

HOMANS' THEORY OF THE HUMAN GROUP: APPLICATIONS TO PROBLEMS OF ADMINISTRATION, POLICY, AND STAFF TRAINING IN GROUP SERVICE AGENCIES *

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Introduction

THESE is one major proposition underlying this paper: that theory to guide social work practice will develop more rapidly and productively by building on theoretical efforts going forward in the underlying sciences of human behavior, rather than by formulating theory primarily on the basis of observation and analysis of practice. We will attempt to illustrate this proposition, leaving to the reader the evaluation of its validity.

First we will set forth, in summary form, a general theoretical model for viewing and analyzing groups, namely that proposed by George C. Homans over a decade ago and presented in his book, *The Human Group*.¹ Sec-

only, we will present three cases which illustrate the application of Homans' theoretical scheme to work-a-day problems in group work agencies. And finally, we will suggest some general conclusions about the applicability of Homans' theory to practice, policy, and administrative problems in group work agencies.

It is interesting to note that Homans' theoretical contribution in *The Human Group* has been largely ignored in the group work literature. To cite a single bit of evidence, the paper presented by Dr. Edgar F. Borgatta at the National Conference on Social Welfare in 1957, entitled "What Social Science Says About Groups," which includes fifty-seven footnote citations, makes no reference to Homans.² Yet as informed

* This paper was originally presented at the Annual Forum of the National Conference on Social Welfare, Cleveland, Ohio, May, 1963.

¹ George C. Homans, *The Human Group*.

New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950.

² Edgar F. Borgatta, "What Social Science

a critic of theory building in sociology as Robert K. Merton writes of Homans' contribution: "I should like to express this considered judgment: not since Simmel's pioneering analyses of almost half a century ago has any single work contributed so much to a sociological theory of the structure, processes, and functions of small groups as George Homans' *The Human Group*."³ Perhaps we have here an instance of the lag between basic and applied scientific effort, a lag which is appropriate to some extent but hardly to the extent of thirteen years.

The following will summarize the major concepts which are to be used in the case analyses that will be presented, cases, you will discover, that

Says About Groups," *The Social Welfare Forum*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1957, pp. 212-35.

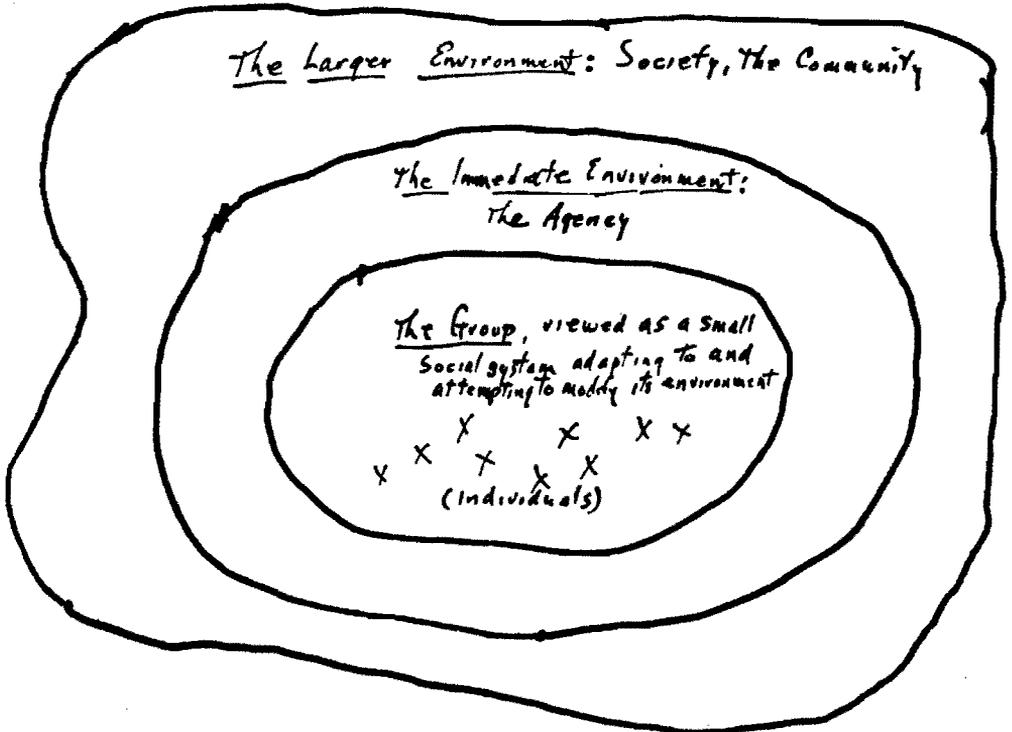
³ Homans, *op. cit.*, p. xxiii.

are very different. One analyzes a training program for camp counselors, a second analyzes the behavior and relationships of the clerical staff in a group work agency, and the third analyzes the problem of professional vs. volunteer staffing of groups in a community center. To facilitate this task, a series of charts will provide supplementation to the verbal exposition.

The Group Viewed as a Social System

In Chart A the object of analysis on which our attention will focus is shown: the group. Groups have many aspects, as had the elephant which the blind men tried to describe by feeling various parts of its anatomy. We need to have some criteria for deciding what aspects of the group we will consider. Homans addresses himself to this problem by selecting a particular type of group—the primary group in

CHART A. The Primary Group as a System Adapting to and Modifying Its Environment.



which everyone knows everyone else on a face-to-face basis—and treating it as a small social system which has parts that are interrelated and that exhibit mutual dependence. Systems, he further notes, have boundaries, and are located in some environment. The central problem of the social theorist is the relationship between a system and its environment, and between the units within the system. These matters are dealt with in the subsequent charts.

