The Berkeley Civic Courage and Heroism Experiment: The Group Dynamics of Individuals Acting in Concert to Advance Ethical Goals in the Public Interest

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THE BERKELEY CIVIC COURAGE AND HEROISM EXPERIMENT: THE GROUP
DYNAMICS OF INDIVIDUALS ACTING IN CONCERT TO ADVANCE ETHICAL GOALS
IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST

ABSTRACT

Many studies have investigated how to get individuals to obey external authority, as noted in the obedience experiments (Miller, 1986). But next to none have investigated how individuals obey their conscience as they act as members of a group committed to taking nonviolent courageous action in the defense of ethical principles and the public interest. The present study investigates the situational group context and group dynamics that allow individuals to act in concert with others to carry out ethical goals, even at personal cost to themselves.

Our study began with the question: "What are the group dynamics that energize peace and justice organizations that take nonviolent courageous action in defense of ethical principles or groups of people seeking to redress grievances in their community or in the United States at large?" The question encompasses the Civil Rights movement during the middle part of the 20th century and seeks to discover the group dynamics that made that movement possible as well as other nonviolent groups acting in the public interest at the time. We wager that group process research can open a view of how particular social and political events come into being. Of particular interest to our study was the capacity of people to bond with each other to accomplish

a task of ethical significance even at personal risk or cost to themselves. Such behavior defines the New Heroism which is socially centered and based on the collaboration of many individuals not the action of a few mavericks or warriors. We believe this kind of collaboration can be taught in a group setting.

As a basis for our teaching method, we designed our study with two assumptions in mind:

1. A group of individuals that follow the modeling and instructions of a workshop leader to adopt specific norms, including resisting aggressive scapegoating behavior, will be able to develop as a group and initiate a project that leads to nonviolent courageous action.

2. Aggressive scapegoating, which means in this context, rejecting and attacking the Scapegoat Leader or Diversity Leader in task groups as described by Ariadne P. Beck (Beck, 2014) is neither inevitable nor necessary to group formation. Therefore, participants must be instructed in how to resist aggressive scapegoating.

We created the following exploratory group to see if our assumptions had some validity.

PARTICIPANTS

The eight participants who volunteered to take part in our study were told that they would explore courageous, nonviolent action in defense of ethical principles or people in need, even at possible risk or cost to themselves. Furthermore, they were told that all participants would be

recorded on state of the art video and the contents edited into a film series to be called, "Group Dynamics and the New Heroism: The Ethical Alternative to the Stanford Prison Experiment." We said the goal of the study and film was to mentor people to use group and leadership skills to act with others in accordance with their beliefs, organize peer support, and challenge authority using conscience as their guide.

They self-selected to participate on that basis.

The participants were recruited through the internet and the efforts of the producer of the film series that would record the experiment. Neither author had any contact with the participants prior to the first filmed session and all participants were strangers to each other. All participants agreed to attend two day long meetings with two weeks separating the two meetings. The median age of participants was 44 years of age. The oldest was 66 and the youngest, 30 years of age.

METHOD: LEADERSHIP MODEL

The first author conducted the group, using non-authoritarian and collaborative leadership—meaning he did not ask the participants to do anything that he did not first demonstrate for participants to emulate. He began the workshop format with group exercises that fostered a sense of trust. Participants were asked to talk about a time when they acted courageously and nonviolently in the service of an ethical principle or a person in need—and then talk about a time when they did not act so courageously and did not follow their conscience. The first author began the exercise himself as a model for the others.

Specific leadership techniques of Virginia Satir (Satir,1964), including eye contact and holding the hands of each participant, helped create a context of openness and flexibility. The workshop conductor demonstrated sociocentric leadership, respecting the value of all group members as equal participants. Sociocentric groups require that each member "buy in" and identify how he or she can contribute to the goal directed action of the whole group.

The conductor also encouraged the emergence of leadership roles from among the participants. Leadership roles is a concept of distributive leadership—which holds that leaders emerge from a group—to perform necessary leadership functions at specific times in order to move the group to higher levels of cooperation and engagement. It's best if the leadership roles that emerge are distributed among all members so that all take responsibility for the group's progress. The group process research of Ariadne P. Beck on the structure and formation of task groups gives a context for the Leadership Roles which emerge in the present study (Beck, 2014).

