Group Development: Theory and Practice

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Abstract: This study explored that the stages proposed by group development theorists are followed in the same sequence or not, the change that group members have felt being the part of the group as well as how group moved from one transition to other transition. The models used as a foundation for this study includes Tuckman (1965) and Bennis and Shepherd (1956). The sample used for this study includes 22 people including both male and female who were divided into two groups and the time duration for these groups was six days. These participants were from Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and USA. The emphasis was placed on the sequence that was followed by these groups and changes being occurred in groups at different stages. The results showed that it is not necessary that the specific sequence is followed and same behavior is being shown by the groups as was shown by the groups being employed by the group development theorists but it depends upon the work settings, group composition, group duration and the task to be accomplished.

Key words: Group • Group development • Dependence • Counter-dependence • KSA • USA

INTRODUCTION

Today the individuals whether they are at the educational place or work place, they have to work in groups. But how these groups are evolved and developed is being under consideration by the operation researchers and organizational behaviorists from the time of 20th century [1]. The dynamic nature of group processes and the sequential nature of these processes are gaining interest and vast studies are being conducted to explore these areas. Groups are like social systems that are continuously changing with time from their existence. In order to explain what group development is, many models have been emerged. How the groups are formed, how they work and how they are separated, these questions are being answered by the group development models. So, group development research investigates the activities of the groups and how these activities change with the passage of time. These different time periods in which certain activities are being performed by group participants are termed as stages of group development. These theories are very helpful in explain and anticipating the group behavior in different stages of group development but still there is a challenge whether these stage of development are being followed in a fixed sequence by the real life groups. Whether the same behavior is exhibited by the real life group participants as was shown by the observed groups of Group Development theories and how the group development is impacted.

The aim of this research is to occupy the space of our understanding of typical group development with the real life perspective of groups. As groups experience transformation with time, so how the group changed from one transition to another. To explore these issues, real life experiences are being compared with the group development theories. This paper studies the two major theories of group development by Bennis and Shepard (1956) [2] and Tuckman (1965) [3] and whether the sequence and modalities of group development are followed by the real life groups or not.

This paper is divided into the following sections: Section I describes the group development and its theories. Section II explains the methodology of this research that includes the subject and the data collection of the study. Section III describes the results and analysis of this research. Section IV is about the discussion of the results being derived from this study. While the section
V concludes whether the group development described in theories is actually taken place in real life groups or not. Along with the conclusion, limitations of this research as well as future implications are also given.

**Literature Review**

**What is a Group?:** Groups are considered as an important component of social life. A group is defined as “interaction of two or more people having similar characteristics with one another as well as also having same sense of unity” [4]. “When two or more individuals are connected through social relationships with one another, they exhibit a group” [5]. Group is also defined as “when a number of people, whether they are few or more, communicate with one another face-to-face often for some time period” [6].

**Group Development:** Since the 20th century, Organizational behaviorists and researchers are continuously attempting to understand how groups are developed and evolved [1]. Why and how groups are changed with the passage of time is the main aim of researchers concentrating on Group Development. This phenomenon of occurrence of particular set of activities in the different periods of time led to the development of certain theories and models. Various models of group development have been proposed determining how groups are formed, their working patterns as well as their partition. Kurt Lewin was the first person to come up with the study of group development, introducing the concept of group dynamics. His model serves as a foundation of many group development models that describes change as a three step procedure that constitutes unfreezing, change and freezing [7].

Bales (1950) [8], one of initial contributor towards the literature on small group development, used Bales Interaction Process Analysis (IPA) over the laboratory groups. He discovered that the groups, without a leader, faced the problems of orientation in the initial phase i.e. what task is to be done, how it is to be done and how to accomplish the task. This phase is followed by the phase of evaluation where the group members exchange their opinions regarding task-related change and self-related change and provide feedback to one another [8].

One of the major theories of group development is the theory published by Bennis and Shepherd (B&S) in 1956. This theory is being widely reproduced and quoted in major texts of laboratory education. They divided group development into two phases: power relations and personal relations. These two phases are further subdivided into three phases each. The group members at first works with uncertain feelings towards the leader i.e. initial phase is authority one but later effective communication and healthy contacts are being developed between the group members. Members shifted from counterdependence towards the development of naturalistic feelings for one another. From the B&S theory, predictions of six modalities were derived and these include Fight (F), Flight (FL), Dependency (D), Counter-dependency (CD), Pairing (P) and Work (WO) [2].

