
GROUP DYNAMICS: OVERVIEW

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Groups are and always will be essential to human life. Our primal ancestors protected themselves from dangerous animals, human enemies, and natural disasters by joining together in groups. Teams of workers in ancient civilizations combined their efforts to build dams, irrigation systems, and colossal monuments. Merchants and craftspeople formed guilds to organize business practices as early as 300 B.C. The Romans used groups extensively, organizing their complex society by means of military tribunes, legislative bodies, and trade associations. Religious rites, too, have traditionally been group activities (Zander, 1985; full citations can be found at www.richmond.edu/~dforsyth).

BUT WHY STUDY GROUPS? WHY DO GROUPS MATTER?

Why would you want to study groups? The answer is not complicated: Because groups are important, and important in many ways—scientifically, psychologically, sociologically, practically, personally.

1. Groups are also important scientifically. Scientists study so many aspects of the world, and it is ironic that they only began to turn their attention to themselves after they studied things like rocks, mountains, distant planets, and germs. Groups are more interesting than these natural phenomena--and more complicated. Groups are also more interesting than individuals: more powerful, more dynamic, more puzzling, more challenging to study (e.g., mobs, crowds, teams, juries, famous groups such as Bay of Pigs, Andes survivors). Groups are intrinsically interesting.

2. Groups are important, psychologically, for individuals' actions, thoughts, and emotions can't be understood without taking into consideration the groups they belong to and the groups that surround them. Human behavior is more often than not group behavior, so people can't be understood when cut apart from their groups (including their families, friendship cliques, work groups). Groups also have a profound impact on individuals; groups shape actions, thoughts, and feelings.

3. Groups are important at the sociological level. The dictionary that defines a society as an "organized system of individuals living as members of a community" is mistaken. A society is more than an organization of groups than individuals. All kinds of societies--hunting/gathering, horticultural, pastoral, industrial, and postindustrial--are defined by the characteristics of the small groups that comprise them. Societal forces, such as traditions, values, and norms, don't reach directly to individuals, but instead work through the groups to which each individual belongs.

4. Groups are also important for practical reasons. Much of the world's work is done by groups, so by understanding them we move toward making them more efficient. If we want to improve productivity in a factory, problem-solving in a boardroom, or learning in the classroom we must understand groups. Groups, too, hold the key to solving such societal problems as racism, sexism, and international conflict. Because groups are the building blocks of society any attempt to change society will succeed only if the groups within that society change.

5. Groups are personally important. You spend your entire life surrounded by and embedded in groups. Through membership in groups you define and confirm your values and beliefs and take on or refine a social identity. When you face uncertain situations, in groups you gain reassuring information about your problems and security in companionship. In groups you learn about relations with others, the type of impressions you make on others, and the way you can relate with other more effectively. Groups influence you in consequential ways, so you ignore their influence at your own risk. The corollary to the maxim "The unexamined life is not worth living" may well be "The unexamined group interaction is not worth repeating."

BUT WHAT IS GROUP, ANYWAY?

When scientific researchers encounter intriguing phenomena--a rarely seen species of spider, an illness unlike any other, a particle emitting atypical radiation--they often initiate their study by gathering as much circumstantial information as possible. Here we consider some commonplace groups and some extraordinary ones before offering a definition of the word *group*.

The Artists. The classicists dominated the world of art in 19th-century France. They favored religious and historical images and they belittled any painter who offered a contrasting perspective on artistic form and content. But a dedicated band of radical painters and artists eventually overwhelmed the classicists. Two founding members of the movement, Claude Monet and Camille Pissarro, met in 1860 and immediately became friends. Two years later, Edouard Manet and Edgar Degas joined them in their search for alternative forms of artistic expression. Later that year, Monet met Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Alfred Sisley, and Frédéric Bazille and persuaded them to join the clique.

The young artists worked together to develop a new approach to painting, often journeying into the countryside to paint landscapes. They sometimes painted side by side and patiently critiqued one another's work. They also met in cafés in Paris to discuss technique, subject matter, and artistic philosophies. Art critics rejected their approach for years, and the artists scarcely earned enough money to survive. But in time they were recognized by the art community as a new school of painting--the impressionists--and their paintings are now revered and worth millions of dollars (Farrell, 1982).

The Survivors. The rugby team's chartered plane crashed in clear weather on a snow-covered peak deep in the Andes Mountains. The crash survivors banded together, pooling their resources and skills to survive in the subzero temperatures. Each one was responsible for performing certain tasks. Some cleaned their sleeping quarters, some tended the injured, and others melted snow into drinking water. The captain of the team coordinated these activities until an avalanche killed him. Three cousins then stepped forward to take on the business of running the group's activities.

