Can Groups be liberating? Forging A Different Path To Look At Group Life
by: Amardo Rodriguez

Abstract This paper looks critically at the condition of small group research and pedagogy. Both show organizational scholars beholden to industry's small group interests. Small group writings and research focus nearly exclusively on decision-making skills and other task outcomes. We rarely find any attention and discussion to how organizations are increasingly using groups and teams to attain superior forms of order and control. I argue that our deep fixation with industry's small group interests masks the liberatory and emancipatory potentiality of small groups. I offer the beginnings of new direction for small group research that is committed to tapping this potentiality. To this end, I briefly discuss four propositions that attend to this emergent direction.

What we need, in short, is a whole new mentality for thehuman and social studies, one which is both technically and morally adequate to the task. Will it come? The range and the depth of the vested interests in the presentmentality suggest to me that, if it comes at all, it willcome very, very slowly.

Still, every journey starts with but one step.

(Thayer, 1983, p.91)

Organizations are increasingly using groups to attain superior forms of order and control so as to maximize productivity and profitability. Barker (1993) gives us compelling descriptions of an organization using groups to exercise higher levels of domination and exploitation. Stohl and Sotirin (1989) also give us an interesting account of an organization using groups to attain higher levels of concertive control so as to limit number of absences among employees. Indeed, what makes groups good platforms of order and control is the fact that the control is concertive and unobtrusive(Tompkins & Cheney, 1995). It mostly 'comes from the authority and power teammates exercise on each other as peer managers' (Barker, 1993, p. 432). Further 'Team members are relatively unaware of how the system they created actually controls their actions' (Barker, 1993, p. 433). The control thus appears as natural and organic rather than unnatural and contrived.

Organizations profess that groups simply give workers and employees the greatest amount of creative control over the production process. Groups supposedly allow for the full maximizing of our creative potentiality. The end of many layers of supervisory and managerial positions is seen as a manifestation of the organization's intent to treat workers and employees as human beings. The move to a group approach to organizing is often packaged by organizations as progress, a new organizational civility, a new moral contract between labor and capital.

Industry's view of groups pervades much of the writings on small groups and teams. I can find no textbook that looks critically at how organizations are increasingly using groups to attain superior levels of domination and exploitation. In fact, as regards to research on groups and teams, critical inquiry is hard to find. The endless textbooks I have seen over the years are predominantly skills-based. Even in meetings to discuss small group pedagogy, I have found a pedagogical obsession with skills that organizations are presumably demanding of new employees. Technology is the new skill that is being peddled as increasingly many organizational groups and teams are technology mediated. Most textbooks enthusiastically discuss the many benefits that teams and groups offer, such as, again, higher levels of creativity, control, and participation. I often look at the endless small group textbooks on my bookshelves and remember Zavarzadeh and Morton's (1994) claim that the primary mission of

our educational system is increasingly 'to develop the affective makeup of the labor force, to produce in the labor force the kind of (ideological) consciousness that situates the subject of labor in a manner necessary for the reproduction and maintenance of existing social relations' (p. 142, italics in original).

The dominant focus in most textbooks is on decision-making and other task outcomes. This focus mirrors the research on groups and teams. Frey (1994) reports that most of the research on groups focus on decision-making. In my view, this kind of industry-driven research program limits and even distorts our understandings of group life. It limits our understandings of group life to groups found within industry (e.g., quality circles, project teams, quality-of-life committees, self-managing work groups). It also makes for the impression that all human beings do in groups is make decisions and perform various tasks. This is an overly narrow description of group life. This research program masks the complexity and ambiguity that abound group life. In fact, the omission and downplaying of writings and research that look critically at how many organizations use groups and teams to exact superior levels of order and control show organizational scholars and writers aiding and abetting the forces of domination and exploitation by giving us no means look differently at group life.

What I also find disturbing in writings and research on groups and teams is the omission of the human element. I am yet to find any text that even suggests any moral, existential, or even spiritual relation between groups and human beings. Organizational scholars and writers simply assume that human beings form groups to perform various tasks. Consequently, writings and research on groups and teams focus predominantly on the skills vital to successfully perform various tasks. Quality of group life is commonly measured by how groups perform various tasks.