Bion (1961) suggested four different phases of group development in which the groups can act from three basic assumptions. The initial phase is based on the assumption of dependency being followed by a succeeding phase that is described by fight-flight period. The assumption on which third phase is based is pairing in which there is solidarity among diverse pairs in the groups. The final stage is the work group where the group members exhibit task-related behavior and least emotional intervention.

In the mid sixties, Bruce Tuckman evaluated fifty articles of group development and come up with a model that was synthesis of group formation literature. Tuckman’s sequential stage model is widely used in organizations and consists of four stages: forming, storming, norming and performing [3]. This model was later updated leading to the addition of one more stage i.e. adjourning [10]. In the forming stage, interpersonal relationships between the group members are illustrated by dependence. The group went through the process of knowing each other and the task at hand. The nature and boundaries of tasks are identified and it is also determined that what information is needed to complete the task. The certain indicators of this stage include vague goals, apathetic associates, poor listening, uncertainty, shyness, negligible involvement etc. In the storming stage, Interpersonal conflicts between the group members increases as a result of sorting of work processes that will be used by the group. The individuals may emotionally respond to the task demands and show up resistance to group influence also. Absence of unity (cohesion), hidden schedules, arguments, inconsistency, anger and conflicts are some of the indicators of this stage. Groups then proceed to the norming stage where the group members settle their conflicts and develop shared understanding towards the completion of work processes. People are free to express their opinions and interpersonal relations and cohesiveness is being developed. Indicators of this stage include clarify objectives, listening, changing
or confirming roles etc. During the performing stage, group members are likely to be less destructive having consensus on how to complete the tasks. So, this stage is characterized by constructive action signaling creativity, open relationships, high morale, concern for people, success, confidence etc. The groups become disbanded in the adjourning stage. Here the focus is on the wrapping up of activities and the members are having mixed emotions i.e. happy over their accomplishments and sad over losing the friendships [3]. So this five-stage model of Tuckman includes two facets: task behavior and interpersonal relationships.

Slater (1966) [11] described that the essential phase in the group development is the revolution against authority. Members persist on dealing with the wish/fear dilemma leading those individual members to fuse with the group but still maintaining their autonomy. He also observed the identity maintenance and boundary establishment as re-occurring issues because of continuous adaptability within the group.

Two other models of group development were also created by Fisher based on decision emergence in 1970 and Stewart Tubbs in 1995 based on systems approach. According to Fisher model, group development consists of four phases: orientation, conflict, emergence and reinforcement. In the orientation phase, group members became aware of one another but are uncomfortable about how to communicate. During the conflict phase, the people will differ in their opinion on the tasks resulting in conflicts but these conflicts are viewed as positive as it ends up with the best idea after debate. Group members experience an attitudinal change and outcome of the group’s task becomes evident in the emergence phase. Finally in the reinforcement phase, group members use verbal and non-verbal communication to support their final decision [12]. Tubbs’ system approach model of group development is comprised of four phases: orientation, conflict, consensus and closure [13].

Srivastva, Obert & Neilsen (1977) [14] proposed five stages of group development. As members are conscious about creating their own identity within the group, so they emphasized social interaction, inclusion, influence and intimacy. Intimacy is developed in the later stages where all the members try to include and appreciate each other.

Marshall Scot Poole suggested a sequential model of group decision making. The multiple sequences model was dependent upon group decision making as a purpose of several contingency variables i.e. task structure, group composition and strategies for conflict management. Task progress; relation and topical focus i.e. three activity tracks are presented in this model. When group switches between these tracks, breakpoints occur. Although a descriptive system was developed by Poole and his colleagues to study multiple sequences, he rejected the phasic models of group development in his later work and anticipated a model of constant threads of activity [15].

