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IDENTIFICATION OF UNINTENDED EFFECTS IN EXPERIENTIAL LABORATORY EXERCISES

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INTRODUCTION

One of the *significant* goals of experiential exercises is to allow participants to have past statements of how they would behave in certain circumstances to the behavior itself when placed in situations which simulate those circumstances. More academicians using experiential material and working in behavioral laboratories are producing research articles. This increasing stream of research attempts to use many aspects of traditional models of research.

Some Unintended Effects of Traditional! Experimental Research

A variety of unintended effects arising from the temporary systems created by research have been identified by Argyris (1964). Briefly, these are:

1. Physical withdrawal which results in absenteeism and turnover.
2. Psychological withdrawal while retaining physically in the research situation. (Under these conditions the subject is willing to let the researcher manipulate his behavior, usually for a price.)
3. Overt hostility toward the research. (Openly fighting the research rarely occurs because the subjects are 'volunteers' and feel some pressure to participate.)
4. Covert hostility as a safer adaptive mechanism. This includes such behavior as knowingly giving incorrect answers, being a difficult subject, second-guessing the research design and trying to circumvent it in some fashion, producing the minimally accepted amount of behavior, coercing others to produce minimally, and disbelief and mistrust of the researcher.
5. Emphasis on monetary rewards as the reason for participating.
6. "Unionization" of the subjects.

Some question whether strong feelings would come out in experiments (or exercises) because the time frame of the task is short and the participants are aware of the temporary nature of the event. However, emotional involvement is not a function of time-exposure but of values already possessed and the intensity of the tasks undertaken. As we believe when we undertake such work - - the experiment and/or exercise is intended to be involving. Indeed, generalizability of results is dependent on 'genuine' participation (Berkowitz and Donnerstein, 1982). Sales (1966) points out the brevity argument is not valid . . . the entire science of experimental social psychology rests upon the assumption that experimental periods are sufficiently lengthy for treatments to "take", an assumption which is supported in every significant finding obtained in the experimental laboratory" (p. 281).

Unintended Effects In Experimental Exercises

Little systematic research exists regarding strategies used by participants, although anecdotal evidence is commonplace when researchers discuss their work!

Several unintended effects can be cited based on discussions with colleagues. These associates are, for the most part, members of the Association for Business Simulation and Experiential Learning (ABSEL). Some of the following reactions may be unintended, but completely unanticipated. Some participants work hard at:

1. Second-guessing the instructor and trying to beat him/her at his/her own game.
2. Participants come to the sessions expecting to be deceived. The challenge for them is to guess what the deception is.
3. Participants (especially those who do not like or respect the instructor) may derail the exercise so skillfully that the instructor may be unaware of the maneuver.
4. Some participants, while appearing alert and interested, are apathetic and indifferent about the results. They simply complete the process as a bothersome "requirement."
5. A few participants start the project/exercise in good faith, but at some point in the process they emotionally disengage. Sometimes this occurs for an ethical or some value-loaded reason. When the latter situation prevails, the change appears to be abrupt and may be articulated by the participant at: the end of the exercise.
6. If participation takes place in small groups, it is quite easy for uninvolved people to "float" on the efforts of others in the group. It is very unlikely that the "floater" will be the spokesperson for the group.
7. This writer has noted (1979) that debriefing is often incomplete, hurried, and poorly designed. Much of this result takes place because the instructor is very aware of what has happened in the past and what was supposed to happen in the present exercise. The participants are much less sophisticated about the event, which has just taken place; therefore, they are likely to miss subtle issues and implications.

Remedies For Some Identified Unintended Effects

If the unintended consequences of rigorous research rests in the degree of control the leader has over the participants (subject), and his/her resultant dependence, submissiveness, and short time perspective, --then theoretically it would be wise to reduce the leader's control over the participants. It would also be helpful to give the participants greater influence and encourage a longer time perspective. One of the goals of the experiential laboratory approach is to generate personal commitment on the part of the participants.

Subjects and participants are much more motivated to sincerely involve themselves in the project at hand when they believe it is in their interest to do so. Projects and exercises should, therefore, be designed so that the subjects/participants can gain something beyond simple feedback. This is their plea for relevant experience and useful results.

Reference list available on request.