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ABSTRACT

The unprecedented development of self-help groups confirms their importance, but few studies have focused on prevention and self-help groups. Two methods for investigating preventive potential are outcome studies and process analysis. To assess the presence of helping processes in self-help group meetings, a process analysis was developed to document the preventive potential of such groups and allow comparison by independent judges of various groups. The verbal interactions of three self-help groups (two similar groups and a criterion group) were recorded during three periods and subjected to content analysis. Results revealed that 14 of the initial categories were retained on the basis of their inter-judges' agreement and frequency. The findings suggest that this process analysis system can differentiate between the criterion groups and allow for analysis of subtle variations in groups of the same organizations. (Author/JAC)

Processes analysis in self-help groups: development and applications.

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1. Introduction

The preventive potential of self-help groups has been discussed many times. Gartner and Riessman (1977) conclude that the self-help movement is the only mean to attain a radical change in human services; Katz and Bender (1976) see in it an alternative or a complementary way of helping people. The unprecedented development of many of these groups in the late years confirms the importance of that social movement.

But there has been very few studies on prevention and self-help groups. Two modes of study of their preventive potential can be distinguished: the outcome studies and the processes analysis. The outcome studies on self-help groups, many of them reported by Lieberman et al. (1979), are the object of various criticisms.

When referring to an experimental paradigm, such outcome studies are said not to respect the essence of self-help groups (unlimited time of participation, volunteer participation...). When using a design inspired by a program evaluation approach, their conclusions are limited by other problems (the non-participation of some members (Videka, 1979); the different types of participation (Silverman, 1978). Researches on self-help groups impact frequently conclude that their main effect is to modify the members' self-esteem and to alter in a few cases some of their psychological problems. Even if they seem unimpressive, these results have to be

considered in the light of the numerous methodological problems of outcome studies with marginal organizations.

Weiss (1975) in a critical analysis of evaluation studies invites the researchers to develop a better understanding of the problem or of the intervention under study rather than to consider some methodological refinements of evaluation studies.

The processes analysis of self-help groups seems to be a way to develop a clearer understanding of the preventive potential of self-help groups because it allows the analysis of some presumably therapeutic conditions and factors. Drakeford (1969) is one of the first to proceed to a description of such therapeutic processes in various self-help groups. But the first systematic attempt to study therapeutic processes in self-help groups is made by Levy in 1976. This study leads to the development of a repertoire of helping processes and emphasizes the interest of comparing the relative frequency of utilization of such processes by different groups. A further study by Levy in 1979 uses questionnaires to gain access to the members' perceptions on the helping processes in their group. Those studies would be improved by the independant assessment by different judges of the presence and relative frequency of such helping processes in self-help groups.

The aim of this study was to develop a method of analysis of self-help processes which used independent judges and to test its application.

2. The development of the process analysis system.

There are two main steps in the development of the process analysis system. The first step was to draw a complete list of the many helping processes described in self-help groups. As proposed by Gartner and Riessman (1977), we considered further more that self-help organizations are mainly influenced by small group processes and by the helping skills of their non-professional members. So a review of the literature on helping processes was done considering these three points of view: self-help groups, therapeutic groups, non-professional interactions. After analysis, a total of 11 themes of helping processes were identified (see table 1).

The second step consisted in the integration of those processes in a workable system. The same review of literature allowed to select as a method the systematic content analysis of self-help groups' verbal interactions. The advantages of this method are its objectivity, the possibility of analysing the relative frequency of utilization of some processes, and even more, as Goodman and Dooley (1976) have indicated, the possibility of comparing groups having different philosophies.

Following the principles of Hawkins and Dobes (1977) and of Herbert and Attridge (1975), each process was operationalized. Some processes cannot be studied when verbal interactions are

used, so they were not included in the final system (existential factor, social factor, cohesion, structure, warmth, touch). Two other categories were added to help the judges: the "interjections" (mm-mm...) and "incomplete". The final system was composed of 34 mutually exclusive categories reported in table 1.

3. The application of the process analysis system

A) Groups' selection. The application of the process analysis system was tested in two complementary ways. It was first decided to study two similar groups and then to compare them to a criterion group. The objective was to verify if such a system detects subtle differences in group functioning and discriminates between groups of various philosophies. The criterion groups were chosen on the basis of characteristics often mentioned in typologies of self-help groups: the groups' structure and clientele. The two unstructured groups (V.N.) were preoccupied with a problem of a transitory nature, divorce; the structured group (Recovery) was interested in people having chronic nervous problems.

