

PRIMARY GROUPS AND PUNISHMENT-BASED CONTROL  
IN AN ORGANIZATION: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY\*

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The conventional theory suggests that primary groups among the dissatisfied participants in an organization tend to decrease the compliance of the participants. But the present study found in a Nationalist Chinese Air Police company that primary groups among the dissatisfied actually increase the compliance. An explanation of the conflicting finding will be discussed.

The General Problem

The significance of primary groups in organizational study is well known. The authors of The American Soldiers (1949) found in tactical units that the direct identification with the total symbols of the military organization as a whole, of the state, or of the political cause in the name of which a war was fought, was relatively unimportant as contrasted with the feelings of strength and security in the military primary groups and loyalty to one's immediate comrades. Such feelings contributed greatly to the combat effectiveness of individual soldiers (see also Shils, 1950; Goodacre 1951; Grinker and Spiegel, 1963; Janowitz and Little, 1965). A positive relation between primary groups and organizational effectiveness has also been found in many industrial situations (hare, 1962:254-255, 263, 375, 390).

There are, however, situations in which primary groups may decrease organizational effectiveness. The authors of The American Soldier also observed that high cohesive groups with norms which were contradictory to official orders led to widespread deviation from orders (1949:411). Seashore (1945) concluded in his extensive study of industrial work groups that high cohesive groups differed more frequently and in greater amount than low cohesive groups from the plant norms. These deviations are toward both higher and lower productivity. The seemingly conflicting findings suggest that the relationship between primary groups and effectiveness is not a simple one.

The fact that cohesive groups are more capable of either supporting or resisting the formal organization has been explained in literature. As Adam (1953) suggests, the cohesive group may provide a minimum amount of socio-

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emotional activity which is necessary for improving communication, maintaining group unity, or resisting hardship. Homans adds that cohesive groups tend to produce a positive surplus, a margin of safety in the qualities the group needs for survival, and that this surplus may be used not simply to maintain the existing adaptation of the group to its environment but to achieve a new and better adaptation (1951:271-272). Cohesive groups, however, may decide that they can better adapt by either supporting or resisting the formal organization of which they are a part.

Seashore (1954) also has offered an explanation for the direction of group action in his study of industrial groups. He suggests that cohesive groups tend to move in a pro-leadership direction if the formal leadership is "supportive" to its subordinates or is able to gratify certain "needs" of its subordinates (reward power). In their study of German army, Shils and Janowitz (1948) also emphasized the importance of satisfying certain strong needs of soldiers in their primary groups by the formal leaders. George (1967) made a similar suggestion in his study of the Chinese Communist army.<sup>1</sup> However, the present author found in a Nationalist Chinese Air Police (AP) company, in which leaders relied on punishment-based control and could not gratify the strong needs of the enlisted men, the participation in high-cohesion primary groups actually increased the compliance of the enlisted men. The need-gratification (reward-based) hypothesis may not apply to a punishment-based organization.

The primary groups in the AP company were generally comparable to the cohesive groups described in the literature. The group members showed a high level of emotional attachments and tended to make the group relationship an end in itself. Their attachments were reflected in the fact that they were quite willing to help and concern themselves with each other at their own costs and without consciously expecting returns.<sup>2</sup> But the nature of formal control in the AP company was different. The AP company was a peace time unit consisting of mostly unwilling draftees in a harsh military environment. The leaders in the company could find no way to placate their subordinates. They relied heavily on the use of the threat of punishment to enforce their orders. The lives in the combat units described in the literature were also harsh. But the leaders in these units were able to gratify their subordinates' most important need of survival because such a need was frequently consistent with the formal goal of destroying the enemy. The military combat units were no doubt more likely to be reward-based than the AP company reviewed in this study. It is even clearer that the industrial organizations are basically reward-based.

Primary groups are related to the punishment-based control because group participation tends to either inhibit or amplify certain emotions or motives generally found among individuals under the threat of punishment. An best-fit-to-data explanation of this relation will be outlined in the following.