METHOD: INSTRUCTIONS TO PARTICIPANTS

The participants engaged in ten and one-half hours of spontaneous, non-scripted group interactions. The entire experiment was conducted while being filmed in a state of the art video and sound studio. Signed releases for all words and images relating to the film study were obtained from each participant. The first author conducted the group as a task group and invited the members to imagine themselves initiating a courageous, nonviolent project. From among the projects the participants proposed, they were challenged to choose one project that they would

develop across the two week interval separating the two scheduled meetings. The conductor instructed them in how to form a functional group, called in this experiment, a *strategic subgroup* to initiate the selected project. The instructions included a method of assessing each participant's motivations to engage in the project as well as the personal obstacles they must overcome. They also gauged the time commitment and level of risk they were willing to assume. **See figure 1.**

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Figure 1   Participant Assessment

Name_____   **Project** _____

Motivation:

        External _____

        Internal _____

Obstacles:

        External _____

        Internal _____

Skills you bring to the project_____

Level of commitment in time _____

Readiness to engage in the project_____

Level of Risk willing to assume_____

The instrument in Figure 1 was utilized in two ways. First, each participant assessed their own project—testing their own motivations and levels of commitment. Then, once the project of one participant (LaTanya) was selected, she used this instrument to assess the skills and level of commitment that each participant was willing to give to her project.

The conductor also enumerated the specific norms they were to follow in order to drive the process forward. These norms were adapted from the work of Kurt Lewin (Lewin, 1951) as further developed by Yvonne Agazarian (Agazarian, 1992) and the authors. **See figure 2. Norms**

Figure 2   Norms

Adaptation of Lewin's force field model demonstrating the quasi-stationary equilibrium of communication in a self-correcting system (Agazarian, 1992).

Force Field of Driving and Restraining Forces in Influencing

Boundary Permeability to Communication

Driving Forces--------------→ ←------------*Restraining Forces*

Accepting the contributions of   Rejecting and attacking

the Scapegoat Leader-→ ←----the Scapegoat Leader

Asking direct questions   ----------→ ←--- Indirect questions

←---Leading questions

←---Sarcastic questions

Answering questions ----------------→ ←---Avoiding answering questions

                                        ←---Changing the subject

                                        ←----Answering a question

                                              with a question

Building on ideas--------------------→ ←--Preempting ideas

                                        ←--Yes-butting

                                        ←--Interrupting

Owning own feelings----------------→ ←-Blaming and complaining

                                        ←Putting self-down

Supporting self and others----------→ ←Oughtituding

Goal: Opening Boundaries---------→   ← Goal: Closing Boundaries

to communication   to communication

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Kurt Lewin (1951) developed the theory that group behavior is a function of the group dynamics of the individuals involved. He described the implementation of his theories as *action research.* The current investigation follows in that tradition. Korsybski (1948) stated the map is not the territory—implying that our concepts cannot achieve their heuristic value without examples that bring them to life in the world of men and women and their interpersonal relations.

Yvonne Agazarian has created the notion of functional subgroups (Agazarian, 1992) in which the internal process of a group shifts from cohesion around similarities to seeing and working with differences as a means to develop a more complex group cohesion. In psychotherapy groups, the techniques of functional subgrouping help therapists manage the conflict between competing subgroups in order to contain negative projections and accept and integrate the conflictual differences. In the present study, we adapted some of these techniques in the creation of *strategic subgroups* which resisted the activation of the restraining forces in group communication, including rejecting and attacking the Scapegoat Leader—while pursuing an explicit, agreed upon goal.

Ariadne P. Beck's research (Beck, 1997) pertaining to emergent leadership roles informed how we perceived the leaders who spontaneously emerged in the course of the group's progress. We believe certain individuals were candidates for these leadership roles because they helped advance the group's process in significant ways. Each leadership role is responsible for

carrying out a specific function that allows the group to proceed toward its agreed upon goal.

Leadership roles are believed to facilitate the passage of a group to more advanced phases of

group development and levels of communication. These roles are not dependent on personality

traits, no more than courage itself can be defined as a personality trait.