Before going on, however, let us be explicit about the license we are taking in our role as theorists. We are abstracting certain aspects of living, breathing groups and trying to account for group behavior by referring only to these aspects. As practitioners, most of us resist putting such blinders on ourselves. We like our gaze to rove over everything we can possibly see and try to include all of this in our diagnoses and prescriptions. Not so the theorist. He long ago accepted as a fact of life that he cannot see things in all their fullness and uniqueness and at the same time discover the features they have in common with one another. To paraphrase a definition of the task of the statistician, the task of the theorist is that of throwing away information systematically. The theorist says what he will choose to look at, sets up rules to guide his observations, and then looks for regularity and relationship in his highly simplified perception of the real world. It is an odd procedure, but it has been the basis, of course, for man's mastery of the laws of the physical universe, and we cannot escape the same procedure in seeking uniformity and predictability in the social universe.

Returning to Chart A, we note that surrounding the group is its immediate environment, and beyond that is the larger environment represented by the community and society. The *environment* is the fundamental determinant

of the *emergence* and survival of the group.

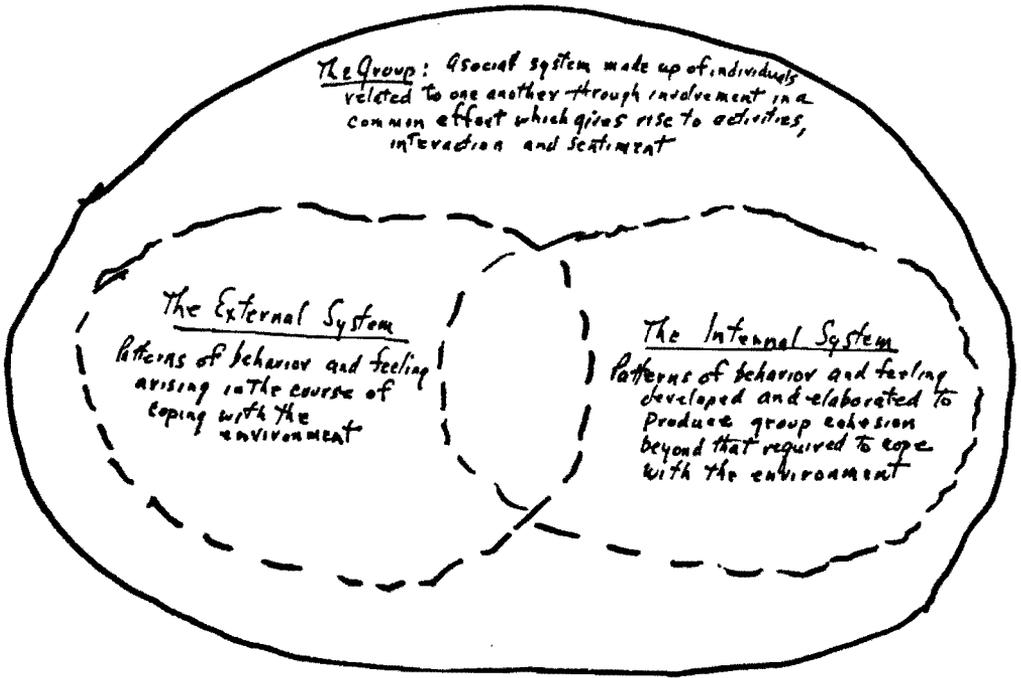
The Elements in the System: Activity, Interaction, Sentiment

Going on to Chart B we should note, first, the elements Homans uses as the foundation of his scheme: activities, interaction, and sentiment. *Activities* are what people do, the jobs they have in a group. Activities precipitate *interaction*, that is, the activity of one man sets off action in some other, and this in turn affects the original actor or some other actor. This is what Homans means by interaction. Finally, interaction generates *sentiment*. Sentiment, in Homans' lexicon, includes motivation, motivation to participate in a group enterprise. Men may get this motivation from any number of places, but such motivation has the characteristic of being social: it arises out of man's involvement with other men. One remarkable feature of human interaction is that very frequently it breeds positive sentiment: the more people do together, the more they are drawn together. Take away interaction between people and sentiment will decline.

The Two Patterns: The External and Internal Systems

Now we come to perhaps the most troublesome aspect of Homans' scheme, the differentiation he makes between the *external system* and the *internal system* of the *social system*, which is indicated in Chart B. There are too many systems here. The problem is largely semantic, we believe. For the term, "external system," substitute the words "pattern of activity, interaction and sentiment arising in a group in the course of coping with its environment." In other words, there is a pattern of relationship among group members which serves *primarily to forward the*

CHART B. Anatomy of the Group: The External and the Internal Systems.



task performance of the group in response to environmental demands.

For the term, "internal system," substitute "patterns of activity, interaction, and sentiment developed and elaborated to produce cohesion in the group beyond that required to cope with the environment." There is, in other words, a pattern of relationship among group members which is an expression of the sentiments toward one another developed in the course of their lives together. Turning to Chart C we note that the organizing focus in the external system or pattern is activity and interaction related to task performance. The organizing focus in the internal system or pattern, we note in Chart D, is sentiment, which gives rise to activity and interaction undertaken, so to speak, for fun. A by-product of this internal system or pattern is enhanced group cohesion which can contribute to the task performance function of the group, or conceivably run counter to it. Surplus group competency develops, in other

words, which gives the group the potential not only of adapting to but modifying environment.

