1996

Groups are Unpredictably Transformed by Their Internal Dynamics

R Scott Tindale
Loyola University Chicago, rtindal@luc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.luc.edu/psychology_facpubs

Part of the Psychology Commons

Recommended Citation
Tindale, RS. "Groups are Unpredictably Transformed by Their Internal Dynamics." The Public Perspective 7, 1996.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License. © R. Scott Tindale, 1996.
ies very little researcher-participant bias is required to produce significant amounts of artifact. These examples from the laboratory apply equally to field experimentation and expand our understanding of artifact in social research.

Fishkin Meets Hawthorne

The desire in any social experimentation such as the Fishkin experiment is for the research participants to behave veridically, independently, and normally. The researcher has designed the project so that these conditions, and hence the goals of his research, will be realized. Yet the three components of the Hawthorne Effect may be inescapably present. Participants in the Fishkin experiment, like the five specially-selected relay assembly test-room workers, have been selected and separated from their peers to participate in an experiment—a highly publicized, novel social experiment. Like the Hawthorne participants, they are receiving abundant special attention—a free trip, national media attention, and an enormous boost to self-esteem. Not only the social scientist’s “microscope,” but America’s television sets will be focused on their behavior. They know this is a novel experiment, and that its success depends on their behavior. They will be highly sensitive to cues to guide their responses. Will the evidence they are to judge be truly balanced, or will subtle expectancies be transmitted? In short, will they respond normally “on stage,” independent of any biases, or be susceptible to the pressures known to produce social artifact? These are questions one must consider in evaluating the Fishkin experiment.

Endnotes
5 Ibid.

John G. Adair is professor, Department of Psychology, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Canada

Groups are Unpredictably Transformed by Their Internal Dynamics

By R. Scott Tindale

Small groups are used in our society in many contexts. Juries, school boards, planning commissions, cabinets, advisory councils, etc., all play central roles in the institutions for which they are formed. The prevalence of small groups in the US is partly a function of political ideology: As compared to lone individuals, they provide a better representation of constituency interests and can encompass a wider diversity of opinion. However, they are also seen as effective for solving problems, making important decisions, and the like. Although there is an abundance of evidence supporting the effectiveness of groups, there is also a growing body of research showing that using small groups can sometimes lead to unexpected, and occasionally problematic, outcomes. As James Fishkin embarks on his deliberative poll, recognition of the potential for such unexpected outcomes in relation to the planned small group discussions leads to questions about what can be generalized from the results.

As an initial caveat, I should point out that Fishkin’s use of small groups is somewhat outside the range of the types of groups that have received the majority of research attention. Although information exchange and social influence are integral parts of small group dynamics in most contexts, rarely are such things the sole purpose of the group task. For example, jury members exchange ideas about evidence and attempt to influence each other, but such processes are invoked for the purpose of reaching a unanimous verdict. More recently, focus groups have been used to generate information, but rarely are the consumers of such information the group members themselves. Probably the clos-
The strong claim made by Fishkin concerning the similitude of his experimental sample to a "theoretically" informed populace would seem to require some empirical evidence, and the literature on small group dynamics to date surely would not support such a claim under many, if not most, circumstances.
Proceeding with Caution

The research results discussed above question some of the assumptions underlying Fishkin's use of small group discussions in his experiment. Clearly, group discussion does not necessarily lead to more or better information availability or to more well thought-out positions. Thus, depending on the makeup of the group (preference distribution, status differences, member perceptions, etc.), the group discussions could actually inhibit the types of outcomes Fishkin envisions and may lead to survey results that differ substantially from the "theoretical" informed populace he envisions. One could argue that the use of small groups in the Fishkin experiment makes it unlikely that the final poll results will represent the opinions of the whole nation, if only they were informed on the issues. Group polarization, poor information sharing and strong differences in participation rates could easily lead a majority of the groups to influence their members in ways very different from simply providing people with unbiased information. The strong claim made by Fishkin concerning the similitude of his experimental sample to a "theoretically" informed populace would seem to require some empirical evidence, and the literature on small group dynamics to date surely would not support such a claim under many, if not most, circumstances. However, for a true empiricist, the only way to really discover the role of small group discussions in such situations is to study them. In that sense, the Fishkin experiment provides an excellent opportunity for further research on influence processes in small groups—an opportunity of which I hope Fishkin takes full advantage.

Endnotes