PARTICIPATION AND ORGANIZATION

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A Social Psychological Approach

Elizabeth Chell

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To my parents and Jean

Contents

Tables x
Figures xi
Preface xii
Acknowledgements xv

1 Participative Behaviour: A Social Psychological Approach **1**
What is Participation? 1
Approaches to Understanding Participative Behaviour 4
The Future of Participation 8
Plan of the Book 9
Summary 10

PART I THE INDIVIDUAL

2 Personality in Interaction **15**
Introduction 15
Some Theoretical Approaches to an Understanding of Personality 16
Empirical Studies Relating to Aspects of Personality and Participation 39
Summary 46

3 Why Participate? Motivational Issues **48**
Introduction 48
Theoretical Orientations to Motivation 48
Empirical Tests and Applications 72
Summary 75

4 Attitudes and Behaviour Change – a Participative Approach? **77**
Introduction 77

What is an Attitude? 78
Attitude Formation 80
Value Systems 92
Beliefs, Attitudes, Intentions and Behaviour 93
Attitude Change and Participation 96
Summary 102

PART II THE GROUP

5 Group Structure and the Process of Participation **107**
Introduction 107
A Typology of Groups 108
Approaches to a Study of Group Interaction 111
Experimental Studies and the Measurement of Group Interaction 112
Factors Structuring Interaction in Groups in Experimental and Field Situations 119
Summary 132

6 Social Influence Processes and Decision-making **135**
Introduction 135
Social Influence Processes 136
Risky Shift 140
Group Polarization 149
Social Influence Processes Revisited 150
Summary 154

7 Social Exchange Theory and the Concept of Equity **156**
Introduction 156
Social Exchange Theory 156
Equity Theory 165
The Application of Exchange and Equity Theories 170
Summary 177

PART III ORGANIZATIONAL ISSUES

8 Intergroup Behaviour and the Nature of Prejudice **183**
Introduction 183
Characteristic Features of Intergroup Behaviour 183

Conflict and Competition in Intergroup Relations 190
Alternative Intergroup Behaviours 194
Interpersonal and Intergroup Behaviour 197
Handling Intergroup Conflict 201
Summary 204

9 A Question of Leadership 206
Introduction 206
Trait Theories of Leadership 206
The Behavioural Approach to Leadership 209
Contingency Theories of Leadership 215
Summary 234

10 The Role of Participation in the Organization 236
Introduction 236
Participation Practice 236
Developing Participative Skills 241
The Diagnosis of Situations 252
Overview 255
Concluding Remarks 256
Summary 258

Bibliography 259
Index 283

Tables

2.1	A comparison of three basic personality models	21
2.2	Summary of Mischel's Cognitive Social Learning Variables	28
3.1	Maslow's hierarchy of needs	49
3.2	Outstanding characteristics of self-actualized people	50
3.3	Alderfer's clarification of Maslow's Need Categories and the incorporation of these into three distinct ERG categories	53
3.4	The major propositions of ERG theory	54
5.1	Conference process analysis: a list of categories used	118
5.2	Group process analysis: a list of categories used	119
9.1	Decision methods for group and individual problems	225
9.2	Problem attributes	227
9.3	Problem types and the feasible set of decision methods	231
10.1	A comparison of the assumptions and designs of pedagogy and andragogy	242
10.2	Summary of leadership style, behaviour and performance in varying situations	253

Figures

2.1	Four types of variability in social behaviour	22
3.1	Diagram showing the mechanism of movement between three need categories	54
3.2	Major terms in expectancy theory	68
4.1	The relationship between change in primary beliefs and change in different dependent variables – attitude, intention and behaviour	100
5.1	Interaction process analysis	114
5.2	A spectrum of evaluative responses in an interactive exchange	117
7.1	Illustration of A's fate control over B	159
7.2	Illustration of A's behaviour control over B	160
9.1	Median correlations obtained in original and validation studies of the contingency model	220
9.2	Problem types	230

Preface

'Participation' is an overarching concept and tends to mean many different things to different people. It has not only been the subject of study for social psychologists, but also by students of industrial relations, by industrial economists, sociologists and political scientists. Within such diverse disciplinary approaches, participation has often been construed as meaning *worker* participation. This fact has focused the area of concern to management and union interaction within specifically designed participatory machinery – works councils, consultative committees, worker director apparatus, etc. However, 'participation' in its psychological sense may be thought of as a much broader, more general phenomenon: that of interaction between people to achieve specific goals or outcomes. Participation is thus fundamental to social life, and *mutatis mutandis* to organizational behaviour.

