

THE STRUCTURED GROUP INTERVIEW

*an "action research" method
for identifying and solving
intergroup social problems*

The structured group interview procedure was originally developed by one of the authors in 1947¹ and has since been used in a variety of settings. In the past four years this procedure has been expanded and adapted for use in applied human relations training as well as large group consultation by the Boston University Human Relations Laboratory, New York, NY. One instance of its application was briefly described by Thomas Cottle² and the considerable response to that article requesting additional information has led the authors to undertake the task of explicating the nature of the process.

The group interview procedure has been developed primarily in response to the increasing need for a vehicle appropriate for working with large groups (25 to 50 persons) to effect changes within a social system, an organization or a community. Although recent years have seen a considerable burgeoning of the use of small groups as a medium for consultation and change, there has been very little experimentation with the use of large groups for similar purposes. With the current trend toward organizational change efforts which involve continued re-evaluation of institutional goals and structure,³ the necessity of involving large numbers of people in the change process is rapidly increasing the need for large group intervention procedures. Indeed what is required is a modified version of an "action research" model, which can create a setting in which large numbers of people participate in the diagnosis and solution of the major problems of a social system.

We have become increasingly convinced that any intervention designed to effect change in a social system of substantial size and/or a community, must involve all or nearly all of the significant members of the system in the change process, as well as the influential members of the constituencies within the community. The intervention procedure must provide the opportunity for a joint consideration of shared problems, so that all may undergo a change of per-

cept and develop a joint concept of the situation, within the sight and sound of each other. Having everyone in on the beginning, middle and end of the change process hastens effective cross-communication, engineering of consent for change and readying of various levels of a hierarchical structure to move in the same direction. For this purpose alone, we have found the structured group interview an invaluable and almost irreplaceable innovation.

DIVERSE APPLICATIONS

We have also found the procedure to be a versatile structure which can be employed for a variety of purposes. It may be used as a training device with a focus on the exploration of relevant affective material (e.g., areas such as prejudice and intergroup conflict in a system undergoing interracial or youth-age upheaval), it may also be used as a context for a problem census and/or problem-solving. We have employed this procedure as the initial step in a team building effort aimed at the formation of an on-going workgroup; it has also been used as a context for group consultation.

We have become increasingly impressed with the power of the procedure to create a sense of community within a heterogeneous group of people and thus accelerate their collective and individual readiness to participate in a joint effort involving significant changes in their own life space. The procedure has been employed in a variety of settings (governmental agencies, religious organizations, etc.) but, since our most extensive experience with it derives from working with school systems and school-community problems, it will perhaps be best if we focus our description of the process within this setting.

It should be noted, however, that the core of the process is essentially the same, irrespective of the setting in which it is employed or the functional purpose (consultation, training, problem-solving, etc.). It is a process design

JAMES F. SMALL
Psychology Department

and

MAX BIRNBAUM
*Director
Human Relations Laboratory
Boston University
New York, New York*

ed to foster a readiness for change by creating a climate in which effective cross-communication stimulates concrete changes in individual and organizational behavior.

SCHOOL SYSTEM MODEL

The model we have employed in working with school systems involves meeting first with administrators, then with teachers and subsequently involving parents, police, community leaders and students in a series of sessions whose sequence is designed to facilitate a reorganization of the school system's approach to handling both internal and school-community problems, especially problems underlain by intergroup conflicts which have the potential to erupt in the form of emotionally charged issues and lead to disruptive or destructive consequences

The sequence begins with the top administration, usually with a two-day session commencing with a structured group interview. The purpose of this session is to engineer administrative sanction for change and for involvement of teachers in collaboration with administrators to determine what changes are necessary in each individual school. Subsequently a "cadre" of teachers who are to become "human relations coordinators" for their respective schools is given four or five days of training in which they are helped to evolve some understanding of the dynamics of school-community issues, to evolve a general concept of their role and to make specific plans for first steps in their schools. In this manner, cross-communication among schools is maintained while allowing for individual differences in the programs developed for different schools in which the problems may vary. Participants are also helped to sort out short-term, long-term and insoluble problems and to develop tentative plans for first steps toward problem solution.