In this paper I contend that foregrounding the human element expands our understandings of group life by committing us to look at groups as sites of human activity rather than merely sites of structures, tasks, and decision-making. In groups, human beings deal with all the hassles, contradictions, and confusions of life. We bring our hopes, fears, beliefs, values, and ambitions to bear on group life. The fact that groups are embedded within other groups further compounds the complexity of group life (Putnam & Stohl, 1990). In sum, group life is laden with all kinds of complexity, ambiguity, and anxiety. Groups heighten and intensify the forces of life. Omission of the human element makes for unsophisticated understandings and explanations of group life. Further, the omission of the human element makes for an omission of ethics. I can find no small group text that deals, even briefly, with ethics. We have no consideration of questions like: Upon what frameworks do human beings act? Upon what frameworks should human beings act? What are the origins of such frameworks? What is the theoretical foundation of such frameworks?

This paper addresses four propositions that attend to an emergent approach to look at group life. I aim to offer the beginnings of an emergent approach to look at the liberatory and emancipatory potentiality of group life. The propositions are: (A) Small groups are vital contexts in the construction and negotiation of the self. (B) Emphasis on the self centers the role of communication in small group theory and research. (C) The construction and negotiation of the self implicate multiple communication processes. (D) Attention to the construction and negotiation of the self deepens our understandings of the complexity and ambiguity of group life. In sum, our neglect of the human element depletes the richness of small group theory and minimizes the potentiality of small group research to the betterment of the human condition. In my view, the emergent approach found in this paper provides the richness that Frey (1994) seeks:

Although the dominant paradigm has generated muchinformation about small groups, there is a richness about groups that is missing from the literature, a richness that potentially can be rediscovered by employing an alternative paradigm and its practices. This richness, in turn, will hopefully renew our sense of purpose and urgency about small group research. (p. 552)

Notions of Self

To foreground the human element is to focus on the negotiation, construction, and representation of self. The concept of self pervades different literatures in the academy. Research findings show a consistent relationship between quality of human interaction and the construction and development of the self (Blotchy, Carscaddon, & Grandmaison, 1983; Friedlander, 1977; Garcia & Geisler, 1988; Greenberg & Stone, 1992; Davidson, Balswick, & Malverson, 1983; Hansen & Schuldt, 1984; Hendrick, Hendrick, & Adler, 1988; Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Prager, 1986; Prisbell & Dallinger, 1991; Stiles, Shuster, & Harrigan, 1992; Waring & Chelune, 1983; Wheeless, 1978; Wheeless & Grotz, 1977). I look at the notion of self as a potentiality that emerges through communication.

A communication understanding of self forces us to look at how different communication practices either hinder or enable the construction, negotiation, and representation of self. Practices that aid the expansion of self make for the evolution of new ways of being and experiencing the world. In this way, a relational understanding of self politicizes us. In contrast, to look at self as a fixed entity that resides within us depoliticizes us. This approach makes for no 'direct, pragmatic application to the issues of ideology and domination at a social level" (Mumby, 1988, p. 43). According to Deetz (1978):

The self is fundamentally experienced as consistence and conceptualize as an inference from responses. In studies and discussions this experience of being subject to actions becomes conceptualize as an entity or image causing actions. The self, thus, changes from a conceptual to an empirical question and people start to look for it. As an entity the experience of self is psychologized and this self is sought deep inside the person. (p. 17, italics in original)

Deetz (1978, 1990, 1992) argues that a communication view of self makes for an ethics that emphasizes openness, discourses devoid of coercion, mutual understanding, and new forms of human relationships. Indeed, to view self as a communication phenomenon is to view ethics in terms of communication practices that either diminish or expand the potentiality and evolution of self. The reason being that no communication practice is neutral, which is to say that no communication practice is apolitical and aethical.

Human beings are political beings and groups are political sites. We are either of an ethics and politics that is committed to the expansion of self or of an ethics and politics that diminishes self. The latter preserves the status quo by blocking the chaos, disruption, ambiguity, and disequilibrium that come organically with the expansion of self. It fosters subordination rather than liberation, and, as a result, makes us less human. An ethics and politics that diminishes our humanity keeps us subservient and dependent on structures and institutions. We develop a deep fear of the ambiguity of the world, and, consequently, lack the ability to act deliberately, purposely, and courageously upon the world. Group life is laden with distrust, fear, and suspicion. Deep and complex human relations are nonexistent. On the other hand, an ethics and politics that is committed to the expansion of self reflects transparent communication practices. Groups reflect deep and complex relations and show a strong striving to transcend the present. Hierarchy is nonexistent. Groups committed to the expansion of self focus on enlarging communication rather maintaining structures.