The group lived for weeks by eating the bodies of those who had died in the crash and avalanche, but when starvation seemed imminent, they sent two men down the mountain to seek help. The two walked for 14 days before they reached a small farm on the edge of the great mountain range. Their sudden appearance after 70 days was followed by a rescue operation that lifted the remaining 14 from the crash site. Those who had managed to stay alive later pointed out that "it was their combined efforts which saved their lives" (Read, 1974, p. 310).

The Jury. The 12 men and women began deliberating the case of *California v. Juan Corona* on January 11, 1973. The jurors spent considerable time discussing the evidence in general and clarifying among themselves the judge's instructions. The group moved painstakingly, reviewing each bit of evidence and insisting that all members state their views openly. Each day, too, as they left the courthouse for dinner and their hotel rooms, they passed by a crowd that supported the defendant. They also had to face his four young children, who were strategically placed where each juror would see them.

The jurors who believed that Corona was guilty gradually began to dominate the group's discussion. After spending hours examining evidence found at one particular grave, the jury concluded that Corona must have been the one who dug the grave. Receipts bearing Corona's name had been found in the grave, and one juror persuasively argued that since Corona never threw away receipts and the receipts had been still folded together when found, they must have fallen from his pocket when he was digging the hole. After eight days of argument, discussion, and debate, the group reached its conclusion: guilty (Villaseñor, 1977).

The Congregation. Jim Jones was a leader. His teaching influenced many, and membership in his church, The People's Temple Full Gospel Church, eventually swelled to 8000. Rumors of improprieties began circulating, however. Former members reported that at some meetings, those who had displeased Jones were severely beaten before the whole congregation, with microphones used to amplify their screams. Jones, some said, insisted on being called Father, and he demanded absolute dedication and obedience from his followers. Many members donated all their property to the church, and one couple even turned over their 6-year-old son on demand.

Jones moved the group to Guyana, in South America, where he established Jonestown. Press releases described the settlement as a utopian community, but rumors still circulated. Was Jonestown a utopia or a prison? Then disaster struck when church members attacked and killed members of a delegation from the United States. Jones, fearing the dismantling of his empire, ordered his followers to take their own lives. Authorities who first reached the settlement were met by a scene of unbelievable ghastliness. On Jones's orders, more than 900 men, women, and children had killed themselves. Jones's body lay near his chair, where he sat beneath the motto

"Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it" (Krause, 1978).

The Committee. President John F. Kennedy created the group because the issues at hand were so complex that they would have overwhelmed a single individual. He was reviewing the Central Intelligence Agency's plan to back an invasion of Cuba by 1400 anti-Castro exiles, but he didn't want to make the decision by himself. So the president gathered an elite group of political figures with years of experience in making important government decisions. The group met for many hours, and a strong feeling of mutual respect soon welded the group into a cohesive unit.

The group decided to approve the invasion, and they personally chose the site for the landing: an inlet on the southern side of Cuba called Bahía de Cochinos, the Bay of Pigs. But on the day of the invasion, little went according to plan. The committee had assumed that the Cuban army would be disorganized, ill equipped, and small, but in less than 24 hours, 200 men in the landing force had been killed, and the remaining 1200 were captured quickly. The attack that had been so carefully planned by the committee ended in complete disaster, and the committee members spent the following months wondering at their shortsightedness and cataloging all the blunders they had made (Janis, 1972, 1982, 1983).

The Therapy Group. The seven members of the group were outpatients at a university clinic. All seven reported problems in relating to other people, to the extent that they could not establish meaningful interpersonal relationships. The two psychotherapists who led the group during the weekly meetings encouraged the members to share problems from their daily lives and give one another support. They also asked the members to disclose information about themselves to others and gave them feedback that helped them acquire useful social skills.

Despite the fact that the group was composed entirely of people who had never been able to maintain friendships or intimate relationships, it became remarkably unified. The members rarely missed a session, and they grew more confident whenever they disclosed some previously unmentioned aspect of themselves. The therapists felt that the group seemed to plod at times, but the clients themselves were excited by their ability to interact successfully. The group lasted for 30 months, after which clinical testing indicated that the members "did extraordinarily well and

underwent substantial characterologic changes as well as complete symptomatic remission" (Yalom, 1985, p. 267).

WHAT IS A GROUP? A DEFINITION

A loosely organized band of outcasts from the art community struggling to refine the way they created beauty. A sports team surviving against all odds in a frozen environment. Twelve men and women deciding the fate of an accused serial killer. A powerful religious leader and his followers committing suicide in the utopia they called Jonestown. Military and political experts planning an ill-fated invasion. Seven troubled individuals working to overcome their psychological problems.