Two popular alternate theories include McGrath’s Time, Interaction and Performance (TIP) theory and Gersick’s Punctuated Equilibrium model. McGrath suggested that group moved through different modes to come at same results that includes inception (goal choice), problem solving, conflict resolution and execution i.e. goal attainment. He also predicted that there was a default path through which the group stepped forward was dependent upon whatsoever was needed by group to complete its functions that are production, well-being and member support [16].

The punctuated equilibrium model was proposed by Gersick in 1988. She developed a new model to explain her observations in a better way as she detected that the stage model was not being followed by the groups under her study. She noted that the groups developed their own methods of how to precede the work within the first few minutes of the meeting but they had to complete that task within certain time limit. Even all the group members agreed instantly on the task goals and how they would accomplish it together. Although the early work was unproductive but still in anticipation of reaching a temporal milestone, the group task as well work behavior of the group remained unchanged. Then each group underwent radical changes after reaching project’s temporal midpoint. In the 2nd phase, the group focuses more on the task as well as enhanced task performance. This transition was basically caused by the presence of deadlines [17]. Recent researches have proved that not all groups go through changes but they are more concerned about the evaluation of their tasks and progress.

Another famous study that added to the understanding of group development is the proposition of integrated model by Wheelan, Davidson and Tilin in 2003. This model discussed the successful teams in terms of maturity and to measure the maturity of a group, several concepts were explored that included feedback mechanism, cohesion, decision making method, communication, operating procedures, acceptance of minority views, participation in leadership and use of member resources [18].
These theories put emphasis on members that in order for group development, they have to face their emotions (in dependence and counter dependence form) towards authority and given up their desire to describe their identity relative to authority to realize a more pragmatic outlook of leader. The dilemma of maintaining self-identity in relation to their fright of engulfment [11], aggravation and disappointment with others [2] and the fright of inability to influence others [14] is another theme of the theory of group development. Therefore, development includes the enhanced feeling of identity and autonomy, establishment of interpersonal relationships as well as appreciating other’s autonomy also. The group that is mature becomes able to overcome the anxiety and other hindrances coming in his way resulting in the attainment of being considerate to others.

The stages of group development follow the fixed sequence as there in theories or the stages are of equal duration or the groups going through all the stages at equal pace are some of the challenges that need to be resolved and what changes do they feel in themselves being the part of the group [19].

In order to implement group development theories to real life, to become aware of how the members of the group consider their contribution, how they give meaning to the new transition that they have experienced, how they recognize themselves and their world, one needs to be the part of the group. Mostly the researches are limited to the measurement of one model suggested by Tuckman (1965) [10] but if this method is effective to measure the group processes, then the other group development models can assessed to capture group processes over time, development patterns within the group, relationship between the development patterns if any and other team relevant variables also. This paper aims to follow the work of Bennis and Shepherd in order to check that whether the groups made in real life experience the real transitions or not or follow the same stages as given in theories. The Tuckman (1965) [10] stages of group development might be used as caption for the series of circumstances experienced by members within the group.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Subjects and Groups:** The subjects were both male and female and they were 22 in number. They were from different ethnic backgrounds. Some students were from Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and some students were from United States of America (USA). These subjects were divided into two groups each containing 11 members from both KSA and USA. These participants were not provided with any specific topic or task they have to accomplish in a group but they were to choose any topic. None of the groups were having any specific leader. So, the members were free to start their conversation on any topic and it was not a necessary condition that any particular individual will lead the discussion. These groups met for 6 days where the focus was on gaining complete understanding of the group processes, interpersonal relationships from participation in the groups and how they had benefited from being in a group.

**Data Collection:** The data was taken from the records of all group days. The written notes were used to analyze the group development within these six days to determine whether the same phasic development is followed or not as Bennis and Shepherd theory. Each group was being analyzed on all of the six modalities i.e. fight, flight, dependency, counter-dependency, pairing and work.

The stages of forming, storming, norming and performing being proposed by Tuckman (1965) [10] might be used as captions for series of events being experienced by the group members.