The threat tends to generate both fear and anger among the threatened. Anger may lead to resistance, but it may also be inhibited by fear when the threatened feels that (1) he is under constant surveillance, (2) the punishment for disobedience would be definitely undesirable, and (3) he has no chance to overthrow or escape from the control of the authority. He will obey when he feels it is hopeless to resist.<sup>3</sup>

An individual with inhibited anger still has the self-interest of seeing someone else challenge or hurt the coercive authority even though he himself does not dare to do so. But he would prefer not to see these to whom he is

emotionally attached take the risk; the altruistic consideration of the safety of one's close friends may suppress the interest in seeing his friends challenge the authority. Therefore, participants of primary groups tend to persuade each other to play safe and comply with the demands of the coercive authority. However, such persuasion will happen only when the participants feel that there is little hope in resisting. Before the threat is high enough, primary group participants may consider challenging the authority as more to gain than to risk for all of them, and may resist collectively.

### Methodology

All the data were collected in the AP company. The company was stationed in a large city in Taiwan and was under the command of both the Air Force Headquarters and the Military Police Headquarters. Its major duties were to guard some important military bases and occasionally important government officials. The company consisted of five to seven officers, 30 to 38 professional sergeants, and 32 to 45 draftees. The present paper will include only the 58 draftees who served in the company at least part of the eight months of this study.

The author was a vice-platoon leader and acted as the operational officer who operated the whole company in one out of every two to four weeks. He relied mainly on the method of participant observation in his data collection.<sup>4</sup> As an officer, he had difficulties in gaining the trust of many of the men.<sup>4</sup> Fortunately, the draftees in the company were relatively easy to approach. Draftees traditionally felt close to a "draftee officer" like this author. Draftee officers are usually sympathetic and not inclined to use punishment. They also are able to communicate with draftee enlisted men with ease because of their similar backgrounds.<sup>5</sup> This author tried to show his sympathy as often as he could. He even ventured to challenge some official rules and his own superiors in order to protect the men. As a result, he became quite close to many of the draftees. They spent their off-duty time chatting with him; they discussed many sensitive topics, e.g., their feelings toward disliked officers in the company; they kidded the author on many occasions as they did others of equal rank; and several of them even kept contacts with him long after he left the army.

The relative close relation between this author and his subjects has reduced the distortion of the author's role as an officer to a manageable level. He felt confident in estimating this distortion and, therefore, the nondistorted phenomena. His confidence was increased by the general consistency among information from different individuals and among different types of data, e.g., observation, interviews, official records, and questionnaires. It was also very helpful that this author had a considerable amount of knowledge about the lives of draftees and the Chinese army in general before he joined the AP company.

Two sociometric tests were also given, one at the beginning of the second month and one at the beginning of the sixth month. The two tests, combined with observations and interviews, are used to measure each soldier's involvement in primary relations. A dual-question questionnaire was made use of in the tests:

1. With whom would you like to be in the same squad?
2. Whom would you like to have as your reading partner(s) (in the "Four Books" class)?

The questions were made with a consideration of the particular circumstances in the company. The author taught a course on Confucius' "Four Books" which is a part of the routine training program for all the privates and sergeants in the military police units. The draftees were allowed to choose their own study partners and were organized into self-chosen groups. If one of a group failed in a weekly examination, the whole group would lose their off-days for two weeks. Names of seven to nine unpopular personalities were purposely announced as "good readers," according to the previous examinations. All the rest were emphasized as "lousy." Since test results had never been announced before, this announcement was the only objective information the draftees had concerning good readers. Therefore, anyone who chose his friend was facing the threat of losing his off-days. Since the loss of off-days was uniformly felt by draftees as an important loss, the draftee had to have a more-than-moderate amount of emotional attachment to his friend if he chose a friend. This is the rationale behind the second question of choosing study partners in the questionnaire.

The test arrangement just discussed was the best the author could do under all the restrictions of the circumstances. The results of the question turned out to be highly consistent with observational and interview data, and is an acceptable indicator of primary-group relations.

The first question of choosing the squad fellows was based on the assumption that soldiers would like to choose as their squad fellows the comrades they were fond of because they will have to share much of their daily lives with their squad fellows. This question failed to indicate the primary relations since marginal men also made their first and second choices.

