Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Small Groups

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INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES ON SMALL GROUPS

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After many years of developing in small islands scattered around different disciplines, small group research has reached a point where interdisciplinary scholarship has the potential to foster major progress. The goal of this special issue on interdisciplinary perspectives is to capitalize on the theoretical advances made over the last 50 years by synthesizing and integrating models and theories on small groups proposed by various disciplines into a set of general theoretical perspectives. In this introduction, the authors identify nine general theoretical perspectives from which small groups have been examined: the psychodynamic, functional, temporal, conflict-power-status, symbolic-interpretive, social identity, social-evolutionary, social network, and feminist perspectives. This article summarizes each theoretical perspective briefly and then offers some observations about the perspectives as a whole. Articles describing three of these interdisciplinary perspectives appear in this special issue, and four other perspectives will be introduced in the next issue.

Keywords: *small group theory; group processes; group dynamics*

People live in groups, work in groups, and play in groups. The study of groups has been a focus across the social and behavioral sciences for over 50 years in psychology, sociology, management,

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communication, education, social work, political science, public policy, urban planning, and information science. Since 1950, literally thousands of studies on many aspects of groups have appeared. There also have been numerous handbooks and edited volumes on specialized group topics. Those literature reviews and syntheses attempt to pull together what is known about groups within distinct disciplines.

Although it has been actively pursued within individual disciplines and subdisciplines, group research as a whole remains fragmented and discipline bound. Theorists and researchers often are not aware of relevant work conducted in other fields. Even within fields, lines of research proceed unconnected to other, potentially relevant work. To capitalize on the advances of the past 50 years and on the present energy directed to group research, it is important to link disparate areas and to foster integration among diverse theoretical traditions. The great advances in the understanding of groups that have appeared in individual fields provide a firm foundation for an interdisciplinary integration of theory and research on groups.

Progress in group research has also been inhibited by lack of critical mass. Small group researchers tend to be a comparatively small specialty within any single discipline. This limits their influence in setting research agendas for their fields, for funding agencies, and for society at large. It can also be discouraging to perceive that only a few other people seem to be interested in the questions that drive one's research. We need only mention the many soul-searching essays and reviews that have appeared over the years in many fields lamenting the lack of interest in and even the demise of small group research. If the small segments of researchers scattered

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across multiple fields could all link together to form an interdisciplinary field of group research, it would not only give voice to an important research area, but it would also help to nurture and vitalize research in the various disciplines (Poole, 1994).

Interdisciplinary linkages cannot be created top down. They will grow best from serious and intensive interaction between group scholars from many fields. This should facilitate the breakdown of barriers imposed by the jargon that has developed around field-centric studies, the methodologies favored by specific disciplines, and the out-group biases honed by reinforcing the values of one discipline through implicit or explicit criticisms of others. Although these barriers retard diffusion of ideas across disciplines, they also reflect constructive and positive development within disciplines that have had to address the challenges posed by their particular history and context. Gradual growth of an interdisciplinary field is the best way to ensure that the positive features of each discipline are maintained while dissolving arbitrary and incidental barriers.

Since 1998, an interdisciplinary group of researchers has conducted an assessment and evaluation of the current state of knowledge on small groups in an attempt to link disparate areas and foster integrative positions in group theory and research.[1] The group started with a small core of members who attempted to distill general perspectives on groups from the multitude of models and theories advanced by various disciplines. These perspectives met the following criteria:

- The perspective had to advance a distinctive view of groups, group processes, and group outcomes.
- The perspective had to have the potential for application in multiple disciplines, even some that had not previously employed it.
- Contemporary scholars working with the perspective could be identified.

The core group developed a preliminary list of seven perspectives and recruited interdisciplinary teams of researchers to delineate the basic assumptions behind their perspective and summarize key findings that touched on a number of important questions in a

comprehensive review of theory and research. Two additional emerging perspectives were subsequently added, bringing the total to nine.