No two groups are identical to one another, but a group, by definition, is two or more individuals who are connected to one another by interpersonal relationships. Some groups--the jury, the committee, the survivors--clearly meet the definition's requirement of mutual influence among members. Others do not. The People's Temple, for example, was so large that only the potential for influence existed. Similarly, people waiting for a bus may not seem to fit the definition of a group, but they may become a group when one passenger asks the others if they can change a dollar bill. In general:

1. Groups vary in size from dyads and triads to very large aggregations, such as mobs or audiences.
2. Unlike members of a category, group members are linked together interpersonally by such interpersonal processes as communication, influence, or identification.
3. Groups come in many varieties.
 - Primary groups are smaller and more psychologically influential than are secondary groups.
 - Planned groups (e.g., concocted groups and founded groups) are deliberately formed but emergent groups (e.g., circumstantial groups or self-organizing groups) come into existence gradually over time.

- People spontaneously draw distinctions among intimate groups, task-focused groups, loose associations, and more general social categories.

THE NATURE OF GROUPS

Every group is unique in some ways. A band of artists like the impressionists will never exist again, for the painters in the group were unique in their artistry and outlook. The players from the stranded rugby team, in its struggle to survive, did something that few other groups ever do: They ate the corpses of those who died in the crash. Some religious groups perform strange rituals, but the People's Temple outstripped them all by committing mass suicide.

These groups, despite their distinctive characteristics, also possessed properties and dynamics that are common to all groups. At their café conversations, the artists bickered over who was right and who was wrong, as so many groups do. The rugby team set goals, as do many work teams. The People's Temple became remarkably cohesive. When you first encounter a new group, you may want to make note of the way members interact with each other, the basis of their interdependence, the group's structure (roles, norms), the goals the group considers important, and the group's cohesion and identity.

INTERACTION

Groups are systems that create, organize, and sustain interaction among the members. Group members get into arguments, they talk over issues, and they make decisions. They upset each other, give one another help and support, and take advantage of each other's weaknesses. They rally together to accomplish difficult tasks but they sometimes slack off when they think others won't notice. Group members teach one another new things, they communicate with one another verbally and nonverbally, and they touch each other literally and emotionally. Groups members do things to and with each other

Group interaction is as varied as human behavior itself, for any behavior that an individual can perform alone can also be performed in a group context. But Robert Freed Bales (1950, 1999), after observing groups interacting in all types of situations, identified two classes of interaction that are most common in group situations. Task interaction, includes all group behavior that is

focused principally on the group's work, projects, plans, and goals. In most groups members must coordinate their various skills, resources, and motivations so that the group can make a decision, generate a product, or achieve a victory. When a jury reviews each bit of testimony, a committee argues over the best course of action to take, or a family plans its summer vacation, the group's interaction is task focused.

Relationship interaction (or socioemotional interaction) in contrast, is focused on the interpersonal, social side of group life. If group members falter and need support, others will buoy them up with kind words, suggestions, and other forms of help. When group members disagree with the others, they are often roundly criticized and made to feel foolish. When a co-worker wears a new suit or outfit, others in his or her work unit notice it and offer compliments or criticisms. Such actions do not help the group accomplish its designated task, but they do sustain the emotional bonds linking the members to one another and to the group. Bales based his Interaction Process Analysis on this distinction between task and relationship interaction forms. This model is reviewed in Chapter 2.

INTERDEPENDENCE

Most groups create a state of interdependence, for members' outcomes, actions, thoughts, feelings, and experiences are determined in part by other members of the group (Wageman, 2002). The acrobat on the trapeze will drop to the net unless her teammate catches her outstretched arms. The assembly line worker is unable to complete his work until he receives the unfinished product from the worker further up the line. The business executive's success (and salary) is determined by how well her staff completes its work. She can fulfill her personal tasks skillfully, but if her staff fails then she fails as well. In such situations members are obligated or responsible to other group members, for they provide each other with support and assistance.

Interdependence also results when members are able to influence, and be influenced by, others in the group. In a business, for example, the boss may determine how employees spend their time, what kind of rewards they experience, and even the length of their membership in the group. These employees can influence their boss to a degree, but the boss's influence is nearly unilateral: the boss influences them to a greater degree than they influence the boss (see Figure 1-1). In other groups, in contrast, influence is more mutual: One member may influence the next member who in turn influences the next (sequential interdependence) or two or more members may influence each other (reciprocal, or mutual, interdependence). Interdependence can occur because groups are often nested in larger groups, and the outcomes of the larger groups

depend on the activities and outcomes of the smaller groups (multi-level interdependence).