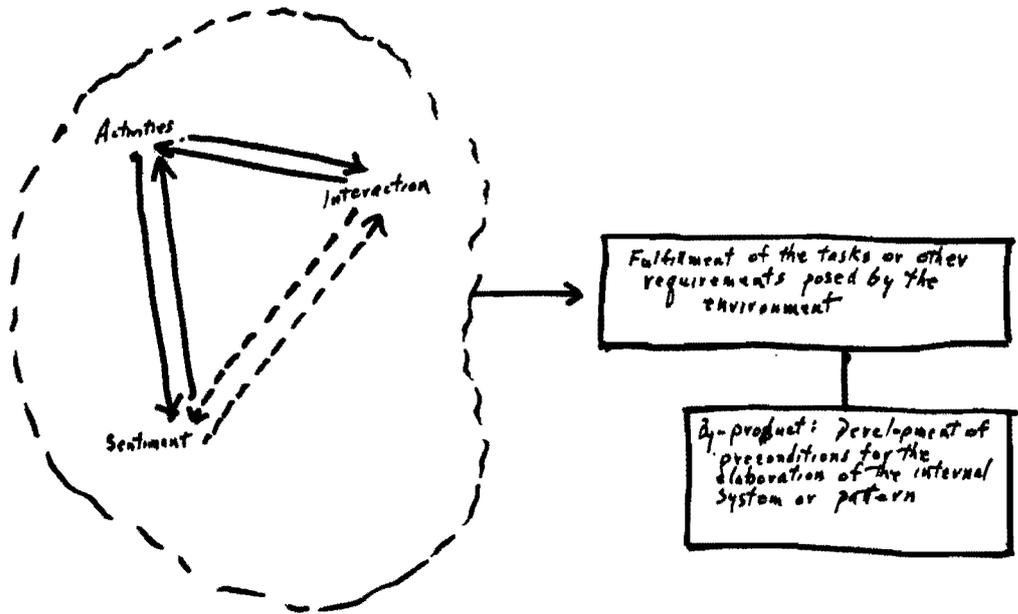
Elaboration of Group Behavior

The essential units or parts of the Homans social system model are now before us. Chart E suggests the process by which the group copes with its environment and develops its cohesiveness or integration. Several terms are used by Homans to refer to the several processes of a group.

One set of terms is *action* and *reaction*, which refers to the relationship between the group and its environment. The process of action and reaction is circular and includes adaptation to the environment and modification of the environment.

A second term that Homans uses extensively is *feedback*, which refers to the process going on between the external and internal systems. The internal system is continually emerging out of the external system, and in turn is feed-

CHART C. The External System: Its Elements and Its Products.



ing back to and modifying the external system. The feedback process can be thought of as a spiral rather than a circular action. It can enhance the general functioning of the social system, say, by strengthening group cohesion for coping with the environment. Or

it can impair the functioning of the social system, say, by diverting energies from task performance to enjoyment of merely social activities. The direction and effects of feedback between the external and internal systems are one focus of inquiry suggested by Homans'

CHART D. The Internal System: Its Elements and Its Products.

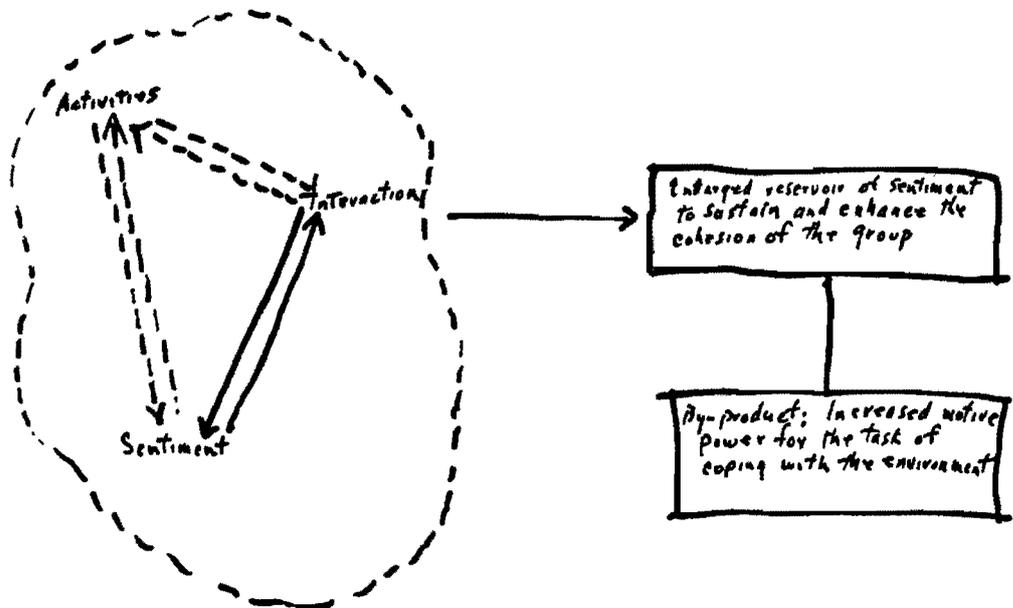
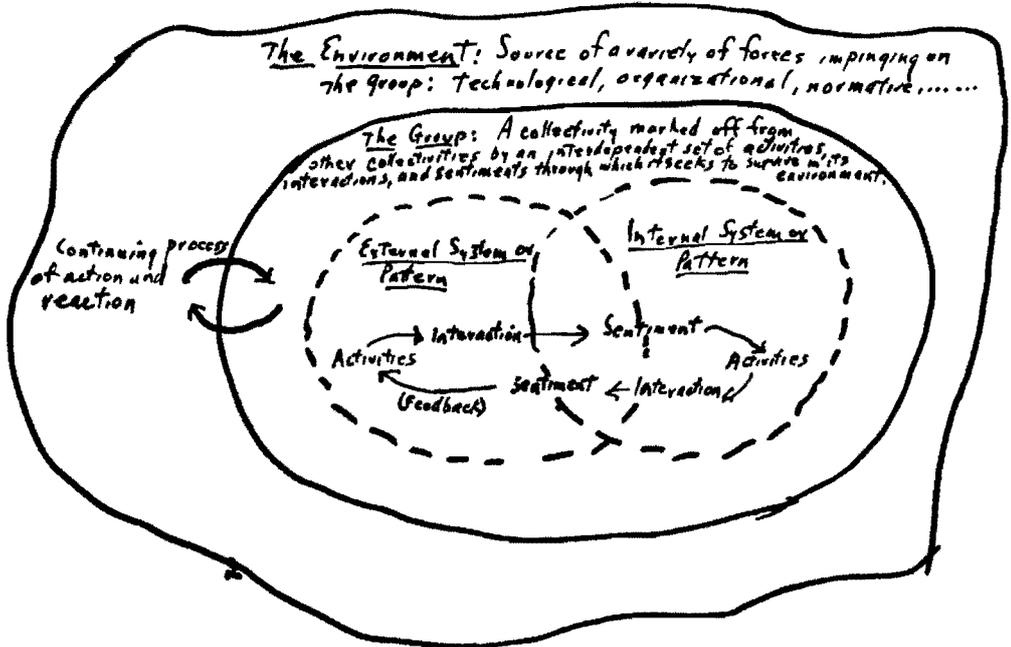


CHART E. The Elaboration of Group Behavior.



theory in analyzing any particular group.