The expansion of self calls forth a commitment to deepen our capacity to exercise trust, compassion, and transparency. It is also about deepening our mental, sensual, and spiritual thresholds for new and different experiences. To expand self is to expand our ability to deal with the ambiguity of the world. Ambiguity challenges us to constantly look at the world anew. It fosters permeability, spontaneity, and diversity by organically undermining our becoming beholden to a set way of experiencing and understanding the world. Ambiguity is a catalyst. It is life's catalyst. Ambiguity undermines the formation of rigid and complex structures like hierarchy. Rigid structures block the ability of natural systems like groups to adapt to the changing forces of the world, as evolution demands permeability, spontaneity, creativity, and diversity.

Research findings consistently show liberatory and emancipatory attributes in the expansion of self. For example, in a seven-year (1949-1956) span of experimentation with 68 leaderless groups at the University of Colorado, Gibb (1964) found that a nonhierarchical reality emerges in groups when group members are given the greatest freedom and least prescribed structure. The features of this nonhierarchical reality are diversity, nonconformity, open expression of feeling and conflict, cooperation, reduced apathy, creativity, decreased need for organizational structures, and consensus decision-making. Gibb posits that all human beings possess natural strivings for growth and development and location in nonhierarchical environments allow these motivations to blossom naturally. In the end, a communication view of self shows human beings with a striving to contest the forces of domination and exploitation. It gives us the foundations of an ethics and politics that can redeem human potentiality.

Conflict As A Life Catalyst

Conflict is vital to the expansion of self. Rodriguez (2000) defines 'conflict as any threat, be it real or imagined, to our mental, sensual, spiritual, and material stability.' This definition of conflict assumes that human beings are moral, existential, and spiritual beings, possessing moral, existential, and spiritual strivings. To view human beings as moral, existential, and spiritual beings redefines our understanding of conflict. Many popular definitions of conflict foreground notions of scarcity, struggle, incompatibility, and aggression. For example, according to Putnam and Poole (1987), conflict is 'the interaction of interdependent people who perceive opposition of goals, and values, and who see the other party as potentially interfering with the realization of these goals' (p. 552).

For Mortensen (1991):

Human conflicts are . . . products of a confluence of animalistic urge and ecological necessity sustained by two or more sources at the same time. From a communicative standpoint, conflicts may be viewed as expressed struggles over the distribution of scarce resources, material, economic, and symbolic. Conflicts redefine and thereby alter communal ties insofar as they facilitate the redistribution (or reapportionment) of whatever it is that humans may lack but nonetheless value. This in turn means that to create conflict one must be able to resist or challenge some aspect of the existing order. Those who lack shelter and nourishment are apt to be too weak or helpless to be able to put up a good verbal fight. (p. 276)

Conflict outcomes are commonly assessed in terms of win/win, win/lose, and lose/lose outcomes. In many ways, dominant understandings of conflict view conflict negatively. Small group writings focus on skills to deal effectively with conflict so as to attain win/win outcomes. Instead, Rodriguez (2000) views conflict as a catalyst. It is any entity, person, experience, or occasion that destabilizes our ways of being and experiencing the world. In this way, diversity is conflict. Conflict forces us to look and act in the world differently. It catalyzes evolution and transformation. Conflict is potentially life affirming. It is a life catalyst. It can potentially expand our humanity

(Witteman, 1991). Conversely, conflict suppression harms the expansion of self by blocking the consideration and evolution of new ways of being and experiencing the world. Conflict suppression also demands no risking of life. It poses no threat to the world. Its goal is stability and order. In supposedly seeking to end and limit the chaos that is commonly assumed to come with conflict, conflict suppression disrupts the natural order and rhythm of natural systems. In fact, in seeking to end chaos, disruption, conflict, and transgression, conflict suppression undermines the potentiality and well-being of natural systems. In the end, Rodriguez's (2000) definition of conflict assesses conflict in terms of the condition of self rather than in terms of outcomes. This approach forces us to interrogate all the discursive, communicative, and performative practices 'both within and outside the group' that work unobtrusively to suppress conflict so as to maintain order and control. More importantly, it reminds us that the costs of conflict suppression are real and perilous.