The reviews focused on purposive groups, broadly construed to include any type of group that has a goal. This included traditional work groups, such as factory and field crews, committees, teams, and task forces, and less traditional groups, such as support and therapy groups, educational groups, and clubs. The broad range of groups brings a wider range of theoretical perspectives to the table than would a narrower definition.

Each team of researchers prepared a review that described their perspective and the various theories that it subsumed, and that summarized relevant findings from research on the perspective. These comprehensive reviews of theory and research from the nine perspectives will appear in an upcoming book, *Theories of Small Groups: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Poole & Hollingshead, 2004). The articles in these two special issues of *Small Group Research* are shorter and less comprehensive and focus on theoretical assumptions and issues in a subset of the theoretical perspectives: the functional, psychodynamic, temporal, social identity, symbolic-interpretive, conflict-power-status, and social network perspectives.

This article introduces the entire set of nine interdisciplinary perspectives on small groups. We briefly summarize each perspective's general approach to the study of groups and then offer some observations about the theoretical perspectives as a whole.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON GROUPS

The dictionary defines perspective as "a specific point of view in understanding things or events" (Guralnik, 1980, p. 1062). Each of the nine perspectives offers the mind's eye a different view of groups. And just as each spectator may notice different aspects of the landscape from the same overlook, specific theories within each perspective may differ to some degree. On the whole, however, theories within each perspective bear a distinct resemblance to one another, in their basic assumptions about what is important

in groups and in the explanations and understandings they offer. The nine perspectives can be characterized in terms of their conception of what groups are and what they do; in terms of the types of inputs, processes, and outcomes they focus on; and in terms of the relative emphasis they place on input, process, and outcome variables.

The *psychodynamic perspective* examines groups in terms of the interplay of deep psychological or sociopsychological dynamics that underlie surface behavior. Key inputs for this perspective are the history of the group and its members, particularly unresolved problems or projects. Important processes include leader-member dynamics revolving around dependence, independence, interdependence, and counterdependence; member attempts to position themselves in the group in order to address problems or needs; the development of group fantasies; and group orientations such as fight, flight, and engagement behaviors. As these processes suggest, the affective and emotional side of groups is a main focus of the psychodynamic perspective. Meaningful outcomes for psychodynamic theories include member and group growth and development and satisfaction of member and group needs. Given the multitude of factors that can shape group dynamics, these theories tend to work backward from process and outcomes to inputs, deducing which inputs are important from analysis of group processes and their link to outcomes.

The *functional perspective* examines groups in terms of the inputs and/or processes that function to influence group effectiveness. It is characterized by the assumption that groups are goal oriented and that group performance in meeting goals varies and can be evaluated. Functional researchers attempt to identify the group behaviors and activities that promote effective performance and also those that detract from it. Inputs that influence group functions include the nature of the group's task, the internal structure of the group, group cohesiveness, group composition, and the group's environment. In some theories, these inputs are contingencies that influence the specific functions required for group effectiveness, whereas in others, they determine which functions or activities the group enacts. Outputs considered in functional theories include

group effectiveness as measured by productivity, efficiency, and quality; leadership effectiveness; and satisfaction with the group outcomes. The functional perspective accords equal priority to all terms in the input-process-output chain. This is understandable, because the input-process-output formulation was first applied in functional research.

The *temporal perspective* examines groups in terms of how they develop and change over time. Some theories in this perspective focus on development, which assumes that there is a direction to the group's change—that is, that the group progresses through a series of states toward a definite goal or end state—whereas others focus on change per se without assuming any particular direction or pattern. Time is a hallmark of the theories in this perspective. These theories view time variously—as a context, as a resource, as a mediator of other processes, and as a moderator of other processes. Time is a context when used as a metric for other processes that are the central focus. For example, studies of group development focus on substantive changes in groups, using time as part of the context in which these changes occur. Time is also viewed as a resource that groups work with, distributing time to tasks and speeding up work when time is short. Time can also be a mediating variable, as in studies of punctuated equilibrium in groups that posit reorganization of the group at a midpoint transition. Time can also be treated as a moderator variable that interacts with other variables, for example, in studies that propose that communication media effects differ in new and established groups. The theories in this perspective emphasize process over inputs and outputs. Inputs function primarily as contingencies that influence how the process unfolds. Outputs are products of the process and, in some cases, also feedback to influence it.