The Influence of Ideas on Behavior

Let me refer, finally, to one other aspect of Homans' theoretical scheme, the way in which ideas enter to influence the behavior of the group. Ideas, of course, have to be represented in individuals in order to enter social life at all. One particular class of ideas around which Homans builds his theory is *norms*. A norm is an idea in the minds of men that specifies what they or other men are expected to do under given circumstances. A norm is not just an idea, but an idea which is backed up by some set of rewards or punishments. Homans distinguishes norms from ideas and makes clear he is talking about the former.

Norms come from somewhere, of course, and in the first instance are brought into a group from the environment. But the group modifies and works out new norms in the course of

coping with the environment and maintaining its identity, and these become part of its resources for surviving and being effective as a group.

So much, then, for the concepts which will be used in the case analyses which will follow. Do not be discouraged if you find these are not all crystal clear and available for your immediate use. They will become more clear as they are used to describe concrete groups with which group workers are quite familiar.

First Case: The Curriculum vs. The Enabling Approach in Group Work

This illustration will identify several major concepts that Homans employs in his theoretical formulation by describing and analyzing the formation and development of a training program for junior counselors for a summer camp program. The purpose is to demonstrate the "goodness of fit" of the concepts to one type of group with which group workers work—the task oriented group—and to suggest that

Homans' formulation can serve to sharpen thinking about the concept of the agency as an environment in which a group develops its pattern of organization and adaptation.

The agency in this case is a Jewish Community Center located in a large city of a middle-Atlantic state. It operates many summer camping programs. Of special concern to agency leaders has been the quality of performance of the younger junior-counselor staff. Consequently, it was decided that the agency should offer a training program for young people interested in becoming junior counselors. Announcement of this program was made and almost immediately there were forty-five calls for registration.

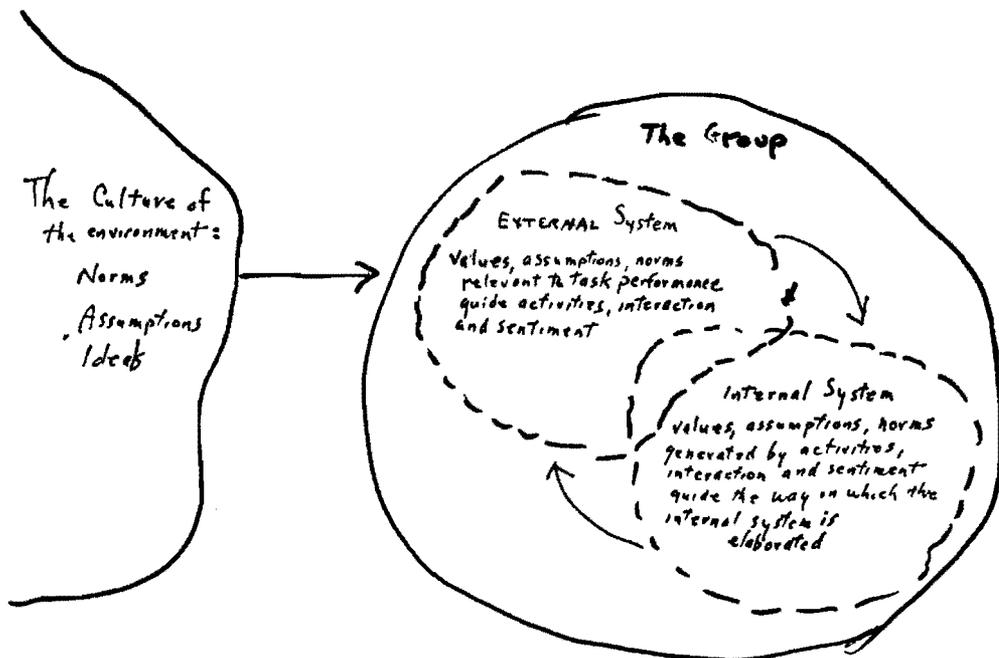
Using Homans' perspective, in every group members bring to each situation feelings (sentiments), ideas about how to behave (norms), certain patterns of behavior (customs), and reasons for coming to the group in the first place (motives), which have developed out of life experience and out of other group affiliations, e.g. family, school, gang, etc. In our counselor training program we did have some insight into these normative and motivating factors. Recognizing that individuals hold many goals simultaneously, the following summary provides

an accurate, though partial, description: Many of the potential junior counselors, particularly the girls, were interested in becoming teachers or in entering related professions, such as social work, and thought that the training experience would be career-related and thus valuable. Most wanted to work in camp the following summer and since those successfully completing the course had first opportunity to secure the few positions available (a reward mechanism employed by the agency in its recruitment), they saw the course as an essential requirement. Many felt that they had to do "something" during the summer, recognizing that few job opportunities were available to them. In almost all cases their parents felt that the training program was worthwhile, and that by participating the teen-agers would be doing something "productive" during the summer.

The training group was comprised of 23 girls and 18 boys, all between 15 and 16 years of age. It conformed to Homans' definition of a group: "a number of persons who communicate with one another, often over a span of time, and who are few enough so that each person is able to communicate with all the others, not at second hand through other people but face to face."⁴

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

CHART F. The Influence of Ideas on Behavior.



The fit was not exact because of the limited time that the group was together (ten weeks), but the social organization that developed illustrates Homans' perspective on task-oriented groups.

The Environment: Social, Physical and Technical Forces

In our case, the community center was itself the immediate environment and produced the forces which brought the training group together. These environmental forces acted, so to speak, as the "starter motor" to the training group. Let us examine some of these environmental forces.

Each applicant was interviewed so that he would understand why and how the program was set up and the expectations of the center concerning his participation in the program. Stress was placed on *active participation* in skill-learning sessions, as well as in the discussions of concepts. Conditions for participating in the program were clearly stated so that the participants would *feel* that they were entering the adult world, and also have a specific understanding of what the "job" expectations were.

