tool.

A review of the professional literature reveals that there is no optimum method for accurately weighing responses to the sociometric questionnaire (see Bjorstedt, 1956; Gronland, 1959; Yates, 1976). Consequently, responses to the sociometric questionnaire were analyzed on a dichotomous basis—chosen (mentioned) or not chosen (not mentioned). No attempt was made to weigh the responses. Participants were encouraged to respond to the questions honestly and truthfully and were guaranteed anonymity upon request. So many made use of the anonymity option that it was impossible to construct a sociogram.

The Subjects

The sociometric questionnaire was administered to nine therapeutic groups, all of which worked with the same therapist. Two groups consisted of prisoners sentenced for miscellaneous offenses ($n = 10, 13$); two other groups were made up of prisoners sentenced for armed robbery ($n = 9, 8$); two groups were prisoners convicted of sex offenses ($n = 17, 14$); two groups were probation officers ($n = 7, 9$); and one group was students attending a teacher-training seminary ($n = 10$). The questionnaire was administered at the beginning of a group therapy session.

Findings

An analysis of the correlation between leadership and sociometric status, as well as the degree of differentiation of responses, revealed that there were three types of group structures:

1. In the two robber groups, a significant negative correlation existed between social desirability or sociometric status and influence within the groups, $r = -.62, p = .05; \chi^2 (1, n = 17) = 4.56, p < .05$.

2. In the two groups of sex offenders, there was a significant positive correlation between these two variables, $r = .56, p = .05; \chi^2 (1, n = 31) = 6.38, p < .02$.

3. Responses for noncriminal groups, $\chi^2 (1, n = 26) = .79, p > .30$, and miscellaneous offenders group, $\chi^2 (1, n = 23) = .041, p > .50$, showed no correlation between social desirability and influence within the group.

Table 1 presents the distribution of these variables in the three types of groups.

The two robber groups were also characterized by a particularly broad dispersal of sympathy and no particular sociometric star. By contrast, in each of the two sex-offender groups, an outstanding and well-liked individual sociometric star was chosen.

A similar pattern was observed regarding the degree or level of differentiation in the responses. In the robber groups, there was little or no differentiation in the responses. For example, a person named as a good friend was also chosen in other questions. The sex-offender groups and the two probation-officer groups had a high level of differentiation in their responses. The miscellaneous offenders and the student groups indicated medium or different levels of differentiation.

Discussion

Results of the research indicate the existence of a relatively unique phenomenon relating to the personality traits and the social characteristics of

TABLE 1
Influence and Social Desirability in the Research Groups

Influence	Social desirability											
	Robber offenders			Sex offenders			Misc. offenders			Noncriminals		
	Liked	Not liked	Total	Liked	Not liked	Total	Liked	Not liked	Total	Liked	Not liked	Total
Influential	0.0	100.0	100.0	60.0	40.0	100.0	40.0	60.0	100.0	57.2	42.8	100.0
%	—	4	4	6	4	10	2	3	5	4	3	7
No.	61.5	38.5	100.0	14.2	85.5	100.0	44.4	55.6	100.0	36.8	63.2	100.0
Not influential	8	5	13	3	18	21	8	10	18	7	12	19
%	47.0	52.9	100.0	29.0	71.0	100.0	43.5	56.5	100.0	42.3	57.7	100.0
Total	8	9	17	9	22	31	10	13	23	11	15	26
%												
No.												

the members of the groups under consideration. The phenomenon becomes particularly obvious when we note the marked difference between the robber and the sex-offenders groups.

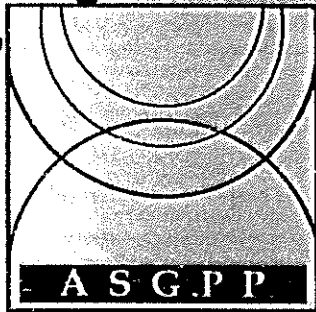
Individual members of the robber groups have, in their past, employed aggression as a prime tool for attaining their goals. These individuals also possess a particularly machoistic gender perception. The results of the questionnaire reveal that the most influential members in the robber groups are not the ones most liked by other group members. It can be assumed that within the robber groups, there exists an internal struggle for control, power, and influence over the other members. As a result, those who exert their influence over and within the group generate a disproportionate amount of frustration among other group members who aspire to the same position. They are therefore not liked (see Burk, 1968).

By contrast, a competitive behavioral pattern does not emerge within the sex-offender groups. Aggressiveness in sex offenders is most often expressed indirectly. The sex offenders' masculine self-image is defective. Within this group, those exerting the most influence over the others are also the most popular. As such, there is legitimation for a group structure containing a highly influential leader.

Further support for this is to be found when we examine the distribution of sympathy in these groups. The dispersal of sympathy is extremely widespread in the robber groups, and there is no dominant group member or sociometric star. The reverse was evident with regard to the sex-offender groups. The distribution of sympathy is not widespread, and one dominant star did emerge. Therefore, it appears that within the robber groups, there exists an underlying force that does not permit the emergence of stars. On the other hand, the sex-offender groups encourage and support the emergence of leaders, at times creating such leaders where none exists. Reinforcement for this conclusion can also be found in the degree or level of differentiation in the responses. Within the robber groups, relationships seem total or all-inclusive. Meanwhile, in the sex-offender groups, relationships appear specific, facilitating an approach based on characteristics often found in a particular leader or star.

In summary, it appears that the robber groups prefer a group structure and intergroup relationship that are egalitarian in nature, whereas sex-offender groups seem to prefer a group structure possessing a clearly defined and obvious social hierarchy. The differences found in the relationship between influence within the group and social acceptance or popularity may be explained in terms of the special characteristics of the individuals who make up the group, the social norms accepted by them, and their sociometric status outside the group.

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Journal of
**Group Psychotherapy
Psychodrama &
Sociometry**

VOLUME 45, NO. 1
SPRING 1992