

SOME CHARACTERISTICS, CAUSES AND
METHODS OF REDUCING PRIMARY TENSION
IN SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

by

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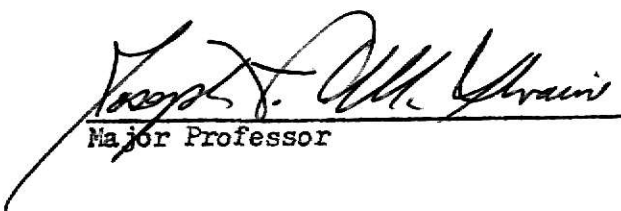
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PREFACE

The following report grew out of an interest in groups the writer had while working on his master's degree. These groups included clubs, organizations, and committee groups which the writer had frequent contact with during his graduate assistantship. The writer became very much interested in the small group process as a result. The belief that beneficial results may be accomplished through the group process have always been the writers personal bias.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION: PRIMARY TENSION

Primary social tension in small group discussion is a problem that has been characteristic of mankind in all aspects of life. It exists in almost all newly formed small groups in all areas whether they be governmental, occupational, religious, social, academic, therapeutic, or any other group that may exist. Primary tension acts as an inhibitor to the free flow in the exchange of communication within small groups. It is this inhibition to the free flow that is one of the causes of the problem of loss of meaningful dialogue among members of the group. This inhibition, primary tension, stops the art process of the blending of individuals within the group through group conversation. The following poem from John Dewey's (1934) Art as Experience illustrates somewhat this art process of group conversation.

"Any experience is an art experience if it has harmony, balance and rhythm, and if every successive part flows freely into what ensues with no sacrifice of the self-identity of any of the parts... Indeed, leaders often have the feeling that in the group process unrelated individuals like unrelated pigments become related in the art process."

Need For Concern

Group discussion is a very important part of life. Not only in decision-making and problem-solving but also in daily activities. Group conversation sometimes referred to as social conversation is also

a very important part of the process in group discussion. It has been said by Bales (1953) that in group discussion very often the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Something emerges from the group discussion that is more than the mere summation of the inputs of all the group participants. The effectiveness of a group in generating this quality is directly related to the amount of participation of the group members. Groups which are dominated by a few of its members with the others remaining quiet, never quite attain this group quality. Participation is the primary responsibility of everyone in the group. Participation also includes the ability to listen, synthesize, and analyze what is said. But before this can best be accomplished, a group needs to overcome tensions that result from the process of getting acquainted. A portion of overcoming this process is alleviating primary tension in small group discussion.

Without alleviating primary tension, business cannot proceed effectively or efficiently in a group. A certain amount of small talk or social conversation seems to be needed before business can proceed as normal. A large amount of time is spent at business meetings, conferences, conventions, seminars, and other gatherings just alleviating this primary social tension through group social conversation.

If a group cannot get over the primary tension stage in group conversation, then there is little hope of accomplishing anything of importance. Free verbal dialogue is a necessity for good group discussion. If this freedom of verbal dialogue is not inherent in the group then little meaningful discussion will never take place.

Groups that ignore or withdraw from tension tend to develop

a social climate that is uncomfortable and punishing. According to Bales (1953), groups sometimes seem to be more neurotic than individuals in their tendency to pretend that social tensions do not exist. The success of a group in solving its problems or tasks will depend upon its skill to free itself from any number and magnitude of barriers which impede the free flow of communication of ideas, feelings, and thoughts among its members. And one of these barriers to communicating is the concept of primary tension.

The Problem

Statement. Social tension in groups is broken down into two parts, primary and secondary tension. The latter will be analyzed briefly but the former is the major concern to the writer. Some of the characteristics, causes, and methods of reducing primary tension in small group discussion are the major concerns of this report.

As mentioned earlier, if primary social tension exists throughout the life of the group it may inhibit the group to a point where it may never proceed any further than does small talk or social conversation.

Definitions. Further clarification of the terms, primary, tension, primary social tension, and phatic communion appears warranted before proceeding further.

The term primary means according to Merriam (1959):

"First in order of time or development or in intention; primitive; original. Of the first order in successive division, combinations, or ramification..."

The term tension means according to Merriam (1959):

"Nervous anxiety, with attendant muscular tenseness. A strained condition of relations..."

The term tension means according to Morris (1973):

"Mental emotional, or nervous strain. A strained relation between persons or groups, uneasy suspense."

The term primary social tension as defined by Bormann (1969):

"The social unease and stiffness that accompanies getting acquainted."

Primary tension is the difficulty which participants in groups have initiating the group process. It is the quiet nonassertive passive hesitation that holds groups back and keeps them from moving forward. It is the block to an effective and efficient higher level of communication in discussion.

Group members who experience primary tension often have the characteristics of quickness to laugh, strained or prolonged laughter, worry, apprehension, uneasiness, stiffness, holding back of expressions, embarrassment, hesitation, strained relations, and many of the signs of anxiety mentioned Bales (1951). In some cases the person is quiet, silent, nonassertive and passive. An example of a case, where primary tension exists, is when two people, neither knowing the other, get into an elevator together. Each may feel a little uncomfortable or anxious when riding in the elevator. Often in such cases "light" topic conversation will result. This light conversation has several names such as chat, small talk, phatic communion, or social conversation. In essence this is the art of saying nothing. Such topics of conversation often begin with discussing the weather or other trivial talk. In most cases

it continues until the primary tension is lowered to a safe level or is entirely released.

