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SELF-VIEW AND NORMS; SOME LONGITUDINAL LABORATORY RESULTS

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ABSTRACT

Responses of various samples responding to a 15-item survey about personal characteristics are remarkably stable over time. Samples of 21 and 100 undergraduate students, 20 management professors may be compared with an eight year cumulated sample of 455 undergraduates. Respondents appear to be conforming to norms set by our society and by what is expected from a person included in "business administration." The concern may be what is useful or functional, rather than what is "normal."

INTRODUCTION

The pathway has been long in terms of the calendar, but short in terms of perceived time -- and always interesting. In this conceptual article, the author has realized that the norms of our culture and our occupations play a powerful role in shaping group perceptions. The expected behavior and beliefs formed by well-known norms (such as being well-organized) appear to be consistently perceived by business-oriented people as being true for them.[3] Thus, whether true in fact or not, we operate based on those "personalized facts."

The admonition to "know thyself" has existed for a very long time, and yet most findings reveal that the majority of people are poor self-evaluators.[4] A person of relatively high status may decline to admit a weakness for fear that discovery or change will undermine his position. His role requires matching the norm of being "right" and he works hard at fulfilling this role. A person of relatively low status -- or one who is considered an "unsuccessful person" may be threatened still more by a fuller realization of his/her inadequacies. 181 T-Group participants face the risk of ego-injury by the very nature of this method of inter-personal confrontation. One should also note that the "successful person" may feel so secure that further changes and development are not a threat but may be viewed as unneeded, or -- on the other hand -- as a challenge.[6] Most would view the second attitude as healthier for the individual. Thus, there are many sides to the issue of individual growth and change.

HOW MUCH CHANGE?

How much behavioral change is needed -- or can be effectively used by adequately functioning people? Fortunately, most adults are not in mental or correctional institutions. Even most persons who are sufficiently troubled so that they see a psychiatrist are given the assurance that they need not undergo a drastic change. Instead, one or a few aspects of attitude and behavior are identified as needing some change for better human functioning. Thus, adults in the mains have been moderately successful in family life, at their occupations, and in community affairs -- and some have been remarkably successful. We live in a society which tolerates (and hopefully encourages) Individuality, and therefore we should expect to see a rather wide range of human behavior.[2]

Not only is moderate change usually needed, but generally not very much at a time is possible, although each person's need and capacity to change is unique. Psychologists realize that adults are not entirely rigid, but they are rather firmly put together. Often we hear that such a person has a "well-integrated" personality, and this is viewed as a positive comment. Terms such as "rigid," "defensive," "unyielding" are viewed as negative comments. The selection of the terms used may well be a function of the observer's norms rather than the performer's action. The "observer" may be a society (or a segment of one) rather than an individual judge (supervisor, etc.). Of course, one must recognize that each person is a unique "experience package" which has been accumulated incrementally over a period of time. Behavior change should, therefore, be expected to occur in an incremental way.

FROM TRAITS TO PERFORMANCE

In recent years, attention has shifted from traits (characteristics) of successful leaders or managers, to the roles and performance of those persons. Many view this as a very healthy change. Even more recently, increasing attention is being given to the creative efforts and variety of contributions that individuals can make to a group effort.[5]

Change agents working within an organization are often (understandably) disappointed at the slow, behavioral changes which, apparently, are taking place. Such professionals working for individual and organizational development are very cognizant of the targets of such change efforts. However, the members of the organization are usually quite unaware of the new, or modified, behavior goals envisioned by the change agent. This unawareness coupled with the incremental capacity for significant behavior, cited in the paragraph above, produce high frustration potential in this whole arena of behavioral change in the adult.