The staff working with this program were very sensitive to arrangements which would affect the development of social relationships. Although it was not announced as a specific purpose of the program, helping the participant to discover new social relationships was an unstated goal of the program. To promote the development of relationships, participants in the program were placed on work teams and were kept in the same group for the entire program whenever appropriate. For example, games to be *learned* were actually *played*. Most of them were played on a team basis, leading to activity and interaction with the same people. This was true for all skill and discussion sessions, with the same subgroup maintained. Thus interaction among indi-

viduals was structured, and this structure tended to produce a sense of solidarity in the subgroups.

External System: Sentiment, Activity, Interaction

In understanding any group, using Homans' scheme of analysis, one must look at the external system and the complex of activities, interaction and sentiment which are directed towards the group's survival in the environment. As an example, let us look at the "games" session.

While at the beginning of the training program the participants played in a rather perfunctory, unenthusiastic way, by the end of the program members of the subgroups were "getting into the spirit" of the games, cheering when their team scored and encouraging one another. There was compelling evidence that as the group responded to demands in the environment, by playing games, there was greater interaction and a growing warmth in the response of members to one another. This same phenomenon could be observed operating as we moved into the different skill sessions that the course included, e.g. dancing, arts and crafts, etc. With time, the group became more relaxed and freer in their participation in the program, with the consequence that the group as a whole participated more productively.

Internal System: Sentiment, Activity, Interaction

The nature of the program was such that the forces of the environment were personified in the program director of the center who, acting as program leader, was always present. Consequently, most of the energy and time of the group were devoted, so to speak, to meeting the demands posed by the environment. However, a break of ten minutes was allowed in the middle of

the two-hour session, giving the participants a chance to obtain refreshments, and it was here that we observe the emergence of the internal system, "the elaboration of group behavior that simultaneously arises out of the external system and reacts upon it."

Early in the training program, when the "coke" break came, there would be an awkward moment as people suddenly found themselves released from a highly structured situation. At first the few people who knew each other prior to the start of the course would go off to the cafeteria together. Others would go as individuals. Still others would uneasily move around, speak to another individual or two, and go off with them. Very rapidly, by the third session, one began to see groups of fours and fives move off for the coke break. Gradually four subgroups formed, with boundaries that were similar though not identical to activity groups maintained during skill sessions. However, whether or not they worked in mixed groups, boys and girls would go for refreshments only with people of their own sex. This reflected the dominant influence of norms which were prevalent in the larger community, particularly in the schools from which the participants came. This pattern continued throughout the ten-week course.

To recapitulate in more abstract terms, activities developed in response to the demands of the environment and led to certain interaction which further led to the development of sentiments of "liking." This led to further activity (having cokes together) and more interaction. In one area, however, namely boys and girls spending time together during coke breaks, the norm prevalent in the larger community from which the junior counselors were drawn operated against the development of this kind of interaction with one or two exceptions.

Reaction of Internal System on External System

By the fourth session, the group as a whole was coming back from the coke break somewhat late. Since tight adherence to schedule had been stressed at the beginning of the course, this matter was raised by staff. The group by and large wanted the break doubled from ten to twenty minutes. After some discussion, and making allowance for this lost time by adding it to the end of the session, the break period was doubled. It became obvious that the group was having a very "social" time in the cafeteria, which could not take place as well at the end of the session when either they were called for by parents or were expected home for lunch. It appeared that it was easier for the youngster to say to his parent that the class was ending later than to say that he wanted to spend time after class socializing. In any event, the development and elaboration of the internal system during the coke break resulted in modifying the rules about the length of the coke break established initially by the representatives of the immediate environment.

Implications for the Curriculum vs. Enabling Issue

This briefly illustrates some of the concepts that Homans employs in his theoretical formulation by describing and analyzing, though on a simple level, some aspects of the formation and development of a training program for junior counselors. It appears that the concepts "fit" the situation described.

Of special interest may be the concepts "environment" and "external" system as employed by Homans. In one concept of group work, the group worker acting as an enabler helps the members to define their own goals, obtain consensus, and carry out the program. Recently, some agencies have

found that the programs of many groups seem to be sterile, members express disappointment, attendance at group meetings has been erratic and low, and consequently groups have disbanded.

Some agencies have experimented with what they call a "curriculum" approach to group work, in which the agency sets certain goals (tasks) which the group accepts prior to affiliation. The goals might include undertaking a community project, conducting a parent-youth program, or developing an interfaith activity. One agency, reporting use of this approach, indicated increased interest on the part of members, more stimulating content in group activities, higher and more consistent attendance.⁵

It would seem that an analysis of the "traditional" and "curriculum" approaches, using the Homans scheme, might shed some useful knowledge on the differences. One immediate, though tentative, observation is that the curriculum approach intuitively recognizes the Homans schema with special reference to the impact of what he calls environmental forces on the external system. That is, the curriculum approach focuses more energy in carefully structuring the forces in the immediate environment in which the group must survive, thereby evoking the external system with its activities, interactions, and sentiments. From the external system, then, the internal system can evolve and elaborate. The classical approach in much of group work practice has been to try and work initially and directly with the internal system, without giv-

ing enough weight and understanding to the need for first setting sound and appropriate environmental conditions in which the external and internal systems can develop. Homans' conceptualization highlights the interdependence between the external and internal systems and suggests that it is the environment which sets the "demand" from which the external system grows, and subsequently from which the internal system develops. We suggest that focus on the concept "environment" in many, though not all, situations provides an extremely useful approach to affecting group processes, for the "environment" is usually most accessible to modification through agency policies and professional practice.

Second Case: The Clerical Staff in a Group Work Agency

Although primary groups do different things, function in any number of different settings, and vary considerably in the composition of their membership, we can discern striking similarities among all primary groups when we, so to speak, put on the appropriate lenses. Although similarities are being stressed, this is in no way intended to minimize the importance of individual and group differences, but rather to draw attention to the potential value of finding a common denominator in the behavior of persons in primary groups (those which permit face-to-face relationships among members over a span of time).

