

Investigation

Group influences on behaviour

Background

Groups perform many tasks, of which decision making is probably one of the most important. Many aspects of our lives are influenced by decisions largely determined by groups. For example, selection committees, juries, parliament, committees of examiners and friends. The processes involved in group decision making have been of particular interest to social psychologists with a focus on whether groups make better or different decisions than those made by individuals (Vaughan & Hogg, 2008).

The influence of others in a group situation, for better and for worse, has been acknowledged widely within the research literature. The enhancement of individual performance when working with others has been referred to as social facilitation, while a decline in individual performance in the presence of others has been referred to as social inhibition or social interference (Gray, 2007; Myers, 2004). Issues surrounding polarisation and conformity have also been the focus of research. Group polarisation refers to the tendency for opinions to strengthen, sometimes to an extreme level, within a group if the individuals involved hold similar attitudes or beliefs (Fletcher & Garton, 2015; Gray, 2007). Group conformity occurs when individuals change their opinions or behaviours in response to group pressure, which increases the likelihood of them being accepted as a group member by the wider group (Fletcher & Garton, 2015).

The role and form of leadership within a group situation has the potential to influence the productivity and performance of the group as a whole. One of the earliest and most influential studies on leadership was conducted by Lippitt and White in 1942 and identified three distinct leadership styles: autocratic, democratic and laissez-faire (Lippitt & White, 1942 as cited in Vaughan & Hogg, 2008).

Autocratic leadership is essentially based on the leader giving orders to the group members, which results in an atmosphere that may be aggressive and self-orientated but produces high levels of group productivity. In contrast, democratic leadership involves consultation, shared agreement and consent between the leader and the group members, which results in a friendly, task-orientated atmosphere and achieves relatively high productivity levels. Laissez-faire leadership has the leader leaving the group members to their own devices with minimal intervention, and produces a friendly, play-orientated atmosphere but low levels of group productivity.

The aim of this investigation is to examine, with a focus on the role of leadership, the influence of others on individual behaviour and group decision-making. In this study, three groups will be formed with each group governed by a different style of leadership: autocratic, democratic or laissez-faire. Students will be randomly allocated to one of the three groups as well as randomly allocated to the role of either group leader or group member. The leadership styles being used in each group will be known to the allocated group leader, but will remain unknown to the group members. The groups will each complete a task before responding to an individual questionnaire regarding their feelings about the decision-making processes used by the group during the activity.

Some of the possible relationships that students might investigate using the data collected for this investigation are:

- the impact of leadership type (autocratic, democratic and laissez-faire) on the students perceived levels of satisfaction with the decision-making process
- the perceived levels of satisfaction between each of the three groups
- discrepancies arising from responses to each question – are there any seemingly big differences within (e.g. a mismatch between levels of personal influence and overall satisfaction) or between (e.g. distinct differences between personal levels of involvement, commitment and responsibility) groups?

Teaching/learning

Teachers need to consider whether students' participation in the investigation will be enhanced by some prior exploration of concepts and terms encountered in the investigation. Any teaching/learning experienced by students prior to the investigation needs to be selective and should not bias the data collected in the investigation. Further exploration of theory and concepts associated with the investigation can then continue after the data has been collected.

Use the following process to collect the data:

- Randomly assign a number to each participant, e.g. by drawing names and numbers out of a hat. Each student's participant number should only be known to you and the student.
- Randomly allocate students to one of three groups (autocratic, democratic or laissez-faire leadership styles) then assign to one of two roles (group leader (one per group) or group member) based on your knowledge of the students and their capacity to carry out the roles appropriately. This can be done by using the information slips provided in Handout 5. Students can be randomly assigned with a participant number and then can be provided with an information slip based on their participant number (Handout 6). Students can inform the group of whether they are a member or a leader, but they are not to discuss the specifics of their role. Students taking on the role of group leaders may need some direction and practice time before leading their groups.
- Provide students with 20 straws and one metre of masking tape.
- Each group compete against the other groups to see who can construct the tallest, free-standing structure in 10 minutes. Students are not to use any other equipment than what has been specified (i.e. no scissors, rulers etc.).
- Identify the group that has the tallest, free-standing structure.
- After completion of the task, students individually complete the questionnaire that has been provided as Handout 3. The completion of this questionnaire should take approximately 5 minutes. The questionnaire examines students' feelings about the decision-making processes used by their group during the activity.
- When the task and questionnaire have been completed, students are informed and debriefed about the investigation and the three different leadership roles are explained. Engage your students in a discussion about their experiences and feelings during the task.

