

## Group Decision Making

It cannot be assumed that use of the decision-making process assures totally rational outcomes

W. B. WHALE  
*and*  
P. G. BOYLE

*It is unrealistic to expect total rationality to prevail in the group decision-making process. The process of reaching some group consensus will likely require some members to alter their views. Emotions become involved in the process of altering views and can be related to a number of aspects of the group process. Research evidence supporting these contentions is summarized as the basis for suggesting that expectations of decisions based on limited rationality are more realistic.*

THE IDENTIFICATION of problems in the process of planning requires, among other things, decisions as to what problems will receive attention. Experience has shown that when a group engages in program planning activity a complicated process is involved. Further, research provides ample evidence that planning groups are most productive when they follow a definite process in making decisions.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, at the time planning groups are oriented to their responsibilities some form of decision-making process is usually recommended for their use.

John Dewey is credited with formulating *the* decision-making process.<sup>2</sup> He proposed a logical sequence of events by which rational decisions can be made. Such steps provide for (1) objectively examining facts and trends that describe the current situation, (2) considering facts and trends that indicate possible needs, and (3)

<sup>1</sup>Patrick G. Boyle, lecture notes and supplementary materials from his course "Program Development in Cooperative Extension," University of Wisconsin, Spring Semester, 1965.

<sup>2</sup>John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963).

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W. B. WHALE is Research Assistant and P. G. BOYLE is Professor, Agricultural and Extension Education, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin.

arriving at decisions concerning what action can and should be recommended. Dewey described each step of the process as an educational experience for those participating. Each step provides an opportunity for the individual to grow in knowledge and understanding through relevant interaction and exchange of thoughts, and thus to arrive at rational decisions.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the question of whether totally rational decisions are necessarily the outcome of using the decision-making process in group planning activity. The conclusion reached and elaborated is that limited rationality is a more realistic expectation. Evidence leading to this conclusion is discussed in some detail in relation to the emotional involvement of group members. It is suggested that emotional involvement may be influenced by the nature of participation and the patterns of leadership followed.

#### EMOTIONAL INVOLVEMENT INEVITABLE

Any group situation is likely to require at least some of its members to alter their views if consensus is to be obtained on a matter under consideration. The group may, in effect, be striving for conformity. Factors of cohesion (the degree of closeness and warmth members of the group feel for each other, pride in being members of the group, the desire to work together toward common goals) are highly desirable requisites to effective group functioning. Certainly, participation is necessary for group interaction. Yet, a wide range of studies supports the idea that each of these—conformity, cohesiveness, and participation—introduces the prospects for emotional involvement. It may be, therefore, that emotional rather than intellectual influences are responsible for achieving the agreement necessary for reaching decisions in program planning groups, even though the decision-making steps are followed.

Asch and Sherif<sup>3</sup> show how people tend to influence one another in group situations. An unconscious tendency to conform seems to be related to a dislike for being different. In the Asch and Sherif study, respondents who made incorrect judgments were significantly influenced by wrong judgments made by others when discrepancies between what was correct and the judgment of others were not too great. Carter and Steinzer<sup>4</sup> found that pressures to conform increase as the group is more attractive or cohesive, as the individual deviates farther from the group norm, as instructions to the group maxi-

<sup>3</sup> See Edmund de S. Brunner *et al.* (eds.), *An Overview of Adult Education Research* (Chicago: Adult Education Association of the U.S.A., 1959), pp. 191-210.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

size the need for unanimity, and as the individual feels more committed to the group.

It has been demonstrated that highly cohesive groups make more effort to fulfill their assignments and members exert more influence to reach agreement.<sup>5</sup> However, the same study revealed that the basis of cohesion has a bearing on the performance of the group. When high cohesiveness is based on personal attraction, one group member has high influence on another, but on a personal basis. When cohesiveness is based on performance of a task, group members want to complete the activity quickly and efficiently. Under such circumstances, discussion is confined to as much as is thought valuable to achieve the purpose. When cohesiveness is based on group prestige, members try to confine their activities to those that offer the least risk of endangering the group's status. Where there is low cohesion, members act independently—they exhibit little consideration for each other and have little influence on each other.

From such evidence it may be concluded that, in order to determine whether decisions arrived at by groups are based on reason, one must consider whether cohesion is based on personal friendship, on group prestige, or on performance of a task. The influence of personal attraction may be responsible for a committee member's agreeing to an incorrect judgment. A member may vote for a decision that does not completely appeal to his reason, simply because the decision is held by those he likes. By the same token, he may vote against a decision that does appeal to his reason because it is held by those he does not like.