Complexity Meets Diversity

This is a dialectical world and group life comes with all kinds of dialectics (e.g., transparency/deception, ambiguity/clarity, dependence/independence, individual identity/group identity). Like all natural systems, all groups possess an organic set of dialectics, such as order and chaos, equilibrium and disequilibrium, and ambiguity and clarity. Chaos, disruption, ambiguity, and conflict are natural catalysts found within the world.

Such forces enliven natural systems by forcing such systems to develop new techniques, new skills, new talents, new relationships, and new arrangements. Conversely, such forces organically undercut the status quo. Such forces force natural systems to discard existing techniques, talents, skills, and configurations. Disequilibrium exercises natural systems. As any kind of exercising, this exercising expands the capacity and potentiality of natural systems. In other words, chaos, disequilibrium, ambiguity, and conflict make natural systems develop new ways of being and experiencing the world. This kind of evolution is vital to the well-being of natural systems, as all natural systems need to adjust constantly to a world that is constantly changing and evolving.

To adjust and maintain harmony with the world demands that natural systems remain fluid rather than rigid, open rather than closed. Harmony demands that natural systems remain vibrantCfull of vitality. The ethos of natural systems is evolution and transformation. Stagnation is death. All natural systems therefore have natural points of conflict, chaos, and destruction. Forest fires are examples of such chaos and destruction. Forest fires enliven the vitality of forests. Such fires destroy the status quo by destroying the fallen trees that block the evolution of new life. This destruction also nourishes the soil, which also helps with the evolution of new life. Consequently, without forest fires, forests will die. The prosperity of forests is dependent on forests maintaining harmony between the forces of evolution and devolution.

That is, natural systems need to allow chaos, disruption, and destruction to occur. Such systems must allow for revolution. Diversity is a forest fire. It is chaos, disruption, disequilibrium, and conflict.

Diversity forces us to develop new ways of being and experiencing the world. It destabilizes the status quo by deprivileging worldviews and deligitimizing relations of power that control and suppress other ways of being and understandings the world. Diversity contests the legitimacy of the status quo. To look at diversity this way verbs our understanding of diversity.

Conclusion

Small groups can make a difference in the quality of human life. In foregrounding the human element small group research can be significant to the evolution of a new set of social, political, educational, and moral frameworks. Groups give us the opportunity to deepen our cognitive, sensual, and spiritual capacity so as to strengthen our ability to better deal with the ambiguity of the world. In turn, this opportunity requires a commitment to relations that exercise trust, compassion, cooperation, and openness. This is the only kind of relations that expands our humanity. Group life uniquely heightens our life experiences.

Many organizational scholars have long argued that our preoccupation with the needs of industry obstructs our obligation and commitment to the improvement of the human condition. This obligation is difficult to find in small group writings and research. We can obviously still do better as regards to our commitment to the concerns that confront humanity. To address this deficiency demands a reevaluation of our research and pedagogical missions. We do need to seriously reconsider the reasons we pursue knowledge, the claims we make about knowledge, the approaches we use to acquire knowledge, the means we use to assess the validity of knowledge, and to whom interest we seek in the pursuit of this knowledge. As Thayer (1983) rhetorically asks:

Then for whom is this research relevant? If not to the lives of those who do [italics in original] the research; if not to the lives of others who cite or review or catalogue the research; if not to the lives of people in general or to the lives of those who make policies for people in general, if not for those, then whose lives is all of the restless and ever-growing output of the human and social sciences supposed to be relevant? (pp. 83-84)

The ideas in this paper are intended to make a small contribution to a new direction in small group research that focuses fundamentally on the betterment of the world and the human condition.

References

Barker, J. R. (1993). Tightening the iron cage: Concertive control in self-managing teams. Administrative Science Quarterly, 38, 408-437.

Blotcky, A.D., Carscanddon, D.M., & Grandmaison, S.L. (1983). Self-disclosure and physical health: In support of curvilinearity. Psychological Reports, 53, 903-906.