The term, phatic communion, is another means of expressing chat, or social talk or conversation. The term was originally coined by an anthropologist, Bronislaw Malinowski, during his studies of the primitive tribe. Duncan (1962) talked about Malinowski's, phatic communion, where natives sat together at the village fire, after the day's work was completed, and chatted or socialized. Here phatic communion is not used to convey meaning or thought, but rather it is used to transmit a mode of action. It exists in an atmosphere of sociability, where there is a personal communion among the group participants. Malinowski stated that each word,

"is an act of serving the direct aim of binding hearer to speaker by a tie of some social sentiment or other. Once more language appears to us in this function not as an instrument of reflection, but as a mode of action."

However today the term has been updated to mean social conversation by such semanticists as Hayakawa (1972).

Small groups. The term small group also warrants some discussion. There are a vast number of definitions for the term small group. The purpose for this definition is to determine the kind of group which the term primary social tension is meant to apply. One definition which is quite appropriate is defined by Bales (1951):

"A small group is defined as any number of persons engaged in interaction with each other in a single face-to-face meeting or a series of such meetings, in which each member receives some impression or perception of each other member distinct enough so that he can either at the time or in later questioning give some reaction to each of the others

as an individual person, even though it be only to recall that the other was present."

Then according to this definition by Bales (1951), a number of people who have never interacted with each other do not compose a small group. A number of persons may be attending a lecture and may be physically present at the same event, but they do not interact with each other enough for each to be able to form a distinct impression of one another. Nor do they interact enough for the participants to produce some data concerning the relationship of each member to every other. Therefore this does not constitute a small group in the present sense. A number of people in a group so large or scattered that their only interaction is through indirect means as unknown members of subgroups, or through intermediary persons, or through impersonal means of communication is too large and distinct to be a small group according to Bales' (1951) definition.

Other characteristics of a small group, such as face-to-face contacts and cooperation among members are stressed by Cooley (1909). Hartley and Hartley (1952) described a small group as two or more persons meeting on the street and looking at each other fit this definition. Cattell (1957) said a small group is a collection of individuals who make it possible for each other to achieve need satisfaction. Thus according to the preceding definitions, small group interaction can be both verbal and nonverbal.

It seems that the optimum size of a group can vary. Several authors agree that a small group begins with two or more persons interacting. However there are many differences of opinion as to how large

a small group can become before it loses its characteristics and effectiveness as a small group. In studies by Applegate (1969:78), a small group was most effective if it contained 15 or fewer people.

Limitations. Since numerous research studies and books are available on tension in groups it is necessary to limit the scope of this report to one aspect of group tension. Primary tension is the limit imposed upon the report to narrow its scope.

Primary and secondary social tensions are the two basic categories in which tension is broken down. Of these two types secondary social tension will not be dealt with in this report, but its definition will be discussed so as not to confuse it with the former. The only time secondary tension will be mentioned in this report is when some of the characteristics of primary tension are similar in nature to secondary tension.

Most small groups are able to release primary tension within a short time and are then able to perform their functions or goals. Structuring usually takes place in a group along with a network of social relationships. This structuring initiates tension of another kind said Bormann (1969):

"Two persons may compete for the social approval of a third. They experience social tensions during arguments and others grow tense because of the emotion and antagonism of the two members... The two members may have different positions on a matter of policy and may try to procure adherents. In either instance, they have what is called a 'personality conflict'."

These conflicts result in secondary tension which are characterized as noisier and more dynamic, where voices are louder and more strained, no one seems tired or bored, long pauses may appear but sometimes two

or more people try to talk at once, and everyone is highly interested in what's going on said Bormann (1969). Members may hit the table, get up and pace the room, gesture excitedly, and exhibit a much higher level of excitement and involvement according to both Bales (1951) and Bormann (1969). Secondary tension will have little chance of developing in a group who has not released their primary tension sufficiently to seriously engage in the task established. However, it is not the scope of this report to deal with secondary tension.

Chapter 2

CHARACTERISTICS OF PRIMARY TENSION

By means of feedback, group members are able to see some of the characteristic signs of primary tension. Through feedback group members can perceive signs as to whether primary tension is at a high or low level in the group. If it is at a high level steps need to be taken to reduce it to a safer level, so discussion can progress in an effective manner. All the participants in the group need affiliation with the group goals, acceptance of the group style, or just understanding whatever the group "game" is and playing it well. This is best accomplished through synthesis and analysis of feedback, which can be both verbal and nonverbal in form.

Apparent During Opening Minutes of Discussion

Primary tension is fairly easily spotted. It is apparent during the opening minutes of a group discussion when all the members are just getting acquainted. The characteristics in a meeting are extreme politeness, apparent boredom or tiredness, and sighing, or yawning. Group members tend to speak softly and tentatively, when exhibiting signs of primary tension, and quite often can think of nothing to say. Often many long pauses (similar to secondary tension) will result mentioned Bormann (1969).

Some Definite Signs of Primary Tension

Primary tension can assume many characteristic forms. Some of its signs are quite evident. Some of these signs are also

characteristic of secondary tension. It is often difficult to draw a line between where primary tension ends and secondary tension begins. Minor outbreaks of reactive anxiety or tension may be noted when members in the group appear, "startled, disconcerted, alarmed, dismayed, perturbed, or concerned," according to Bales (1970). Such characteristics as, "hesitation, speechlessness, flurry, fluster, confusion, trembling, blushing, sweating, blocking-up, gulping, swallowing or wetting the lips persistently may be included." Indications of holding back may also be added as showing primary tension. Reactions to disapproval may be contained as well as, "appearing to be embarrassed, fussed, sheepish, chagrined, defected, crest fallen, chastened, at loss, or mortified." Showing signs of primary tension of the extreme include, "verbal or motor expressions of fear, apprehension, worry, dread, fright, terror, or panic," explained Bales (1970).

