Group effectiveness as a function of the group's knowledge of member dissatisfaction¹

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Abstract

Thirty groups of five persons each attempted an easy task and a difficult task under either no feedback, overt dissatisfaction feedback, or covert dissatisfaction feedback conditions. In the overt conditions Ss publicly indicated their dissatisfaction with the group process, whereas in the covert condition dissatisfaction was signalled anonymously. Contrary to findings involving satisfaction, overt feedback of dissatisfaction was more valid and relatively more effective than covert feedback, although the latter finding was not statistically significant. The act of providing information concerning dissatisfaction appears to be psychologically different from the act of providing information about satisfaction.

Problem

In a recent investigation (Shaw & Blum, 1964), it was found that the group's effectiveness in solving difficult tasks was improved when group members were given an opportunity to signal covertly their satisfaction with the group process. This was interpreted in terms of pluralistic ignorance (Schanck, 1932). That is, it was assumed that in many group situations most or all of the group members are dissatisfied with the proposed task solution, but each believes that the others are satisfied and therefore goes along with the perceived group consensus. When they are permitted to signal satisfaction secretly, however, this misperception is revealed and better solutions are sought. This did not occur with easy tasks, where there is little chance of error, or when the satisfaction feedback was overt and presumably less veridical. The present experiment represents a partial replication of this earlier experiment, but with group members signalling dissatisfaction rather than satisfaction. The purpose was to determine whether the same results obtain when dissatisfaction is involved rather than satisfaction.

Method

Ten groups of five persons each were run under each of three conditions of dissatisfaction feedback: overt feedback, covert feedback, and no feedback. Each S was provided with a silent, five-position switch, located under the edge of a work table, which controlled five of 25 lights mounted on a panel in the center of the table. Each S could signal his dissatisfaction to the group by setting his switch in the first position to indicate mild dissatisfaction, in the next position to indicate somewhat greater dissatisfaction, and so on, with the fifth position indicating the greatest amount of dissatisfaction. In the overt condition, each S was assigned colored lights corresponding to his experi-

mental "name." Thus other group members could easily determine the degree of dissatisfaction indicated by each member. In the covert condition, all lights on the panel were red and those assigned to a given S were distributed randomly over the panel. Further, Ss were instructed to operate switches carefully so that others would not know when they signalled. In the no feedback condition the light panel was not used.

Each group attempted two problems which had been selected to have high and low scale values on the Difficulty dimension (Shaw, 1963), and to have approximately equal scale values on other dimensions. Task 1 was a city ranking problem similar to that used by Gaier & Bass (1955), and had a Difficulty scale value of 2.50. Task 2 was a puzzle problem concerning dormitory room assignments, given certain limiting conditions. Its Difficulty scale value was 6.09. These were Tasks 1 and 3 in the earlier experiment (Shaw & Blum, 1964), and Tasks 80 and 97 in Shaw (1963). Half of the groups in each condition attempted Task 1 first and Task 2 second, whereas for the other half this order was reversed.

Groups were allowed a maximum of 30 min. on each task. At the end of the experimental session, each S completed a questionnaire designed to measure overall dissatisfaction with the group process.

Results

Measures of group effectiveness were time to reach a solution and performance scores. Mean time to solve was 7.7 min. for Task 1 and 29.2 min. for Task 2 ($F=514.79$; $df=1,24$; $p<.001$). There were no differences attributable to feedback conditions. The performance score on Task 1 was the correlation (converted to z scores) between the city ranking provided by the group and the true ranking according to the 1960 census. The mean scores were .78, .77, and .78 for control, overt feedback, and covert feedback, respectively. Obviously, these scores do not differ significantly. Task 2 required that four questions be answered; the performance score was the number of questions answered correctly. The mean performance scores for Task 2 were 1.4 for the controls, 1.9 for the overt feedback condition and 1.3 for the covert feedback condition. Differences between the overt feedback and the other two conditions approached, but did not attain, significance at the 5% level (Wilcoxin's $T=97.5$, where $T_{.05}=79$).

There were no statistically reliable differences in ratings of overall satisfaction among feedback condi-

tion; however, the mean number of lights turned on at the end of each problem solving session was 2.05 for the overt condition and 4.30 for the covert condition ($p < .001$). The mean number of lights was 2.41 for Task 1 and 3.91 for Task 2 ($p < .05$). These findings are in accord with the results of the earlier study involving satisfaction feedback. On the other hand, the correlation between ratings of dissatisfaction and lights was $-.08$ for the covert condition and $+.75$ ($p < .01$) for the overt condition, which is opposite to the pattern found in the earlier study. This suggests that dissatisfaction feedback was more valid in the overt than in the covert condition.

Discussion

The results of this experiment agree with the findings relative to satisfaction feedback (Shaw & Blum, 1964) in that presumably valid dissatisfaction feedback is associated with greater effectiveness. They disagree with earlier results in that overt feedback, rather than covert, appears to be more valid. The reasons for this are not at once evident, although it seems clear that providing evidence of dissatisfaction is a psychologically different process from providing evidence of satisfaction. We may speculate that Ss are reluctant to reveal dissatisfaction to the group, especially in the overt condition where social restraints are strong.

Those that decide to do so against these restraints should be motivated to communicate validly. In the covert condition, on the other hand, Ss are less restrained and may feel less compulsion to valid communication. In satisfaction feedback, the pressures are reversed, resulting in a reversed pattern of veridical signals.

In any case, feedback of dissatisfaction is not related to group effectiveness in the same way as satisfaction feedback. The signalling of dissatisfaction is relatively ineffective as a technique for improving group performance.

References

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Note

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