INTERNAL IMPETUS

It is important that action consequences grow directly from problem assess-

ments, so that the impetus of the program comes from people within the system. Thus a program can be developed whose substance is not imposed from outside and whose consequences are immediately real and palpable, rather than purely verbal. Subsequently, sessions may begin to incorporate significant members of the community (parents, police, community leaders) and begin to help cadre and principals establish lines of communication to those outside of the school who have a significant impact on school life.

In each "training" session, the major ingredient is an initial structured group interview which asks each person to explore the attitudes and feelings toward other racial, religious and ethnic groups arising from his background and to pool the resources of the group to attain a perspective on the intergroup issues which are impinging on the school system. Although this frequently leads to individual reconsideration of attitudes, it is a secondary consequence of the process, the primary thrust being to stimulate consideration of how to deal effectively with the concrete problems of intergroup conflicts (e.g. physical violence, discipline, fear and hostility, real or imagined exclusion or preferential treatment, student protest, irate parents, etc.) It should be emphasized that there is no therapeutic or para-therapeutic effort in this process in that individual attitudes and feelings are not pursued as such, but rather are generalized to help clarify the kinds of dynamics that underlie conflicts in the schools (e.g. black-white, Protestant-Catholic, black-Jewish, etc.)

GROUP FACTORS

Most sessions have involved approximately 30 participants. A particular effort is made to involve persons crucial to the change process. Working with groups of this size allows sufficient heterogeneity for most major subgroups within the system to be represented. Thus significant intergroup and interface⁴ issues can be explored, ac-

ording to the group composition. One can work with differences within a faculty with a group of teachers, with police-school issues with a group of police, administrators and teachers or with school-community issues with a group of teachers and parents. Working with participants from throughout the social system in a large group creates a sense of community and an awareness of the group as a microcosm of the larger society. One may break the group into subgroups at any given time but the large reference group remains most significant in the experience rather than the small group, as is usual in many training situations. It is the positive feeling about sharing an experience as a total group which opens the way to significant internalized learnings. With a large heterogeneous group most major subgroup points of view are represented and the wealth of dynamics supplied by the resources within the group provides the raw material for exploring a large range of issues (e.g. racial, ethnic, teacher-student, school-community, faculty-administration, etc.)

METHOD

The structured group interview procedure usually consists of interviewing each participant in a group in succession. Participants are seated around a hollow square of tables with cardboard "table tents" in front of them, on which each person's name is printed. The hollow square maximizes people's ability to see one another. This physical structuring seems to be conducive to the formation of a "group" feeling and a work orientation. Usually we have found the process most successful with one interviewer, or with one person taking the most active role during the interview. The content of the successive individual interviews varies according to the roles of the interviewer and participants, the goals of the session and the place of the session in an overall design.

If, for instance, the interviewer is functioning as a consultant to an on-going group which will work together in the

future, he may use the group interview for problem census and diagnosis. He can ask each participant his view of the problem and help the group to sort out discrepant views to arrive at short and long-term goals for concrete steps toward problem solution. The interviewer's question might be "What would you like to see changed, if it were up to you?" The group interview would then be an initial step in the group attempting to organize or reorganize itself to solve specific problems. The interviewer would help each participant to reconsider his attitudes and his job functioning, to consider whether they are appropriate to his job goals and to entertain alternative approaches to handling problem situations.

Timing of the individual interviews varies, depending upon the individual's

response and the avenues it opens for exploration of significant issues. Also critical is the degree of trust which needs to be developed, often more time is spent in drawing out a resistant participant and negotiating common understanding necessary for minimal rapport, even if it is only agreeing to disagree in a mutually respectful way.

In a human relations training session where the interviewer is functioning as a trainer, initial questions might focus on aspects of the person, relevant to the training goal, e.g. "What would you like to get out of this session?" In the Boston University Summer Laboratory in Community Relations and Community Development, we have used the structured group interview to begin the "clarification group," which is the basic affective group of the laboratory, focusing on participants' feelings about their own group identifications, attitudes towards other groups and perceptions of how other groups view their own. In this setting the basic question is "Who are you?" in terms of group identifications (age, sex, religion, race, social class, ethnicity) and "What does your group identification mean to you?" The interviewer asks each participant to consider the influence of his group identifications on his attitudes, feelings and actions on the job. He attempts to legitimize speaking freely about group differences rather than avoiding or minimizing them.