Laughter sometimes a sign. Laughter may be a sign to show that primary tension exists. "Strained laughter, prolonged laughter, or in the extreme case hysterical laughter or laughter that appears to be close to tears or moaning is generally indicative of severe tension," whether it be primary or secondary, according to Bales (1970). It is therefore important to listen to the quality of the laughter in establishing its significance. Likewise, Glass (1969) stated the same that "another manifestation of anxiety is that of laughing or giggling, usually to an extreme. This should not, however, be confused with the genuine laughing or giggling at a humorous anecdote."

Testing period of first impressions. Primary tension can account for uncertain behavior at the beginning of a meeting. Members

tend to speak softly, tentatively, and with great politeness explained Bormann (1969). They all want to make a good first impression on each other, so therefore are very polite. They tend to refrain from telling jokes (other than humorous comments), expressing strong opinions (political, religious, etc.), and they do not insult other members in the group. They tend to laugh at humorous comments, but the laughter is often a bit strained. Members will almost discuss any "light" topic, such as the weather or sports in order to start getting acquainted. In essence the members "test" each others first impressions of one another.

Sensitivity to other group members. Bonner (1959) mentioned basically the same thing as Cooley (1909), that, "In intimate and face-to-face interactions which make up a group, the individuals are keenly sensitive to the opinions and actions of others in the group." In this process sympathy is developed, and participants closely identify themselves with one another so that one person is the ultimate concern of all members of the group. Thus people when they are extremely nice and sensitive to each other, show the signs of primary tension in the group.

Verbal and nonverbal expressions. Primary tension is also revealed through verbal and nonverbal expressions. It can be picked up through tones of voice, facial expressions, gestures, and "body language". Often one can pick up signs of primary tension by not only what is said, but how it is said.

Silence in a group is another nonverbal indicator of tension. A group experiencing primary tension may be uncomfortable. When this

happens the group may become silent and reflective, and/or extremely restless and anxious according to Glass (1969). Such may be the case when a professor cannot obtain any verbal response from his class.

Loss of group effectiveness. If the primary tension becomes too great then effective group discussion cannot occur. When the level of primary tension rises too high the group cannot function on the task. Some of the group members become passive, quiet, and non-assertive. The group may attempt to discuss the task at hand, but when the tension reaches a high enough level, the real item under discussion would have to be the problems causing the tension. When the tension level is high enough in a group explained Bormann (1969), "it should stop talking about the discussion question and consider the social problem." An effective small group begins work on the discussion problem as soon as the primary tension has been released.

Balance among group members. The group will try to attain a balance of tension among its different members according to Kadis (1963). This balance behaves sort of like a homeostasis which keeps the anxiety or tension of the members on a tolerable level, just as the body's endocrine machinery represents an attempt to keep the body's internal secretions balanced.

Disinterest. A person in a group who feels a strong amount of primary tension, similiar to stage fright, will often separate from the group and pretend to be disinterested in the meeting felt Bormann (1969). Such can be the case when someone reads during the meeting or looks out the window.

The same was found to be true in the Minnesota Studies. In

this study members in small group discussions who seemed disinterested or who withdrew were really very tense, and were exhibiting a very high level of primary tension. The members who were interviewed as to why they did not take a more active part in the group discussion said they weren't sure and implied the subject was uninteresting. More extensive investigation revealed that it is extremely rare that disinterest in the work and activities of the group exists as the group process continues. But rather the group members were experiencing a high degree of primary tension.

Read between the lines. Sometimes by reading or looking between the lines of what group members are saying, the real meaning of what is being said can be caught. This is often true where presymbolic language is concerned stated Hayakawa (1972). Often clues of primary tension existing can be perceived. Such is the case of a guy who is hitchhiking along a major highway, and then a motorist sees him and stops and asks him, "Do you need a lift?". If upon interpretation of these words literally, this would be a very stupid question, because of course he needs a lift or else he would not be hitchhiking. If the hitchhiker, by paying no attention to the words, but focuses upon the understanding and meaning of the words, he could see that the motorist wants to be friendly and is offering him a ride. If the hitchhiker returns the comment by some equally friendly comment, he has obtained a ride. In a similar way Hayakawa (1972) mentioned,

"Many situations in life demand that we pay no attention to what the words say, since the meaning may often be a great deal more intelligent and intelligible than the surface sense of the words themselves."

The same is true with primary tension. Group members sometime declare that they are not uncomfortable when in reality they are, but feel too ill at east to imply so. By reading between the lines symptoms of primary tension may often be discovered.

Need for Social Conversation Before Business

Primary tension accounts for the universal phenomenon of small talk or social conversation first, and then business later. This is very much a characteristic of business meetings, interviews, conferences, and socials in today's society. Often "ice breakers" or jokes are employed to get things moving. More will be said about that later in the report.

Small group social conversation when used before the discussion of the main problem or topic, is time well spent. Social conversation goes by other names such as chat or small talk, or phatic communion to name a few. Its influence is felt in all other steps of the total group process; thus both time and energy can be saved. Group social conversation may move into group discussion, when the primary tension that group conversation releases, lowers to a safe level.

DuBois and Li (1971) expressed:

"The controversial aspects of an issue are intentionally postponed until a mood of acceptance has been developed so that the members of the group are able to enter the discussion phase when they are ready to enter into it constructively and with a sense of trust, openness and directness."

The mood of acceptance can be obtained by lowering the level of primary tension to a pleasant point. Not until feelings of strangeness, suspicion, tension or even hostility are cleared can little real business

in any group gathering ever be accomplished. When these feelings are complicated by several kinds of differences, not to mention those of nationality, religion, race, sex, or age, the blocks to discharging primary tensions can be serious.