Davidson, B., Balswick, J. & Halverson, C. (1983). Affective self-disclosure and marital adjustment: A test of equity theory. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 23, 93-102.

Deetz, S. (1978). Conceptualizing human understanding: Gadamer's Hermeutics and American Communication Studies. Communication Quarterly, 26, 12-23.

Deetz, S. (1990). Reclaiming the subject matter as a guide to mutual understanding: Effectiveness and ethics in interpersonal interaction. Communication Quarterly, 38, 226-243.

Deetz, S. (1992). Democracy in an age of corporate colonization. New York: State University of New York Press.

Frey, L. R. (1994). The naturalistic paradigm: Studying small groups in the postmodern era. Small Group Research, 25, 551-577.

Friedlander, F. (1970). The Primacy of trust as a facilitator of further group accomplishment. Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 6, 387-400.

-15-

Garcia, P.A., & Geisler, J.S. (1988). Sex and age/grade differences in adolescents' Self-Disclosure. Perceptual and Motor Skills, 67, 427-432.

Gibb, J.R. (1964). Climate for trust formation. In L.P. Bradford, J.R. Gibb, & K.D. Benne (Eds.), T-Group theory and laboratory method (pp. 279-309). New York: John Wiley &Sons.

Greenberg, M.A., & Stone, A.A. (1992). Emotional disclosure about traumas and its Relation to health: Effects of previous disclosure and trauma severity. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 63, 75-84.

Hansen, J.E., & Schult, W.J. (1984). Marital self-disclosure and marital satisfaction. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 12, 923-926.

Hendrick, S.S., Hendrick, C., & Alder, N.L. (1988). Romantic relationships: Love, satisfaction, and staying Together. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 54, 980-988.

Mortensen, C. D. (1991). Communication, conflict, and culture. Communication Theory, 4, 273-293.

Mumby, D. K. (1988). Communication and power in organizations: discourse, ideology and domination. New Jersey: Ablex.

Pennebaker, J.W., & Beall, A.K. (1986). Confronting a traumatic event: Towards an understanding of inhibitions and disease. Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 95, 274-281.

Prager. K.J. (1986). Intimacy status: Its relationship to locus of control, self-disclosure, and anxiety in adults.Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 12, 91-109.

-16-

Prisbell, M., & Dallinger, J.M. (1991). The developmental nature of self-disclosure. Psychological Reports, 68, 211-214.

Putnam, L. L., & Poole, M. S. (1987). Conflict and negotiation.In F.M. Jablin, L. Putnam, K.H. Robert and L.W. Porter (Eds.), Handbook of Organizational Communication (pp. 549-599). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Putnam, L. L., & Stohl, C. (1990). Bona fide groups: A reconceptualiztion of groups in context. Communication Studies, 41, 248-265.

Rodriguez, A. J. (2000). On matters of liberation: The case against hierarchy. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton.

Stiles, W.B., Shuster, P.L., & Harrigan, J.H. (1992). Disclosure and anxiety: A test of the fever model. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 63, 980-988.

Stohl, C., & Sotirin, P. (1989). Absence as workplace control: A critical inquiry. In J. Anderson (Ed.), Communication Yearbook 13 (pp. 57-67). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Thayer, L. (1983). On "Doing" research and "Explaining" things. Journal of Communication, 33, 80-91.

Tompkins, P. K., & Cheney, G. (1985). Communication and unobtrusive control in contemporary organizations. In Robert D. McPhee and Phillip K. Tompkins (Eds.), Organizational communication: Traditional themes and new directions (pp. 179-210). Newbury Park: CA. Sage

-17-

Waring, E.M. & Chelune, G.J. (1983). Marital intimacy and self-disclosure. Journal of Clinical Psychology, 39, 183-189.

Wheeless, L.R. (1978). A follow-up study of the relationships among trust, disclosure, and interpersonal Solidarity. Human Communication Research, 4, 146-157.

Wheeless, L.R., & Grotz, J. (1977). The measurement of trust and its relationship to self-disclosure. Human Communication Research, 3, 250-257.

Witteman, H. (1991). Group member satisfaction: A conflict related account. Small Group Research, 22,24-58.

Zavarzadeh, M., & Morton, D. (1994). Theory as resistance: Politics and culture after (post)structuralism.New York: Guilford.