STRUCTURE

Group members are not connected to one another at random, but in organized and predictable patterns. In all but the most ephemeral groups patterns and regularities emerge that determine the kinds of actions that are permitted or condemned, who talks to whom, who likes whom and who dislikes whom, who can be counted on to perform particular tasks, and who others look to for guidance and help. These regularities combine to generate group structure: the complex of roles, norms, and intermember relations that organizes the group. Roles, for example, specify the general behaviors expected of people who occupy different positions within the group. The roles of leader and follower are fundamental ones in many groups, but other roles—the information seeker, information giver, elaborator, procedural technician, encourager, compromiser, harmonizer—may emerge in any group (Benne & Sheats, 1948). Group members' actions and interactions are also shaped by their group's norms: consensual standards that describe what behaviors should and should not be performed in a given context.

Group members are also connected, one to another, by various types of social relations. Some of these relations are based on status, or authority; others, in contrast, are based on liking and affection. The three most common types of social ties are status, attraction, and communication.

- **Status.** In the president's advisory group, the president had more status, or prestige, in the group. He was, after all, officially elected to the role of president and his years of experience earned him considerable respect from the others. Status hierarchies, however, are also common in even informally organized groups. People may start off on an equal footing, but over time certain individuals are afforded more prestige by others. In many cases groups confer status on those who are exceptionally skilled and contribute the most to the group effort. In other cases, though, qualities that have little relevance to the aims of a group can also influence the rise to the top of the hierarchy. Unrecognized prejudices may prompt us to afford more status to men than to women, to Whites than to Blacks, and to older people than to younger people (Berger, 1992; Berger et al., 1986; Forsyth, 1990; Ridgeway, 1982, 1984).
- **Attraction.** Just as some people have more status than others, some group members are better liked than others. In the artists, Monet may have liked Renoir, but disliked Degas. Degas, however, may not have liked either Renoir or Monet. These

patterns of liking and disliking make up the sociometric structure of the group (Doreian, 1986). This term derives from sociometry, which is a technique for measuring social relationships in groups (Moreno, 1953). Researchers who use this method typically ask group members to identify who they like the most or dislike the most in their groups. Their choices are then summarized statistically or in a graph where popular individuals (stars) are singled out by virtually all the others to be the target of much affection; isolates are neglected by most of the group; outcasts are rejected by the majority of the group; whereas the average members are liked by several others in the group (Coie, Dodge, & Coppotelli, 1982; Newcomb & Bukowski, 1983; Newcomb, Bukowski, & Pattee, 1993).

- **Communication.** The flow of information from one person to another in groups is often structured by the group's communication network. Leaders usually both sent information to and received information from a variety of sources, including those within and outside of the group. Such networks are centralized rather than decentralized since most information flows through one person. These types of networks tend to be most efficient so long as the communication rate is modest. If the number of messages routed through the central member becomes too great, however, then this type of network can break down (L'Herrou, 1992; Shaw, 1978).

Roles, norms, and other structural aspects of groups, although unseen and often unnoticed, lie at the heart of its most dynamic processes. When people first join a group, they spend much of their time initially trying to come to terms with the requirements of their role. If they cannot meet the role's demand, they might not remain a member for long. Norms within a group are defined and renegotiated over time, and conflicts often emerge as people violate norms. In group meetings, the opinions of those with higher status carry more weight than those of the rank-and-file members. When several members form a subgroup within the larger group, they exert more influence on the rest of the group. And when people manage to place themselves at the hub of the group's information exchange patterns, their influence over others also increases. If you had to choose only one aspect of a group to study, you would probably learn the most by studying its structure.

GOALS

Groups usually exist for a reason. A team strives to outperform other teams in competitions. A study group wants to raise the grades of all of the students who are members. A jury must

make decisions about guilt or innocence. The members of the congregation seek religious and spiritual enlightenment. In each case, the members of the group united in their pursuit of common goals. In groups, we solve problems, create products, create standards, communicate knowledge, have fun, perform arts, create institutions, and even ensure our safety from attacks by other groups. Put simply, groups make it easier to attain our goals. For this reason, much of the world's work is done by groups rather than by individuals.