THE SELF-VIEW EXERCISE

In the interest of discovering what groups of people think of themselves, the author constructed a set of fifteen questions dealing with personal behavior. The questions, rating scale, and instructions appear as Appendix I following the text of this conceptual piece. All participants were told that individual profiles were to remain each person's own possession. Any comment about their own responses would be their own decision. The moderator (instructor) would receive only tally sheets, without names, which would show the ratings given by various individuals. Thus, the moderator's function would be to construct a profile, against which the individual could compare his/her own profile.
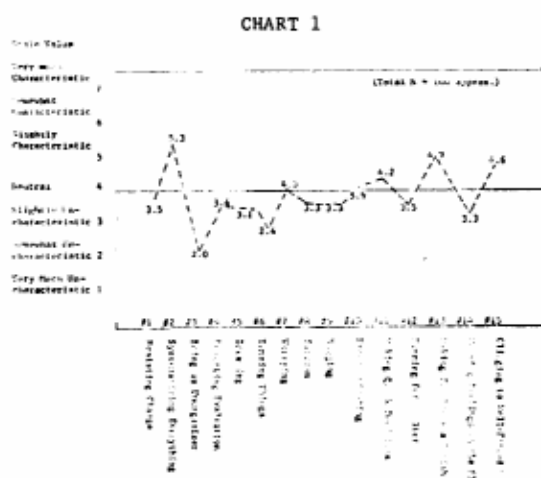
Some profiles in diagrammatic form appear below. The data represents response by undergraduate students, largely male, with a median age of 23, taking
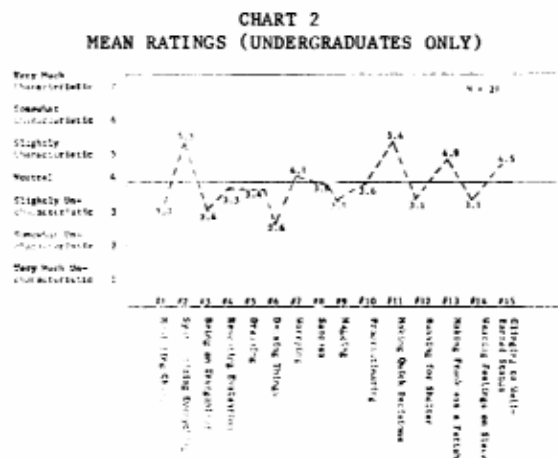
a senior-level Management course in the College of Business of a large Southern University. The median age is slightly higher than one might expect due to mature students enrolled in evening sections.

A comment about the design of the questionnaire items is in order. (See the Appendix I for the 15-item questionnaire.) Some of the items contain ideas that appear to go in more than one direction. Item 13 is a good example: being honest with others is considered good behavior, but causing others pain by being bluntly truthful is not so good. This item, plus several others, are intended to simulate the difficult "grey area decision-making" facing adults. As our world becomes more complicated, as our options increase, and our available information enlarges clear and easy decisions become memories of past childhood days. However, even with this intended ambiguity built into some of these items the group data generated seems to be remarkably stable.

The first chart (N100) was accumulated over a two-year period of time (1984-85). The values shown are arithmetic means for the total group.

CHART 1

In an effort to further study the stability of responses from Chart 2, one can compare these responses with the data collected over an eight-year period. This accumulated data represents 25 undergraduate classes numbering 455 students, and is shown in Appendix II.

Once again, we find that the pattern of responses is remarkable similar to Chart 1 and Chart 2. One may begin to wonder if there are forces other than the traditional authority and rule orientation of our educational system that are at work in producing such consistent responses?[3] There may be norms which persist in professions or occupations which - to those occupants - appear to be the proper responses. This paper does not answer the issue but it raises that question as a research issue.

A third question arises quite logically; do more mature individuals demonstrate the same, or similar group profile? The author secured the cooperation of twenty management professors in August, 1985 in responding to the same 15 questions. Chart 3, below, shows the results. The time of the event and the size of the groups shown in Charts 2 and 3 are almost identical.
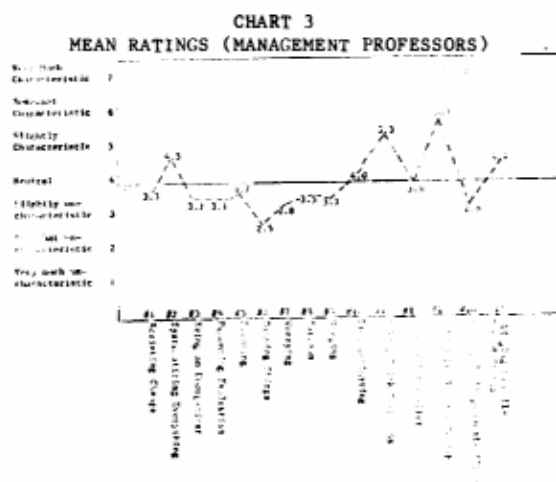

CHART 3
MEAN RATINGS (MANAGEMENT PROFESSORS)

Since the responses were accumulated over a time period, one might raise the question of the influence of the passage of time and events within that period. To satisfy that question we can observe the profile of a small group of 21 undergraduates from a daytime class in the Fall, 1985. See Chart 2, below. The larger accumulated sample has a smoothing effect on the group profile, but the general flow of the pattern appears quite similar.