Because groups and individuals are so different from each other, it is not possible to generalize, for instance, about the specific group norms which will evolve in particular cases, or the specific qualities an individual needs in order to emerge as the group's leader. But we *are* able to generalize that whoever *does* become the leader will assume a specific stance toward the enforcement of the group's norms and in his personal adher-

⁵ Daniel H. Matlaw, *Agency Involvement in Curriculum Program*, Graduate Thesis, N.Y.U. School of Public Administration on Social Service, May, 1956, as reported in Harry Specht, "A Program Curriculum for Social Club Groups," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Winter, 1957, Vol. 34, No. 2, p. 190.

ence to those norms; that he will consistently function as a leader in a variety of group situations as they affect the group's relationship to its environment, and that if the leader fails to do so, his status within the group is in the process of changing and his leadership role may be approaching an end.

The value of having available such information is not that it is so profound (we all work on the basis of such knowledge in groups with which we are familiar) but that this information may be generalized for all primary groups. On the basis of such information, we may venture certain predictions even for groups about which we have no first-hand knowledge, or which have just come into being. And to the extent that we can predict, we are in a position to plan with greater foresight.

Homans has arrived at a number of generalizations about primary groups and has expressed them in the form of hypotheses. Taking as an illustration the clerical staff of a group work agency, let us examine how closely the theory and the life situation coincide.

This particular clerical staff is working in a medium-size agency in a large city. Five persons constitute this group: the office manager, who is also the bookkeeper; the assistant officer manager, who is secretary to the executive director; the registrar, who is in charge of membership records, collects fees and maintains statistical records; the program secretary, who does most of the mimeographing and takes dictation; and the switchboard operator, who also does some typing.

The social environment which acts most consistently upon this group is the agency, and specifically the staff to whom they are responsible. Their daily work gives rise to the external system which Homans identifies, and which links such activities as typing, billing, mimeographing and dictation to communication or interaction and to feelings or sentiments such as respect, liking, or disliking. While coming together primarily because of their work responsibilities, being together has opened the way for the emer-

gence of other links which go beyond the demands of their work.

Thus the group eats lunch together daily in the office instead of going out. They keep a closet full of crackers, coffee, tea, salt, condiments and silverware for their noon lunches and for their morning and afternoon coffee breaks. New purchases in clothing and stylish combinations are examined and discussed by everyone during working as well as non-working time. Periodically the program secretary sells sweepstakes tickets, and during that lunch hour everyone discusses what she will buy with their winnings. After quitting time some of the girls go shopping together. Some also meet socially at each other's homes. During the day the girls talk about their families, their personal health, what conditions their apartments are in, and the problems of the neighborhoods in which they live. They exchange anecdotes about their children, husbands, clerks or bus drivers and, amid giggles, tell some off-color jokes.

The Elaboration of the Internal System

These events correspond closely to what Homans calls the "mode of elaboration of the internal system." ". . . Persons who feel sentiments of liking for one another will express these sentiments in activities over and above those of the external system, and these activities may further strengthen the activities of liking." Also, "If the frequency of interaction between two or more persons increases, their liking for one another will increase, and vice versa." It is, of course, possible that frequent interaction in the external system may produce negative sentiments. These may be revealed in connection with work through expressions of irritation or favoritism toward others, but they show up more clearly in the internal system through the exclusion of that person in the very activities, interactions and sentiments which comprise the internal system. Thus a disliked person's opinions are always taken lightly or criticized, they are not invited to participate as frequently in activities outside of

working hours, and the rest of the group does not want such individuals to do favors for them.

Development and Enforcement of Norms

Often negative sentiments toward individual group members arise because they do not conform to the norms of the group. As Homans defines a norm, it is an idea in the minds of group members which specifies what the members are expected to do under given circumstances. It is a norm only if any departure of real behavior from the norm is followed by some punishment. Norms are only ideas. They are not behavior itself, but what people think behavior ought to be.

The clerical staff had developed a number of group norms of their own. Conversation during lunch frequently touched on the subject of how to dress well. Everyone agreed that it was important to do so, yet everyone did not dress according to the verbalized standards of the group, no matter what they said. The same held true for the equally popular subject of dieting. A slight punishment was disbursed for deviating from this norm in the form of a "bawling out" if one of the overweight girls, who it was felt should be dieting, ate too much.

The professional staff was welcome to have lunch with the secretaries, or to come in and get a cup of coffee, provided they contributed regularly to the office kitty from which supplies were bought. The girls had a "rule" that no agency business could be discussed during lunch. Anyone who broke this rule had to pay a nickel. What constituted an infraction was decided upon by the office manager, who was quite serious about collecting. The executive director, at whom this rule was primarily directed, would sometimes offer to pay a dollar before he sat down to eat and discuss the agency to his heart's content.

It was customary that every so often each of the girls brought in some fruit, fancy crackers, cake and even calves feet in aspic, if they happened to turn out particularly well. The professional staff members were always offered a taste of these delicacies, but it was expected that they bring in a contribution of their own every so often. If someone did not make such a contribution for a while, they might find themselves being offered a piece of candy together with the office manager's comment, "We like to share with everybody, even free-loaders." The group had certain norms with which all their members agreed. If outsiders joined the group, they were expected to abide by these norms, or they received some punishment, the same as any infractor. But despite the acceptance of the norms, all did not act accordingly. Homans hypothesizes that "the members of a group are more often alike in the norms they hold than in their overt behavior."

Status and Leadership

On the subject of leadership, Homans says that, "A person of higher social rank than another originates interaction for the latter more often than the latter originates interaction for him." The office manager and the assistant office manager held a position of higher social rank because of their responsibilities, seniority and larger salaries. It was they who allocated the work to the rest of the staff. Furthermore, they retained their level of authority when there was a change in the scheme of activities. It was the office manager who decided when a fine was to be paid for talking business during lunch and who decided when lunch was over. In her absence the assistant office manager did the same thing. Coffee breaks were not held at regular times, and it was usually either of these two women who suggested that "somebody put up the water." The

following hypotheses appear to be applicable here: "Whatever changes occur in the scheme of activities of a group, the scheme of interaction between the leaders of various levels and their followers tends to keep the same pyramidal form." Also: "A person who originates interaction for another in the external system will also tend to do so in the internal system."

