

# RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS AND CHANGE IN SENSITIVITY TRAINING GROUPS

RIE R. MITCHELL

California State University, Northridge

There is now good evidence (Bare and Mitchell, 1972) that positive behavior change occurs as a result of participating in sensitivity training groups. Several important subsequent questions may be asked, including: (1) what types of people seem to benefit most from sensitivity training groups, and (2) are there types of people who "get lost," or behaviors that inhibit change in groups?

Various facilitators of sensitivity training groups have observed that some group members seem to profit more from the group experience than others (Wechsler and Schein, 1962). Generally, this phenomenon is attributed to individual personality characteristics; however, very few empirical data have been gathered to determine which personality characteristics are important in promoting and hindering behavior change. Further, there is a possibility that some personality characteristics may have quite different effects in various time training patterns.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify some personal characteristics which promote or hinder individual positive behavioral change under various time conditions of sensitivity training.

---

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Supporting data may be obtained from the author.*

SMALL GROUP BEHAVIOR, Vol. 6 No. 4, November 1975  
©1975 Sage Publications, Inc.

## METHOD

In order to achieve the purpose of the study, behavioral change data were gathered for individuals attending 3 types of sensitivity training groups: (1) spaced sensitivity training groups, meeting for an average of 30 hours spaced over a period of approximately 10 weeks; (2) massed sensitivity training groups, that met for an average of 24 hours in 1 continuous training session; and (3) combination sensitivity training groups that met for a weekend, during which approximately 10 hours were spent in training, followed by 2-hour sessions once a week for 5 weeks, and terminating with another weekend similar to the initial one. These conditions comprised 42, 45, and 36 adult subjects, respectively.

A pretraining test battery was given to each individual: the Gordon Personal Profile (GPP), the Gordon Personal Inventory (GPI), the Edwards Personal Preference Schedule (EPPS), and the Behavior Check List. From the test battery, 4 or 5 problem dimensions were determined (representing behavioral areas in which each individual subject could change in order to move toward greater psychological health). From these problem dimensions, an individual Behavior Change Rating Sheet (the criterion instrument) was constructed to measure the amount of change on the dimensions.

At the termination of the group sessions, each subject, group trainer, 2 group members, and 2 outside individuals closely associated with the subject rated him on his individual Behavior Change Rating Sheet. Similar follow-up data were gathered approximately 3 months later.

Those subjects showing the highest amount of behavior change (the top one-third) were compared with those subjects evidencing the lowest amount of behavior change (the bottom one-third) to determine which of 25 personal characteristics were important in promoting and hindering

individual behavior change. The 25 characteristics were derived from the GPI, GPP, and the EPPS, plus 2 demographic variables—sex and age.

#### DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

In order to determine the relationships between 25 personal characteristics and behavior change through participation in sensitivity training groups, a one-sided t-test was made for each of the characteristics between the high and the low behavioral change subjects in each of the three experimental conditions (spaced, massed, and combination) and for the three conditions combined, at both termination and follow-up. The results of these analyses are summarized below. A positive relationship means that, as the scores on the personality variable increase, there is also a tendency for the amount of change to increase. A negative relationship means that as the scores on the personality variable increase, there is a tendency for the amount of change to decrease.

It is found that, when the data from all three experimental conditions at the termination of the group sessions are combined, there are significant ( $p < .05$ ) positive relationships between change and both dominance and responsibility. These positive relationships are still observed after three months, but at a less significant level. At termination of the groups, there are also significant negative relationships between change and the following variables: nurturance ( $p < .01$ ), succorance ( $p < .05$ ), and autonomy ( $p < .05$ ). The follow-up data show that there continues to be a significant ( $p < .05$ ) negative relationship between change and both nurturance and succorance after a three-month period.

For subjects in the spaced groups, a significant ( $p < .05$ ) positive relationship is found between endurance and change at termination, although this trend is no longer seen three months later. Succorance and nurturance generally have negative effects on change for this condition also.

For the massed condition, there is a significant ( $p < .05$ ) positive relationship between the achievement variable and change at termination, and a substantial continuation of this trend for three months. There is a significant ( $p < .05$ ) negative relationship between nurturance and change at termination and a similar but less significant relationship at follow-up. A negative relationship is found between change and vigor, both at termination ( $p < .07$ ) and at follow-up ( $p < .01$ ).

A significant ( $p < .05$ ) positive relationship between vigor and change is found for the combination group at termination, although this is not observed at follow-up. Nurturance is again negative ( $p < .06$ ) at the follow-up.