**Analysis of Group Development:** The analysis is being carried out with the help of the experiences of group members that they had in the 6 days. On the 1st day, the groups were basically formed i.e. forming stage. The group members introduce themselves and search for shared values and beliefs. They were in the phase to discover one another talents for making contribution to the group. They also shared their views about the purpose of being in a group. The group members mostly talked about general topics like history topics (alliance between KSA and USA in 1950), Middle East and American culture and views about working of men and women in both countries. These topics were discussed by the Group 2 while the Group 1 discussed about one another’s personal life like work experience of group members, problems faced by Saudi members while travelling to U.S. what motivated Saudi students to come to U.S. as well as their views about being in a group. One of the members talked all the time without giving space to other members to talk.

On the 2nd day, Group 1 started their conversation on the topic named managers attitudes towards the employees and how their relationship should be. The other group members who wanted to contribute give their views and then the conversation was turned by American member to the facilities in the form of no tax being
provided to Saudi people by the government. But one of the Saudi members also complained about the job problems faced by Saudi women as they are not permitted to do the work. Only few members participated in the conversation while the rest of them listened to them. While the Group 2 started conversation by talking about one another families, hobbies and personal experiences of one another. Even one of the member discussed how she benefited from the last day discussion about cultures. Jessica, group member, tried to be the leader by initiating the conversation every time. One of the members named Sara shows her disliking about another member if he started conversation on politics or history. So the group tried to change the topic in order to avoid conflict that can be arisen in the group. Another group participant named Lindsay didn’t contribute to the group discussion, only making notes about the gestures of other members. It is observed that the Group 2 follows the Tuckman (1965) stage of forming after storming as they came to know about one another on second day.

On the 3rd day, Group 1 was successfully controlled by one member who showed herself as a leader, so she initiated the discussion with the topics of her own will. She came with the topic of women strength and women responsibility of successfully managing the work-life balance. Waleed who was very active participant and fully contributed to the group on previous days was quiet most of the time giving other members opportunity to talk. Group 2 mostly talked about the concept of dating in KSA and USA where the Saudi members actively participated by telling their views about dating as well as the norms prevailing in their culture regarding the matter of dating. In the end of conversation, the group came up with a message that states, “Creating and maintain friendly and healthy atmosphere in order to encourage learning, friendship and faster relationship beyond this class”.

According to the above extracts, modalities that were predicted from Bennis and Shepard Theory (1956) [2], showed the following results.

**Fight (F):** There was no fighting in the Group 2 on all the days while Group 1 disbanded with the F between the members on being the leader on the last day. The other members tried to overcome the fight but one of the members was not willing to end the fight as he didn’t want to follow any other leader within the group.

**Flight (FL):** In case of Group 1, there was low level of flight on the 1st day but as they proceeded, FL seemed to be highest as the participation by the members decreases while in case of Group 2, flight was highest on the first day but with continuous conversations on consecutive days, FL dropped.

Generally, the general pattern of FL exhibited by Group 2 confirmed the consensus among the theories that it was more in the starting stages and low levels in the latter stages.

**Dependency (D):** Dependency was expected to be high as everyone was waiting for someone to take the initiative and in case of Group 2, one of the Saudi members was much dependent on other Saudi members and he talked after they participated in the conversation. This dependency seemed to be the dropped quickly on the other days even in case of both groups.

**Counter-Dependency (CD):** In case of Group 1, counter-dependency seemed to the highest as the two members were resisting one another as leaders on the last day while his was not the case with Group 2. While in
case of Group 2, CD was not prevailing as the group members were not opposing the member who took the leadership position in the group.

**Pairing (P):** Pairing expected to be low on the 1st two days for Group 2 but later on, they then P increases because of intense involvement by group members either inside or outside the class, so P seemed to be highest as the members were having good group experience with powerful understanding, acceptance and intimacy on the final day. But in case of Group 1, P was lowest on the last day as the group disbanded after a fight between two members and other members were not feeling any kind of bonding with one another.

**Work (WO):** No salient work stage could be identified as the groups were not given any specific task to accomplish. But if the group discussion is considered as work, then it was highest in the early days, dropped in the middle days as the members thought that they do not have anything to debate but then gradually increases until the ending of the group.

