Individual and Group Behavior in 4-H

Insights into how individuals and groups function are demanded of the competent informal educator

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IF EXTENSION is to continue having noteworthy influence on the lives of young people and adults involved in 4-H, it will be necessary for professional personnel to sharpen their understanding of how people function as individuals and as groups. This applies to work with young people and to volunteer adults. (It also applies to those involved in adult programs.)

The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of what is known about factors that influence choices made in groups and factors that influence individual behavior. Also, some program considerations for work with young people will be suggested to point out the need for added competence in organizing and working with individuals and groups.

Changing Dimensions

One has but to read Erickson’s My Sixty Years with Rural Youth to recognize that 4-H Club work is a continually changing, developing program. Articles such as Streeter’s “Is Extension Due for Some Changes?” and Federal Administrator York’s “Will the Farmer Lose His County Agent?” have produced considerable soul searching among Extension personnel. The tremendous technological innovations in agriculture and the rapid social and economic development

T. A. Erickson, My Sixty Years with Rural Youth (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956).


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taking place in farm areas have produced an expectancy of change.

It appears that agents will play an increasingly important organi-
zational and educational role in programs designed to raise levels of
living and community life. This represents an extension of "helping
people to help themselves." In simplest terms this type of agent will
be an organizer and educator as well as an expert in corn produc-
tion, beef cattle, home management, or nutrition. This agent will
have to rely more on specialists and other professional people, as
well as more on his own resources.

PROGRAM CONSIDERATIONS

Additional understanding of group and individual behavior, to
be meaningful, must be translated into the framework of a program.
Perhaps we can justify 4-H work as the vehicle by which we provide
guidance for young people and adults on important questions not
being effectively handled elsewhere. These questions could involve
choices of careers, college training, manners, appropriateness of
dress, and similarly varied matters.

How do we justify devoting attention to sociological and psycho-
logical understandings of individual and group behavior when the
law creating Extension assigns the responsibility of "diffusing ...useful and practical information on subjects relating to agriculture
and home economics"? The law also assigns the responsibility of
"encouraging the application of the same." To encourage application
requires effective teaching. To teach effectively requires an un-
derstanding of those we attempt to teach. To reach effectively any-
thing like the potential audience for Extension work, and especially
4-H, Extension personnel must train and utilize volunteer adult and
junior leaders. To do this, an understanding of individual and group
behavior is essential.

For example, if young people are to satisfy their basic urge to
learn and grow more mature they need chances to live and work
with adults. Such adults need to be those:

1. Who enjoy working with young people;
2. Who believe in young people;
3. Who are willing to accept young people as near-equals, with
   mental capacity and potential skills (given appropriate chance
to practice them) at almost adult levels;
4. Who understand, feel for, and accept as a natural step in grow-
ing up, the temporary failures, frustration, and rebellion which
young people experience as they struggle out of childhood de-
dependence toward more independent adult competence and toward a more mature kind of place in the sun with grown-up peers—and yet

3. Who recognize that young people still do have important growing up to work on, and need adult guidance and direction in tackling this unfinished business of maturity. 4.

When we can bring young people and adults together under such circumstances—with a common interest in something specific to work on (subject matter, projects, activities)—we stand a good chance of making significant contributions to their development.

Conditions for Growing Up

There are conditions under which young people can be helped to cope with their growing-up assignments. Group and individual relationships are much involved. Under the following conditions young people are best helped to master their growing-up activities:

1. They find they have real responsibility, just as far as they can handle it, for making important decisions affecting their lives at each step in working with adults—exploring possibilities, deciding between alternatives, planning how to work on alternative choices, taking personal responsibility for carrying out assignments, evaluating results, planning for the future.

2. Their failures are seen as signs of what to improve next time, not as reasons for lessening one's sense of self-worth and self-respect.

3. Their successes are recognized as the natural, expected result of healthy work, not as reasons for being singled out over their fellows.

4. They are helped to recognize the inescapable and democratically desirable truth of the parable of the talents.

This kind of understanding, acceptance, and working relation with adults gives young people their best chance to grow into the intelligent, responsible, independent-yet-cooperative citizen described in the 4-H Club pledge and in our definition of a good citizen. 5

Factors Influencing Behavior

Behavior has causes. However, the causes may be hidden. To fully understand the individual and his actions one must have a

4 "Texas 4-H Junior Leadership Training Laboratory" (Texas 4-H Club Staff, Texas Agricultural Extension Service, Brownwood, Texas, August, 1961), p. 2.

5 Ibid.
general understanding of the causes of behavior. For example, a young person or an adult may be reluctant to join a group or to participate fully because of the image held concerning the organization. (A young person might think of it as an organization for farm youth while he or she lives in town.) Once a particular cause for certain behavior is learned, it must also be recognized that such a cause is surrounded by strong emotional feelings. The individual needs experiences or ideas that will help him evaluate his behavior in terms of changing environment.

