

Eléonore Herbert and Eric Trist

An Educational Model for Group Dynamics

The Phenomenon of an Absent Leader*

The Conception of the Project

THE THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The project from which this paper selects an episode for detailed report represents one of the lines of growth stemming from a program of exploratory studies in the dynamics of small groups inaugurated during 1946–1948 at the Tavistock Clinic and Institute of Human Relations by W.R. Bion. He (Bion, 1961) distinguishes between two levels of group activity: that of the “sophisticated” or “work” group (*W*), which involves learning and development and is concerned with specific tasks that must be met and undertaken in social reality; and that of the basic assumptions (*ba*) dependence, fight/flight and pairing, which are unlearned, primitive emotional response systems existing as cohesive patterns that alternate. The basic group organization may be in conflict with the sophisticated or *W* organization and is often unrecognized by members of the group, whose level of performance may be severely impaired in consequence. The aim of this program was to explore the use of a common method of interpretative group discussion in groups of different kinds: patient groups, student groups and staff groups. Though the method was derived from the *method* of psychoanalysis, recourse was not necessarily had to psychoanalytic concepts in making interpretations. Psychoanalytic concepts had been elaborated in the study of the individual in the two-person, inter-personal, as distinct from the multi-person, group situation. As the aim was now to explore what emerged at the level of the group, interpretation faced a new task: that of assisting a group (as contrasted with an individual) in extending its recognition of what was going on in the group situation as a whole, helping in achieving its work task (*W*) more effectively and more completely than would otherwise be

*A shortened and rewritten version of the original—*Human Relations*, 6:215–48, 1953.

the case. In making comments on the group's behavior, however, the member of the group in the role of social consultant or therapist could be said to proceed in accordance with psychoanalytic method in that he relied for his information principally on the relation of the group to himself in the immediate here-and-now situation.

The problems and types of stress that arose in these different kinds of group had differences as well as similarities. These differences led to more specialized models of the general method. Among those working with patient groups, there was a tendency to relate interpretation to a more directly psychoanalytic frame of reference by emphasizing the way in which each individual, as a personality, dealt with the "common group tension." This is the line of development that characterized the work of Ezriel (1950) and also of Sutherland (1985). It represents a more specifically clinical model.

By contrast, the development of what may be termed an action research model may be seen in such work of the Tavistock Institute as the Glacier Project as described by Jaques (1951) in *The Changing Culture of a Factory*. Under industrial field conditions he found that the most worthwhile discussions with the social consultant took place not so much in special meetings of an unstructured type outside the action situation as through his presence during the actual proceedings of various executive and consultative groups. Interpretation required to be related to a more sociological frame of reference and to be concerned with the ways in which roles and relationships in the particular social systems in which the groups existed were being used for unrecognized ends.

It remains to consider the experience yielded by the student type of group, in which the group met for educational purposes, usually under conditions of a seminar that gave maximum scope for free, as opposed to set, discussion. This technique may be regarded as initiating the search for a *training* or *educational* model of the method. Considerable difficulty was experienced with this type of group during the period of exploratory studies. The groups consisted of "students" of problems in human relations (industrial executives, social scientists, or practical workers in educational and community activities), prepared to examine their own experiences in a group as a method of gaining direct access to, and so increasing their understanding of, the dynamics of socio-psychological phenomena. These groups, however, tended to develop in one of two directions: when a good deal of interpretation was given the group tended to transform itself into a patient group and ask for treatment; when interpretation was restricted, the group tended merely to discuss the topic as a topic, and very little progress could be made in showing its relationship to the group. As the result of repeated experiences of this kind, student groups were discontinued, students being asked either to face taking the patient role and join a therapy group or to limit themselves to attendance at the workshop type of event. It was

not concluded, however, from these experiences that the original idea—that the student group might constitute a distinctive field of study—was necessarily invalid; rather that a suitable form had not yet been found.