We were also cognizant of experiments by the National Training Laboratory (NTL) that

name leadership roles as they emerged in single session groups.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

There is a long history of Obedience Experiments (Miller, 1986) including the classic by

Milgram (1975) in which subjects were instructed to inflict pain on others as part of a so-called

"learning experiment." The Stanford Prison Experiment (Zimbardo, 2007) carried out by the

second author, assigned subjects to roles of either prisoners or guards—but did not explicitly

instruct guards to abuse prisoners. However, in his role as warden, the second author *implicitly*

encouraged the process of aggressively scapegoating prisoners by not stopping abuses by guards

who humiliated prisoners openly. He gave nonverbal permission to continue the abuse.

COMPARISON WITH THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT

Both the Stanford and Berkeley experiments required initial agreements from participants

to be engaged in a study and participants in both studies conformed to the norms of their

particular group. What was radically different was the leadership in each study, the intentionality of the participants, and the norms of each group.

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STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT	BERKELEY CIVIC COURAGE

Variable: Leadership

Egocentric leadership reinforcing participants adherence to assigned roles	**Sociocentric leadership focusing on collaboration of participants and the spontaneous emergence of leadership roles**
Implicit support for guards to abuse prisoners	**Explicit instruction to not reject or attack an emergent Scapegoat Leader**

Variable: Intentionality

Guards: Control and Domination	**All: To act in concert with each other to pursue an ethically**
Prisoners: Resistance and Survival	**defined goal**
Payment for participation	**No payment for participation**

Variable: Norms

Aggressive scapegoating and abuse of one subgroup by the other	**The willingness of all participants to resist aggressive scapegoating or attacking the Scapegoat Leader becomes an organizing principle**
Guards: Avoid listening to one's conscience	**All: Listen to one's conscience and be congruent with one's values**
Prisoners: Avoid pain of abuse or invite abuse by resistance	**All: Build pleasure in community achievement by mutual validation**
Guards: Passive conformity and fear of challenging peers	**All: Encourage peer support and the enlistment of allies to actively support project in distinctive ways**
Prisoners: Low peer support	
Pirates Code: "Everyman for himself"	**Collective courage and empathy**

RESULTS

The Berkeley Civic Courage and Heroism Experiment tested a method of teaching group formation that is non-authoritarian, models collaborative leadership, encompasses the emergence of leadership roles, is sociocentrically focused, and stipulates specific norms stated in Figure 2 above. The experiment also tested a specific process leading to group formation by which the group maintains Lewin's Driving Forces of Communication, resists aggressive scapegoating or attacking the Scapegoat Leader, and attains a moderate level of maturity.

Both the method and the specific process were shown to be effective operationally in this idiographic study of a single group. Along the way, our experiment also challenged the way the Stanford Prison Experiment is generally understood. Whereas the second author *implicitly* encouraged guards to abuse prisoners in that experiment, in the Berkeley experiment, the first author explicitly instructed participants to resist rejecting or attacking the emergent Scapegoat Leader. Our experiment demonstrated that the norms set by the conductor and originator of a group influences its behavior, including the proscription of abusive and aggressive scapegoating behavior. The Berkeley group formed and developed to the point where its members could complete a task of ethical significance—without overtly attacking the Scapegoat Leader.

The group was able to attain a high level of Beck's Phase 3 of group development—the cooperative work phase—a remarkable achievement, given the brief time they had to form a

group. Also, they were able to give each other mutual validation and appreciation—a characteristic associated with Beck's Phase 8 of group development—when the conductor structured a "goodbye" process in the closing moments of the group's life.

The Berkeley Experiment has become the basis for the 6 hour group process film series, *Group Dynamics and the New Heroism:The Ethical Alternative to the Stanford Prison Experiment(2014)* and the 2 hour abridged edition of the same film (2016).

Specific Observations and theoretical speculation on Leadership Roles

On the first day, the group selected a project designed to help families involved in Child Protective Services (CPS). Within the two week time frame, they were able to initiate and develop a comprehensive advocacy program for parents to help them adapt to the requirements of CPS. LaTanya came up with the idea and all participants chose to join her *strategic subgroup* to begin planning for implementation. Each participant assumed responsibility for the functioning of the group and its progress as they advanced LaTanya's project. Their chief motive for doing this was their love of children and their liking of LaTanya as a person.