Releasing primary tension enables the faculties of reason and analysis necessary for discussion to function. It establishes an atmosphere that inspires the participants in group discussion to share the kind of experiences that will bring deeper impact into discussion.

Introducing small talk or social conversation to alleviate primary tension early in a conference, seminar, or workshop can be very effective. It can help a group, meeting for the first time, to move into the topic of discussion much more rapidly and directly. Time should be more than compensated for by the speed with which the rest of the meeting moves into the heart of the discussion and action.

Thus this social conversation at the beginning of a meeting or discussion meets a real and universal need. If it did not it would probably be excluded from the fast pace of modern living, where so much time is spent in conference expressed Bormann (1969).

Chapter 3

SOME CAUSES OF PRIMARY TENSION

Reasons for Primary Tension

Defense mechanisms. According to Kadis (1963) members in a group are likely to resist any change which involves a modification of their customary method of doing things. Defense mechanisms represent the security procedures which are activated in order to fend off change, anxiety or tension. This is often a characteristic of groups trying to avoid tension caused from change. Change often creates resistance which causes tension.

Memories of unpleasant past experiences. Bormann (1969) mentioned, "That a member in a discussion group who has been rejected or hurt in previous ones, and it is likely that he will be rejected again, may not risk taking part and will experience primary tension." If there is the possibility of failure in the group where he may be rejected, despised or belittled, and this happens, he might respond with a feeling of unpleasantness, and most likely with frustration and anger. If he has had a good positive experience in small group discussion and was liked as a human being, then probably he will continue to participate. If on the other hand he did not have a positive experience in a previous group, then he will be less likely to participate, and escape by pretending not to be concerned. This is one cause of primary group tension.

Environment of strangers. People placed in a discussion group with strangers will experience primary tension, usually most

strongly during the opening minutes of their first meeting. During the opening minutes of the group discussion people who are new to one another tend to develop some tension, until they have had time to socialize and to "feel" each other out. This first encounter with strange group members tends to cause primary tension.

Subject of laughter. The fear of being laughed at by the other group members is a cause of primary tension. This fear is often characteristic among youth in their peer groups, said Applegate (1969:78). The thought of not being liked or accepted and laughed at is a difficult feeling for the group member to handle. Laughing with others unites; laughing at others separates.

Prejudice. Sherif and Sherif (1953) talked about the social distance between groups caused by prejudice that one group may have for another. They stated, "Group prejudice may be characterized as the negative attitudes of members of one group, derived from the group's established norms, toward another group and its members." This causes social distance and primary tension. Likewise, this same thought can be applied to prejudice within a group, which some group members may have concerning others. One example would be racial prejudice in a group. This prejudice tends to cause primary social tension that may be so great, that no other effective, progressive group discussion can take place until it is released.

According to Dean and Rosen (1955), "Persons unexperienced in intergroup relations frequently alienate minority persons with whom they wish to be friendly by inadvertently expressing themselves in a language of prejudice." The language of prejudice is a common cause

of primary tension in groups. Terms such as, "kike," "wop," and "nigger," alienate group members before the group has a chance at cohesion. Using these terms brings the level of primary tension to a high intolerable point.

Fear of authority person. Some members in a group remain silent because they have a fear of the authority person in a group. Johnson (1963) noted there are many people though not overtly depressed, exhibit personality traits that suggest a depressive personality. Characteristics of this type of person are passive and nonassertive. Some are quiet and withdrawn in their relationship to other people. These are some of the same characteristics which also describe a person experiencing a high level of primary tension, as mentioned earlier. These members are hesitant about talking or verbalizing their feelings. Some are able to verbalize with one or two people comfortably, but become quiet, withdrawn, and frightened when placed in a small group. They tend to "freeze-up" or "go blank" in their relationship with authority figures. Here again too much primary tension exists, so no effective discussion can result.

Fear of the unknown. Sometimes in groups just the fear of the unknown may cause primary tension. In a new group environment often members of the group will feel tension because they are unfamiliar with each other and they do not know what is expected of them or what to do. They more or less have a fear or apprehension of the unknown. This will cause primary tension.

Fear of the unknown is a definite factor causing primary tension. Some group participants may experience, fear, anxiety, or tension the first time they encounter a new group situation. Such fear, anxiety, or tension is similar to stage fright, where a new lead actor's hand may begin perspiring on opening night of a new Broadway play. He is unsure of himself. The performer does not know how the audience, public, or critics will react to his performance. He is reacting to the unknown. This is a mental or psychological process which causes the physiological reaction, sweating of the hands. So much depends upon the opening night success that the fears, anxieties, and tensions result in the perspiring hands. These reactions of stage fright are in essence forms of primary tension. Not unless the fear, anxiety, or tension can be eliminated is the actor able to proceed with an effective performance. Likewise a participant in a group discussion may experience the same fear of the unknown with new group members. This fear, anxiety, or tension is just as real as that of the actor, only it exists in the group situation. It is this unknown fear of the new group participants, or not knowing what to expect, or what the group goals are which tend to cause primary tension.

Fear of the unknown is a problem which has plagued almost all parts of society. It is prevalent in schools, where students often have difficulty verbalizing in the classroom. Students have fears of the unknown when they are not acquainted with the other students.