The *conflict-power-status perspective* examines groups in terms of the dynamics of power, status, resources, and social relationships and the group structures associated with these processes. Theories in this perspective generally assume that there are inequalities among members in terms of resources, status, and power and focus on how these inequalities are generated and reproduced and how they influence group processes and outcomes. Influence,

conflict management, negotiation, consensus building and distribution of resources are important processes studied by the theories within this perspective. Important inputs include status outside the group, resources, existing status and power structures in the group, and the type of interdependence among members. Key outputs include distribution of valued resources among members, realization of members' interests, group performance, member satisfaction, and changes in status and resource control. Input and process are the two elements most emphasized by theories in this perspective. Inputs function to determine members' initial positions (e.g., their initial status, their tendency to compete versus cooperate), which have important effects on processes such as influence. Group processes also have their own dynamics that shape outcomes, and a particularly important class of outcome is change in the input structures.

The *symbolic-interpretive perspective* focuses on the social construction of groups and offers explanations based on the meaning that groups have for their members. Social interaction, language, symbols, and individual and collective interpretative schemes are common elements in symbolic-interpretive theories. These theories posit that processes such as fantasy chaining, structuration, dialectics, and sense making underlie the creation, growth, maintenance, and demise of groups. They argue that such processes frame and shape other group phenomena, including work, conflict, power and status dynamics, and stability and change. Inputs are viewed mainly as conditions or stimuli for symbolic and interpretive processes, and are thus accorded less attention in these theories than processes. Outcomes in these theories include some directly related to symbolic-interpretive processes, such as a common vision, group identity, internal group structures, and group boundaries, as well as effectiveness, group cohesion, and member satisfaction. These latter outcomes are mediated by the former; for example, the cohesiveness of the group depends on its developing a coherent identity and vision.

The *social identity perspective* examines groups in terms of members' sense of the social groups they belong to, their identification with these groups, the social identity they construct based on

this identification, and the dynamics between in-groups and out-groups driven by social identity. The primary focus of social identity theory is the relations between different social groups, but it has also proved useful for understanding within-group dynamics. Important inputs for social identity theory include the structure of the surrounding society, culture, member characteristics, and cues that make group versus individual identity salient. Key processes include self-categorization, depersonalization, inclusion/exclusion, social influence, stereotyping, and intergroup conflict. Relevant outputs for social identity theory include member self-concept, group cohesiveness, loyalty, turnover, conformity, and social loafing.

The *social-evolutionary perspective* posits that group structure and interaction reflect evolutionary forces that have shaped human social behaviors over thousands of years. Theorists within this perspective argue that human preferences for certain types of groups and general norms that govern group behavior (e.g., cooperation) have evolved since the advent of humankind through a process of variation, selection, and retention (natural selection). This requires them to extend evolutionary theory into the realm of group behavior. Social-evolutionary theories differ in how they conceptualize groups. Some theorists treat groups simply as aggregates of individuals and view group behavior primarily at the level of the individual: Group behavior is a product of individual behavior that scales up to the group level. Others view groups as meaningful entities that have evolved along with cultures through group selection at the cultural level and focus on cultural variation in group behavior. A few theorists posit that the small group is a basic unit through which human society has evolved. The socioevolutionary perspective regards inputs as paramount: People (or in some cases, the cultures in which people live) have inherent tendencies toward group behavior that have evolved because they increase the likelihood of survival and reproduction. Processes and outcomes are influenced by these tendencies.