As the group developed, we identified Beck's Emotional Leader, Task Leader, and Scapegoat Leader or Diversity Leader (Beck, 1997, 2014)

1. Gloria was the Emotional Leader, the one who expressed the excitement about the group's cooperation in launching a project. She was also a comforting voice assuring group collaboration. Hers was a positive voice, validating the participation of others, advancing group cohesion, and opening intrapsychic boundaries. It's significant that in the one meeting of the group between the two studio sessions—filmed by Ryan (see point 7 below)—she functioned as Task Leader in the first author's absence.

2. Jenny was the Task Leader, the one who structured the communication in the group relevant to the task. She organized the beginning attempts to create a business plan and helped bring the group back on task when it was lost in details. She influenced the degree of participation of members in decision making.

3. Pete emerged as the Scapegoat Leader—the one who made himself vulnerable to attack and tried to provoke negative reactions from the group. He monitored the group's progress from a stance of impatience and needing boundaries to be clarified. But he was never attacked by the group members. He surprised us at the close of the group by announcing a major shift in the way he perceived himself. He realized he could make a contribution to the group without becoming the object of negative projections.
In the post-workshop questionnaire, he indicated the "harsh self criticism" he usually experiences due to the high personal expectations he brings to a task. However, he reported that he could hear from the feedback of fellow group participants that his "contributions were meaningful."

To be clear—a Scapegoat Leader emerges in every group as part of its development and may contain the negative projections of other group members. When the Scapegoat Leader is rejected or attacked by other group members, we call this process *aggressive scapegoating.* But this process does not have to occur. The Berkeley experiment demonstrates that aggressive scapegoating is not a necessary condition before group members can function as an effective group. In fact, aggressive scapegoating can seriously retard a group's capacity to take action in defense of ethical values or people in need.

The names for the roles the other five participants played were phenomenologically derived from our observation and description of their behavior—and our assessment of the functions they served in the group as a whole. Unlike Beck's roles, which have been studied extensively, these potential leadership roles are hypothetical and require in depth research.

4. Michele was what we called the *Fearful Leader*—the one whose initiative and readiness to act was clouded by her fearfulness. In a group attempting to take courageous nonviolent action, it follows that there must be one member who takes this role and expresses the fear that all participants must overcome.

5. Caroline became the *Leader who must quell her anger and let go of her need to control in order to communicate more effectively with others.*
   With the conductor's help, she experimented with taking back her negative projections and identifying with persons she would otherwise have rejected without realizing the way she herself mirrors the offensive behavior she dislikes.

6.   The behavior and feelings expressed by Craig were the most surprising to us. Craig was *the one who felt most intensely the urge to aggressively scapegoat another member of the group*. Toward the end of the first studio session, he sarcastically remarked, "We still have to scapegoat." By this statement, he reminded the group that the energy to attack the Scapegoat Leader was still alive and must be attended to on an on-going basis. At another point, he shared his intuition that our experiment was really about "How groups eat each other alive"—a dark vision and highly descriptive of groups that reject and attack the Scapegoat Leader.

After reading his responses to the post workshop questionnaire, we understood the full implications of his comment—which could be considered a direct request to the conductor: "Do you realize I'm carrying something I need help with?" He was carrying the internal struggle of the group to actively resist aggressive scapegoating and contain negative feelings. He revealed the painful burden of containing the impulses to attack.
He wrote that he had to set up "boundaries between himself and Pete" and minimize contact because he held strong negative feelings toward him.

Craig showed much integrity by staying within the research frame which the conductor established for *strategic subgroup* formation. He carried the internal conflict of group participants to resist attacking the Scapegoat Leader. Overall, he reported it was a "painful social experience."

Craig's remarks are instructive to us as investigators because it tells us that those who train people in this method must make themselves available to members of a *strategic subgroup* to help resist the tendency to attack the Scapegoat Leader and help certain members cope with the emotional consequences of doing so. The conductor (the first author) did not do this in the

present study, although he did set norms for the group to follow. In future investigations, conductors or trainers must take a more active role coaching participants how to manage negative feelings toward others as they resist the urge to project negative and hostile feelings onto the Scapegoat Leader.

7. Ryan carried the *leadership role of recording and remembering*. He offered to film the one meeting of the group between the two studio sessions. He also invited participants to share how they connected with
LaTanya's project.

