

Understanding role expectations in a group

This method can be employed to explore relations and understand how people perceive group expectations and how they change their behavior according to them. Dealing with the “empowerment” theme, you can use this technique particularly stressing the “power” dimension and discussing this role playing in relation to decision making about health.

Objectives

1. Experiment the pressure that people may feel in relation to specific roles.
2. Show the influence of the expectations related to a role on the behavior of a person in a group.
3. Explore the effects of social pressure related to a role in the whole group representation.

Group size

Ranging from 10 to 15 persons.

If you work with a larger group, you can involve a smaller group and other people can observe.

Time needed

About 45/60 minutes.

Materials needed

A wrapper for each participant to be tied around the head. On each wrap you can write the indication of a role and a simple instruction about how other people should behave with that person. Find some example below:

Comedian: laugh at me

Expert: ask me for advices

Important person: be submitted to me

Stupid: jeer me

Irrelevant: ignore me

Loser: have pity on me

Authoritarian: obey me

Desperate: encourage me.

Setting

One chair for each participant making a circle in the center of the room.

The observers can sit behind them in order to be able to see also the non-verbal aspects.

How to proceed

1. The trainer selects 10 up to 15 volunteers to demonstrate the effects of role expectations.
2. He puts a wrap on the head of each participant so that nobody knows what is written on his own head but everybody else can read it easily.
3. The trainer suggests a theme for the discussion, inviting each member of the group to behave as naturally as they can: they should not play as actors but try to be themselves.
In addition he invites the group to react to what other people say, according to the instructions written on the wrap of each speaker. He clarifies that they must never tell what is written on the other participants' heads, but they just have to interact on the basis of that instruction.
4. After a 20 minutes discussion, the trainer stops the activity and makes some questions to each participant to lead them guessing what is written on their wrap. Then they can take it off and read it.
5. Finally a debate starts, involving each person who was observing the activity. You can use the following questions:
 - a. How would you describe your difficulties in trying "to be yourself" despite you were feeling the group pressures on your role?
 - b. How did you feel by being repeatedly misunderstood by the group, for example, hearing them laughing when you were trying to lead the discussion or being creative?
 - c. Did you behave differently in consequence of the reactions of the other members of the group?
For example: did you step off if you felt to be ignored, or act confidently when you felt to be respected or order around if other people were submitted to you?

Other versions

1. You can adapt the roles to the participants and according to the theme you are interested in, as for example: teacher, nurse, police man, migrant, parent...
2. You can leave one wrap blank to show the power of inference or projection.
3. This activity can be preceded or followed by a short explanation about the theory of roles, symbolical interaction or about leaving according to others' expectations.

Source: "E. Spaltro e U. Righi, *Giochi psicologici*, Celuc Libri, Milano, 1980".