The *social network perspective* considers groups as interlinked structures embedded in larger social networks. Groups, their properties, and their processes are conceptualized in terms of patterns of relationships among members. Important input variables for the

network perspective include member attributes; properties of preexisting networks such as density, centralization, and structural holes; and resource distributions and interdependencies. Processes within networks include affiliation, exchange, influence, information flow, diffusion, and reticulation of the network. Key outcomes include task effectiveness and efficiency, cohesiveness, attitude and belief convergence, and change in the network. Groups are not treated as freestanding entities in the social network perspective but rather as part of larger networks in which they relate to other groups and individuals. As such, groups are subject to effects depending on their position in the larger social network. The network perspective offers a clear model regarding how patterns of relations between members and attributes and patterns of relationships between members affect functioning at the group level. The network perspective accords inputs—most important, network structure and properties—the most significant place. Processes are also important, though they tend to be secondary to the structures within which they occur.

The *feminist perspective* challenges traditional approaches to studying groups by investigating and theorizing how power and privilege are enacted through interactions that favor one gender over another. This perspective traces group dynamics and outcomes to differences in male and female motivations in social situations, their views of groups, and their different life experiences. There is an assumption that typical social structures and conditions are tilted toward male standpoints and privilege them over female views, although participants are generally unaware that this is the case. The result is a tendency by both researchers and groups to emphasize rational, task-focused concerns over relationships and community. The most important input for this perspective is the gender composition of the group. Some studies focus on the proportions of men and women in a group, of whatever size—as in notions about a "tipping point" beyond which the group culture changes. Others pay attention to specific numbers of men and women in the group—as in concerns with "token" or single representatives of one sex or the other. Some mainly contrast all-male with all-female groups. All of these kinds of formulations use a

feminist perspective to examine variations in how roles and statuses get distributed, what kind of group culture develops and how that development comes about, and how different aspects of group process play out (e.g., how group members interact with one another to carry out group work) in groups of different gender compositions. Most feminist scholars are concerned not only with explaining how gender affects groups but also with the elimination of relations of domination in all groups. It is important, these scholars say, to give voice to all points of view in groups without privileging any. This can only be accomplished by a redefinition of group interaction that emphasizes surfacing and acknowledging different points of view, without insisting that they be compromised. This quest for a different way of working in groups has suggested novel structures and processes that can be applied in group settings.

SOME OBSERVATIONS

We had assumed at the outset that we would be able to identify several interdisciplinary perspectives on small groups, but we were surprised to find this many theoretical perspectives that cross more than one field. Common themes across disciplines may reflect the increasingly cosmopolitan nature of the field, or it may be a product of general intellectual trends that influence several fields. It is hoped that crystallizing the perspectives can stimulate theory development and more research both within and across disciplines.

It is striking that the same theories and scholars are often cited in more than one perspective. For example, Robert F. Bales is mentioned in connection with the psychodynamic, functional, and time-change-development perspectives. This reflects a long career that generated many diverse studies and much in-depth theoretical thinking. It also highlights the fact that individual theories and models, such as Bales's (Bales & Cohen, 1979) SYMLOG framework, may combine aspects of two or more perspectives. Thinking in terms of theoretical perspectives directs our attention away from theories developed by individuals or small groups of scholars and toward broader theories that transcend individual scholars. It invites

synthesis and awareness of basic assumptions and of different ways of viewing groups.

The same topics are often studied from more than one perspective. For example, conflict has been studied by scholars working in the functional perspective (which emphasizes consensus and resolution of conflict) and by scholars working in the conflict-power-status perspective (which emphasizes how conflict and competition develop group structures and distribute rewards and resources among members). Obviously, the different perspectives illuminate different facets of the same phenomenon, and this is valuable not only for the diverse understandings it offers. Trying to make sense of disparate accounts of the same phenomena can direct our attention to previously overlooked elements. For instance, the development of status hierarchies (emphasized by the conflict-power-status perspective) serves to stabilize the group and give members a common reference point (the consensus emphasized by the functional perspective).

