THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF SMALL GROUPS

Craig D. Parks
Department of Psychology, Washington State University, USA

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Summary

This article highlights some of the most recent findings pertaining to behavior within and among small groups. Examined are group formation, the nature of group-based influence, processes of group decision making, and conflict resolution within groups. Throughout, I have attempted to emphasize three key ideas about the nature of small groups. First, group phenomena are often at odds with what conventional wisdom suggests should happen. Second, many of the events that are of interest to groups researchers occur in everyday life. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there are relatively few aspects of groups that we understand so well that we can confidently describe the conditions under which the phenomenon will and will not occur. I note that some seemingly well-established principles, like groupthink and the equality of groups and best individuals on decision quality, are now being rethought, and other topics, like social facilitation, have a myriad of possible explanations and little consensus as to

which is most accurate. The overall picture I hope to have conveyed is of a study area that has both intellectual and societal value, and one for which there are many unanswered, interesting questions that can occupy researchers for quite a while.

1. Introduction

The foundation of modern society is largely the small group. Many societies assign the most important societal tasks not to individuals, but to groups: juries or tribunals decide the fate of the accused; elected governments rely upon a congress to make policy decisions; a group of judges decides whether a law or procedure is consistent with the country's constitution. Industry relies heavily upon small groups, from the work groups who create the product up to the board of directors that makes the key decisions. There are also many important groups that exist not to accomplish a task, but rather to enhance daily life. Friends, clubs, and sports teams are some examples. Finally, the family units and romantic relationships that ensure continuation of the society are subject to their own particular dynamics.

Groups are thus a pervasive feature of life, and group membership constitutes an integral part of our self-concept. Research shows that most people define themselves to some extent in terms of the groups with which they are affiliated. That is, when you ask people to describe themselves, at some point almost everyone will make reference to a group membership (e.g. "I am a member of the Sierra Club"). The extent to which people think of themselves in terms of their group memberships is heavily influenced by their culture, but the fact remains that our groups are important for helping us define who we are. Their ubiquity has made them a popular topic of study in psychology for over a century. Indeed, what many consider to be the first experimental study in social psychology was conducted to understand an element of group-based performance.

Considering that entire books have been devoted to summarizing the many hundreds of psychological studies of groups, to present an overview of the field in a relatively short article is a daunting task. One treads the fine line between imparting information about a large number of questions and overwhelming readers. In the interest of avoiding the latter, my primary emphasis throughout the article is on explanation of what we know at this point about a variety of group topics. Discussion of the genesis of interest in these topics, or the methodology employed to study the topics, will unfortunately fall by the wayside. To somewhat make up for these omissions, I have included some of the most up-to-date summary books in the bibliography. These texts expand upon all of the points I make here, and also cover a bit of the history and methodology of the field.

Our emphasis will be on small groups, rather than the large concentrations of people that produce mass behavior. However, we will use the term "small" in the relative sense. In some situations, a group of 20 people might be small, but in others this same size might be quite large. In general, our concern is going to be with groups in which coordination of actions is reasonably possible. This coordination could occur via discussion, behavioral example, or some other means, but it is possible for everyone's actions to be informed by the behaviors of other group members. Thus, a 12-member jury is small in the same sense that a married couple is small—group members can talk with each other to plan a common course of action, resolve disputes, and so on. This is

not to say that small groups will always act the same way regardless of group size. Indeed, we will see that size of group can strongly influence group behavior. The point is that many different groups can be considered "small," and our discussion will be accordingly wide-ranging.

It is also important to point out that, while a group is a readily identifiable entity, it is in fact just a collection of individuals. Groups do not exist as extant organisms. They do not think, feel, or make decisions. When we ask what "the group" decided to do, or what "the group" thinks, we are actually asking about the collective preferences of the members. So the question "Why did the group do that?" is easy to answer—because its members concluded that the action in question was appropriate. The question that is difficult to answer is "Why did the members decide on that specific action?" It is this question that will occupy us now.

2. Group Formation and Maintenance

Many groups are purposely assembled by a person or a collective, usually with the goal of maximizing some quality of the group. Judges and attorneys attempt to make a jury as competent as possible to evaluate the accused; medical teams consist of experts with broad and complementary areas of expertise. But just as many groups come together for no clear reason. What brings people together?

A number of factors affect grouping. First, we generally bond with people who share the same basic physical space as us. This is because we encounter these people very frequently, and become familiar with their habits, likes, and dislikes. We expect to encounter these people again in the future, so in order to make those meetings as pleasant as possible, we use the information about their personal preferences to help ensure that we do not offend them. Repeated pleasant interactions in turn facilitate liking. Similarity is also important, as we most prefer to interact with people who share our beliefs and opinions. The reward value of the group influences attraction as well. These rewards may be personal, in that the group may provide us with benefits that we could not otherwise achieve, or social, in that being a member of the group may confer prestige and status. Personal rewards have been suggested as a major reason why adolescents join gangs—most gang members come from troubled homes, and the gang can provide a sense of support and community that youths cannot find at home. Finally, it is known that having to suffer in order to join the group increases the attractiveness of the group. This is probably because submitting to an experience that one would not normally undergo arouses cognitive dissonance, and to rectify the dissonance people convinces themselves that the eventual outcome (being a member of the group) will be far more positive than the suffering is negative. The use of suffering to increase membership attractiveness is best illustrated by the hazing and initiation rites fraternal organizations sometimes impose on potential members.