The essential feature of the patient group in the treatment situation is that its task is directly and exclusively the study of its own internal tensions and relations. Its activities, so far as these concern the topics that it discusses, are regarded as meaningful only if they provide material which allows the underlying relations to be exhibited. A work group, however, in the action situation has a defined line (direction) of activity which is predetermined by its position in the social system to which it belongs. Its task is to pursue this line of activity. Its problem is that its relations may severely disturb its performance. In first approximation, the clinical and action research models can be described in terms of the different ways in which group relations and group activities are related to the task of the group. The search for an appropriate educational model depends on finding a type of task which requires a relationship between group activities and group relations distinct from that in either treatment-centered or action-centered groups.

The structure of the type of situation required may be regarded as a function of the degree of determinacy of the line of the group's activity. If the action situation is such that this is predetermined by the position of the group in a social system and the treatment situation such that it must be kept indeterminate by the therapist, the training situation may be described as that in which the group goes through the process of determining its own line of activity. In this sense, work with training groups may be related to the frame of reference of the project method in education as developed by John Dewey just as that with patient and action research groups may be related to psychoanalytic and sociological frames of reference. The relevance of the project method is that it is concerned with finding and carrying out types of concrete activity through which immediate experience may form itself into more general understanding.

If the task of the group is to find and undertake a definite project within a general field, it follows that the group will expect to meet on the assumption that its sessions will be limited—though indeterminate—in number. This assumption has a selective effect on the type of material which the group is likely to produce and therefore on the depth and scope of interpretation. If the loyalty of the social therapist is to the *W* of the group, he must take up whatever is impeding the group in meeting this *W*, however deep. On the other hand, since the task is limited, he need not take “everything” up; nor, indeed, will everything come up. Moreover, the group will have different phases—that in which the project is found, that in which it is carried out and that in which it is evaluated. The relationship of the consultant to the group changes in consequence. In the discovery phase it is more like that of a group therapist; in the execution phase like that of a contributor; while in the third phase group and

consultant can act as collaborators in evaluating what has been done—from complementary viewpoints. The implicit existence from the beginning of such a progression means that a force is acting throughout the entire situation towards establishing the independence of the group from the consultant. This safeguards it against the development of too great a dependence, which would otherwise tend to be unresolvable except under patient conditions. Since the aim is to relate experience in the group to some particular field of outside experience, members should be drawn from a common field, e.g., teachers, nurses, supervisors, works managers. There must be common needs and common problems. The degree of heterogeneity within the common field that will be most beneficial will vary widely according to circumstances.

Treatment and action groups are brought together by a need to solve concrete problems causing immediate tension—personal problems of patients or practical problems of institutions. A somewhat different pressure provides the incentive that convenes training groups, where the felt need is to learn rather than to resolve. Experience of social situations in the past has created in their members a need to learn more about group phenomena and processes for application to social situations in the future. Such learning must be general as well as particular for the “transfer-effect” to be realized. A need for such learning may be regarded as authentic and reality-based (as distinct from simply an intellectual attempt to avoid facing awkward experience more personally) so far as it derives from the roles and responsibilities which members carry outside the group. While the presence of intellectualism as a defense is to be expected in such groups (and will usually be deployed with both ingenuity and strength) this does not negate the reality of the need for intellectual and theoretical, as well as emotional and practical, understanding of group phenomena among those on whom professional or executive responsibility devolves for dealing with many kinds of group problems in community and industrial life. Training groups composed of such individuals require to develop both types of understanding, and in work with such groups teaching is important as well as interpretation.

To increase general understanding of group phenomena may be regarded as the sophisticated task of training groups. It would be a fallacy, however, to suppose that this could be achieved apart from direct experience of the emotional reality of these phenomena. A way must be found through the activity which the group itself undertakes of relating interpretation to teaching. It is the scope that it affords for establishing this relationship that recommends the project method as a supplementary approach to the general method of interpretative group discussion in the training situation. For it is through the project method that the fullest use may be made of the opportunities for more general teaching afforded by the occasions when the interpretation of direct, concrete experience has created emotionally favorable conditions in the immediate

situation. The field study to be outlined below, from which one meeting is selected for detailed report, represents an explicit attempt to erect a model of a practical training technique on these premises and to test out its usefulness with a group of practicing teachers presenting a serious professional need for increased understanding of group phenomena in relation to their own work at school.