Some theoretical perspectives are "tighter" than others. The functional, social identity, and psychodynamic perspectives are the tightest and can be described in terms of a common explanatory scheme that is compact and easy to articulate. In contrast, the time-change-development and conflict-power-status perspectives are much less coherent, although the theories within them clearly share a common focus. The socioevolutionary and feminist perspectives are also relatively loose, but this may be due to their nascency. Tight perspectives are valuable because they offer a common reference point for theory development and for explaining phenomena. We can question and refine them, as in the debates over what constitutes a satisfactory functional explanation (Giddens, 1977; Pavitt, 1994). Looser perspectives are valuable because they are flexible and suggestive, offering scholars more alternatives than well-defined canonical explanatory schemes.

Finally, it is necessary for us to acknowledge the functional bias that runs through this article, and indeed, this entire effort. All the authors and almost all the scholars who organized this effort have significant training and experience in the functional perspective. This is reflected in many ways, including the adoption of an input-

process-output framework for explaining the perspectives and a preoccupation with "moves" and effects in interactions. The initial definitions of the perspectives were cast largely in functional terms. However, once a team of authors was constituted, one of their charges was to recognize and overcome the functionalist bias and produce a description of their perspective that was as true to its origins and unique approach as possible. Knowing that one has a bias is the first step toward escaping its influence, and we believe that the theoretical perspectives articulated in this special issue suggest viable alternatives to functionalist analysis.

CONCLUSION

Understanding small groups has been an important area of study for many disciplines in the social and behavioral sciences for many years. However, scholars interested in small groups have largely been working in disciplinary cages, leading to a body of theory and research that is fragmented and uninformed by scholars working on similar topics in other disciplines. This special issue represents an attempt to assess, synthesize, integrate, and evaluate the body of theory on small groups across disciplinary boundaries. We hope that the theoretical synthesis and integration apparent in the articles of this special issue will inspire more linkages across diverse theoretical traditions and will foster more interdisciplinary collaborations. By identifying where the field has been and where it is now, its strengths as well as its weaknesses, we, as a community of scholars, will be uniquely poised to make large strides in describing, predicting, and explaining the behavior of small groups.

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NOTE

1. Two conferences on the theme "Assessing Theory and Research on Groups: What Do We Know and What Do We Need to Know?" were held at Texas A&M University in fall 2001 and Case Western University in fall 2002. The initial planning team for this effort consisted of Joe McGrath, Dick Moreland, Scott Poole, and John Rohrbaugh. This was augmented to an expanded planning group, which included the original four members with the addition of Deborah Ancona, Janet Fulk, Charles Hermann, Poppy McLeod, Rick Kettner-Polley, and Cecilia Ridgeway. Sandy Schuman was facilitator for this meeting. This group identified additional scholars to represent the seven perspectives defined during the planning effort, and they convened at the Nag's Head Conference Center in January 2001. The scholars added to the expanded planning group for the Nag's Head meeting included Dominic Abrams, Holly Arrow, Linda Caporael, Larry Frey, Andrea Hollingshead, Michael Hogg, Bibb Latane, and David Wilson. The group of scholars involved in this project has continued to evolve, with many additions and some departures. The history of this project is recounted in more detail in the upcoming book *Theories of Small Groups: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Poole & Hollingshead, 2004).

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Richard L. Moreland (M.S., 1976; Ph.D., 1978, University of Michigan) is a professor of psychology at the University of Pittsburgh, with a secondary appointment in the Katz School of Management there. Although he is interested in many aspects of groups, he is especially interested in how groups change over time, including such phenomena as group formation and termination, group development, and group socialization.

John Rohrbaugh earned his Ph.D. in social psychology at the University of Colorado and currently serves as a full professor in the Department of Public Administration and Policy and as associate dean of the Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy, University at Albany (SUNY). His research has focused on the problem-solving processes of management groups, executive teams, and expert task forces in an effort to identify methods that would improve both the efficiency and effectiveness of organizational decision making. His work, ranging from brief laboratory studies to a 10-year demonstration project in a field setting, has been published as articles in over 20 different journals and as chapters in nearly as many books.