The best measure of primary group involvement seems to be the combination of the two questions, however. If a draftee chose good reader(s) as study partners, but picked different persons as his squad fellows, his choice was apparently nonemotional or instrumental. On the other hand, a highly attached group member who had chosen his (bad-reader) friend(s) as a study partner(s) must also like to have his friend(s) in the same squad with him. Thirty-four draftees were identified as having primary relations with others, and the other 23 were low attached.

## Findings

### A. A Coercive Organization

The leaders in the AP company relied heavily on the use of punishment to induce compliance. They punished an average of one to two draftees every day, and the punishment ranged from carrying a few hours of extra work to being jailed for one month. More important, all the draftees understood that the leaders could always increase the severity of punishment to an almost indefinite degree until their orders were obeyed. One soldier interviewed states,

...In case of more serious crimes, such as insulting a superior or disobeying in the performance of duties, a soldier may be court martialed. He may be sentenced to several years or even life in prison if he is not very lucky.

In saying this, the individual quoted was expressing what most, if not all, draftees understood and feared. The threat of punishment was very high.

The company also had a carefully designed "check system" which was performed by the 13 to 15 officers and squad leaders with the assistance of five to six senior professional sergeants. One of the officers or sergeants would check the activities of all the draftees on guard every 10 to 15 minutes, 24 hours a day. The officers and squad leaders who lived and worked closely with the draftees under them also watched the draftees' off-duty activities. The draftees had little chance of doing anything wrong without being caught.

The compliance of the draftees was generally high enough to perform the company's duties well. Almost all the draftees obeyed unquestioningly even though they felt the routine of standing at their posts for six to eight hours a day in perfect military manner, plus a few hours of training and irregular work, were extremely boring and tiresome. Their high compliance can be seen in the fact that they usually were punished for only some minor reasons, e.g., a bronze button on a uniform not polished well or a uniform not ironed properly.

The high threat of punishment was no doubt a major cause of the compliance. In a field test, the author tried to minimize the use of punishment in favor of the use of warnings and counseling. His actions represented a slight decrease in the threats. As an immediate result, he became a popular figure among the draftees. On the other hand, the deviant rate of the draftees increased from about 40 cases per month to around 55 in the next month and a half according to the official records, the operational officer's diary. The number of deviant cases had been rather stable during the previous year due to the relatively stable task structures and the deviance-detecting system. In a brief counting of the cases in the previous year, the author found that the number of cases steadily fell between 34 to 45 each month. It is safe to assume that 46 cases or more represents a significant increase. The increase in the third and fourth months can be seen in Table I. The deviant rate dropped back to normal after the author ended his field test in the middle of the fourth month.

The increase in the number of deviant cases during the field test tells only part of the story. The leaders also found many cases of more serious offenses, such as napping on the posts or leaving the base unauthorized. These offenses were rare in the company's previous records.

## B. Primary Group and Compliance

In the repressive organization of the AP company, the compliance of primary-group participants was clearly higher than that of the low-attached individuals. This author examined the officially recorded deviant cases in 38 days in the second and third months of this study, and in another 38 days in the sixth and seventh months, and he found that the low-attached were consistently more than twice as likely to violate official orders as the highly attached (see Table II). The fact that the statistical difference remains significant over two different periods of time should reduce the chances that the difference is simply a statistical accident. It also means that the organizational changes over the time span did not alter the difference between primary groups and low-attached individuals. More important, half of the earlier group were replaced in the later months, and the new replacements were considerably different from the earlier group: the later group were at least high school graduates, but the earlier group had an average of one and a half years of formal education less than the later group; the later group were more likely to be from urban origins; some of the earlier group were from families of Taiwanese origins, but all the later group were from mainland families; and all the later replacements were selected and trained by the

Air Force, not the Army as were the earlier groups. The two groups were even visibly different. The later were notably heavier and taller and acted livelier. Despite the differences, the lower deviant rates for primary groups remained significant in both of the groups.