Decisions reached by groups may also not be completely rational if those involved are concerned with their individual or the group's status. Decisions may be influenced more by the desire to maintain or enhance status than by the desire to arrive at a choice among alternatives judged to move the group more expeditiously toward its stated objectives. A committee may arrive at a decision it feels will be socially acceptable and therefore influence the maintenance of status or prestige of the group and its members. Emotion appears to have significant bearing on decision making where either personal attraction or group prestige or both are bases for group cohesiveness.

In a study of roles in problem solving<sup>6</sup> it was demonstrated that, in group interaction, those who contribute the greatest number of

<sup>5</sup>Kurt W. Back, "Influence through Social Communication," in Eleanor E. Maccoby, Theodore M. Newcomb, and Eugene L. Hartley (eds.), *Readings in Social Psychology* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1958), pp. 183-97.

<sup>6</sup>Robert F. Bales, "Task Roles and Social Roles in Problem Solving Groups," in Maccoby, Newcomb, and Hartley, *op. cit.*, pp. 437-47.

ideas, or are considered the "idea men," are not the best liked. Those best liked do not make the greatest contribution of ideas—they give greater attention to the welfare of the group and its members. It is reported that group members who are considered "idea men" must talk a great deal; to be best liked, group members must let others do the talking. No individual is likely to succeed in being the group's "idea man" and enjoy the highest regards of the group at the same time—at least not for long. "Idea men" are liked best in the first meeting but least in the final meeting. Such a finding is of special interest in this discussion, considering the *ad hoc* nature of most of Extension's group planning activities.

Social status and status aspirations and satisfactions may be an extremely important ingredient in the personality of the individual, particularly with regard to his integration with the total society.<sup>7</sup> Much individual social behavior and many attitudes the individual reveals may be related to status adjustment. Wealth, education, and occupation may be dimensions of status that are responsible for divisions among membership of a decision-making group. Such divisions can directly influence group interaction.

A lower-status group member may respect the judgment of a higher-status member to the extent of agreeing with his point of view, even though, on the basis of his own judgment, the lower-status member may have doubts about such a point of view. On the other hand, a member of one status level may discredit the judgment of a member in another status level to the extent of disagreeing even though he judges such a point of view to be correct.

A third influence of status is possible if a group member perceives his own status to be lower than that of other group members. Such a person may consider his own judgments unworthy of consideration. Thus the group may be denied ideas and information that could broaden its base for making rational decisions.

#### *Influence of Leadership Patterns*

Since the leader is in a position to guide or control interaction, the type of leadership he displays can influence the extent to which the decision-making process leads to rational decisions. Lippitt and White<sup>8</sup> studied the effects that variations in leadership style (authoritarian, democratic, *laissez-faire*) might have on group and individual behavior. Authoritarian leadership resulted in group members depending on the leader to a great degree. Members were frequent-

<sup>7</sup> Eugene L. Hartley and Ruth E. Hartley, *Fundamentals of Social Psychology* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961).

<sup>8</sup> Ronald Lippitt and Ralph K. White, "An Experimental Study of Leadership and Group Life," in Maccoby *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 496-511.

is more irritable and aggressive toward fellow members and there was a tendency to direct antagonism toward the authoritarian leader and to out-groups. In the democratically led group, there was more contentment and more friendly, constructive, and task-oriented interaction among members and between members and the leader. Members were more disposed to give recognition to each other. The *laissez-faire* led group had lowest task-orientation because of lack of cooperative working relationship between the leader and group members.

The study shows that type of leadership can have a considerable bearing on whether the decision-making process will lead to rational results. All three types of leadership behavior may be used in guiding groups through the decision-making steps. Success in producing rational results depends upon the extent to which the emotional element has influenced the decisions.

Leadership characteristics and tasks outlined by Ross and Hendry<sup>9</sup> suggest that a large portion of the leader's activity should be directed toward keeping emotionality from destroying the effectiveness of group interaction in the process of making decisions.

#### LIMITED RATIONALITY

It has been proposed that expectations for group decision-making activity be based on an assumption that man exhibits limited rationality.<sup>10</sup> The basis for such an argument is that it is unrealistic to assume that a participant can be totally rational as he takes part in making decisions in small groups. If he were totally rational, man would choose the best alternative, as he perceived the situation, in making complex decisions. Decision-making procedures provide a means for helping him identify and choose the most preferred or the optimal alternative. In place of such optimizing behavior, man sacrifices; the attempt is not to find the best alternative but simply to find one that is good enough to serve the perceived purpose. "Satisficing" rather than optimizing behavior is therefore a more realistic expectation in group decision making.

