

Bruce W. Tuckman – forming, storming norming and performing in groups



Bruce W. Tuckman – forming, storming norming and performing in groups. Bruce W. Tuckman produced one of the most quoted models of group development in the 1960s. We consider his contribution and the model's continuing use.

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Bruce Wayne Tuckman (1938-) is probably best known for a short article – ‘Developmental sequence in small groups’ first published in 1965. However, the vast bulk of his published work has been concerned more broadly with educational research and educational psychology. Tuckman’s book *Conducting Educational Research* (first published in 1972) has gone through five editions and his *Theories and Applications of Educational Psychology* (first published in 1996) is now in its third edition. Currently Bruce W. Tuckman directs the Academic Learning Lab at Ohio State University (from 1998). Previously he had been a Professor of Educational Psychology at Florida State University (1983-98). From 1965 to 1978 he held a variety of posts at Rutgers University before moving to the City University of New York. Currently Bruce W. Tuckman’s scholarly interest focuses on motivation: ‘its manifestation in the form of *self-regulatory behavior*, and its absence in the form of *procrastination*, particularly as applied to the behavior of studying’ (Tuckman 2003) . He is concerned with exploring the links between motivational factors and school achievement; and interventions that enhance the self-regulatory behaviour of students (such as goal setting, planning, and incentives). Bruce W. Tuckman gained his Bachelor of Science from Renesselaer Polytechnic Institute in 1960, his Masters in Psychology from Princeton in 1962 and his PhD in 1963. He has also written a novel *The Long Road to Boston* (1988).

Forming, storming, norming and performing – developmental sequence in groups

Even a quick glance at the literature of group development reveals a wide range of theoretical models concerning developmental processes. Most commentators assume that groups go through a number of phases or stages if

they exist for an extended period. It is clear, for example, that people tend to want to know something about the other members; have to develop a degree of interdependence in order that the group or team may achieve its tasks and be satisfying to its members; and has to learn at some level to deal with conflict if it is to survive. The most influential model of the developmental process – certainly in terms of its impact upon texts aimed at practitioners – has been that of Bruce W. Tuckman (1965). While there are various differences concerning the number of stages and their names – many have adopted a version of Tuckman’s model – forming, storming, norming and performing. He was later to add a fifth stage – adjourning (Tuckman and Jensen 1977). To begin we will look at his original formulation.

The initial four-stage model evolved out of Bruce W. Tuckman’s observations of group behaviour in a variety of settings and his encounter with the literature. After completing his doctorate Tuckman had worked with the industrial psychology lab at Princeton and then went on to undertake research on small-group and organizational behaviour as a Research Psychologist (GS-12) at the Naval Medical Research Institute, Bethesda MD. (1963-65). At this point he argued that groups were likely to go through four distinct stages as they come to together and begin to function. These phases or stages might well be recognized in some way by participants – but there may only be a limited consciousness of the changes and their implications. The obvious implication was that if people could develop a better appreciation of the processes surrounding group development then it would be possible to enhance group effectiveness and functioning. Bruce W. Tuckman describes the process as follows:

My first professional job was as part of a small group of social psychologists in a think tank setting studying small group behavior as the US Navy prepared for a future of small crew vessels and stations. Nine of us at the Naval Medical Research Institute were busy studying small groups from all perspectives and under all conditions. I was fortunate to have an experienced and talented boss by the name of Irwin Altman, who had been collecting every article he could find on group development. He turned his collection over to me and suggested that I look it over and see if I could make anything out of it.

The collection contained 50 articles, many of which were psychoanalytic studies of therapy or T-groups. The task of organizing and integrating them was challenging. After separating out two realms of group functioning, namely, the interpersonal or group structure realm and the task activity realm, I began to look for a developmental sequence that would fit the findings of a majority of the studies. I hit on four stages going from (1) orientation/testing/dependence, to (2) conflict, to (3) group cohesion, to (4) functional role-relatedness. For these I coined the terms: ‘forming,’ ‘storming,’ ‘norming,’ and ‘performing’ (Tuckman 1984)

This is how Tuckman described the stages in the original article:

Groups initially concern themselves with orientation accomplished primarily through testing. Such testing serves to identify the boundaries of both interpersonal and task behaviors. Coincident with testing in the interpersonal realm is the establishment of dependency relationships with leaders, other group members, or pre-existing standards. It may be said that orientation, testing and dependence constitute the group process of forming.

The second point in the sequence is characterized by conflict and polarization around interpersonal issues, with concomitant emotional responding in the task sphere. These behaviors serve as resistance to group influence and task requirements and may be labeled as storming.

Resistance is overcome in the third stage in which in-group feeling and cohesiveness develop, new standards evolve, and new roles are adopted. In the task realm, intimate, personal opinions are expressed. Thus, we have the stage of norming.

Finally, the group attains the fourth and final stage in which interpersonal structure becomes the tool of task activities. Roles become flexible and functional, and group energy is channeled into the

task. Structural issues have been resolved, and structure can now become supportive of task performance. This stage can be labeled as performing. (Tuckman 1965 – page 78 in the 2001 reprint)

So it was that the influential model was formulated. As Bruce W. Tuckman has noted these terms would come to be commonly used to describe developing groups for the following 20 years and their character probably accounted for the paper's popularity.