B) Procedure. Three meetings of each of these three groups were recorded for the study after a session of habituation. Those meetings were approximatively of two hours. There were from three to six members present at each meeting.

C) The training of the judges. Two judges were trained to unitize the transcriptions of the verbal interactions of the meetings. Following the recommendations of Holsti (1969) and of Kiesler (1973) that units of coding pertaining to the objectives of the study and adapted to the context should be used, two hierarchical units of coding were chosen, the statement and the idea. The inter-judges' agreement on unitizing was of .92 (mean coefficient of reliability, Holsti, 1969). The same judges were trained to categorize the verbal interactions by using the 34 categories of helping processes. Their agreement on categorizing was of .69 (Kappa, Cohen (1960)).

4. Results

Preliminary considerations. This process analysis system being in development, it was important to verify for each category the inter-judges' agreement (Johnson et Bolstad, 1973). Many categories were infrequently coded by the judges (less than 1% of the coding units) and they had a too low inter-judges' agreement to be retained. The categories "interpretation and opinion" were grouped a posteriori in one category. Finally, 14 categories are used for analysis; they all had a frequency of occurence of 1% in a least one group and they had an inter-judges' agreement of at least .50. Another important verification was to check if the remaining categories allowed to analyse a sufficient portion of the verbal interactions recorded. The use of thirteen categories allows

to code about 80% of the verbal interactions units. The fourteenth category "incomplete", referring to undecodable units, gives some information on the difficulty of coding which is similar in the three groups (approx. 4% of incomplete units). The residual categories covered the remaining 15% of the units.

Descriptive analysis of the groups. The first step in the descriptive analysis was to check the stability of the results in a group from session to session. Such stability of results was found in each group. And we could then proceed to the inter-group comparison.

Figure 1 illustrates the mean frequency of the 14 categories and of the residual categories for the three groups. The unstructured groups are group 1 and group 2; the structured group is group 3. There are some similarities in the functioning of these three groups. The categories most frequently used by the three groups are "self revelation" and "approbation". The category "change method" has a high frequency of occurence in group 3; the members discuss a great deal about ways to modify their problems. For group 1, the category "interjections" refers to the frequent "hum-hum" emitted by the leader. This category is not further discussed.

There are other differences between the groups. Members of group 3, which aim is to reinterpret their problem following Dr. Low's principles and to center its members on action, refer much

more often to some "sanctioned model of interpretation" and to some "change methods" and less to some personal mode of interpretation (categories "interpretation and opinion" and "paraphrase"). This group is also more preoccupied with "organization" than the two other groups. The categories "group's goals" and "report of discrimination" are emitted more frequently by the members of group 3. This could be another indication of their mode of organizing the group's interactions in a pre-determined way. But the validity of these two categories should be checked in further studies. The differences with the other groups seems to confirm the more structured approach of the Recovery method. The two unstructured groups (group 1 and 2) are less centered on "organization", refer more to some personal mode of interpretation (categories "interpretation and opinion" and "paraphrase") and very rarely to a "sanctioned model of interpretation". Yet, there are some differences between those two unstructured groups. Group 2 gives more emphasis to "informal conversation", to "encouragement to talk" (sometimes named question) and to "self-revelation". And doing so, this group seems to conform more to a style of helping interactions characteristic of non-professionals.

5. Discussion

This process analysis system allows one to analyse the differences between groups of various structure and philosophy and to

document the variations in functioning in groups of the same organization. It has been applied in this study to groups working towards the adaptation of their members, and this study should be completed by analysing groups having as objectives the evolution of their members' behavior (example: weight reduction groups) if we want to be sure that this system is applicable to any self-help groups' meetings. In those subsequent studies, other categories of the processes analysis system may possibly be retained.

When compared to other researches on helping processes in self-help groups, this approach confirms the greater use of "self-revelation" and "approbation" documented in other studies but gives a more accurate image of the intrecate interplays between processes. It suggests the importance of studying in groups of the same allegiance, the role of the leader and the motivations of the members which could explain the differences between the groups. Finally, the use of such a process analysis system could help document the preventive potential of self-help groups. As we have seen in those preliminary analysis, these groups seem to have recourse to a greater variety of helping processes than those usually identified in studies on non-professionals helping interactions.