Increases in Group Solidarity in Response to Environmental Forces

The two final hypotheses which we illustrate deal with two possible ways in which the group responds to events in the environment which are perceived by them as threatening to their present form of functioning. If none of the professional staff happened to have lunch with the clerical staff for a while, if they were upset because a request for office equipment had been turned down, or if they felt that they had been under constant work pressure for too long a time, they would order a big Chinese luncheon to which the professional staff was specifically *not* invited. If one entered the office during that time, one would be received, amidst a great deal of hilarity, by the announcement, "We are having our own little party, because nobody else cares about us." Homans hypothesizes that "a decrease in the frequency of interaction between the members of a group and outsiders, accompanied by an increase in the strength of their negative sentiments toward outsiders, will increase the frequency of interaction and the strength of positive sentiments among the group."

The periodic arrival from the printer of the agency's newsletter took precedence over all other work since it contained dated material. Everyone either addressed or stuffed envelopes for most of the day. At lunch the following day, the girls discussed how tired they still

felt, and how tense they had been last evening from the continuous pressure. Finally they asked the office manager to discuss with the executive director how this job could be made less onerous. Eventually the format of the newsletter was changed so that it could be mailed without being enclosed in an envelope.

Both "feedback" and "adaptation" appear to have been in operation here, providing the forces which brought about certain changes in the environment. An activity in the internal system (eating lunch) was conducive to an informal discussion, which led to the request that the office manager, *in her position in the external system*, try to bring about a change in the environment. Thus the combined forces of the internal and external system reacted on the forces of the environment (feedback) and brought about a change in the environment (adaptation) which enabled the group better to survive.

Third Case: A Change in Group Staffing Policy

The policy problem to be considered in this case is rather mundane, and it may seem pretentious to discuss it conceptually. Yet it seems to us the strength of Homans' theoretical model becomes particularly evident in relation to the ordinary experiences we face each day in our practice.

The agency policy issue in the present case revolved around the substitution of untrained lay people for social work students as advisers to teen-age club groups in a middle-size Jewish community center. Not all agencies may be faced with the rather nice dilemma of how to use students on field placement. For the agency in question the issue was real. During the years immediately prior to the proposed change in staffing of teen-age groups, these groups were continuing to grow in size and, as a concomitant, there was a significant decrease in group achievement. There was continued pressure on agency policy-makers to do something about the "do-nothing groups." The agency

was not prepared to risk a policy of putting a ceiling on group membership (as the assumed cause of "do-nothing clubs") for fear that it might cause groups to withdraw, thus severing an already tenuous contact.

Instead of limiting group size, the agency decided to change the structure of group staffing. The social work students were to be supplanted by untrained lay people from the community on the assumption that task-oriented laymen would have greater capacity to stimulate group achievement. In addition, it was hoped that a lay staff, recruited locally, would bring a commitment for long-term relationships with the groups, unlike the one-year tenure which had been characteristic of the students. Hopefully the change in policy would be accompanied by a diminution of community pressure on policy-makers.

Some would suggest that the very issue of staffing is secondary, that in tackling this the agency was avoiding more basic problems relating to its teen-agers. But given the policy issue, which incidentally does have its counterpart in other recent discussions on the use of untrained "locals" or "professionals" with youth groups, can the social theory of Homans be of any help? The discussion which follows will be reapplying to a small group situation a model whose peculiar strength for social group work may rest in its development out of the facts of small group life.

The Agency and the Group

The agency, typically, offers staff help to groups in the hope that the goals of the agency will be reflected in the activity of the group. The worker represents the helping function of the agency through a consciously fashioned relationship with members of the group. In terms of the Homans model, the workers' relationships are initially rooted in activity and interaction, which are the elements characteristic of the "external system." These elements in turn lead to feelings of sentiment by and toward the worker and the group members, followed by further activity and a continued strengthening of the bonds of the group. The crucial nature of activity in starting this cycle needs to

be underscored. It brings to mind the Wilson and Ryland trilogy of "love them, limit them and help them to achieve," with the note that we may have often failed to "help them achieve."

It is suggested that the particular structure of our society creates specific individual needs which lead to the teen-age group (or gang). We can seek to connect this group structure to the larger society through our leisure-time agencies. The group adviser provides the linking role between the group and the agency (and society). How the worker performs this linking and helping role can only be understood as we perceive his extra-agency commitments. For the lay worker these commitments rest in the community. For the student they rest, hopefully, in his socialization to a professional role. As we examine the ideal types of "student" and "lay" worker, we may begin to see the pulls that these other systems of orientation have upon the worker's role performance in the group.

The Student Worker

To the teen-age group the worker becomes an on-the-spot link with the adult world which is making demands on the group collectively and on its members individually. He also becomes the embodiment of the agency which, no matter how permissive, is imposing its own demands upon the group. The student worker begins by helping the group to develop activities and from the activities flows the cycle of interaction and sentiment resulting in a "we" feeling, which represents the emergence of the "internal system" of which Homans speaks. In the particular problem cited, the short-term student worker can and does leave the group before its natural demise. The group stays and the worker goes. If he has worked well, he has not let himself carry a leadership

role in the group's "external system" (although he may at the beginning) and internally he is not perceived as a competitor for rank and relationship. Thus when the student worker's tenure ends, there is undoubtedly some questioning by the group of its capacity to continue to operate, and certain individuals who made their relationship to the group *through* the worker are upset, but his leaving need not be fatal. In fact, the group's capacity to survive his departure becomes a sign of its strength and of his skill in working with it. Hopefully the group, with the help of the student worker, has made good beginning adaptations to its environment and has elaborated an internal life which permits of interaction, sentiment and activity in a way which makes the existence of that group a sufficiently vital force in the life of its members that it continues without the stimulus and support provided by that worker.