The development of new perspectives may take time, but the results can be rewarding. For example, the management of a corporation decided that a new accounting system was needed. From time to time literature concerning the advantages of new systems was disseminated among the workers. As interest in the accounting section grew, further developments were fostered. A forum was held in that division. A representative was sent to observe the operation of such a system at another corporation and later presented his report verbally to the division. When management announced plans for a new system, the workers remarked to one another: “Well, we worked that smoothly—had the company buying new machines and putting in a whole new system before they realized what was happening.”

Activity is generally directed toward some goal which satisfies certain needs or motives of the individual. Both the goals and the proper activities by which they may be reached are learned by each individual through his experiences in reference groups. A reference group involves very personal ties and provides a basis for shaping attitudes, experiences, and behavior. When an individual accepts the values of a group, his behavior comes to be affected by these values or standards.

The specialist in nutrition may not understand the lack of interest in a basic “meat and potatoes” program until she learns that the participants are a select group including primarily the better-educated women of the country. Consumer research indicates that homemakers with a degree will choose exotic dishes twice as frequently as those with junior high school education. As the educational level continues to rise, individuals change their goals, thus their groups also tend to change.

People prefer certainty to uncertainty or a known situation to an

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5 William M. Brown, “Coq au Vin or Club Steak” (paper presented at Fourth Annual Top Management Seminar, Texas Restaurant Association, Austin, Texas, 1959), Section 2, p. 3.
unknown one Tried and proven ways generally represent certainty. Untried and unproven ways represent uncertainty. The task of an adult educator is to increase the known area in a given individual's mind in order that his confidence level may be raised. Attempting to change people's customs or habits is an even more delicate operation than surgery. It is said that people resist change. They do resist changes that (1) appear to threaten their basic securities, (2) they do not understand, and (3) are forced upon them.

If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences. When introduced by W. I. Thomas, this idea led to understanding and appreciation of attitudinal factors in human behavior. With reference to attitudes, several questions are pertinent for organizational activity: How much significance does the member attach to the established offices, rules, procedures, and activities? Are there classes of activities through which the individual advances assuming greater responsibilities and privileges as he advances? Is there one high point of achievement which makes further participation meaningful?

Organizational analysis of this type might reveal negative attitudes of 4-H Club members toward particular programs selected by adults "who know what young people need."

Behavior patterns represent consistency. In terms of total behavior, the most disorganized individual tends to follow a consistent pattern. His psychological and emotional body (pattern) reacts in much the same way to pin pricks as does his physical body. Consequently, organizational analysis generally produces best results when it is a "self-analysis" procedure.

To build upon an idea or to tear down an unfavorable idea, an agent or specialist must know existing images in the group. The presence of rugged individualism may produce resentment toward the idea that "help is needed or is available." The most indirect

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*Dan R. Davis, "Human Relations and the Rural Development Program" (paper presented at Southwestern Social Science Association Annual Meeting, Dallas, Texas, 1930), p. 2; and "Problems of Adjustments to Foreign Cultures" (paper presented at the Texas Academy of Science, Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, Texas, 1930), p. 5.
*Although now frequently termed "self-fulfilling prophecy" or "self-confirming hypothesis," this idea was introduced by W. I. Thomas as the "definition of the situation." For further clarification see: Robert K. Merton, Social Theory and Social Structure, revised edition (Glencoe: Free Press, 1957), pp. 4, 21-36.
*Bardin H. Nelson, The Role of Money in Rural Family Living, Texas Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin 979 (College Station: Texas A & M College, June, 1961), pp. 2-5.
approach enables one to avoid such dilemmas. For example, attitudes revealed in research in the low farm income areas of Texas included such ideas as: "The world just seems to be out of step. Folks are not honest, moral, and friendly like they once were."

Such attitudes become more understandable when one learns that in a 24-county area of Northeast Texas, 77 per cent of all families with income below $1000 had a family head who possessed one of the following characteristics: (1) 65 years of age or over; (2) physically handicapped; (3) was a female; or (4) completed fewer than five grades of schooling. A matter of primary concern to them was health and their ability to meet medical expenses.

Consider the futility of presenting programs to such people when anticipated actions involved risks. Change under such conditions seems pointless, meaningless, or even dangerous to the individual. Also consider the futility of programs designed to help young people adjust to the problems of such areas. Contemplate the impact on 4-H program planning of the following expression of attitude by a high school senior: "I'd rather stay here than any place on earth if work were available, but we just don't have it here. It has everything I would like except opportunity or work."12

**FACTORS INFLUENCING CHOICES**

Human beings in a complex society are constantly making choices or judgments. For the adult it may be a judgment concerning financial affairs or the proper degree of control to exercise over his children. For the young person it may be what to wear to 4-H camp, whether or not to go to college (and if so, what to major in), or whether to study or go to the pep rally with the gang. In making such judgments one utilizes standards derived from many sources.