The ratings from the student questionnaire can be collated and tabulated using the record sheet provided as Handout 4. From these ratings the percentage ratings for each question can be calculated for each group and comparisons made between the groups.

For example: Autocratic (Group 1) ($n=6$)

Question	Rating							
	1		2		3		4	
	Tally	%	Tally	%	Tally	%	Tally	%
a	5	83	1	17	0	0	0	0
b	4	67	2	33	0	0	0	0
c	3	50	3	50	0	0	0	0
d	4	67	2	33	0	0	0	0
e	5	83	1	17	0	0	0	0
f	4	67	1	16.5	1	16.5	0	0

From these percentages, students can discuss perceptions about the decision-making processes used in each group in relationship to the style of leadership used in each group. Student findings could be presented in the form of tables for each group and column graphs for each question.

It is important to note that students cannot claim the differences in these scores are significant as the application of more complex statistical analyses (such as *p*-values) are required to determine this.

Students will construct an A3 poster in class under test conditions. Materials required for constructing the poster will include data (tables and graphs), list of references, questionnaire and responses and a half-A4 page of notes.

Ethical considerations

An information letter has been provided for your students (Handout 1) stating the nature and purpose of this investigation. Students will need to read this letter and make a decision about their participation in this investigation. Participation will only be possible for students who return their signed consent form (Handout 2), which outlines the student's rights and responsibilities as a participant of this investigation. Parental/guardian consent will be required for students under the age of 18 to participate in this investigation. Usual permission procedures apply for students living independently.

Students who consent to participate in this study will be randomly allocated to one of three groups (see outline of activity below). Students will not be required to share any private or personal information. However, to ensure that written student data and identity remain anonymous, the participants' data should be coded with a number (no names) that is known to you. You will need to keep the data and record of ID numbers assigned to students in a safe and secure place until the completion of the unit for participants who may want to withdraw their data. All student data and confidential information will need to be shredded at the completion of the unit.

It is anticipated that your students will not be at risk of worry or discomfort from any of the procedures in this investigation. While steps have been taken to minimise any potential harm or risk, you should advise your school counsellor/s or welfare officer/s about the investigations that students will participate in and be observant of any negative reactions that occur during the investigation.

As a teacher, you are responsible for the physical and emotional safety of all your students. You should inform your students of the facilities within the school that can provide them with support and privacy, and of the wider range of services available in the community (e.g. local youth services and hotlines) that can assist them with any concerns that may arise from the investigation. You will need to be on the lookout for any behaviours that are uncharacteristic of your students (i.e. withdrawal, agitation, disruption) as they may indicate distress as a result of their participation in an investigation.

Usually it is necessary to conduct an investigation without informing the participants in detail of its nature. This allows the participants' spontaneous and natural reactions and feelings to be measured reducing the influence of subject bias. As the classroom teacher, it is your responsibility to ensure that your students do not suffer distress in this process and therefore you need to ensure that your students are fully debriefed. This provides not only an opportunity to fully inform the participants of

the purposes of the investigation, but to eliminate any mistaken attitudes or beliefs that the participants may have about the research.

Possible issues arising from this investigation

- Some students may feel uncomfortable working with the group they are randomly allocated to.
- Some students may experience feelings of unease or dissatisfaction in regards to the leadership style used within their group.
- The autocratic leadership style may invite negative behaviours such as bullying if not monitored.

Resources

Text

- Fletcher, J., & Garton, A. (2015). *Psychology: Self and Others*. Cengage Learning Australia, Melbourne.
- Gray, P. (2007). *Psychology* (5th ed.). New York, NY: Worth Publishers.
- Myers, D.G. (2004). *Psychology* (7th ed.). Holland, MI: Worth.
- Vaughan, G.M, & Hogg, M.A. (2008). *Introduction to Social Psychology* (5th ed.). Melbourne: Prentice Hall Australia.