The evidence reviewed concerning emotional elements introduced by the ordinary group factors of cohesiveness and participation adds weight to such a conclusion. On this basis one cannot assume that the necessary outcome of using the decision-making pro-

<sup>9</sup> Murray G. Ross and Charles D. Hendry, *New Understandings of Leadership* (New York: Association Press, 1957).

<sup>10</sup> See Robert J. Meeker, Gerald H. Shure and Miles S. Rogers, "A Research Approach to Complex Decision-Making," in Jack A. Culbertson and Stephen P. Hendey (eds.), *Educational Research* (Danville, Illinois: The Interstate Printers and Publishers, Inc., 1963), pp. 165-87.

cess will be totally rational decisions. Limited rationality is more likely to result—how limited it is will depend on the extent to which the decision-making steps are organized as educational experiences, as Dewey originally intended, and upon the extent to which emotionality can be kept from being a major factor in decisions.

### *Implications*

Expectations of a totally rational outcome of the group-decision process must be revised so only outcomes of limited rationality are anticipated. Making such a revision in expectations poses implications for Extension workers and others involved in planning educational programs. Decisions reached by study groups and recommendations made for action programs may not be made on a completely rational base; emotion is likely to have entered into the decisions. Better decisions could possibly be reached by reason alone.

Recognizing that group decisions are likely not reached on the basis of reason alone puts additional responsibility on those who analyze the problems, opportunities, and recommendations submitted by planning or study groups. The study group, its activity, and its conclusions need to be analyzed in order to arrive at some judgment as to the extent to which non-rational factors may have inhibited the identification of real needs.

The most important implication for those organizing program planning is that once the fact is recognized that decisions are not always reached on a totally rational basis it becomes possible to plan for maximum rationality. The totally rational outcome can become the ideal to work toward rather than the assumption around which group planning efforts are organized.

One cannot dispute the evidence that a definite procedure for achieving group goals in decision making is a valuable aid to group productivity. Neither can one overlook evidence from a wide range of program-planning research that the procedure most frequently proposed—the decision-making process—cannot be followed without difficulty even when group chairmen are given specific training.<sup>11</sup> If the premise is correct that only limited rationality actually operates, the group decision-making process may be inappropriate, as it is typically interpreted and utilized. It is doubtful whether each step of the process is given the educational interpretation that could work toward maximum rationality.

As was discussed earlier, Dewey's goal of rationality is arrived at through education. He defines education as the reorganization of experiences which adds to the meaning of experience and which

<sup>11</sup> Boyle, *op. cit.*

adds to the ability to direct the course of future experience.<sup>12</sup> To Dewey's way of thinking, education of the individual must start with an experience that is critical to him and grow from there. Experience, therefore, becomes crucial to rationality. It would follow that in the matter of decision making the process should start with the experience of the individual. This step is provided for in the present process. The question arises as to whether it is interpreted to achieve the most rational consideration of problems. Rather than provide committee members with situational information explaining "what is" in a subject area of concern—as is usually recommended—it may be more practical to find out from committee members what their understanding and knowledge are in relation to the subject area. This could mean beginning the process by having committee members identify the problems they see in their area of concern. Such a first step would allow development of the committee activity from a base of member experience and knowledge. Professional guidance and resource material could then be provided to build upon that base in order to increase the ability of the group members to make decisions within their area of concern based on reason.

This different interpretation of the decision-making process (resulting from the notion that it is more realistic to expect limited rational behavior from participants in group planning) has further implications for those who are arranging for group planning. The training of committee chairmen and members becomes even more crucial. There would be less concentration on the decision-making process as such and more on how to use the steps as a guide in organizing committee activity to utilize and develop resources of the committee members themselves. Selection of resource materials and persons becomes more critical. These cannot be selected only on the basis of what should be known about the area of concern. They should be selected on the basis of what the particular committee members need to know in order to meaningfully enlarge their present understanding as the basis for aiding them in arriving at decisions based on reason.

By modifying the assumption that groups will arrive at totally rational decisions in following the decision-making process, it becomes possible to plan for maximum objectivity and rationality. Committee work can then be looked upon as an educational experience for group members. It becomes the responsibility of the professional to organize learning experiences so that through group interaction individual group members are provided with the resources they need to make decisions based on reason.

<sup>12</sup> Dewey, *op. cit.*