Groups do so many things that their activities can be classified in a variety of ways. Joseph E. McGrath's circumplex model of group tasks, for example, distinguishes among four basic group goals: Generating, Choosing, Negotiating, and Executing. When groups work at generating tasks they strive to concoct the strategies they will use to accomplish their goals (planning tasks) or create altogether new ideas and approaches to their problems (creativity tasks). When choosing, groups make decisions about issues that have correct solutions (intellective tasks) or problems that can be answered in many ways (decision-making tasks). When groups are negotiating they must resolve differences of opinion among the members of the group regarding their goals or their decisions (cognitive-conflict tasks) or resolve competitive disputes among members (mixed-motive tasks). The most behaviorally oriented groups actually do things. Executing groups compete against other groups (contest/battles) and perform (performances). Some groups perform tasks from nearly all of McGrath's categories, whereas others concentrate on only one subset of goals (Arrow & McGrath, 1995; McGrath, 1984).

COHESIVENESS

Groups are not merely sets of aggregated independent individuals, but instead they are unified social entities. Groups cannot be reduced down to the level of the individual without losing information about the group as a unit, as a whole. Whenever a group comes into existence, it becomes a system with emergent properties that cannot be fully understood by piecemeal examination. The Gestalt dictum "The whole is greater than the sum of the parts" suggests that a group is more than the sum of the individual members.

This quality of "groupness" or unity is determined, in part, by group cohesion: the strength of the bonds linking members to one another. A group of executives squabbling among themselves each time the group must a decision is clearly less cohesive than a sports team whose members train together daily to perfect their coordination and efficiency. However, all groups require some modicum of cohesiveness, or else the group would disintegrate and

cease to exist as a group (Dion, 2000). A group's unity may also be more perceptual than interpersonal. Even though an aggregate of individuals may not be very cohesive, those who observe the group and even the members themselves may believe that the group is a single, unified whole.

STAGE

Groups, like all living things, change over time. A group may begin as an assort of unrelated individuals, but in time roles develop and friendships form. New members join the group and old members leave. The group may become more cohesive or begin to loose its unity.

These changes, however, follow a predictable pattern. In most groups the same sorts of issues arise over time, and once resolved the group can develop further. Bruce W. Tuckman maintains that this group development often involves five stages (Tuckman, 1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). In the forming phase the group members become oriented toward one another. In the storming phase the group members find themselves in conflict, and some solution is sought to improve the group environment. In the norming phase standards for behavior and roles develop that regulate behavior. In the performing phase the group has reached a point where it can work as a unit to achieve desired goals, and the adjourning stage ends the sequence of development; the group disbands (see Table 10-3). Throughout these stages groups tend to oscillate back and forth between the task oriented issues and the socioemotional issues, with members sometimes working hard but at other times strengthening their interpersonal bonds (Bales, 1965).

Individuals also experience change as they pass through the group. We don't become full-fledged members of a group in an instant. Instead, we gradually become a part of the group, remain in the group, and eventually leave the group. Richard Moreland and John Levine's (1982) model of group socialization describes this process. During the investigation stage we are still outsiders: interested in joining the group, but not yet committed to it in any way. Once the group accepts us as a member, socialization begins: we learn the group's norms and take on different responsibilities depending on our roles. Even though we are full-fledged members at this point, changes still occur. If the group changes, our roles and responsibilities change as well. During this maintenance phase we may have to learn new ways of doing things or accept responsibilities that we would rather avoid. If this maintenance is successful then we remain in this stage until the group or our membership ends as

scheduled. If, however, we fail to adapt to changes appropriately, then group members may attempt resocialization: they remind us that, as group members, we must abide by the group's norms. If they fail, then we will probably leave the group. In any case, once membership in the group is concluded we sometimes pass through yet another stage: remembrance. We are not longer members, but we still remember, sometimes with fondness, sometimes with regret, what membership in the group was like (Moreland & Brinthaup, 1990).

GROUPS ARE DYNAMIC

If you were limited to a single word, how would you describe the activities, processes, operations, and changes that transpire in social groups? What word illuminates the interdependence of people in groups? And what word adequately summarizes a group's capacity to promote social interaction, create patterned interrelationships among its members, and bind members together to form a single unit, and accomplish its goals?

Kurt Lewin (1943, 1948, 1951), who many argue is the founder of the movement to study groups scientifically, chose the word dynamic. Groups tend to be powerful rather than weak, active rather than passive, fluid rather than static, and catalyzing rather than reifying. Lewin used the term group dynamics to stress the powerful impact of these complex social processes on group members. Although Lewin died unexpectedly of a heart attack just as group dynamics was beginning to develop more fully, his students and colleagues carried on the Lewinian tradition in their theory, research, and applications (Back, 1992; Bargal, Gold, & Lewin, 1992; Marrow, 1969; White, 1990, 1992).