PHASES

Regardless of the focus of the group interview, the process tends to go through a fairly consistent series of phases. The interviewer must gauge the group's progress through these phases to make decisions about the appropriateness of alternative interventions. It is generally fruitless to move into any subsequent phase until the group is ready. He must estimate the degree to which people have begun to listen to one another before exploring any issue in depth. He must estimate the degree to which the group has worked through

its resistance and hostility before moving from his stance as one who helps raise important questions to the role of helping the group focus on possible solutions to the problems.

In general the group phases are ⁵

1. Unfreezing (or Credibility and Trust Development) — the process of opening up the issues by successive interviews, drawing out the participants' attitudes and feelings and working through denial of problems.
2. Resistance (or Reluctance) — Once communication opens up hostilities are brought out, often in the form of scapegoating (e.g. once teachers have agreed there are problems in the school they may express their negative feelings about administration or parents, as responsible for problems).
3. Reexamination — Participants begin to take a second look at their own roles in terms of the issues and problems and to explore their differences.
4. Application — Having defined the questions and the problems and gathered sufficient data to set them in perspective, participants are ready to ask "What can we do?"

These phases often overlap, but they are generally descriptive of the group process as well as the individual process. The interviewer's perception of the group's progress through these phases guides his shifting role. In the early stage he may constantly be reminding the group to focus on determining *what is* rather than *what should be*, in the effort to undercut denial and scapegoating and to get the participants to face the issues realistically.

In the later stages he may focus the group's concern on *what can be*, taking an active role in generating alternative paths of action, which he would have attempted to defer had they been raised earlier.

PROCESS

The group interview procedure could potentially be used in a number of

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ways to focus on interpersonal, intergroup or interface issues, with goals in terms of human relations training, education or organizational development. In different situations the interview questions and the focus of the interviewer would vary. There are, however, a number of common threads which constitute the heart of the procedure and are critical to its success, apart from the variations in focus.

Most critical is the manner in which the interviewer follows up on the answers to the universal questions. It is crucial that the interviewer establish a norm, which legitimizes looking at both the affective and substantive aspects of the participants' responses. In most situations, the affective element will occasion resistance by some participants. The way the interviewer follows up on the affective component of participants' responses as well as the posture he takes with regard to his own feelings, become extremely important in determining whether the resistance is reduced or increased.

A major goal of the interviewer is to make the latent affective component of the participant's responses apparent to the group and generalize it as a source of learning to allow a group to be more open about feelings usually requires this be done more subtly than through direct interpretation. This is to some extent a question of individual style, although it is subject to certain limits outlined below. The interviewer may, for instance, point out that a feeling or opinion expressed by a participant is generally representative of the attitude of certain segments of the community.

RECOGNIZING PREJUDICE

It is important for teachers, for example, to understand the significance of the resentment of perceived "preferential treatment" for blacks (particularly strong in lower class ethnic communities) so they can make the distinction between prejudice and conflict of group interest which is necessary for planning ways of reducing the "backlash" reac-

tion. If a Polish participant, with a lower-class background, should make a statement which implies this kind of resentment, he may be asked to elaborate on the point by, in a sense, becoming a spokesman for the community in which he grew up or now lives.

Often recognition of negative intergroup feelings which are not prejudice as important data can lead to a participant's feeling that he will be treated fairly in this group. This is particularly so when he finds himself prized for expressing feelings which may have encountered rejection in other settings. Once non-punitive and fair ground rules are established, participants may feel enough trust in the interviewer and the group to be increasingly open about their own prejudices. This is one example of how the interviewer can surface and legitimize talking about important feelings.

In each successive interview, the interviewer is talking not only to the individual but also to the entire group. He faces the task of establishing an individual relationship with that participant which allows him to be open in front of the total group. Each successive interview sets a model for those to come. The first few interviews are especially important for establishing a model of communication so that participants raise questions with each other and the interviewer. Thus the process becomes increasingly a joint inquiry.