CHART 2
MEAN RATINGS (UNDERGRADUATES ONLY)

The professors (estimated average age of about 42) appear to be more conservative than the undergraduates for the first seven items; their responses hover around the neutral value of four more closely than the younger participants. These differences may or may not be significant in a statistical sense-- the important thing in the author's mind is the reflection of the concept of self and the stability of the data in these diagrams. Thus, this brief paper should be considered a conceptual observation of responses rather than an empirical survey.

Responses, although it is true that different people are involved, do not appear to vary a great deal over time. This seems to be the case when accumulating responses from about the same age group over a two-year period. Likewise, when comparing responses from undergraduates and professors (the later almost twice the average age of the former) --there does not seem to be great differences.

Some other tentative conclusions, this author has reached are:

    1. People are quite cautious (and uncomfort

able) about making judgments about themselves.

2. The conservative nature of typical responses may reflect values that are attached to an occupation such as "business administration."

3. Participants are quite conservative even when the general tone of the item was flattering to the self-images (considering the usual U.S. cultural definition.)

In summary, perhaps it is the issue of "Does your self-image seem to work well for you?" -- and not does some judge (society, etc.) consider your behavior pattern to be "normal." The term "normal" may indeed be becoming a useless word in our working vocabulary. To look at functional value, instead of matching (or trying to match) behavior with someone else's definition of normal seems a more realistic approach. What do others think about all this? Are people handling change in their environments fairly well? What about change in our own inner spaces --our minds and emotions -- are we moving healthward or toward disequilibrium? If healthy balance means responding -- and hopefully believing -- that one is meeting the expectations of his/her culture and subculture, then this preliminary data shows a healthy pattern.[1] It is also fascinating to consider the apparently powerful and persistent impact of our cultural and occupational norms on our self-view.

APPENDIX I
A SELF-PERCEPTION EXERCISE

Instructions: Each paragraph below gives a description of personal characteristics which might or might not be true of you. For each statement try to determine the degree to which the statement is typical of you. Try to be as objective as you can. Rate each statement according to the following scale:

7   The statement is very much characteristic of me.

6   The statement is somewhat characteristic of me.

5   The statement is slightly characteristic of me.

4   The statement is neither characteristic not uncharacteristic of me.

3   The statement is slightly uncharacteristic of me.

2   The statement is somewhat uncharacteristic of me.

1   The statement is very much uncharacteristic of me.

1. I resent suggestions, hold to my present ways and tend to resist pressure to change.

2. 1 am orderly, and tend to systematize things and people.

3. 1 am disorganized, and live in a state of "clutter."

4. 1 do each days work well but resist and resent evaluation. I am inclined to get involved in busy work and avoid tasks which call for a lot of future planning and preparation.

5. 1 tend to do a lot of dreaming, and have been sometimes referred to as an "idea" man but accused of having lost a sense of proportion of perspective.

6. I spend much of my time and energy in criticizing political parties, school, work, other people and so on.

7. 1 am a "worrier." Often I worry about things that have not happened or about things that are already over.

8. 1 am sarcastic, sometimes towards others in my presence and sometimes toward others who are not present.

9. 1 am likely to "nag" if things aren't going well.

10. 1 am a procrastinator, putting off decisions until I have sought out and questioned others; often it is then too late to take the best action.

11. 1 am what people could call "decisive." I am efficient, size things up quickly and act so as to get results right away.

12. 1 avoid becoming entangled in other people's emotional problems and usually find some excuse to get away from people who are about to "unload" on me.

13. 1 consider myself an honest person. I am often quite frank even if the truth is painful to others.

14. 1 am quite sensitive and often take things said very personally. I am likely to "fly off the handle" with little provocation.

15. 1 find it very difficult to "step down in responsibility" to make room for others. Once 1 have gained a position with status I find it difficult to give it up.