A fifth stage – adjourning

In 1977 Bruce W. Tuckman proposed an update of the model (in collaboration with Mary Ann Jensen). He has subsequently commented:

We reviewed 22 studies that had appeared since the original publication of the model and which we located by means of the Social Sciences Citation Index. These articles, one of which dubbed the stages the 'Tuckman hypothesis' tended to support the existence of the four stages but also suggested a fifth stage for which a perfect rhyme could not be found. We called it 'adjourning'. (Tuckman 1984)

Adjourning involves dissolution. It entails the termination of roles, the completion of tasks and reduction of dependency (Forsyth 1990: 77). Some commentators have described this stage as 'mourning' given the loss that is sometimes felt by former participants. The process can be stressful – particularly where the dissolution is unplanned (*ibid.*: 88). In many respects Tuckman and Jensen's addition of 'adjourning' was less an extension of the model, more an after word. The original article was written from the perspective of the functioning group, the fifth 'stage' takes us beyond that.

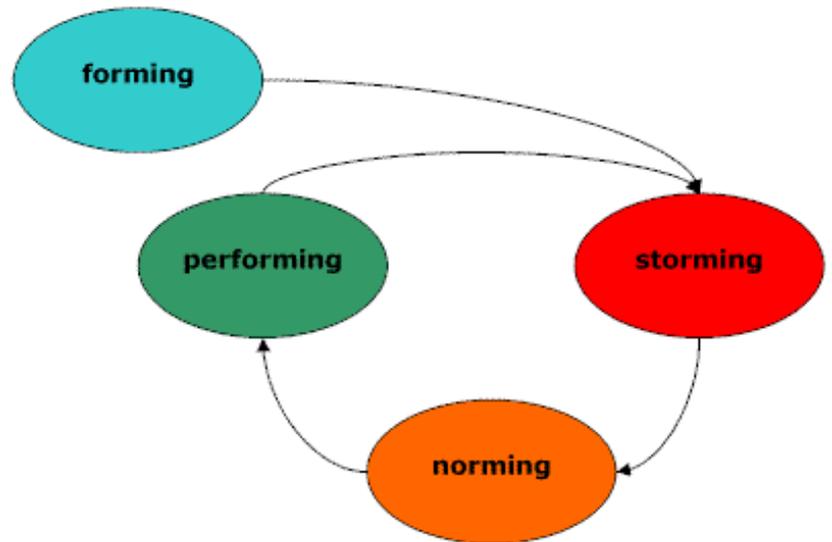
Assessment

Several things need saying about Bruce W. Tuckman's model. First, it can be subjected to a more general critique of stage theory (which is discussed elsewhere with regard to [life span development](#)). The sheer scale of such theory – by seeking to present a universal or general picture can mean it over-reaches itself. While there may be some 'universals of development' when we come to examine, in this case, the individual group things are rarely that straightforward. Human processes are frequently characterised by variability and flux. Furthermore, our own experiences of groups are likely to show significant deviations from the path laid out by stage theories. 'Stages' may be missed out, other ways of naming a phase or experiences may be more appropriate.

Second, we need to explore the robustness of the actual categories. There is some overlap between the different stages in Bruce W. Tuckman's model – the demarcation is not that clear-cut. For example, 'when group conflict is waning... feelings of cohesion may be increasing, but these time-dependent changes do not occur in a discontinuous, steplike sequence' (Forsyth 1990: 89). However, the take-up of the model isn't simply a matter of some catchy titles. Many theorists and commentators have used the categories (often re-titled) with only marginal amendment.

Third, Bruce W. Tuckman's model is linear (sometimes described as 'successive-stage'). A number of other theorists have proposed cyclical models. An example of how this may occur comes from Bales (1965). He argued that group members tend to seek a balance between accomplishing the task and building interpersonal relationships in the group. At one point the focus will be on the former, at another on the latter. The result is, effectively, a movement between *norming* and *performing*. Below we have represented Tuckman's initial model in a way that follows the same phases but allows for issues recurring at different points in a group's life.

Fourth, there is a question of the extent to which the attractiveness of the labelling Bruce W. Tuckman adopted has contributed to unthinking application by trainers and a reading onto groups of the phases. This really isn't an issue with the formulation – rather how a nice turn of phrase can lead to laziness on the part of practitioners and trainers. Bruce W. Tuckman's model offers us a way of thinking about the groups we encounter and participate within in. It offers, in Donald Schön's terms a metaphor or image that we can play with to make sense of the phenomenon before us.



Conclusion

Bruce W. Tuckman's model of the developmental sequence in small groups has rightly been adopted as a helpful starting point about possible stages or phases within different small groups. When the original article was written it was an important summary of the existing literature – and its longevity reflects Tuckman's ability to categorize and synthesize – and to get it right. While there may be all sorts of debates around such approaches to stage theory, and around the need for a model that reflects the flux of groups, there does seem to be some truth in the assertion that small groups tend to follow a fairly predictable path.

Further reading and bibliography

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Links

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