THE CHARACTER OF THE MODEL

The project consisted of a working seminar on "Human Relations in School" attended by a group of practicing teachers. It took place under the auspices of a School of Education. No special attempt was made to select the members, who registered in the ordinary way. The meetings of the group were conducted by the first author, the second acting as a research consultant with respect to planning and the analysis of the material.

The original group of 19 was drawn from all types of school. Between the ages of 11 and 12 years all children took a national examination as a result of which the brighter ones went on to grammar schools (the equivalent of high schools) which prepared them for university entrance, while the less bright followed a less exacting curriculum in what were known as secondary modern schools, where they stayed until the school-leaving age of 16.

Two positive factors, one professional and the other psychological, affected all members and made for homogeneity: all were teachers and all were concerned in varying degrees about their relations with their pupils. Thus they all belonged to a large and dispersed professional group, i.e., teachers, and to a smaller attitudinal group, i.e., the category of teachers who attach importance to psychology and the study of personality as a means of achieving good pupil-teacher relations. This last factor constituted the overt motive that brought them together to discuss their problems.

There was also a third factor—the group contained no avowed authoritarian. All members, however, taught within the British educational system in which some degree of authoritarian discipline is traditional. To this tradition they had to conform, at least to some extent, in their classroom practice. They could, therefore, be described as an anti-authoritarian minority within the educational system of their society.

Though the project was planned as a three-phase program, the question of there being a second or third phase was not taken up with the group until a point had been reached, towards the end of the preceding phase, when the problem of the group's future became acute. It was then worked through until an agreed solution was reached.

The first, or *discovery*, phase consisted of 10 weekly meetings of one-and-

a-half or two hours duration. The group worked out its own program of topics, on one of which a short paper was presented each week by a particular member. Discussion then proceeded in a free manner. A near-verbatim record was kept, of which another member prepared a summary for circulation at the beginning of the next meeting.

The first author, as the consultant working with the group in the face-to-face situation, had two related roles: *interpretative*—to help the group to see its task in terms of its own behavior; *educational*—to help it to relate its own group experience to the common outside work field. Since the object of increasing the insight of group members into group phenomena was to improve their work as teachers, the two roles had a common relationship to the *W* that constituted the group task. For this reason it was felt that no inherent contradiction between them need be expected.

The first role was dominant during the first phase, when a considerable “battle” took place between consultant and group over its insistent demand for intellectual teaching. But during the second, or *execution*, phase, when the group settled down to the examination of a single basic problem over a further series of 10 meetings and had also learned to accept the examination of what was going on in itself as a regular part of its task, there were many more teaching opportunities. Nevertheless, there was often strong, though decreasing, resistance to accepting the consultant as a *contributor* as well as a *social therapist* and the problem was not fully worked through by the end of the phase. The group’s difficulty was in giving up the consultant as a therapist.

The third, or *evaluation*, phase was brought into existence by the feeling that arose in the group that they must find some way of reporting back their group experiences to other teachers, and the question was broached of their writing up their own version of these experiences for communication to an educational audience. At this point a special meeting was held at which the head of the department concerned and the second author were present as well as the first author. This was the meeting at which the group had to give up the first author as a member of the group, which from now on was to meet alone. The object of the special meeting was to help the group, by an actual demonstration, to perceive the first author as a member of a technical group and to show them that if they must now lose her as a member of their own group they could still have a relationship with her as a member of this technical group whose support both she and they would need for the next phase of the task.

The outcome of this meeting was that the group decided to undertake the assignment of writing up an account of its experiences for publication to the profession, accepting full responsibility for making its own executive arrangements and the necessary internal role allocations. All this it proceeded to do, with an efficiency and a speed which provides another instance of the reward to be reaped, when it comes to executive action, of preliminary working through.