TABLE 1

The 11 themes of helping processes and the 34 categories

Theme	Categories
1. Recapitulation of the primary family group	Recapitulation of the primary family group
2. Organization	Organization
3. Informal conversation	Informal conversation
4. Humor	Humor
5. Group's principles	Sanctioned model of interpretation Norms Group's goals
6. Reciprocity	Reciprocity
7. Universality	Universality
8. Social reinforcement	Approbation Disapprobation Encouragement to talk Empathy Mutual affirmation Reassurance of competence Support (concrete)
9. Self-revelation	Self-revelation Self-disclosure Opinion Interpretation Disclosure of feeling Paraphrase Offering feedback Requesting feedback
10. Information	Normative information Instrumental information
11. Method	Personal goal setting Discrimination training Discrimination description Discrimination advice Description of method of change Advice on method of change Added categories Interjections Incomplete

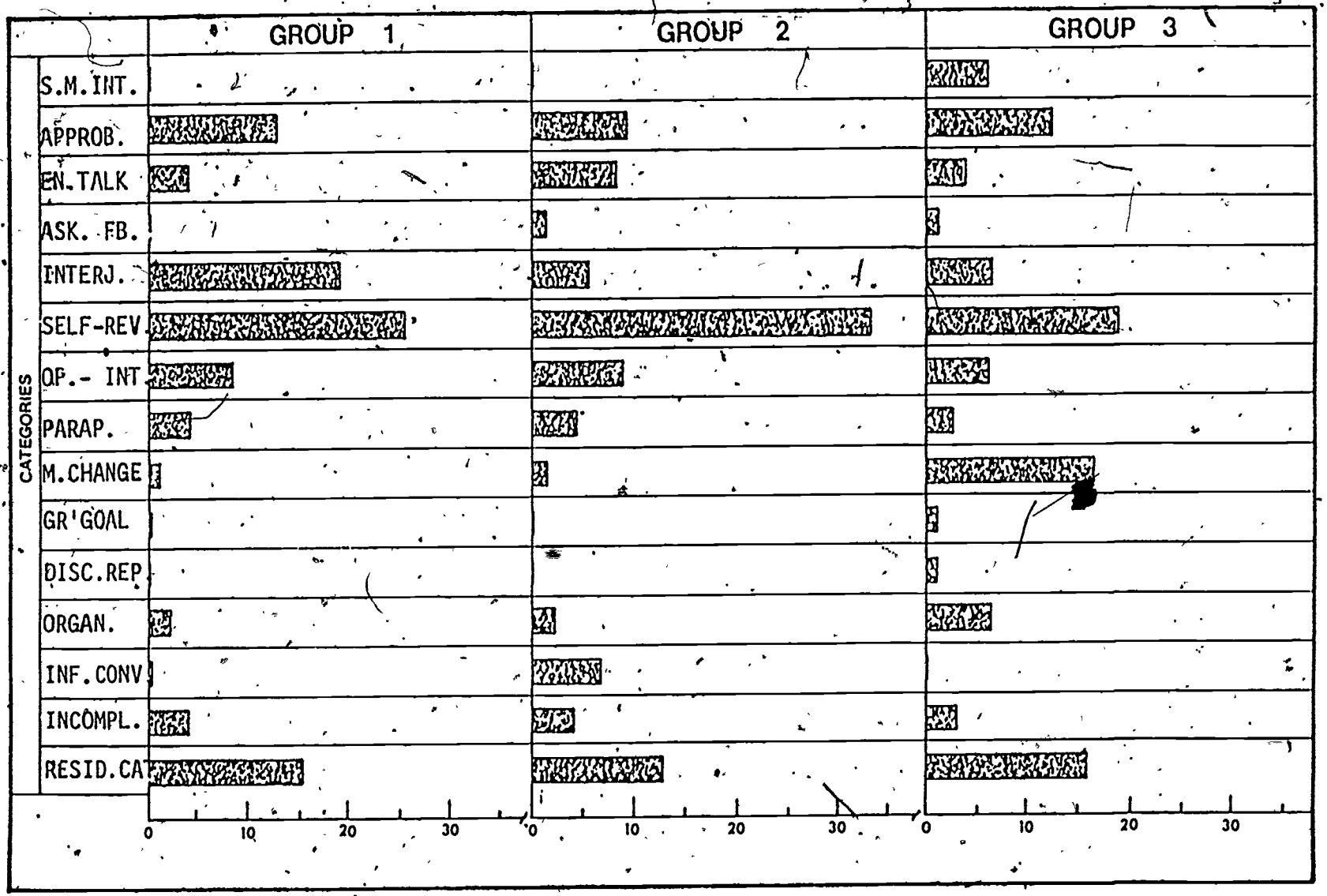

Figure 1. THE MEAN FREQUENCY OF THE 14 CATEGORIES AND OF THE RESIDUAL CATEGORIES FOR THE THREE GROUPS.

Footnotes

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3. An instruction manual on the process analysis system is available from the author (in french only).

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