One Study

In one study by Applegate (1969:78) there were some definite reasons or causes why students would not verbalize in a class discussion. One section of the study had a questionnaire which was designed to force students to select reasons why they or their peers might choose not to participate verbally in class discussion. The questionnaire was given twice to three classes of ninth grade students in October, 1967, and again in April, 1968. The two reasons most often selected in rank order for not participating verbally in class discussion in both October and April were, "Not being able to say what they mean," first and "Possibilities of being wrong," second. The one reason that made a significant change from October to April was "might be laughed at," (mentioned earlier in this chapter) which dropped from seventh in October to eleventh in April when it was selected by 50 percent fewer students. This then suggests according to Applegate (1969:78), "The students perceived that more of their comments would be accepted by their teachers and peers without being laughed at in April than in October." It could be inferred from the preceding that much of the primary tension of the students may have been released over the period of six months which caused their change in feelings, as they perhaps became more acquainted. The students were less afraid of being laughed at in April than October.

In another portion of the same study, Applegate (1969:78) wanted to know if students would be encouraged to verbalize more in a smaller group. Because students expressed concern about the lack of student verbal participation in class size groups of 25-30 students,

they were placed by the teacher in groups of 10 to 15 in an effort to encourage them to participate verbally. Two generalizations were developed after investigation of the student answers to the questionnaire. They were, "Students think more students will participate verbally in a discussion when they are in groups of 15 or fewer students than when in groups of 25-30 students," and "students say they will participate verbally more in a discussion when in groups of 15 or fewer students than when they are in groups of 25-30 students."

It may be inferred that students think they will overcome their primary tension earlier in the smaller group, thus being able to verbalize sooner. They have a better chance at "feeling out" the other students in a smaller group. Thus, the larger group size would perhaps cause more primary tension.

Chapter 4

METHODS OF REDUCING PRIMARY TENSION

Methods of Reducing Primary Tension in Groups

Direct attention. Primary tension may be reduced by paying direct attention to it. The sooner this can be accomplished the sooner the group can get to work on its real task. If tension is ignored it can grow and become a greater burden for the group. A good way to release primary tension is by direct recognition of it. For example, say in a large lecture hall there is a speaker giving a lecture, and suddenly a bird flies in the window and lands on the platform. If the speaker does not deal with the bird, it can be very distracting. The audience will be distracted by the bird if the speaker ignores it. The speaker can meet the problem by recognition of the bird the moment it enters the lecture hall by calling the audiences attention directly and explicitly to it. Discussing the bird should discharge whatever attention the audience may have put on the bird, thus the audience should be able to return to the lecture with little distraction. Likewise, Bormann (1969) expressed, if primary tension is released by paying attention to the distraction directly, the group can go back to work on the topic of discussion. If ignored, it will enlarge and become a greater burden for the group.

Recognition and gratification of social and esteem needs. In small group discussion social relationships develop. These relationships raise questions to each person's basic social and esteem needs and how they relate according to Bormann (1969). A member in a group

will experience primary tension until he begins to see evidence that his social and esteem needs will be gratified. When it becomes apparent to him that the group will accept him as a person, he can then relax and attend to the topic of discussion.

According to Johnson (1963), in group therapy a depressed group member improves from the recognition and ventilation of repressed anger and fear. With this ventilation of anger and fear by improved self-assertion, there is a rise in self-esteem and a lessening of guilt. During group therapy the depressed member improves from the recognition and ventilation of repressed anger and rage. This will tend to reduce the tension level of the group.

Need for warm-up. Bormann (1969) noted that a group will usually experience primary tension at the beginning of each meeting. The members of the group feel they need a period of time to warm-up by having social conversation. Usually these periods of primary tension grow shorter as the participants in the group settle into relatively stable relationships. The group members more or less "test" each other to see if the others will treat them the same as they have in the past. The participants in the group also have to find out if the group expects the same sort of behavior of them that it has in the past. This testing of each other is a way of reducing any primary tension that may exist.

DuBois and Li (1971) said basically the same thing, "that by taking an hour or so at the beginning of a group meeting to exchange memories or experiences of joy or sorrow in a group experience based on spontaneity, a warmth and closeness develop quietly and quickly."

This in essence will help to release primary tension. In small group discussion where there is a face-to-face sharing of both the past and of the present in a spontaneous atmosphere, this will tend to quickly produce rapport and cohesiveness. This kind of vocal sharing helps to tear down the fears and suspicions that separate group members, because our society has taught us to see differences of age, race, ethnicity, creed or class as liabilities. With this initial phase of give-and-take, it helps to build a basis of faith and trust which enables the participants to begin work effectively and with mutual confidence.

Prevention of silence. Primary tension in groups often causes silence among group members in the early stages of group discussion. This can result from the members not knowing how to interact in the group or what is expected of them in the group meeting. This introductory silence can best be offset by having the group leader (assuming there is one) give instructions to what is expected of the group members, and the type of interaction desired. It would also help to know what the goals of the group are. This will help to lower primary tension in the group. In general the best way to reduce tension caused by silence is trying to recognize the cause. It is unwise to allow silence to continue. It is upsetting and anxiety-producing for the group members and serves no useful purpose.

According to Hayakawa (1972), "the prevention of silence is itself an important function of speech, and that is difficult for us in society to talk only when we 'have something to say.'" Rarely in group conversation, especially among friends, are their remarks

important enough to be worth making for informative value. However, it is regarded impolite to remain silent. In such instances as greeting and farewells--"Good day"--"Lovely weather"--"And how are you"--"Hello"--"It was nice to meet you"--it is thought of as a social error not to say these things, even if we do not really mean them or want to say them. There are numerous times each day in which we talk simply because it would be impolite not to. And each group has its own form of this kind of talking--"the art of conversation," "small talk, or "mutual kidding." "The togetherness of the talking, then is the most important element in social conversation; subject matter only secondary," according to Hayakawa (1972). Thus social conversation acts as an eliminator to silence which in turn lowers primary tension.