All of these influence the creation of a group, but once the group exists another set of factors determine whether the group will remain together or break apart. The term "cohesion" refers to the sense of attraction that group members have for one another, and the extent to which group members want to be together. Cohesion is affected by many things: the extent to which group members like each other, have their personal

goals fulfilled by group membership, and are satisfied with the group, to name a few. External factors can also act to hold a group together, as can the existence of a rival group that can better meet members' needs. This last point is especially important, as it explains why a person might leave a satisfying relationship.

Many of us have personal experience with groups that seem to contain the right mix of talents and abilities needed to complete the task at hand yet fail to do so, sometimes quite miserably. A common theme throughout the history of groups research is the explanation of subpar group performance, and we will talk in other sections about factors that contribute to such failure. From a group composition perspective, research has shown that particular personal characteristics that group members bring to the interaction can act to undermine effective group performance. Status differences, gender differences, extreme breadth, role conflict, and frequent changes in membership can all work against the group. For example, an established finding in the medical literature is that status differences can severely affect decision making within medical teams. Doctors seem to believe that decision making should be hierarchical, with the doctor rendering the final decision after soliciting input from nurses and allied health professionals, but nurses and professionals feel that decision making should be more democratic. The result of this difference of opinion can be miscommunication, conflict, and failure to execute important tasks.

It is important to note that the mere presence of these factors within a group does not ensure that performance will suffer. Many groups function perfectly well despite containing a number of the factors listed above. The point is that if the group is not doing especially well the supervisor might first look at the mix of members to see if one or more of these factors is present. If so, simply replacing one or a few members, or minimizing the turnover rate among group members, may be sufficient to enhance performance.

3. The Influence of Groups on Individuals (see *Social Influence*)

Group membership is rarely a passive enterprise. The experience of being a group member often affects individuals, in both positive and negative ways. Sometimes the influence of a group on the individual is obvious, other times more subtle, but it is clear that groups can affect individual thoughts and actions, in sometimes profound ways.

3.1. Conformity

Probably the most pervasive example of group influence on the individual is conformity. Conformity occurs when one changes one's behavior as the result of real or imagined pressure to adopt the new behavior being exerted by a group. Importantly, personal belief regarding the propriety of the new behavior may or may not change. In other words, we may think what we are doing is stupid, but we do it anyway because a group is (or seems to be) pressuring us into the action. Finally, conformity is most likely to occur if the expected punishment for nonconformity is unpleasant. Examples of large-scale conformity abound. Few of us dress as we did in 1977, if for no other reason than we would probably experience ridicule if we did so, and being ridiculed is a sufficiently unpleasant experience for most of us that we would like to avoid it if

possible. Conformity pressure can be exerted by small groups as well. Research has shown that particular types of small groups are especially likely to expect conformity of its members. For example, members of structured social groups (e.g. fraternities, sororities, social clubs) tend to exhibit extremely similar patterns of behavior. To some extent this is a function of the similarity-attraction link that we discussed earlier, but the rate of uniform behaviors in such groups is usually much greater than can be explained by a simple attraction process. Further, ostracism of nonconformists will often be overt and severe, and may lead to expulsion from the group.

An aspect of small-group conformity that is currently receiving much attention is the exertion of conformity pressure within the corporate world. Researchers have found that white-collar workers, especially lower-level managers, experience sometimes crushing pressure to conform to rigid norms. These norms almost always involve dress and grooming norms that go far beyond the corporate dress code (e.g. what suit manufacturer to wear, which hair salon to visit), but often also extend to aspects of managers' personal life, including the type of car they drive, where they live, and, most incredibly, the type of person to whom they are married. The expected punishment for nonconformity reported by these managers is a lack of career advancement at the minimum, and extends up to the belief that nonconformists will be fired or somehow drummed out of the organization.

While conformity pressure strikes many people as an undesirable feature of a group, it is important to note that there are many situations in which individuals will resist the pressure. Conformity pressure will generally be successful only if all other group members are performing the behavior. The presence of even a single deviate is usually enough to allow individuals to avoid conforming, because the deviate demonstrates that nonconformity will not be punished.

Further, people are unlikely to conform if the behavior in question concerns some issue that is central to the person's self-concept. Few people will succumb to group pressure to change religions, for example. Finally, conformity is unlikely if the behavior is privately versus publicly performed. There are also some individual difference factors that influence willingness to conform. Nonconformists simply do not care about the reactions of others to their behaviors, and anticonformists will perform the opposite, or some altered version, of the new behavior. Finally, most research evidence shows that women are far less susceptible to conformity pressure than the widely held stereotype suggests. Women do tend to be more conformist than men, but only slightly more so.

3.2. Performance Inhibition and Facilitation

Conformity describes that situation in which a group is somehow attempting to bring about behavior change in individuals. Groups can also affect individual behavior without meaning to do so. For example, the mere act of watching another person perform a behavior can induce behavior change. However, that change may not necessarily be negative. Continuing with the observation example, an audience can sometimes make a person perform a task more efficiently. How exactly does this passive influence work?

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Biographical Sketch

Craig D. Parks is associate professor of psychology at Washington State University. He received his bachelor's degree from Michigan State University, and master's and doctoral degrees from the University of Illinois. His research specialties are facilitation of cooperative behavior and the dynamics of group decision making. He has authored or co-authored over 30 articles and two books on these topics.