The group was now able to accept the first author as a *collaborator* with a complementary task, the second decision of the meeting being that she should prepare a parallel account of the group's development as she had perceived it from her position as their consultant. Meanwhile the head of the department undertook to preface both accounts with a critique of the project as an exercise in post-graduate teacher training. The task of the second author was to collaborate with the first in the technical appraisal of the material from the point of view of a research organization concerned with the development and application of group methods in working institutions.

In the subsequent scrutiny of the total material it appeared that certain group phenomena observed during the project might be of general interest, particularly the institution by the group of an absent leader in opposition to the *legitimate* leader during the ninth meeting of the first phase. Accordingly, this episode has been abstracted and in what follows an account of it is presented from a group dynamics rather than an educational viewpoint, which will be that emphasized in the account of the project as a whole to be published elsewhere by the first author and the members of the group.

The Ninth Meeting

Note: The first session of the course was taken up with dealing with the group's reactions to the consultant's refusal to give formal lectures. This produced a format in which each member was to prepare a paper on an agreed topic for discussion by the group. Themes covered were: the difficult child; handicapped children; pilfering; improved discipline; the "crush" in girls' schools. The topic for each session arose out of the experience of discussing that for the current session. In every case the theme was found to have a parallel in the relation of the consultant to the group in the here-and-now. These parallelisms were interpreted and opened up the dynamics of the situation. A paper on truancy, prepared by a headmistress, was postponed by the group three times—the topic was specially threatening—but was finally given in the last but one session, now to be reported. The first author speaks throughout in the first person in her interpretative role.

SUB-GROUP ROLE-TAKING

The ninth meeting opened with a message from the member who was to have spoken on truancy. She sent a letter in which she stated that pressure of work would prevent her from attending this meeting and the next—the last two of the session. As she had previously said that, in the event of the group meetings

being continued the following term, she would not be able to attend, her letter was a final leave-taking. She had, however, sent her paper, which the bearer of the message had consented to read.

It seemed indeed as if truancy was not only to be discussed but enacted. Seven members in all absented themselves on this occasion, the largest number since the first session. Of these, only one, who had sent a note of apology, was to return. The headmistresses' sub-group had completely disappeared. The largest element among the remaining twelve members was the grammar school assistants' group. There were six of them, one man and five women, who made up half the attendance. The others were divided as follows: two junior school masters, one master from an all-age school, one mistress from a school for handicapped children and two secondary modern school masters. Their common characteristic was that none belonged to a grammar school. To take another sub-division, the group fell into two halves according to sex: there were six men and six women. Furthermore, there was a distinct group of persistently silent members. The total group was also divided into two halves in this respect: six silent members listened throughout the evening to six speakers.

The various groups did not coincide but the resulting set-up presented a considerable advantage: every member could at any time rely on the support of another five who had something in common with him or her. (Six people had grammar school experience, six lacked it; to talk was to belong to a group of six speakers; to be silent was to belong to a group of six silent members.) See Table 1; note that italic letters designate women.

Lest it should appear—as is often thought in committees and debating societies—that only the speaking members play a part in discussion, it should be emphasized that the silent members were very much part of the group and, on the present occasion, were destined to play a crucial role. If, for a moment, one supposes the silent members to have been absent—i.e., to have joined the absentees' sub-group—the importance of their presence soon appears. In this particular case the speaking members formed one-third of the original group. If two-thirds had been absent those remaining would have represented a very much mutilated, and therefore threatened, minority. The silent members held the balance. By choosing to be present they helped to perpetuate the life of the group. Their passive attitude put them in the position of an audience and the future of the group depended on their being persuaded by the speaking members to continue to attend.

The absentees' sub-group also constituted a force that exerted a considerable effect on the proceedings. Absentees have once belonged to a group and have contributed to making it what it is. Conversely, the group has contributed to making them what they are. On this occasion their participation was evident, since the paper to be discussed embodied the views of one of them and, indeed,

TABLE I Equal Sub-Groups in the Ninth Meeting

<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Grammar schools</i>	<i>Non-grammar schools</i>	<i>Speakers</i>	<i>Silent members</i>
A, B, C, D, E, F	G, H, I, J, K, L	A, C, D, E, F, G	B, H, I, J, K, L	A, B, C, E, G, K	D, F, H, I, J, L

was about absenteeism. The absentee sub-group was also six strong. The original number of members had been 19—an odd number—which left 7 absentees; but the position of the absent speaker was equivocal. She could not be said to be *absent* since she introduced the topic of discussion; nor *silent* since the words were hers; nor could she be described as *speaking*, since she was not present in person. Thus, on the one hand, she did not belong fully to any of the three sub-groups; on the other, she belonged to them all, for she partook of some of the qualities of each.

