

1944

An Experimental Study of the Development of Democratic Behavior

Ralph H. Ojemann

Iowa Child Welfare Research Station

Leon Yarrow

Iowa Child Welfare Research Station

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

Copyright ©1944 Iowa Academy of Science, Inc.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/pias>

Recommended Citation

Ojemann, Ralph H. and Yarrow, Leon (1944) "An Experimental Study of the Development of Democratic Behavior," *Proceedings of the Iowa Academy of Science*, 51(1), 389-395.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/pias/vol51/iss1/45>

This Research is brought to you for free and open access by the Iowa Academy of Science at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Proceedings of the Iowa Academy of Science by an authorized editor of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.

AN EXPERIMENTAL STUDY OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF DEMOCRATIC BEHAVIOR

RALPH H. OJEMANN AND LEON YARROW

Psychologists are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of an analysis of complex social phenomena, especially in the area of democratic behavior. If we wish to know how democratic behavior develops, and how its development can be controlled, we must be able to evaluate the effects of various types of experiences on its growth and ultimate pattern. It is the purpose of this paper to describe briefly a series of tests which have been devised to study democratic behavior at the elementary school level, and to indicate the effects on behavior of certain special experiences that have been introduced.

In developing tests in this area, one is confronted with a great deal of confusion, in popular thinking at least, as to the meaning of democratic behavior. Therefore, in designing the tests, we examined carefully a variety of the concepts of democratic behavior which have appeared in scientific and political literature. One fundamental aspect of the concept is a respect for the human personality. Translated into more concrete, behavioral terms, this concept involves consideration of the effect which a rule or law, or one's behavior has on other individuals. It is this conception of democracy with which we are primarily concerned. It appears that the various methods of political democracy are designed to insure that the effects of individual and group actions on all will be considered, for example, the majority vote. That a majority vote in and of itself is only a method and that it may be either democratic or undemocratic was recognized by Thomas Jefferson when he said, "All will bear in mind this sacred principle that though the will of the majority is to prevail, that will to be rightful must be reasonable." Hence, it would seem that behavior which takes account of and recognizes the effects on persons involved including both self and others would be classed as democratic, while the behavior that neglects such effects would be undemocratic.

Since the democratic-undemocratic continuum is probably multi-dimensional, it may be helpful to speak of behavior as falling within or outside the democratic area. Some examples of undemocratic behavior, according to the criterion set up, would be: applying a rule that is traditional or acting on the basis of an individual's whim without concern about the effects on people involved, doing something that benefits only one's self or a clique to the detriment of others, impeding the development of security and status in certain classes, neglecting accepted responsibilities to others, exercising power for one's own ends or for that of a small group.

The problem now is to devise tests which will discriminate such undemocratic behavior from the democratic type. These tests must meet certain requirements.

1. In each test situation the individual should be free to proceed either democratically or undemocratically, and there should be nothing to prevent the person from showing either form of behavior. For example, the teacher or other adults in the test situation should not permit one form and prohibit the other.

2. Since we want the subject's own hierarchy of desires to have full play, the situation should seem real to the child.

3. It would seem helpful if the situation were neutral as far as extrinsic rewards were concerned, that is, the situation should not give the child an extrinsic reward such as adult approval for one form of behavior and disapproval for the other. Such neutrality of external approvals seems to characterize one of the situations in real life, namely, the secret ballot. As long as the ballot remains secret, it is difficult for a person to reward someone for voting in a certain way.

4. Finally, it would be helpful to devise test situations that can be set up relatively easily under different conditions such as in different schools. This would make possible a more extensive study than would otherwise be the case.

For the purposes of this study, four test situations were devised. All of the situations were designed for use with fourth, fifth, and sixth grade pupils in school.