COMMUNICATION NEEDS

To succeed in working through the normal resistance, the interviewer must communicate a number of things

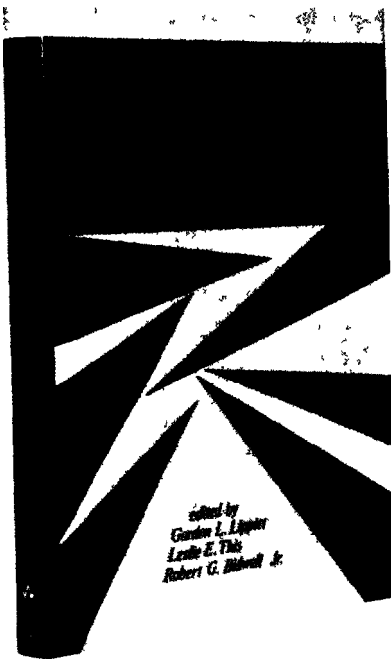
1. The questions are for gaining relevant information and bringing out issues which become the agenda for the group, as well as to make resources within the group evident and create a situation where participants can use each other as resources. The interviewer must make it clear that the interviews are forming the agen-

da. Although the procedure asks for "personal" information and deals with participants' feelings, this is done in an effort to use the group's resources for learning purposes, not for focusing on the individual as individual. Although the group interview procedure in a training or consultation setting may have personal growth consequences, these are incidental to the major task which involves generalizing learnings for the total group. Thus the interview procedure in a training or consultation setting may have personal growth consequences, these are incidental to the major task which involves generalizing learnings for the total group. Thus the interviewer must communicate both a task orientation and a determination to take relevant affective data into account. He searches with the group for workable hypotheses to diagnose the problems and issues and he contributes his own hypotheses as well as drawing hypotheses from the group. Through experience, he brings a cafeteria of questions which raise crucial issues. Some will "take root" with to add other significant questions. The interviewer may orchestrate the major issues by restating, combining or clarifying or suggesting that certain ones be set aside for consideration in depth later. In choosing issues to be discussed later, he must be sensitive to the resonance each sets in motion in the group. He looks for the "live" issues which free considerable affect within the group. This sort of issue (discipline, "preferential treatment," police presence, dress code, etc.) stimulate participants to commit energy to problem solution. This is essential if the participants are to take active roles when they return to their schools, rather than write off the experience as a "talk" session.

HIDDEN AGENDAS

2. It is of prime importance that the interviewer establish a norm of openness and firmness for participants to

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unlock themselves from past perceptions and consider new alternatives. He must draw out negative feelings about the process and deal directly with them. In so doing, he may often defend the right of participants to a healthy skepticism about the process. Particularly at the outset of the group interview, he may wish to draw out the participants' expectations and suspicions. Only if participants' notions about the interviewer's "hidden agenda" can be surfaced, can the interviewer establish credibility necessary for subsequent affectiveness. The success of the sharing process in the structured group interview depends upon a minimum of unspoken concerns.

It is also often functional at the outset for the interviewer to take upon himself hostility which would otherwise be exchanged among individuals or subgroups. In so doing he may avoid argument from which learning may not be derived. It is critical here that he not be counterpunchive but rather show he can handle hostility without responding in kind. He may also establish a norm of fairness through his responses to different or opposing points of view. He is asking each person to re-examine his own point of view and consider alternatives presented by the interviewer and other participants. Thus in a problem census the consultant would, through his own interventions, ask each person to expand his view of the problem and to recognize discrepancies among the various views expressed. In a "clarification group" the trainer would equally challenge the rigid conservative and the rigid liberal to reconsider their own automatic reactions.

It is important to note that the "challenge" here involves helping participants confront the important issues and the discrepancies among different points of view, not to confront each other. In fact, the

interviewer's posture is distinctly the opposite of some approaches often referred to under the rubric of "confrontation."