To judge anything one must have something as a basis for comparison. The anchorages or reference points involved in making judgments come from past experience, from a positive or negative stand on an issue, or from a particular relationship to individuals.

To enable us to organize our behavior on the basis of established reference points—rules, status, roles, etc.—each social group in

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organization attempts to structure or define the important behavioral situations which will occur within its framework. Definite roles are established which define appropriate behavior for different individuals—adult leader, county Extension agent, nutrition specialist, school officer, junior leader, etc. Each role carries with it certain definitions and expectations. These influence both individuals performing that role and individuals in counter roles.

**Personal Involvement**

For example, the role of the agent as a leader might be to help people recognize or determine their wants, needs, or goals and then help them realize their potentials through planning and productive action. Through group decision making, needs are translated into realistic goals to which the group commits itself. Such goals create certain expectancies within the group. These exercise influence over the individual members.55

The role of a local leader might also be to help young people recognize or determine their wants, needs, or goals and then help them realize their potentials through productive action. As with the agent, the leader helps the group determine its most pressing wants and needs and through group decision making helps formulate goals. (For example, all of us are supposed to have one project and one demonstration this year.)

In fulfilling his role, the leader (or agent) is more than just another member. He must equip himself with skills in group processes and motivational techniques. He is an initiator, an energizer, an organizer, and unifier of people. The problem of involvement in any group is to get well enough organized that a number of significant roles exist which define what is appropriate or expected behavior for each member. The establishment of many roles or positions within the organization results in a high degree of personal involvement.

**Morale**

Yet individual interests vary. Programs should be designed so as to possess varying meanings or types of significance for participants. There are indications that involvement may be related to group morale. Various studies have indicated that group morale

tends to be high when the following conditions are met:
1. The members believe this particular group is of vital importance to them personally.
2. Each member experiences a sense of sharing in the accomplishments of the group.
3. The established goals of the group are worthwhile and call for concerted effort by all members if they are to be reached.
4. Contacts between members are personal to the extent that recognition of efforts, encouragement, and praise are meaningful and continuous.
5. Members are made aware of the significance of their group through becoming acquainted with past accomplishments, traditions, and special activities.
6. The emotional unity or esprit de corps of the group is symbolized or spelled out for the members.

The degree of unity is related along with the frequency of association of members, range or variety of common interests held by a majority of the members, and the degree to which contacts are personal or impersonal.\(^*\)

**Patterns of Action**

In a small, intimate friendship group there is little need for elaborate social structure. Members are bound by a personal loyalty, stimulated by common interests and frequent contacts. As the size of a group increases and membership is more dispersed, the regulative power of personal attitudes is considerably diluted. For its own preservation the larger group must develop means for facilitating or making easier indirect contacts.

This larger group can only direct the behavior of members through standard patterns in the form of rules, laws, official custom, and ritual. The standardizing forces of offices, different levels of status as rungs in a ladder, and procedures for securing, selecting, initiating, and training new members all tend to formalize and make relatively permanent the pattern of activities.

Any group must establish patterns of action (certainty) which lead to the fulfillment of certain needs or motives of the individual members. The action of members is sanctioned by the group—such sanctions are referred to as group norms or rules.

**Traditional Norms** In a group that has either been functioning for a long time or where few changes have occurred, much of the

action receives its legitimacy or is sanctioned by tradition. For example: “We have always met once a month and I see no reason for changing our system.” Or, “Our vice president has always been program chairman: Are you suggesting that we change our way of doing things?” Traditions are important, but they assume more importance in some groups than in others.

**Personality Norms** In smaller, more intimate groups personal influence looms large. The individual who has been known for a long time, respected for his judgment, and makes few mistakes may be a primary influence on decision making. For example: “What did Charlene have to say about this idea? If she’s for it, I’ll buy it!”

**Functional Norms** In a society where changes are occurring at a rather rapid rate or where there is a rather high level of technological development, more emphasis is placed upon education and training. Training has as one of its functions to make individuals more efficient. Efficiency may come to be the only measuring stick that a highly organized group uses. For example: “If Bill can’t get his committee on the state leadership laboratory to work, get someone else in there who can. I don’t care if he was chairman of that committee last year.” Or, “What do you think about this program? If you know a group that has a better program, let’s see it.”

**Legal Norms** As groups become larger and more impersonal, people do not like to make or accept decisions based on personal relationships. The question then becomes: “What do the bylaws say?” Action occurs according to the rules regardless of circumstances or who is involved.

**SUMMARY**

To keep abreast of the demands of our time it is necessary that extension personnel continually improve their competence in working with and through individuals and groups—both adults and young people. Sociology and psychology provide us insight into the behavior of individuals and groups. Some of this knowledge has been categorized under factors that influence choices and behavior. However, such knowledge is sterile unless translated into program considerations. This can be done for adult programs as well as for work with young people. In this instance bases for effective adult-youth relationships are suggested to illustrate the program utility of inner insights into individual and group behavior.