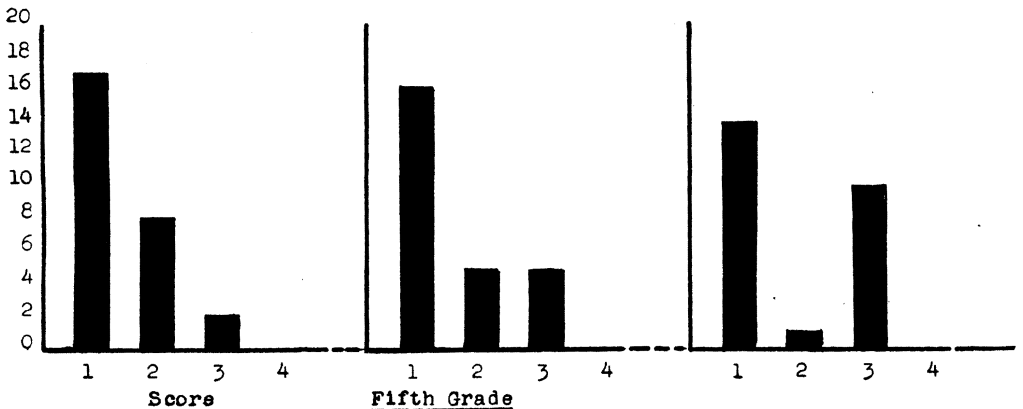
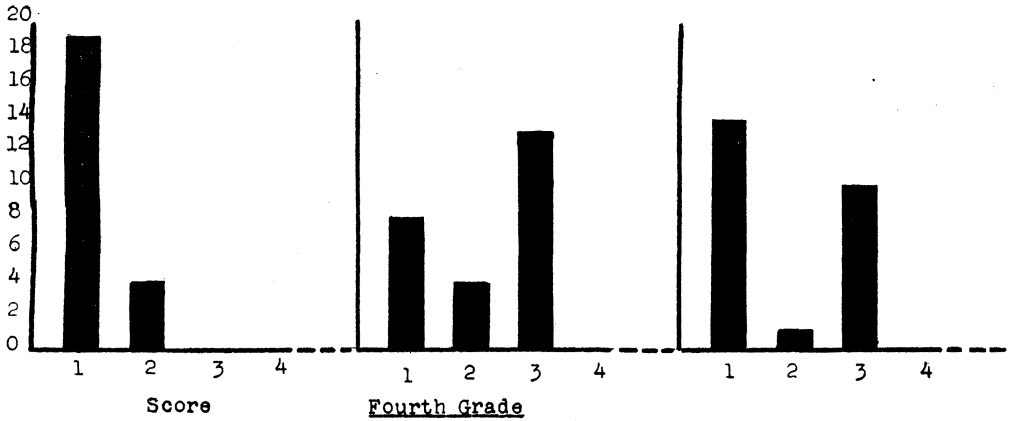
TEST I.

The first situation involves what is known as the class council. The entire class meets once a week to formulate rules and to consider rule violations and other problems involving class members. We selected those situations in the council in which some issue was put to a vote. After the issue had been brought to a focus, that is, had been rather clearly defined so that everyone knew what the issue was, the pupils were asked to write their decisions on a ballot provided for this purpose. They were also asked to indicate the reason for their decision.

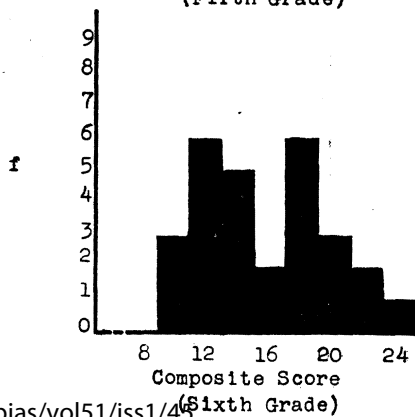
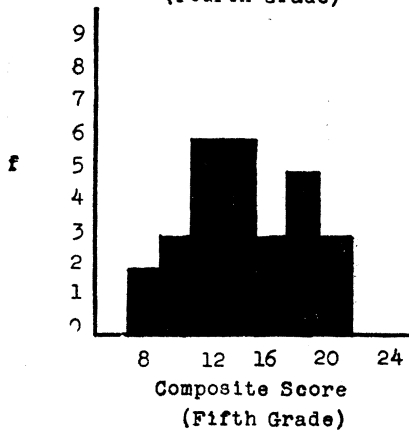
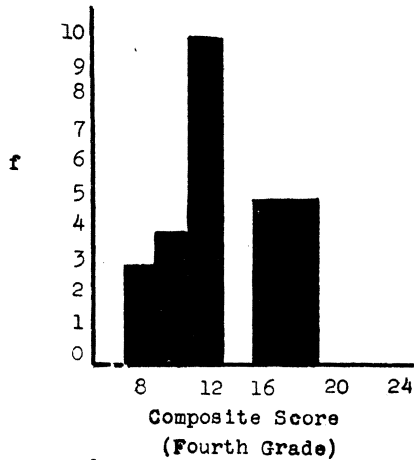
The purpose of this "why" question is not to reveal the motive prompting the decision—it is not a "why" question in this sense—but rather to see what meaning the decision has for the child, that is, does he vote for something that he thinks will help the children involved, does he vote for something that is traditional as when he says, "We did it this way before", or does he vote for something implying hostile criticism.

The responses were scored in the following manner: If consideration were given to the personalities involved, it would imply a recognition by the child that there are many factors involved in a given form of behavior and that there are large individual differences, and that it is necessary to consider these differences before attempting to change the behavior. Thus the highest score would be assigned to a response that suggested the child has taken into account *individual* differences and differences in circumstances. The lowest score would

DEMOCRACY TEST I



DEMOCRACY TEST



be assigned to responses which do not consider the person affected, but are in the nature of appeal to tradition, hostile criticism, or some rule of thumb procedure.