The "Local" Lay Worker

In general, the "local" lay worker may be seen as wanting to help teen-agers "do things" in a way consistent with what he believes teen-agers ought to be doing. Identification with the agency exists to the extent that he shares its goals. Through the lay worker the group is linked to the very community whose familial and economic systems nurture and mandate teen-age group life. Such a link may be infinitely valuable. It could be the forerunner of a series of specialized adult roles designed to ease that part of teen-age trauma which is socially created. On the other hand, it might serve to further alienate the teen-age group from the adult community.

It can be speculated that the lay worker from within the community must have a more difficult time dissociating himself as an environmental representative than does the student professional.

The very person who embodies the expectations of the community is called upon to be of help to a group in meeting needs which grow out of these communal expectations. In addition to being a worker, he may be "father," "next door neighbor," "employer"—all of which may strain his role performance as worker with the group. Conversely, as he is experienced as a helping person by the teen-agers, his very identification with the community makes it likely that the group will aggressively use such a person to help it with its adaptation problems.

Using the Homans model, an excellent case can be made for the helping potential of the lay worker. However, if he becomes a competitor for rank and leadership in the group with little capacity for getting satisfaction from the activity and achievement of others, he becomes a potential usurper in the midst of the group. He puts constraints upon methods available for adaptation and inhibits the development of an internal system. How many times have we heard youngsters say "too many adults here." Don't they really mean, "too many adults whom they are not sure they can trust" as they work out their problems with a sometimes hostile world?

Another Look at Group Life in the Agency

Now let us re-examine this agency decision to staff groups with lay leaders rather than student professionals. The lay people who made the policy were concerned about group "inactivity." Undoubtedly staff and lay notions of what constitutes activity differ. In some areas, of course, the policy-makers did not really know what kind of activity they wanted to see—mirroring society's confusion about what it seeks for its youth. In other instances groups could not confront their environments in such a way as to produce significant group

interaction and consequent good feeling (sentiment) about what they were doing. Many groups were having so much trouble developing activity that an internal elaboration never got going. And here Homans' concept of feedback is helpful. He suggests that as elaboration toward an internal system takes place, the emerging internal system reacts back upon the external and creates further impetus to activity. But this process was not taking place—groups drifted, attendance dwindled, hostilities were uncontrolled and the agency realized it did not have functioning groups. And measured against the Homans model they did not.

Perhaps the most hapless victim of this degeneration of group life in the agency is the youngster who needs the group and whose participation in it must be sustained through the worker's intervention. These are the youngsters who always seem to be peripheral to life in the group. They say nothing and do little to plan or implement activities. The feelings and interaction which accompany activity are theirs to share in a secondary way. As this process elaborates itself they find themselves looking in on the internal system; their connection to the "we" group hangs on a thread. Their one link to the group may be through a relationship with an important member. But even here Homans tells us that they will not aggressively pursue this relationship for he hypothesizes that persons of higher rank generally initiate interaction.

All of the above happens in any group with some people. With a good staff worker, activities are found and roles facilitated so that those on the periphery may have their "moments of glory." Those who hang on to the group without developing meaningful internal connections could be helped to find new groups or referred for more intensive help, if their position were understood. A nice

thesis could be suggested about developing our humanity only as we become active participants in a group in which we share activities, sentiments, and interactions. The sensitive worker in the primary group can help the person claim life for himself.

Implications for Staffing Policy

As we analytically separate the life of a group according to Homans' notions of an "internal" and "external" system, we come to understand the peculiar demands each of these arenas make upon staff functioning. Because the external system is evolved in response to the facts of the group's environment, the layman by virtue of his other roles in that environment may bring particular strengths to the worker's role. But it is in the internal system that the "stuff of life" takes place. Here the worker must act upon his assessments of behavior. Here the worker can become a crucial force in the allocation of roles and in the procurement of resources for role performance. Here the worker becomes a force helping to generate a normative system peculiar to the group. Hopefully, this will have some carry-over in the approach that group members bring to the other social situations in which they operate.

When one analytically focuses on the role of the worker in the internal system, there is not much at issue in who shall staff our youth groups: the crucial importance of "conscious use of self" points to the advantages of the student professional. But as the Homans model points out, the internal system must have its genesis in an external system whose core is activity. Those in social group work who have focused on process have tended to neglect this aspect of group life. Homans tells us there is a symbiotic connection between product (a major focus of the external system) and process (a major focus of the internal

system). To focus on process to the exclusion of product is a denial of the real world that we all live in. But to abandon a focus on process would be to give up part of social work's potential for affecting how men shall live with each other.

Conclusions

In concluding this presentation, we would like to go back to our original proposition, that the development of theory to guide social work practice, policy, and programming will move faster and further by building on theoretical efforts going forward in the underlying social sciences, rather than by pursuing a boot-strap approach which takes as its starting point the wisdom and experience of practice.

The case presentations have been able to illustrate the potential contribution of one theoretical scheme in sociology, that of Professor Homans. We have made no pretense of testing, in the scientific sense, the validity of Homans' theory. Validity is a distant, and perhaps illusory criterion to invoke in evaluating theories for the type of task undertaken today. A more appropriate criterion, we suggest, is utility: is a theory, whether that of Homans or Parsons or Freud, more useful than others at our disposal in setting up problems and making choices in social work?

James Bryant Conant, writing about the physical sciences, contrasts the nineteenth century view of theory as map-

making—producing accurate descriptions of what the world is really like—with the twentieth century view of theory as policy, a fruitful guide to action.⁶ If a theory gives us a set of policies for making observations and ordering data in a way that is useful, it is good theory. Conant notes that the wave theory and the corpuscular theory of light, for instance, are incompatible as theories and do not fit all the facts that are known about the behavior of light. But these inconsistent theories have made possible accurate predictions which could not have been made without them. Homans' theory of the human group is inconsistent with other theories of group behavior and does not fit all of the "facts" of group life. This in no way means that it is unimportant or irrelevant for social group work, as the case presentations have shown.

To use Homans' or any other scientist's theory, however, we need critical and informed translators who are grounded in both the theory and the phenomena and the problems and the practice of social work. We hope that this paper has helped to correct the conspicuous indifference with which social group workers have treated the work of one of their most promising allies, Professor Homans of Harvard University.

⁶ James B. Conant, *Modern Science and Modern Man*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1952, page 97.