The interviewer cannot fake a fair and open posture. He must, in fact, be aware of his own feelings in the area to be explored. This becomes particularly crucial when the group interview focuses on intergroup relations. The model which the interviewer sets has a special impact on the process. The interviewer must use his own background, attitudes, prejudices, etc. as a resource in modeling what he expects from the participants. He may even begin by giving his own group identifications and background to provide a model. This process also communicates that he is aware of his prejudices, is able to exert some control over them and considers it normal for people to have variety of cultural prejudices. This is quite the opposite of the posture frequently employed in other group situations in which the leader may purposely avoid self-disclosure to maximize projection. It is also a posture which requires that the interviewer have at least a modicum of understanding of his own prejudices and ability to handle them. This may have come through professional training, some formal or informal effort at self-exploration or through general life experience, but in any case it is indispensable.

PUNITIVENESS

3 In establishing norms for group functioning through the structured group interview process, it is especially important that punitiveness be handled immediately. If addressed to the interviewer he can handle it directly, taking open notice, wondering as to the reason, communicating that he can take it without responding in kind. If it is directed to a participant, the interviewer must intervene in a fashion to challenge the punitive person. For instance, if an Italian participant is accusing an Irish partic-

part of stereotyping Italians, he may be asked whether he himself also has some stereotypes of the Irish. Again, however, this sort of intervention must be framed in such a way as to be no more than a good-natured, gentle chiding, if it is to draw the person out, any counter-punitiveness would have the opposite effect on the participant and any other member of the group who would tend to identify with that particular participant. Even when the most obstinate participant continues to refuse to consider other opinions, the interviewer is aware that in posing the questions to this participant, he has posed them to others in the group. The learning of the individual participant is not primarily a function of his amount of "air time" in the group, nor is it necessarily a function of his dialogue with the interviewer. We have often found that the quiet but attentive participant, constantly struggling to understand and digest all the issues being raised and identifying with aspects of himself which he sees in other participants, turns out later on to have experienced the most fruitful changes in perspective and behavior.

REAL ISSUES

4 Particularly at the outset, it is important that the interviewer's posture be one of persistently raising questions. In so doing he does not allow premature resolution of conflict or premature diagnosis of a problem. He insists that the group first learn to ask the right questions. He also thus prevents himself from being pegged as a proponent of any one ideology or set of answers. Although he may later be open about his own opinions, he cannot allow himself to do so until the group has worked through the conflicts sufficiently that his statements will not have a divisive impact on the group. In the early portion of the interview, the interviewer is constantly interpreting the latent messages in the partici-

part's responses and checking out his perception of these messages with the participant, in front of the group. Even though some participants deny implications of what they have said, a norm is gradually established in which the "real" issues are increasingly dealt with rather than the "surface" issues or "red herrings." Again, the success depends upon a positive feeling between participants and interviewer growing out of the handling of initial resistance in a good humored rather than a punitive or aloof manner. Although individual interviewer styles may vary immensely, the creation of a positive relationship and the reduction of emotional distance between interviewer and participants is essential.

GROUP RESPONSES

5 In the training application of the structured group interview process, especially when applied with an intergroup focus, the interviewer's interventions are based on his assessment of significant intergroup dimensions among the participants and within the social system. Among the varied cafeteria of opportunities provided by participants' responses he must choose the issues which will be fruitful if followed up at greater length. In so doing he has in mind those intergroup issues which will be operative in the social system, on the basis of his experience. He is constantly seeking to see which issues each participant may be a resource for, to draw upon the individual's experience for learning of the total group. He may explore an Italian American's attitude toward ethnicity, a strongly-traditional teacher's opinions about the way a teacher should handle discipline, another participant's feelings about youth-age issues, etc. shifting the focus with some frequency, but also returning to recurrent themes and exploring different facets of inter-related issues. As described above, he is also looking for really effective

issues which are capable of stirring the feelings of the majority of the participants, so as to set in motion the dynamics of intergroup differences. Any issue which is underlain by significant intergroup differences can perform this function for a heterogeneous group, but the interviewer looks for those issues which most stir the feelings of the group he is working with. It is important that these effect-laden issues be identified, checked out with the group and put on the group's agenda for further exploration after the interviews are completed. In exploring issues and feelings, the interviewer looks for "focal figures," people whose attitudes are influential on other participants.

These may be people who voice feelings which are shared by others who are reticent to express their feelings. They may be people who challenge the interviewer, such that the resolution of the challenge may set the tone for subsequent group interaction. The interviewer, in drawing out participants who have social influence on the group and in engineering their consent to the group enterprise, is aware that he is often speaking through them to the total group. Thus individual interviews strongly affect the growth of cohesiveness in the group.