Websites

- www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newLDR_84.htm (outlines 10 leadership styles and relates to the workplace)
- <http://psychology.about.com/library/quiz/bl-leadershipquiz.htm> (quiz to evaluate your style of leadership; refers to three main styles)
- <http://psychology.about.com/od/leadership/p/leadtheories.htm> (outlines eight theories of leadership)

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Allocation and description of roles for groups

<p>PARTICIPANT 1 GROUP 1 Role: GROUP LEADER You are to lead in an <i>autocratic</i> way. In the activity, you make the decisions and do not discuss them with the group. DO NOT INFORM GROUP OF YOUR LEADERSHIP STYLE.</p>	<p>PARTICIPANT 2 GROUP 2 Role: GROUP LEADER You are to lead in a <i>democratic</i> way. In the activity, you need to consider the ideas of all members before making a decision. DO NOT INFORM GROUP OF YOUR LEADERSHIP STYLE.</p>	<p>PARTICIPANT 3 GROUP 3 Role: GROUP LEADER You are to lead in a <i>laissez-faire</i> way. In the activity, you will not be really involved with group. Let the group just do whatever they like. DO NOT INFORM GROUP OF YOUR LEADERSHIP STYLE.</p>
<p>PARTICIPANT 4 GROUP 1 Role: GROUP MEMBER You need to be an active group member and to participate fully.</p>	<p>PARTICIPANT 5 GROUP 2 Role: GROUP MEMBER You need to be an active group member and to participate fully.</p>	<p>PARTICIPANT 6 GROUP 3 Role: GROUP MEMBER You need to be an active group member and to participate fully.</p>
<p>PARTICIPANT 7 GROUP 1 Role: GROUP MEMBER You need to be an active group member and to participate fully.</p>	<p>PARTICIPANT 8 GROUP 2 Role: GROUP MEMBER You need to be an active group member and to participate fully.</p>	<p>PARTICIPANT 9 GROUP 3 Role: GROUP MEMBER You need to be an active group member and to participate fully.</p>
<p>PARTICIPANT 10 GROUP 1 Role: GROUP MEMBER You need to be an active group member and to participate fully.</p>	<p>PARTICIPANT 11 GROUP 2 Role: GROUP MEMBER You need to be an active group member and to participate fully.</p>	<p>PARTICIPANT 12 GROUP 3 Role: GROUP MEMBER You need to be an active group member and to participate fully.</p>
<p>PARTICIPANT 13 GROUP 1 Role: GROUP MEMBER You need to be an active group member and to participate fully.</p>	<p>PARTICIPANT 14 GROUP 2 Role: GROUP MEMBER You need to be an active group member and to participate fully.</p>	<p>PARTICIPANT 15 GROUP 3 Role: GROUP MEMBER You need to be an active group member and to participate fully.</p>
<p>PARTICIPANT 16 GROUP 1 Role: GROUP MEMBER You need to be an active group member and to participate fully.</p>	<p>PARTICIPANT 17 GROUP 2 Role: GROUP MEMBER You need to be an active group member and to participate fully.</p>	<p>PARTICIPANT 18 GROUP 3 Role: GROUP MEMBER You need to be an active group member and to participate fully.</p>
<p>PARTICIPANT 19 GROUP 1 Role: GROUP MEMBER You need to be an active group member and to participate fully.</p>	<p>PARTICIPANT 20 GROUP 2 Role: GROUP MEMBER You need to be an active group member and to participate fully.</p>	<p>PARTICIPANT 21 GROUP 3 Role: GROUP MEMBER You need to be an active group member and to participate fully.</p>
<p>PARTICIPANT 22 GROUP 1 Role: GROUP MEMBER You need to be an active group member and to participate fully.</p>	<p>PARTICIPANT 23 GROUP 2 Role: GROUP MEMBER You need to be an active group member and to participate fully.</p>	<p>PARTICIPANT 24 GROUP 3 Role: GROUP MEMBER You need to be an active group member and to participate fully.</p>

Handout 6
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Three leadership roles

Aggressive	Assertive	Non-assertive
YOU DO:	YOU DO:	YOU DO:
try to get what you want	ask for what you want directly and openly	hope that you will get what you want
try any way that works	ask appropriately	keep your feelings to yourself
YOU DO NOT:	YOU DO NOT:	YOU DO NOT:
respect that other people have a right to have their needs met	violate other people's rights	ask for what you want
look for situations in which you both might be able to get what you want	expect other people to magically know what you want	get noticed