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Psychology

ONE of the most stimulating but controversial areas of contemporary psychological endeavor is that termed "action research," or "group dynamics." The work in this field is stimulating in that it attempts to deal with the almost untouched problems of social therapy and social change. It is controversial because it deals boldly with areas science has hitherto been hesitant to enter, and because its workers, instead of remaining "outside" the interactions of their experiments, often serve as "participant observers"—that is, they themselves become research variables.

Although there are available several definitions of action research, perhaps a consideration of the vocational activities of the action researcher will prove more illuminating. Working on the boundaries of social, clinical, and industrial psychology, as well as sociology and cultural anthropology, the action researcher considers leadership in its many aspects; what makes for cohesiveness among living groups; how to make discussion, industrial, and other groups function more effectively and productively; how to relieve national, racial, economic, and other group tensions; and how to change attitudes, opinions, and habits of action.

The action researcher utilizes many scientific tools, but he also employs some radically different techniques. One of the latter, termed sociodrama or role-taking, illustrates the newer methodologies. If, for example, the action researcher takes as his problem the reduction of friction found to exist between white and Negro students of a certain high school, the scheme of social therapy he will follow might prove to be something of this nature: Members of both racial groups would be asked to act out as realistically as possible some tension-producing situation. Drama roles would be assigned arbitrarily, with the experimenter as a possible participant. At first, perhaps, the whites might be assigned white roles, and the Negroes, Negro roles. Later the roles might be exchanged, so that members of one race might better

experience the tension-producing stimuli surrounding the other.

Action-research studies on problems associated with group decision lead to conclusions quite contrary to what has rather generally been held in the past. They show that lectures by experts tend to be inferior to discussion in changing attitude and nonsymbolic activity. Thus, if one wants to alter the food habits of a group, it seems wise to avoid the exhortations of experts. A better procedure would appear to be that of bringing the group together for intimate discussions of the subject. It is assumed, of course, that the members will have ready access to pertinent informative materials.

It is difficult to appraise this new field of action research. Indeed, many a psychologist still regards the work as only quasi-scientific, but the movement is still very young. It was born only a few years ago at MIT, where a group of social psychologists began work under the guidance of the late Kurt Lewin. Now there is a flourishing Research Center for Group Dynamics at the University of Michigan, and each summer the National Training Laboratory, of Bethel, Maine, schedules increasingly popular workshops on action research.

Perhaps a quotation from the Bethel Laboratory's prospectus will reveal the uniqueness of action research, this strange blend of research and attempts at social change.

Usually research is set apart and there is a wide gap between researchers and action people. At the Laboratory, however, training leaders and participants play a part in research projects, and research workers play a part in training plans. Thus, action leaders have the opportunity to see the place of research in action programs, and to learn the use of research methods in a practical situation. Research workers have an opportunity for data collection on both short-term and long-range research projects on group behavior, which meets the demands of the training purpose.

PAUL R. FARNSWORTH

*Department of Psychology
Stanford University*

SCIENCE, founded in 1880, is published each Friday by the American Association for the Advancement of Science at the Business Press, 10 McGovern Ave., Lancaster, Pa. Entered as second-class matter at the Post Office at Lancaster, Pa., January 13, 1948, under the Act of March 3, 1879. Acceptance for mailing at the special rate postage provided for in the Act of February 28, 1925, embodied in Paragraph (d-2) Section 34.40 P. L. & R. of 1948.

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Annual subscriptions, \$7.50; single copies, \$.25; foreign postage, outside the Pan-American Union, \$1.00; Canadian postage, \$.50. Special rates to members of the AAAS.

The AAAS also publishes THE SCIENTIFIC MONTHLY. Subscription and advertising rates on request.