Malinowski (Duncan, 1962) also agreed with Hayakawa (1972) that the prevention of silence is an important function of speech. Malinowski stated that:

"Speech is the intimate correlate of this tendency, for, to the natural man, another man's silence is not a reassuring factor, but, on the contrary, something alarming and dangerous. The stranger who cannot speak the language is to all savage tribesmen a natural enemy....The breaking of silence, the communion of words is the first act to establishing links of fellowship, which is consummated only by the breaking of bread and the communion of food."

Thus by preventing silence through speech or social conversation, primary tension in the group lessens.

Agreement on subject. Agreement on subject matter is important in the early stages of discussion in alleviating primary tension. Bormann (1969) felt that agreement acts as social reinforcement. Since in the early stage of discussion the kind of talk desired is the

establishment of communion where, "we are careful to select subjects about which agreement is immediately possible," noted both Hayakawa (1972) and Bormann (1969). Such things as agreeing upon how nice the weather is, becomes necessary for proceeding onto higher levels of discussion. "With each new agreement, no matter how commonplace, or how obvious, the fear and suspicion of the stranger wears away and the possibility of friendship enlarges," explained Hayakawa (1972). Thus communication and cooperation may commence, while alleviating any tension.

Taking a break. Taking a break in discussion can help lower primary tension. If discussion is having difficulty getting established because the primary tension level is too high, then create a diversion by permitting a break. Taking a break by having a drink is one of the most accepted ways of creating one of these diversions. This is so typical in today's business world where having a drink (usually spirituous in content) is almost a social standard. This will give participants more time for sufficient social interaction to breakdown some of the tension of the group.

Laughter. Laughter almost always reduces primary tension in discussion. The joke is a very common form of interaction in a group discussion to provoke a laugh. The laugh produces a sudden release of tension according to Bales (1970). This should not be confused with strained laughter mentioned earlier. Many stories and anecdotes are not meant to produce a sudden outburst or laughter, but rather to amuse and entertain, to elicit interest and enjoyment, or to perpetuate a pleasurable state. Expressions of feeling better after a period of tension are often a result of "any manifestations of

cheerfulness, buoyance, satisfaction, gratification, contentment, enjoyment, relish, zest, enthusiasm, pleasure, delight, joy, or happiness; any indication that a member is thrilled elated, emphoric, or the like, may act as a tension releaser," mentioned Bales (1970). These often bring about the feeling of good spirits and lay the groundwork for an equally friendly response.

Laughter seems to achieve a sudden escape from emotional tension. According to Bales (1970), as long as the person contains the emotion and passively "hangs back" from forward movement, he is said to show tension. Laughter is a momentary breaking of the tension state, and if prolonged may help to reduce the general state of tension.

Acceptance and permissiveness. In order to reduce primary tension in small group discussion an atmosphere of acceptance and permissiveness is needed according to Bennett (1963). By acceptance she means that each individual will be accorded respect and a status of belonging to a cohesive group, no matter what his personal characteristics or problems may be at the moment. Permissiveness means freedom to express any ideas, feelings, or attitudes for consideration by the group with awareness that all group members will attempt to comprehend and to continue to accept each other as respected individuals in spite of any disagreement with or disapproval of ideas or behavior.

Open discussion of feelings and attitudes. Luchins (1964), said tension, including primary tension, often arise because the kind of leadership exercised in the group is different from what the group members expect. He says such tensions may be used for group analysis and may serve as stimuli for bringing about changes in attitudes, thus

relieving tension. He feels that these tensions in a group are often due to differences in habits, personal ties, points of view, and prejudice. He says that bringing these feelings out into the open can help the social climate of the group and reduce tension. He feels also that tension can be the life and blood of a dynamic system of communication in groups, if held under control. Therefore, it would seem in order to bring these habits, personalities, points of view, and prejudice out into the open before good group discussion, and discuss these more urgent matters before any indepth discussion can begin on the real topic.

According to Howell and Smith (1956), as people come to understand one another better, "there is a tendency for them to build closer, warmer relationships with one another; a tendency for suspicions and antagonisms to be abated, and for feelings of mutual confidence and respect to grow." It is their feeling that development of understanding is a basis for improved human relationships. Freedom to express both positive and negative feelings is based upon mutual respect the members develop for each other. This building of warmer closer relationships will tend to lower primary tension.

Howell and Smith (1956) also felt that some adults practice concealment of their real attitudes, motives, and feelings in their conversation with other adults. That some people have undergone bad experiences concerning their real attitudes or feelings that have resulted in some punishing consequence. According to Howell and Smith (1956):

"unfortunately, in many people, these habits have

become so extensive, so deep-seated, so generally practiced, that these persons lose the capacity to be open, or honest, or spontaneous in any communication situation. This loss of spontaneity or openness is one of the real barriers of 'breaking the ice'."

This is often a cause of primary tension.

The problem of concealment is a personal problem, for each person participating in discussion. Howell and Smith (1956) said the "discussant who consciously seeks more open communication of his own motives, attitudes, and feelings is likely to experience almost immediate reward for such action in terms of improved interpersonal relations." This in turn helps reduce primary tension in groups caused by concealment.

One of the good aspects of the problem of concealment is that any one participant of a discussion group may initiate action toward more open, spontaneous communication without waiting for a commitment from his fellow group members. Initiative in this area may evoke a similar response. "Persons most fearful of revealing themselves are sometimes stimulated by the warmth with which they will ordinarily respond to an open attitude on the part of a fellow group member, and thus encouraged, they may join this new action pattern," noted Howell and Smith (1956).