Organizational behaviour, then, is about people participating in, and sharing in, activities, associated with which are various goals and outcomes. In order to understand *participative* behaviour from a social psychological point of view, we can ask, and attempt to answer, a whole series of questions, each of which merely touches on one particular aspect of this complex social phenomenon. For instance, are there identifiable characteristics of people which shape their participative behaviour? Moreover, to what extent can we attribute the *cause* of their behaviour to their personalities or to the situation in which they find themselves? How can we motivate people to participate? What needs are they seeking to fulfil by so doing, and is there any necessary link between the effort put into participation and the outcomes of such behaviour? How are attitudes linked to behaviour – participative or otherwise – and how might one attempt to change attitudes and/or behaviour if they are perceived as barriers to successful interaction between people?

At the level of the group, we can ask a rather different set of questions. People tend to participate in groups and may be influenced by other group members. Therefore it is appropriate to ask what structural and dynamic factors within group interaction affect the

participative process. How do people exert influence in groups and what effect does this have on decision-making? Moreover, are people fair in their exchanges with others and what effect might the comparison of own efforts with those of others have on participative behaviour in an individual or collective sense within the firm? How do groups interact, and what effect does competition or conflict have on that interaction? These are just some of the questions which inform the structure of this book. The implications are that participation affects the individual manager, supervisor, nurse, orderly, policeman, shop assistant, etc.; the work group, shop stewards committee, research team, surveyors, canteen staff and so on.

But should the organization be concerned about participative practice? Should it want, as a matter of policy, to improve such behaviour and what, if any, are the longer-term benefits of doing so? How can it go about improving participative skills? The whole area is highly complex and so one of the aims of this book is to attempt to unravel the complexity of the various issues, by examining theoretical perspectives and empirical research and presenting an account of the whole in a way which will, it is hoped, both satisfy the needs of the student of organizational behaviour and stimulate thought in the practitioner.

Such questions as those listed above arise directly from the theoretical material covered in this book. It is clear therefore that the application of such ideas is highly dependent upon a thorough understanding of their theoretical underpinnings. It has to be acknowledged that enthusiasm for theory seems to have waned somewhat. Such an attitude of disinterest in theory overlooks the fact that people theorize and hold implicit assumptions about other people's behaviour all the time. That is, they seek to *explain* their behaviour and, in so far as they do, they develop reasoned accounts (that is, theories), based on hypotheses about what is reasonable to suppose happened; they make assumptions about the way the other usually behaves; and they use evidence to support or throw doubt on the original account. But to what extent does academic theorizing shed light on everyday occurrences? My own view is that it can offer a great deal of insight, and I trust that this book will testify to that.

The book is pitched at an intermediate level. It therefore assumes a rudimentary knowledge of the subject and falls between a general introductory text and the original sources of material as found in the journals. Indeed, I have gone out of my way to include and utilize as far as possible the research literature. However, this book is not intended as a substitute for one's own inquiry into the rich labyrinth of exten-

sively documented academic ideas. Such a journey has rewards of its own which tend to be highly personal if not also egocentric.

The coverage is intentionally highly selective. But for some there may be unforgiveable omissions. I have attempted to cover topics which are clearly central to the issue of participation and which are also currently topical. However, there is no coverage of the wider organizational context: the effects of organizational structure and environment as they constrain the behaviour of individuals and groups. For such omissions I can only apologize. However, I hope that the selection I have made may be seen to form a sensible and coherent whole, building up layers of understanding from individual through group to some wider organizational issues.

E.C.

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