Self Perception Rating Tally

Instructions: After completing the questionnaire copy your ratings of each statement below. Keep the original questionnaire and turn in this unsigned to the instructor.

1.   4.

2.   5.

3.   6.

7.   12.

8.   13.

9.   14.

10.   15.

11.

APPENDIX II

An analysis of 25 separate response sheets representing different classes was completed in December, 1978. This study used classes taking the undergraduate course in Managerial Behavior and included section sizes, ranging from 13 to 27 (with one group of 34). Both day and night sections were included, and the total number of students involved were 455 over the period, January 1970 through November, 1978.

Sample means were calculated for each of the 15 items on the survey and the standard deviations were also calculated for each item. With the general assumption that participants' responses are approximating a normal distribution a curve for each item can be created. It should be noted that the actual shapes of these distribution curves differ since the response patterns to the items themselves differ.

Probability statistics for dispersion from the mean (either X or U) are as follows:

Range	Percentage of Data Variation Accounted for
U + .67 std. dev.	50%
U + 1 std. dev.	68%
U + 2 std. dev.	95%
U + 3 std. dev.	99.7%

The possible range of responses for the Self-Perception questionnaire was 7 (very characteristic) to 1 (very uncharacteristic) with 4 being a neutral or "not applicable" response.

The Individual Items

1. Resisting Change

   U = 3.11   std. dev. = .46
   Thus: 3.11 + .46 = 86%
          3.11 + .92 = 95%
          3.11 + 1.38 + 99.7%

2. Systematizing Things

   U = 5.25   std. dev. = .368
   Thus: 5.25 + .368 = 68%

          5.25 + .736 = 95%
          5.25 + 1.1 = 99.7%

3. Being an Unorganizer

   U = 2.2   std. dev. = 426
   Thus: 2.2 + .426 = 68%
          2.2 + .852 = 95%
          2.2 + 1.28 = 99.7%

4. Resisting Evaluation

   U = 3.22   std. dev. = .422
   Thus: 3.22 + .422 = 68%
          3.22 + .844 = 95%
          3.22 + 1.27 = 99.7%

5. Daydreaming

   U = 3.27   std. dev. = .318
   Thus: 3.27 + .318 = 68%
          3.27 + .64 = 95%
          3.27 + .96 = 99.7%

6. Being Critical

   U = 2.66   std. dev. = .41
   Thus: 2.66 + .41 = 68%
          2.66 + .82 = 95%
          2.66 + 1.23 = 99.7%

7. Worrying

   U = 4.27   std. dev. = .53
   Thus: 4.27 + .53 = 68%
          4.27 + 1.06 = 95%
          4.27 + 1.59 = 99.7%

8. Being Sarcastic

   U = 3.61   std. dev. = .42
   Thus: 3.61 + .42 = 68%
          3.61 + .84 = 95%
          3.61 + 1.26 = 99.7%

9. Nagging

   U = 3.43   std. dev. = .53
   Thus: 3.43 + .53 = 68%

          3.43 + 1.06 = 95%
          3.43 + 1.59 = 99.7%

10. Procrastination

    U = 3.72   std. dev. = .55
    Thus: 3.72 + .55 = 68%
           3.72 + 1.10 = 95%
           3.72 + 1.65 = 99.7%

11. Decisive

    U = 4.65   std. dev. = .5
    Thus: 4.65 + .5 = 68%
           4.65 + 1.0 = 95%
           4.65 + 1.5 = 99.7%

12. Avoid being involved in the emotional problems of others.

    U = 3.12   std. dev. = .59
    Thus: 3.12 + .59 = 68%
           3.12 + 1.18 = 95%
           3.12 + 1.77 = 99.7%

13. Being Frank

    U = 5.1   std. dev. = .44
    Thus: 5.1 + .44 = 68%
           5.1 + .88 = 95%
           5.1 + 1.32 = 99.7%

14. Being Sensitive

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U = 3.55                std. dev. = .51
Thus:  3.55 + .51 = 68%
       3.55 + 1.02 = 95%
       3.55 + 1.53 = 99.7%
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15. Clinging to Status

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U = 4.59                std. dev. = .46
Thus:  4.59 + .46 = 68%
       4.59 + .92 = 95%
       4.59 + 1.38 = 99.7%
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