GROUP vs. INDIVIDUAL

6 The interviewer must constantly gauge the depth to which he wishes to probe the feelings and issues which come from each participant, being careful to generalize them for group learning and to defer lengthy consideration until after the initial interview. In the training or consultation setting he does not focus specifically on one individual's feelings for any length of time. He especially avoids focusing on the individual's idiosyncratic feelings. This is an important distinction between a process

of group education or reeducation and the therapeutic process, in which the focus is on the individual as individual.

MISSING DYNAMICS

7 The interviewer must constantly attempt to supply any missing dynamic, acting as a resource for the group by presenting the missing point of view (e.g. in a largely traditional or conservative group he must constantly remind the group of the forces which are pushing for change in the social system, in a strongly change-oriented group, he must constantly remind the group of forces which wish to conserve certain aspects of the system or which see change as a mixed blessing)

CONCLUSION

To this point, our major source of data on the effectiveness of the structured group interview process has been a shortened interview conducted at the end of the session asking each participant to give both positive and negative feedback about his experience. This has served the purpose of providing a good sense of group closure as well as important information for the interviewer. More formal evaluation of the application of the structured group interview procedure in the context of a school system change effort is currently in progress.

Preliminary results, both formal and anecdotal, indicate important changes in the behavior of principals, teachers and students in some schools, involving a considerable revamping of their traditional relationships to one another. The extent of change appears to be particularly dependent however, upon readiness for change of the individual principal. In some schools, student and parent participation in determining important aspects of school life has been dramatically changed through the forming of wholly new organizational structures

(e.g. the student intergroup council, the parents intergroup council), while in other schools, lack of administrative response appears to have resulted in far less implementation of new approaches

Another effect of the program appears to be the ability of people to handle problem situations (especially serious intergroup conflicts) without being overwhelmed by the severe and often unanticipated emotional impact that accompanies such conflicts (e.g. student-faculty or black-white confrontations). Although no forms of training can totally prevent such confrontations in the current context of our society, many participants seemed to feel that the sessions had succeeded in inducing some degree of inoculation, in effect, preparing them to better handle intergroup problems

It has been our experience that the dynamics which can be mobilized in a large group (25 to 50 persons) can often lead to significant individual and social system change. Although the pace of the process varies from group to group we have found that it generally requires at least two days to work through the stages of the process and have come to use two-day sessions as our most frequent vehicle. Although a two-day session can be used, under certain circumstances with limited goals as a "one-shot" intervention, the impact of a two-day opportunity to reassess one's feelings, attitudes and opinions and to compare oneself with a variety of other people of differing backgrounds and points of view is considerably enhanced by its placement in the context of an institution-wide change effort.⁶ It is conducive to serious self-evaluation in relation to job function and is often adequate stimulation for the initiation of changes which are usually not attempted outside of an intensive residential laboratory. The two-day sessions provide the opportunity for subgroups which do not usually communicate with one another to address themselves to the issues which separate them. A diver-

sity of resources, a clear administrative mandate for change and a process such as the structured group interview which allows the human resources of the system to be mustered in a constructive way appear to be crucial ingredients affecting the potential for both individual and social system change

REFERENCES

- 1 Max Birnbaum developed this procedure when he was director of the Rutgers Human Relations Workshop
- 2 Cottle, Thomas, "Strategy for Change," *Saturday Review*, Sep 20, 1969.
3. The increasing involvement of the National Training Laboratories in the field of organizational development may be seen as one index of this trend
4. The term "interface" is used here to refer to relationships among subgroups within a given social system (e.g. school principals and teachers) as opposed to "intergroup," which refers to group differences which are not defined by roles in a social system (e.g. ethnic group differences).
- 5 For those who may be familiar with some of these terms in other contexts, please note that their usage here should not be considered perfectly analogous. Connotations in this context may be somewhat different
6. Elucidation of the process involved in a system-wide change effort and of the complex factors involved in the design and implementation of such a program must wait a later explanation, as they are beyond the scope of this article.