My position, as consultant, was similar to hers for I could not be said to belong fully to any of the sub-groups either. I was not *absent* since I was there in person; nor *speaking* since I had refused to lead the discussions or indeed to make any personal contributions unless they were called for by members' remarks; nor *silent* since I summed up the arguments and formulated problems raised by members. Conversely, both she and I were ubiquitous since we belonged intermittently to various sub-groups. By this means the members in each sub-group were kept at six, for she and I cancelled each other out.

The recurrence of the number six was not due to chance. Officially, six members constituted the smallest number for whom a course could be held. The group knew that, in the preceding term, a course of lectures on psychoanalysis had been stopped after the second meeting because only five members had registered for it. Throughout the twenty sessions of the seminar, whenever the numbers present approached this threshold the group became anxious lest it should be officially stopped. Thus the threat to the continuation of the group was actual, but this was not always realized. The appearance of anxiety was the sign of it. Anxiety had been noted each time the topic of truancy was raised and had led to repeated postponement of its discussion. On this occasion, when a third of the group had "played truant," the threat had become greater and more imminent. But it did not come from the absentee members alone, though they appeared to be responsible for it. In order to keep the group alive, the speaking members had to be victorious over the negative attitude present in *themselves* towards the *W* that constituted the group task. All the sub-groups had to contend with ambivalence in this regard. The speakers, in so far as they were dissatisfied with the pattern imposed on the group, would wish to absent

TABLE 2 The Situation at the Beginning of the Ninth Meeting

<i>Speakers</i>	<i>Silent members</i>	<i>Absentees</i>
A	D	M
B	F	N
C	H	O
E	I	P
G	J	Q
K	L	R
(PL)		(AL)

PL = present leader

AL = absent leader

themselves from it, but the wish to continue was stronger and made them choose to stay in the group and fight for it. The absentees had enough positive feeling to shrink from remaining in the group and overtly attacking it: their belongingness led them to compromise by choosing *flight* rather than *fight* to express their dissatisfaction. In the six silent members the balance of positive and negative feelings made the fight and flight reactions of equal strength, so that they were prevented from taking any action: they did not absent themselves, neither did they fight for the survival of the group.

Throughout this meeting the speakers made use of the absentees' sub-group as a reference group (Newcomb, 1952) into which they projected their negative feelings. They cast the absent speaker, as a reference individual, in the role of spokesman of the absentees, an *absent leader* (AL). To her they gave their allegiance whenever they wished to express their criticism of me, the *present leader* (PL), and take flight from the group task. At this point, however, they were confronted both by their need to continue with their task and to have my help in enabling them to do so; fear of my loss and of retaliation on my part made them swing back to me. AL and PL never appeared in the same sub-group (see Table 2).

INDIVIDUAL ROLES

The speaking members had unwittingly arrayed their forces in such a way that each assumed a role which he kept throughout the session. The discussion would be started indirectly by a passage of arms between two of them (A and G), who continued the fight started at the eighth meeting between the men's and

women's sub-groups. Very soon a third, *K*, would intervene, as if to remind them that they should sink their differences, since something of greater moment—the continued existence of the group—was at stake. *K*'s role was that of *PL*'s "champion," his efforts always being aimed at rallying the group under her leadership. His interventions followed a similar pattern throughout: he would indicate explicitly or implicitly that there was no cause for disagreement within the present group, would sum up the arguments, and thus open the way for a new departure. The fourth, *C*, consistently played the role of mediator between the absentees and the present members. She took the role of *AL*'s champion in opposition to *K* whenever the absentees were excluded. The other two, *B* and *E*, acted as supporters of the speakers' group, and it was one of them who formulated the topic for the next meeting, which was to focus the work of the group during the subsequent phase of its existence.