## DISCUSSION

The results of the study suggest that there are some personal characteristics which promote and others which hinder individual positive behavior change in sensitivity training groups. It was found that persons changing most as a result of sensitivity training have a high degree of: responsibility (i.e., perseverance, reliability); achievement (need to be successful, do a difficult job well); vigor, except in massed groups, as discussed later (psychological energy investment); original thinking (flexibility and enjoyment of challenging tasks); and, to a lesser extent, dominance (need to control and be a leader) and endurance (need to work hard at a task until it is finished). This study also finds that the following personal characteristics generally seem to hinder positive behavior change: nurturance (need to help others); succorance (need to have help and understanding from others); and, to a lesser extent, autonomy (need to be independent of others and unconcerned with what they may think) and cautiousness (impulse control).

Many of the results form a pattern which is very similar to results found by Harrison and Lubin (1965), which suggest that work-oriented subjects learn more as a result of

participation in sensitivity training groups than do person-oriented subjects. Person-oriented individuals were described as those who seek and value close personal relationships with others. Work-oriented members were characterized as hard-working achievers with a strong need for control.

Person-oriented individuals, as described by Harrison and Lubin, appear to be very similar to people scoring high on the EPPS nurturance and succorance variables. Thus, it is not surprising that, in the present study, a negative relationship is found between change and both nurturance and succorance. Nurturance is one aspect of person-oriented behavior that can, in some cases, be a protective behavior in a group. An individual, while being nurturant, does not have to reveal or expose himself for possible interactions and responses from other group members. A certain amount of nurturant behavior is essential to the success of a group; however, these findings suggest that group leaders should be careful not to overvalue or reinforce such helping and facilitative behavior in a given individual to the exclusion of other types of involvement in a group.

Harrison and Lubin, in explaining their results, suggest that person-oriented individuals are probably less challenged by their learning experience than work-oriented individuals, since their personal styles and preferences are only confirmed by the training. It is also not unexpected that individuals having high achievement needs (a part of being work-oriented) show high change. Such individuals are highly motivated and probably decide that, since the purpose of the group is change, they will put forth much effort in order to bring about self-change.

The results of this study also receive support from a study by Watson et al. (1961). They found that responsive, outgoing individuals were more likely to find ways of applying what they had learned. It is possible that individuals with high vigor and need for dominance are more actively involved in a group, thus giving the group more material to

which to react. Therefore, they probably receive more feedback on their behavior than do, e.g., succorant, nurturant, cautious people. This feedback helps them to better determine in what ways they might change.

The present investigation also found that there is a positive relationship between change and both responsibility and original thinking. Although these specific personal characteristics have not previously been identified with change in other studies, they are closely allied with the general pattern of hard-working, achievement-motivated, actively involved group participants who appear to have relatively high change. Individuals scoring high on responsibility and original thinking tend to be persevering, determined, and like to work on difficult problems. Thus, in a group they probably act in a similar way and persevere until change comes about. Those scoring low on responsibility and original thinking, however, tend to give up rather quickly, especially when a task becomes uninteresting, unpleasant, or complicated. Therefore, the behavior of these individuals in a group is possibly very similar to their behavior outside the group; they probably attempt to escape, either through physical or intellectual means, whenever the group is not of interest to them or when feedback becomes too pointed.

It was found that vigor seems to promote positive behavior change in spaced and combination groups. However, exactly the opposite relationship was observed for individuals in massed groups, in which vigor seems to hinder behavior change. This effect in massed groups may support one of the hypotheses often made about mechanisms operating in massed groups, namely, that the exhaustion produced by an extended and intensive session leads to a more truthful expression of feelings because tired people do not have the energy to maintain a facade and, without this facade, change is more likely to occur. Therefore, highly vigorous people, who presumably have more energy, would tire less quickly and thereby experience less change.

The results of this study suggest several possibilities for future research. It would be interesting to study the behavior of people with high nurturance needs within a group itself to determine if, in fact, their behavior and encounters tend to be other-person oriented, rather than focusing on themselves and their growth needs. Also, as more data about personal characteristics and change are gathered, it is theoretically possible to construct a regression model which could approximately predict probable change based on personality characteristics. This could help facilitators to become aware of those group members who will need special attention in order to promote positive behavior change.

## REFERENCES

- BARE, C. E. and R. R. MITCHELL (1972) "Experimental evaluation of sensitivity training." *J. of Applied Behavioral Sci.* 8: 263-276.
- HARRISON, R. and B. LUBIN (1965) "Personal style, group composition, and learning." *J. of Applied Behavioral Sci.* 1: 286-301.
- WATSON, J. R., R. LIPPITT, D. KALLEN, and S. ZIPH (1961) "Evaluation of a human relations laboratory program." University of Michigan Research Center for Group Dynamics. (typewritten)
- WECHSLER, I. R. and E. H. SCHEIN (1962) *Issues in Training: Selected Readings*. Washington, D.C.: National Training Laboratories, Series Five.