8. LaTanya demonstrated the characteristics of the *Reluctant Leader*—expressing uncertainty about how she would lead. She was assertive but low key. She was personable but not charismatic. No pied piper seeking the group to follow passively—rather she wants to know how she can count on each of them to help with the task. But she must first learn how to trust the group at a deeper level before she can imagine how it can help her fulfill her project. As the only African-American participant, she did not want to explain herself—but instead decided to trust that the group would trust her competence.
LaTanya came away with a plan for implementing and sustaining her project. In the post workshop questionnaire, she indicated she was making progress with the help of some of the original subgroup. One year following the workshop, she had incorporated the program into her nonprofit and was still in contact with some of the participants, although they were no longer engaged directly with her project.

We believe the leadership roles that participants assumed were determined more by the group context than by personality traits. Yvonne Agazarian says, "sometimes the group requires them to contain for the group, more than they can bear." (Agazarian, 1992, p.197) This clearly applied to Craig in our observations that we cite above.

DISCUSSION

It seems relevant for our times to attempt to understand the group processes of peace and justice organizations acting in the public interest.

Beyond the motives that impel individuals to join such groups, we wanted to explore the group dynamics that allow individuals to pursue ethical goals collectively and collaboratively. The absence of investigations in this realm is noteworthy. We initiated our study to open a line of research that would fill this gap.

Although Henry David Thoreau emphasized the duty of the individual to resist social evils, his essay, "On Civil Disobedience" (1846) has influenced generations of social movements to act in concert with their conscience. There are historical examples in the 20th century of groups that have been formed to pursue nonviolent courageous action in the cause of national liberation, defending universal human rights, and protesting unjust wars and military occupations: Gandhi's liberation movement in India, the Civil Rights movement in the United States, and the anti-Vietnam War mobilizations. These social and political movements made profound and world-historic changes. We assume they did not arise by accident.

What are the group dynamics that underlie these organizations?

Answers to this question could prove vital for the creation of such movements in the future.

The use of video to capture the proceedings of unscripted, spontaneous group process—in order to analyze group dynamics—is well established. (Roller and Nelson, 1997) The data extracted can be meticulously studied and edited for use in classrooms and by other researchers. Although groups of this kind can yield valuable information, they are seldom initiated by investigators. To engage in this method of research is to put oneself on a sea of uncertainty and at the winds of chance. We speculate that the presence of cameras may account in part for the group's willingness to stay within the research frame—although we have no clear indication of this. Then, again, we can assume they were pursuing the original intentionality for why they joined the study: "To explore courageous, nonviolent action in defense of ethical principles or people in need, even at possible cost to themselves."

LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

Various interpretations of video data possible

We edited our original 10 ½ hours of footage to 6 hours running time or 3 DVD's. We attempted to identify a coherent pattern within the complexity of the group dynamics captured in our video study. In that effort, we identified specific leadership roles that seemed critical to the group's progress and identified the relationship of aggressive scapegoating to nonviolent, courageous action. But there is much more to be discovered and understood. Other investigators

might perceive the events of our film series quite differently. Other interpretations of the same video data are possible and other theories may be derived from them.

No Control Group

A control group to test a key independent variable is lacking in the current study—but would be welcome in future studies that attempt to replicate aspects of our experiment. For example, a group of individuals could be formed around their desire to take courageous, nonviolent action but without the conductor's training piece on *strategic subgroups* and the specific norms that drive a group forward. Would results similar to the present study be obtained?

As social scientists, we must be cautious of being overly enthusiastic about the results of our experiment—an idiographic study of a single group.
We based our theories on our observations of the group process and the assumptions we made as we constructed our experiment. But more research in this area will be required before anything approaching "knowledge" appears evident.

CONCLUSION

In this study, the lead author demonstrated a method of instruction that took participants through the steps we believe lead to courageous, nonviolent action. It begins with the awakening of an individual conscience to an ethical issue requiring action; then moves from solitary focus to

the enlistment of allies; then comes the creation of an action plan, the emergence of various leadership roles, and the development of group norms that embolden the moral courage essential to serve the public interest. This progression epitomizes the New Heroism of ordinary people taking extraordinary action for the common good.

In combining concepts and methods taken from both social psychology and clinical group psychotherapy/group processes, we hope to build a bridge between the two fields and establish a basis for mutual understanding and collaboration that up to this point has been lacking. We believe it is imperative to break through traditional academic barriers for the good of community involvement—and apply our wisdom across the domains of research, psychotherapy, and social engagement.

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TITLE PAGE

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TO ADVANCE ETHICAL GOALS IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST:

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