IDENTIFICATION OF THE SPEAKERS' GROUP WITH THE "LIKED CHILDREN"

Before the paper was read the record of the eighth meeting was circulated. It gave rise to a brief discussion in which all six members spoke who were to discuss the paper later. The report of the preceding week's discussion on homosexuality was the immediate cause. The young master, *G*, who had raised the topic at the end of the previous meeting to repeat that "it did not exist between masters and boys" returned to the charge. "It had gone unchallenged," he said, "the group had shifted away from it." *C* agreed that the discussion had proceeded rather irrelevantly. *K* disagreed, "the point had been thoroughly discussed."

But still, in complete disregard of the evening's task, and of *K*'s reminder, *A* and *G* continued the feud about homosexuality in men and women teachers. To *G*'s reiterated assertion that men teachers were guiltless of it *A* retorted that "it did not make much difference whether homosexuality existed between boys and masters or only between boy and boy; the crush of boy for boy and girl for girl proved the homosexual content." The exchange became more and more rapid and the enjoyment of the two protagonists more evident. The more *G* denied the homosexual attitude of men teachers the more *A* refused to be convinced and airily reaffirmed her own contradictory belief. It became apparent that the excitement roused by this discussion was of a flirtatious kind, which, in view of the topic—homosexuality—might at first seem strange. But if people are preoccupied with heterosexual feelings they often find it easier to talk about homo- rather heterosexuality, for the social taboo on the former makes its expression in reality impossible, and the discussion safely theoretical, whereas heterosexual feelings may lead to actual relations which cannot be admitted in public. It is notable that *A* meets *G*'s denial of his homosexuality

not by denying her own but by maintaining that “there is no difference between his feelings and hers.”

Curiously enough she disregards the available “*tu quoque*” reply, for a teacher-boy relationship, which was described in the seventh session, was not unlike a two-way crush. No one thought of it. The men attacked and the women pleaded guilty. This collusion in accepting a statement contrary to evidence shows how carefully the whole group will push aside any facts that do not serve its immediate unconscious needs even though they might justify the behavior of some individual member on the *sophisticated* level. If the men’s sub-group had recognized their homosexual tendencies they would by this admission have suggested that they could not have a heterosexual relation with me. But the women’s case was different: a love relationship with me could only be a homosexual one. Thus it was from the same *group* motive that one sub-group declared its immunity from a condemned form of behavior and the other accepted the accusation of it.

By a kind of pun on the word homosexual it is made to mean “we are both sexual *in the same way*,” i.e., “we are both offering our love to you.” Since A could feel sure that G would not go back on his denial—which incidentally was also an offer to her as a woman—and run the risk of my misunderstanding him, she could safely afford to push him further and further. It was this that gave the impression of sparring, of a kind of Beatrice and Benedick dialogue in which the protagonists paired under the cover of spirited attacks that ill disguised their underlying friendliness and the similarity of their feelings.

For a while the group took pleasure in this dialogue. A and G, both members of the speakers’ sub-group, appeared to be acting as its *spokesmen* in making me a love-offer, since it put them all in the role of liked children (the crush had been described as a two-way situation, and if they loved *me* I must love *them*). Gradually, however, the rest of the speakers’ sub-group became uneasy. The “Beatrice and Benedick” pair monopolized the conversation to such an extent that everyone else was relegated to the silent members sub-group, so losing “liked children” status (Table 3).

The verbal duel had had its use as a temporary resurrection of the main defense of the eighth meeting, but if it went on it would disrupt the speakers’ group by reducing it to two members. More than two-thirds of the whole group would be put out of action. The remaining speakers, having been driven into the silent sub-group, might from there eventually join the absentees. In addition it made contact with me impossible. All this roused K in his champion role, making him call Beatrice and Benedick to order; the real battle for the survival of the group must be joined, “we have an urgent task to which we must return.” They accepted the reproof and settled down to listen to the paper on truancy.