TEST II.

The second test situation is carried out in the art class. It is designed to test whether a pupil, when not subjected to any adult pressure, will think of the effects of his behavior on others to the extent that he will clean up and leave things, which he knows a subsequent class will use, in such a condition that the next class can start without delay. He is told that he is to leave things in condition for the next class. If a child asks what he should do, he is told to do as he likes. There were no punishments, verbal or otherwise, if a child left a place dirty. (The experimenter actually cleaned up the places left in disorder).

TEST III

The third situation consisted in determining the extent of compliance with proposals voted on in class council and the extent of carrying out responsibilities that had been given the child at a council meeting, such as being given the duties of hall monitor, librarian, etc.

TEST IV

The fourth test was designed as follows: It was indicated by experimenter that there had been some talk about having a class picnic or party. Then each pupil was asked to tell how the plans for the event should be decided. He was asked to answer three questions:

1. Who should be consulted?
2. How should the arrangements be decided?
3. Who should make the arrangements?

The score was based on answers to the first two questions. If the child suggested that all the class, teacher, and parents, be consulted democratically, he received the highest score. This test is based on the idea that when something is planned which affects many people and these people are all equally informed, the democratic procedure is to give everyone involved, disliked as well as liked, a vote. This test does *not* assume that if there are wide differences in tested knowledge in a group of people, the uninformed as well as the informed have equal weight in the decision.

There will not be time to consider the results of each of the tests individually. We can best demonstrate the general nature of the results and at the same time explain the special learning program which was attempted by examining the results of the first test mentioned. Data are shown in the first set of graphs, from three applications of this test in grades four, five and six before any experimental program of redirecting behavior along democratic lines was attempted. It will be recalled that this test involves the decisions made at a class council and the meaning that the decisions have for the child. The possible

scores ranged from one to five dependent upon the extent of analysis of the problem in terms of individual differences and individual circumstances, as revealed in the recommendations made for handling the problem, i.e., whether suggestions were made for helping the child, or whether he voted for the application of some rule of thumb procedure that had been previously used without consideration of the effect on the individual personalities involved.

It is clear from inspection of these graphs that the behavior of these subjects is predominantly undemocratic. In most of the cases, the subjects voted for punishment as payment (e.g. "they should stay in for three recesses") or punishment as censure (e.g., "he ought to know there is a rule"), or punishment as appeal to precedent (e.g., "we did it this way last year.") without inquiring into the causes of the behavior or the effect on the individuals involved.

An analysis of this behavior suggests that it is produced in some such way as the following. Children at these ages are interested in and enjoy taking part in formulating group rules, considering rule violations and other forms of behavior that disturb them. The ordinary motives seem to be operating, and it is not the motive but the method chosen that is at fault. That is, they seem to choose the undemocratic method not so much because they are emotionally disturbed but because they are adopting a cultural pattern. These children are attempting to solve problems of human relations in the same way as do many of their parents, teachers, and neighbors. In this sense our culture is fundamentally undemocratic.

If this analysis is correct, then it should be possible to change this behavior by making the subjects familiar with and giving them satisfying practice in a democratic method of dealing with human behavior. This is essentially what we have attempted in this experiment. Instead of following the cultural pattern of considering a disturbing form of behavior in its overt form only and choosing some arbitrary punishment, such as staying in five recesses or missing three activity periods, we may suggest that they try out the plan of looking into the causes of such behavior and attempt to work out a plan which will help the person to choose a more socially acceptable form of expression of whatever needs are underlying the behavior.

For example, in the experimental group in which we are trying out such a redirection of behavior, the problem of talking out of turn was relatively acute at one time. Instead of voting that each person who talks without waiting for recognition from the chairman be forced to leave the room, or to keep still for three sessions, or stay after school, it was suggested to the class that they consider why the problem arose. This discussion brought out several interesting suggestions. Some pupils pointed out that the chairman does not call on them when they ask for recognition, some of the pupils who had previously been chairmen of the group pointed out that some members of the class do not contribute good ideas or do not stay on the topic, and others noted that often there isn't time for each one to get his say and the bolder pupils talk without waiting for recognition, and so on. The discussion finally resulted in suggestions of improved procedures

on the part of the chairman, the use of an assistant when the discussion is lively, and suggestions to give pupils when they talk off the point.

Similarly, a discussion of misbehaving—indulging in horseplay, wasting time—in the art class resulted in suggestions by classmembers of measures that would motivate the class and help them direct their energies to more constructive ends.

We are at present in the midst of the training program. The results to date seem to indicate that the elementary school level is not too early to apply direct influences for changing the cultural pattern from a relatively undemocratic one to one more definitely democratic.

IOWA CHILD WELFARE RESEARCH STATION
IOWA CITY IOWA