Common ground. The establishment of a common ground among group participants given them a social identity, which relaxes social tensions. Group members are attracted to others who are in several ways similar to themselves in interests, beliefs, activity, preferences, and language patterns. Securing the individual self as a stable, valued,

and important member of the group is one of the social groups' functions. "Quick acceptance is made possible by a common something to talk about," expressed Ingrahm. The sense of common ground or community depends on a body of common interests which may include music, automobiles or as what Ingrahm talks about is the drug culture. This is where a sense of identity is found, where old stories are retold as well as experiences of where and how to "score". The sense of community--"of we-ness"--is further enhanced by the sharing of a special language to distinguish the "in-group" from the "out-group". There seems to be a common acceptance of group members with similar interests, activities, and language, as well as those who even think the same way about many different things says Ingrahm. All this commonality which seems attractive in the social network of the group process, seems to relax tension and give the participants more of a sense of identity.

Social pressure. Limit the use of social pressure in the early stages of group discussion. This will help to ease any social tensions that may exist. Group standards or norms are often thought of as a uniform set of directions explained Israel (1956). These group standards are induced upon the forces which act on the members of the group. These forces are called social pressures. They are a very subtle and difficult to localize. As the group becomes more cohesive, then these social pressures can be accepted easier. But sometimes in the early stages of the group process, it is best not to have too many social pressures. Minimization of social pressures in the initial stage of the group discussion will tend to curtail primary tension that could result.

Protecting the unorthodox opinion. Howell and Smith (1956)

stated, "most persons are motivated strongly toward conformity, and in any discussion situation the greatest threat to open communication rests in the conscious or unconscious arrogance assumed by minority opinion toward the unorthodox or minority viewpoint." In effective group discussion it is the responsibility on the part of each group member to see to it that the participants are open and honest and are not punished for their contributions. This will help reduce any primary or secondary tension that might exist.

Discussion involving undue criticism of opinion, evidence, and/or reasoning destroys the intellectual purpose to be served by discussion. "Discussants must have freedom to be open in expression of opinion or feelings, and that this openness is possible only in an atmosphere in which the unorthodox or minority viewpoint is protected rather than punished," expressed Howell and Smith (1956). Criticism can be in itself very punishing if not done constructively. The intellectual rigor of a good discussion may in itself be injurious to openness on the part of the less intellectually secure members of the group.

Ice breakers. Ice breakers are often used in group situations to get things going at a faster rate than usual. Often in meetings where large groups are broken down into several smaller interaction groups, ice breakers are often used to get dialogue progressing. Ice breakers are little situational group projects that have a pleasant way of getting the participants to interact with each other. An example would be telling each member in the group what kind of animal they remind one another of. These are relatively easy, simple, and safe methods to

get the members of the group acquainted with one another. They act as a kind of a melting device to reduce any apprehension or tension the group members may have for one another.

Social conversation. Social conversation acts as a reducing agent to primary social tension in group discussion. At the beginning of group discussion often social conversation takes place. Members in the group may flit from topic to topic, so long as the subject is approved by those members discussing it. If the topic is not approved, the subject matter may change quickly or the response of silence may be given to the unapproved topic. It seems not too important what is being discussed during group social conversation, but rather what is not being discussed. This group social conversation tends to establish acquaintanceships, which help to relax primary tension.

Phillips (1970) noted that, "social conversation is often employed for 'testing' purposes to determine how deep a relationship might become with people that we don't know very well." If the conversation gets too deep at the beginning, primary tension raises toward too high a level. For that reason social conversation remains on a relatively superficial level, and avoids controversial subjects until it is indicated that the relationship is strong enough to hold them, when the primary tension is at a lower ebb. There must be ample opportunity given for the members of the group to "test each other out, to estimate reactions, and to familiarize themselves with the communication styles of other people. In this sense, informal, nonpurposive conversation becomes part of all small group discussion," as Phillips (1970) put it. This process helps to lower primary tension.

Phatic communion or social conversation is important for the reduction of primary tension in groups. In group discussion it is not always true that the dialogue depends upon what is happening at the moment. The true meaning of what is spoken cannot always be connected with the behavior of the group participants. When phatic communion exists in the early stages of discussion, often there seems to be no purpose to what the group members are saying or doing. Thus the context of the situation seems to be nothing but the words themselves. Malinowski (Duncan, 1962) said inquiries about health, remarks on the weather, and hearty agreement with what has just been said, are communications made neither to inform, nor to connect the participants to any kind of action, nor to express any kind of thought. Inquiries by group members about how a participant really feels, do not really signify the group members are interested in the participant's state of health. So the participant usually carefully refrains from exposing too much about his real state of health. These seemingly purposeless moments of idle chatter and sociability serve a definite function, if the group members "read" between the lines of the conversation. This tendency to congregate, to be together, and to enjoy the company of other men establishes ties of purely social communion and function to release any tension that may exist. Thus this phatic communion or social conversation tends to tie the group participants into a pleasant atmosphere of polite, social intercourse to release primary tension.

Primary tension accounts for the almost universal phenomenon of small talk, chat, phatic communion, or social conversation first, then business later. Social conversation can be used to warm-up group

discussion in an effective, efficient, easy natural manner, when the primary tension level is too high. Here the object of conversation is not to obtain some practical aim, but simply to exchange words as an end in itself. Malinowski (Duncan, 1962) agreed with this when he stated "the referential function of a narrative is subordinate to its social and emotional function." Social conversation can be best described as an adult "social pacifier". This is why so many business meetings, interviews, conferences, luncheons, use it so often to get things started. If it did not achieve effective results, then it would probably be eliminated from today's fast pace of modern living.