The above difference between primary groups and low-attached individuals is far more significant than the number of recorded deviance indicates. The low-attached also accounted for almost all of the most serious cases of deviance, e.g., napping on the posts, leaving the base unauthorized, taking free taxi rides from a remote post back to the barracks, and arguing with a squad leader. The primary group participants usually were punished for unintentional minor mistakes.

The reviewed need-gratification hypothesis apparently does not apply to the findings just described. According to this hypothesis, primary groups should decrease, not increase, the compliance of the draftees because these draftees did not feel that they were properly rewarded in the company or the military. None of them liked their boring and tiresome work. They also felt that the highly repressive military command was unbearable. Some bitterly complained that the two (or more) years of service disrupted their plans (most of them had plans to go to college), and their pay was about eight times lower than that of a low-skilled worker in the civilian society. The author simply never found a satisfied draftee throughout his tour of service. Among 28 draftees thoroughly questioned on related subjects, 14 said that the military life was, without any doubt, undesirable, but they could adjust to it; 8 said that it was highly undesirable and difficult to adjust to; 6 reported that it was unbearable and that they were suffering very much. There was no notable difference between primary groups and low-attached individuals in their dissatisfaction.

A large amount of data collected by this author generally support the alternate hypothesis that primary-group participants tend to persuade each other to comply with a highly repressive leadership. The evidence will be discussed in the following.

As mentioned earlier, the draftees' anger toward the repressive command and the deprivative nature of military lives were very much inhibited. But they still like to see someone else challenge the command even though they themselves dared not. Their self-interest in seeing others challenge the authority could be seen in the fact that draftees always rewarded the ones who dared with high prestige and other favors. In one of the instances, all the five draftees elected to positions in several monthly "honor and solidarity meetings," the only semi-democratic situation in their military lives, were well-known deviants. In the votings, each of the five deviants received votes from two-thirds or more of all the draftees. The deviants were heroes.

However, primary-group participants tended to take the safety of each other into their immediate concerns. This concern usually suppressed the draftees' self-interests in seeing others within primary groups challenge the hated command. Therefore, they would persuade each other not to take any "hopeless" and "senseless" risks. Such persuasions actually happened in the primary groups in the AP company. A draftee, Chai, once voluntarily stated in a long conversation with the author:

..Lu [his kou-mer (or buddy)] always gets into trouble because he likes to argue with our squad leader. I always try to convince him that we won't be here forever; why can't he just be patient and get through the two years of service happily?...They [squad leaders] don't really care if you can take it or not; they would make your life as miserable as you can imagine...Only a fool will do things like that [only a fool will fight the squad leaders]... He [Lu] agreed with me but sometimes he still can't control his temper.

The persuasion to keep a friend out of trouble is evident in this passage. It is also clear that Chai persuaded his kou-mer because of his emotional attachments to his kou-mer. As Chai added,

...If I didn't really care for him, I wouldn't bother to repeat this kind of talk like an old mother...I never talked to any other in this way.

The author talked to Lu, Chai's kou-mer, on the same day. Lu stated his own experience.

...Everybody knows what will happen if you get smart [challenge the authority] here. A real friend is the one who tries to hold you back [from challenging the authority]...Chai was right. I am pretty sure that he has helped me a lot. If I didn't know Chai, I might have been jailed for many times [because I like to argue with my squad leader].

Lu's past behavior was consistent with the interview data. According to the officers in the company, Lu was a known rebel in the company long before this author joined them, and he was charged for "unwilling to obey" three times in the first month after this author's arrival. But Lu received no such charges in the later months. Lu was no doubt one of the most changed rebels in the company.

Two other primary groups, one of two draftees and another of three, also have provided similar type of data. In one of the two groups, the participants reported that they seldom openly discussed the problem, but they had clear understandings that they wanted each other to play safe and to comply with the leaders' demands.