**DISCUSSION**

The association between Group Development theories and their practical implication in the form of real life groups has been explored. With the help of findings, certain predicted patterns were being observed and it was also found that the groups had gone through a number of stages as per described by B&S. The observed patterns of P, WO and D were having good fit with the expected patterns of Bennis and Shepard theory (1956) [2] and not very good for FL (in case of Group 1) and F. It was also observed that F was high at the final stage in case of Group 1 where the members show more aggression and hostility as opposed to the B&S prediction where the group became free of F at final stage. The transition from one stage of group development to another stage was effectively done as almost all the members exhibited the behavior as was expected. This transition was successful for Group 2 as compared to Group 1. Group 2 successfully introduces one another, having fine conversations on general topics and finally disbanded with good interpersonal relationships, superior experiences as well as knowledge on how to be a good fit in a group. While Group 1 was on his way to successfully pass these transitions but in the later stages, the fight between two members for leadership and less participation by the group members could not make the group to effectively pass through the successful transition.

A question was raised in the earlier section of the paper that whether stages of group development follow the fixed sequence as there in theories or the stages are of equal duration and whether the groups go through all the stages at equal pace or not. The results indicated that Group 2 follows the sequence of group development theories more than the Group 1 where the group members were less connected with one another and even the termination of the group follows with the fight of who will become the leader. Other group members tried to overcome the fight but of no use and the group disbanded with the fight. It was also revealed that the duration does matter as the group members were still unable to explore all the stages in a way they should be and also all the stages needed to be followed like the Group 1 did not go through the norming stage unlike Group 2. The stages proposed by Tuckman (1965) [10] as well as other group development models were suggested depending upon certain conditions of group composition, group duration and specific group task, thus it must be believed that the sequence of group development can be changed as per the work setting that is provided. These setting-specific differences may influence the sequential change relative to particular features of stages in the group developmental sequence.

The group members of Group 2 have revealed that they had experience being the part of the group as they have learnt how to work in teams and in case of being the part of any other group, how to fit in the group. The members were also having comfort being in the group and every member was so cooperative in the group, taking care of each other in order to maintain the cohesion and intimacy. While the members of Group 1 didn’t have any good experience as the intimacy and group cohesion that is very important was missing. The shyness and nervousness that needs to be dissolved in the last days (when the group members had got enough familiarity about one another as well as pairing is there between members) was still there and even the group members did not contributed to the group effectively.

Certain other factors that were also observed in these groups are the participation level of group members as well as the group size. The participation level tends to be lower in large groups as fewer members participate in the group discussion. The members in a group of 5 are more participative than the group having 12 members. According to the above findings, as each group was comprised of 11 members, only few members contributed effectively in the group conversations and these results are consistent with the study of Hare (1952) [20]. These results were powerfully consistent with the
participation level shown by Group 1 where the group conversation was dominated by only few members and most of them did not participated either due to their nervousness or no interest to be the part of conversation and group [21-23]. So this study provides verification of the previous work in case of large group size as an inhibitor of participation but it is also possible that the large groups need more effort and time to develop a particular setting supportive of more interaction and work within the groups.

CONCLUSION

This study was sought to examine that whether the group development theories as proposed in a specific sequence are fully followed in the real life groups or not. The members who work in groups have to pass certain stages in order to accomplish a task and finally they have to be disbanded. During this whole process, the members exhibits certain modalities like fight, flight, dependency, counter-dependency, pairing and work. It is concluded from this study that in the starting stages, dependency is more which decreases with the passage of time and pairing also increases as the group members move towards the termination stage. Fight mode depends upon the circumstances being prevailing in the group. It is also revealed that it is not necessary the same kind of group development and its sequence is being done in real life when individuals work in groups unlike the group development theories.

Group development being followed by some specific sequence is dependent upon the composition of the group, duration of group, the task to be accomplished within the group and the most important is the work-setting of the group. There is certainly a relation between the setting and development which in turn can change the sequence of group development stages.

Limitations: This study has suffered from the common limitations of any field research as limited number of groups are studied who were not even facilitated by any leader as well as they were not even provided with any specific project or tasks to accomplish within the given work setting.

Future Implications: However the conformity of this research with the previous researches will encourage the researchers to work with different groups with confidence to explore more about group development. As this research has certain limitations as described above, so more research still needs to be done with groups of different sizes in different contexts as well as provision of certain tasks to group along with some leader or facilitator should be provided before making any firm conclusion.

REFERENCES