A Further Thought

Group social conversation can also be called a form of social-emotional discourse. Social-emotional discourse is also necessary for easy group discussion. In some cases, the sensitivity of an issue or the people involved often make it necessary to make discussion in semiformal or informal surroundings such as at a luncheon or dinner. Many business luncheons and interviews use this kind of dual activity in informal surroundings. Here the level of primary tension may attain a high level rather suddenly but may return to a safe level rather quickly and easily perhaps by having a drink or by attending to some other social function. This combination of purely social-emotional functions with getting acquainted provides for more options to the participants. If business seems to get too sticky it is possible to reduce interpersonal tensions by paying attention to social interaction (a primary tension relaxer) returning to business discussion when the time

seems more appropriate. These social-emotional exchanges permit the group members to interact equitably, where it is much easier to relax primary tensions. It is often better to know a little more about the person whom you will be in discussion with, than to know relatively little about him. As Gordon Allport of Harvard once put it, "until we get this acceptance of others in our very muscles, glands, and bones, we do not have it."

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

Summing Up

The focus of this report is upon primary tension and its relationship to small group discussion. The inability of groups to conquer this tension looms as one of the major problems in the group process. It disables the effective, efficient, and forward progress of the group to a point where it cannot achieve a high level of discussion. It inhibits the free flow of communication in the group, so the exchange of ideas, thoughts, and feelings cannot occur. Free uninhibited communication is an important aspect to the extended life of the group, as it effects the decision-making and problem-solving process. The effectiveness of a group as a whole, being greater than the sum of its parts, is related to the level of participation of its members in generating this quality.

Primary tension has several characteristics, all of which are a benefit in aiding awareness and identification of the existence of the problem. These signs are sometimes confusing and may be easily misinterpreted if their underlying meanings are not properly understood.

Primary tension seems to be most apparent during the opening minutes of discussion, when all the members are just becoming acquainted. There are many physical symptoms of this tension in both the verbal and nonverbal forms. These include laughter, sensitivity of other group members, loss of group effectiveness, and disinterest. Social

conversation is a by-product of primary tension.

Awareness of the reasons for primary tension is important in this report. Knowledge of not only what the effects of tensions are, but more important, what some of its causes are. Knowing these causes will help attain a better understanding and help attain better possible methods of solution to the problem. Some of these include defense mechanisms, memories of unpleasant past experiences, environment of strangers, laughter, prejudice, fear of the authority person or of the unknown, and not being able to express oneself. All of these are results of primary tension. Size of the group in terms of numbers also effects its progress.

There are many methods of relaxing primary tension in small group discussion with the aid of feedback. This is best accomplished with some understanding of the group process and its effects upon small group discussion. By reducing some of the concerns (primary tension) of the participants effective, efficient, and forward progressive group discussion may occur. These methods, which initiate good group interaction, include those of direct attention, gratification of social and esteem needs, warming up, prevention of silence, agreement on subject matter, taking a break, social pressure, common ground, laughter, acceptance and permissiveness, ice breakers, open discussion of feelings and attitudes, and protecting the unorthodox opinion. All these aid to lower primary tension to a safe comfortable level, so effective group interaction may proceed.

A Final Word

Social conversation is also necessary in reducing primary tension. It accounts for the almost universal phenomenon of the need for small talk, chat, phatic communion, or social conversation, first, followed by business later. This is very much characteristic of business meetings, interviews, and conferences in today's modern society.

Social conversation or phatic communion when used prior to the main problem or topic, is time well spent. Its influence is felt in all other steps of the total group process; thus both time and energy can be saved. Group social conversation may move into group discussion as soon as the primary tension, which social conversation releases, is lowered to a tolerable level. If social conversation did not achieve such effective results, it would probably be eliminated from almost all aspects of today's fast pace of modern living.

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SOME CHARACTERISTICS, CAUSES AND
METHODS OF REDUCING PRIMARY TENSION
IN SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

by

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

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The focus of this report is upon primary tension in small groups and its relation to effective discussion. Primary tension may best be described as the social unease and stiffness that accompanies becoming acquainted. The inability to overcome this problem of primary tension disables the effectiveness and efficiency of the groups progress to a point where it cannot achieve a high level of discussion. Its inhibition to the free flow of high level communication and by stifling it is also examined.

Primary tension has several characteristics, all of which are a great help in becoming aware and identifying the problem. These signs are sometimes confusing and may be easily misinterpreted, if their underlying meanings are not properly understood. Its prevalences during the earliest stages of group discussion are mentioned.

Awareness of some of the reasons for primary tension are discussed. Knowing not only what the effects are of the tension, but more important knowing what are some of the causes of the tension, are explored in the report. A knowledge of these causes helps achieve a better understanding to the situation and helps with possible solutions to the problem. Also the effects of the group size upon the group are discussed.

Some methods of relaxing or reducing primary tensions in groups are explored. This includes some knowledge of the group process and what effects it has upon small group discussion. Upon relaxing or lowering some of the concerns of the small group, effective progressive,

efficient discussion may occur. Some of the social and esteem needs of the participants are also related, along with group silence prevention, laughter, taking a break, as well as methods of initiating and reinforcing group interaction.

The importance of social conversation in relieving primary tension in small groups is also explored, and how it acts as a "social pacifier" in the early stages of the group process. Its reasons for being one of the major characteristics in alleviating tension in groups, whether they be social, educational, occupational, or whatever is discussed. The final thought supports the statement that social conversation is necessary in reducing primary tension in groups and that it enhances the group to achieve its higher level functions.