The author questioned another 12 draftees, six highly attached and six low-attached, about "what are some reasons for draftees to disobey their superiors?" In the long discussions with the author, the low-attached draftees clearly showed more uninhibited anger toward their superiors than the highly attached ones did. More importantly, all the highly attached clearly tied their primary relations into their own behavior of compliance when the author asked that they give concrete examples. For example, draftee Laing described that once he refused to help a fellow draftee to shirk work. The refused person got angry and called Laing "the operative officer's walking dog." Laing's kou-mer was there at that moment and was about to beat up this person. Laing had to try hard to hold his kou-mer back. Laing's kou-mer also told Laing, "if they want to risk it, that is their business. They don't have any right to let

us die [get caught] for them." In this example, we can see that a primary group not only may make its participants to comply, but may also resist outside pressure toward disobedience. In another example, a highly attached draftee stated,

If you keep your mouth shut when an old sergeant, professional sergeant shouts at you, some fellows might think that you lost face. But your real friends won't think that way...That is very important to me. You don't feel had if you know that your friends are on your side.

It is highly significant that none of the low-attached draftees gave any example indicating that any friend persuaded him to comply with the formal command, even after the author pushed them hard for more and more concrete examples. Many of them, for example, were concerned about the ways their squad leaders insulted or threatened them in front of their squad fellows and made them uncontrollably angry. But they never mentioned that their squad fellows had helped them to withhold their anger. The sharp distinction between the six low-attached and the six highly attached may be explained by the fact that they were among the most highly attached and the least attached in the company.

There is also evidence that individuals may persuade close friends in primary groups to play safe while trying to force others to risk. This may be seen in a warning system developed among the draftees. Draftees who guarded the posts frequently warned other guards with a phone call whenever they saw an officer or sergeant coming to check on them. The operator in the operational officer's office also would give an early warning if he saw a sergeant or officer walking toward the posts. Protected by such a system, they could relax on posts, write letters, or listen to transistor radios. The leaders caught and severely punished three draftees who warned others and made many draftees hesitate to continue the warning system. The draftees began to sanction whoever hesitated by calling them insulting names, e.g., the operative officer's dog, the Commander's big son, and so forth. In a period of three weeks, this author has caught three draftees who had repeatedly urged their close friends to play safe, but called others the insulting names. Apparently these draftees would persuade each other to comply only within their primary groups. Their forcing others to take risks reflects the predominance of self-interests outside of primary groups.

Many primary groups were involved in the deviant warning system because the system benefited all of them. However, the primary groups seemed to become more cautious and more able to resist outside pressure when the risks of warning others became high. An important fact was that primary groups continued to be less likely to deviate in the later months when the warning system was popular among draftees (Table 2). As mentioned before, there were also concrete cases in which primary groups demonstrated their ability to resist the outside pressure toward deviance.

Primary groups also violated official rules on some other occasions. But they usually did so only when the threat of punishment was not severe. During the period of the field test of reducing the threat, different primary groups left the barracks to buy ice cream cones or drinks. The field test was the only period in which primary groups were found committing more serious disobedience. The primary groups also tended to violate some loosely enforced orders about as often as low-attached individuals. For example, kou-mers



might stay up late chatting with each other when they were supposed to be sleeping. They knew that leaders wouldn't do more than shout at them for such a minor violation. The finding suggested that primary groups would increase compliance as a reaction to the high threat of punishment.

The findings generally supported the argument that the altruistic nature of primary group tends to make its participants take into account each other's safety and well being in high threat situations. Therefore, the participants tend to persuade each other to comply with a highly coercive formal authority, and increase their compliance. The hypothesis may be strengthened by examining other plausible explanations. This author has considered many of such alternative explanations in reviewing his findings.

Following the conventional line of analysis, we may expect that primary group interactions tend to reduce the relative deprivation induced by the repressive command and undesirable military life. Therefore, primary-group participants may be more satisfied and have less desire to resist. This hypothesis was not highly supported because the author found no significant difference between primary-group participants and low-attached in regard to their (dissatisfactions).

Another alternate explanation of the findings of the higher deviance for low-attached individuals is that some draftees may have certain personality traits which make them fail to get along with either their fellow draftees or their superiors. Therefore, personality traits may have caused the correlation between marginality and disobedience. This explanation is also not very plausible. The AP company performed very important duties including more-than-infrequent operations to provide guards for President Chaing Kai-Shek. Hence, all the draftees in the company were carefully selected by the high command. All of them had proven themselves to be very obedient under a highly coercive command in at least their six months of basic training. They were unlikely to be habitual rebels. Moreover, many loners among the draftees also reported that they had close relationships with fellow soldiers in their basic training days. Few of them can be qualified as habitual loners. If these deviant-loners in the AP company indeed had certain traits which made them into deviant-loners, the chances would be small that they would be able to hide these traits in their long and rugged training and other military duties before they joined the AP company.

We also may consider the possibility that compliance may cause the difference in informal group participation, rather than the other way around. It is logical to suspect that some draftees may decide to stay away from the rebels in order to avoid unnecessary troubles with their superiors. This is unlikely, however. The leaders in the company had shown no intention to harass the friends of rebels as long as the friends weren't rebels themselves. More important, some rebels were very popular personalities in the company. Although they failed to establish primary relations with their fellow draftees, they never had difficulty in finding willing companions in their leisure time. Apparently most draftees would not be afraid of associating themselves with any rebel in the company. In general, the author could not find a well-supported alternate hypothesis.

## Conclusion

The conventional theory suggests that primary groups among discontented participants in an organization tends to decrease the compliance or effectiveness of the participants. But the present study found in a Nationalist Chinese Air Police company that primary groups among the discontented actually increase the compliance. The suggested explanation of the conflicting finding is that the conventional theory is applicable in explaining reward-based organizations, but not the coercive organization such as the AP company. The high threat of punishment exercised by the formal authority tends to make the high-attached members of primary group be concerned themselves with each other's safety. They tend to persuade each other to play safe and to comply with the leadership demands.

The present study is claimed to be suggestive, not definitive. The study of a punishment-based organization is particularly difficult. Usually the authority in the organization (or frequently the authority in the large society) do not like to see anyone study the ways they coerce people under their control. On the other hand, the threatened individuals are often highly reluctant to offer honest information. Social scientists still do not know how to overcome these difficulties easily. Any study of a punishment-based organization is likely to be suggestive at the present. However, the hypothesis suggested in this study may be tested in any peace-time, non-voluntary, army, or a prison, or any other coercive organization.

## Footnotes

1. This is the same direction toward which individuals tend to move according to the students of "human-relation" leadership (Mayo, 1946; Homans, 1947; Berelson and Steiner, 1964:374-375). However, groups tend to do more than individuals in any direction they choose.
2. The altruistic nature of the primary group is frequently described in literature. A clear example is suggested by two eminent psychiatrists, Roy Grinker and John P. Spiegel. In summarizing their work with the Air Force, they made this statement on primary groups: "The men seem to be fighting more for someone than against somebody" (cited from Janowitz and Little, 1965: 77).
3. A large number of psychological studies on punishment have been reviewed in Berkowitz (1962) and Gurr (1970).
4. It was particularly difficult for the author to interview the professional sergeants who traditionally looked down on the resented, the green reserve officers.
5. A typical reserve officer is only two to three years older than draftees, and he has about four years formal education more than his subordinates. In the case of the AP company, the officers and most of the draftees were so-called "mainlanders," the more recent immigrants from the Chinese mainland.

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Table 1

## Deviance of All Draftees by Month

	1st mo.	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th
Number of Cases Recorded*	40	38	55	49	35	41	45	41

\*Based on the official records in the operative officer's diary. Forty-six or more cases is regarded as a significant increase. See the text for justification.

Table 2

## Deviance by all Draftees by Group Participation

## I. 38 Non-consecutive Days in the 2nd and the 3rd Month.

	a. No. of Deviant Cases	b. No. of Draftees in Company	c. Average Deviance a/b Per Draftee
High Attached Group Member	15	18	.83
Low Attached and Marginal Men	36	17	2.11
	51	35	1.46

$t = 1.91$  Df = 33  
significant at .05 level (one tail test).

## II. 38 Days in the 6th and 7th Month.

High Attached Group Member	24	28	.86
Low Attached and Marginal Men	29	12	2.41
	54	40	1.35

$t = 2.5$  Df = 38  
significant at .0 level (one tail test).