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The "small group" is one of the most enduring and most frequently studied areas of inquiry in social psychology. Studies of individual behavior in and of groups have occupied social scientists since Floyd Allport's research on social facilitation in the 1920s. Bibliographies of material in this area (e.g., Raven, 1961) typically include more than 1,500 entries, in part demonstrating the amount of interest which this topic has generated. In addition, the small group has been studied in a tremendous variety of settings, ranging from the laboratory to the delinquent gang and the large industrial organization.

Yet in spite, or in part because, of the tremendous amount of empirical knowledge which exists about groups, there has yet to appear a major conceptual synthesis dealing comprehensively with the small group. A recent paper on small group theory points out that there are at least six important conceptualizations, and that there are marked differences in their orientation and content (DeLamater et al., 1965). Some of these differences are no doubt due to differences in the training of the theorist(s) and in the research methods typically employed. More importantly, it would appear that

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these differences in conceptualization are perhaps primarily a function of differences in the definition of the "small group" itself.

Definitions are of primary importance because they provide the scientist with an implicit orientation toward the world. By stating explicitly what is to be included within the concepts with which he is working, and at least implicitly excluding all other phenomena, the investigator has determined those events with which he is concerned. Thus, if one defines a "group" as individuals who share affective ties, he would be excluding by implication much of the work on "secondary groups," whose ties are formally determined and often are not characterized by affective ties among members. He might go on to construct a comprehensive theory of groups with or without recognizing that his theory is primarily applicable to informal or primary ones. Often, one suspects that the failure to recognize limitations on the generality of a given theory grows precisely out of the fact that the author's focus was highly restricted by his definitions, and yet the author himself was unaware of such restrictions. In effect, important characteristics and processes in the phenomena of interest may be ignored systematically due to the nature of one's definitions.

In addition, the definition and surrounding theory frequently determine the research strategy. Measures designed to operationalize concepts are often developed using the criterion of face validity, at least initially. Secondarily, the experimental setting which one chooses is heavily influenced by one's concepts and theory. Thus, for example, studies in the group dynamics tradition which deal with cohesiveness frequently rely on paper and pencil measures in a laboratory setting of the three aspects of cohesiveness specified by the conceptualization (compare DeLamater, 1964): attraction to the task, attraction to other members, and the prestige of the group (e.g., Pepitone and Reichling, 1960; Schachter et al., 1960). Thus, the empirical results which one obtains, in this

case about cohesiveness and groups, are heavily dependent on the underlying conceptualization. This introduces biases and omissions of unknown types and importance in empirical data concerning the phenomena of interest.

These problems become especially important when one attempts to synthesize information in a particular problem area, since one will encounter concepts of varying degrees of precision and arbitrariness, and biases in conceptual orientations and supporting data. Such inconsistencies cannot long be tolerated if one is to make real progress in delineating the major variables, events, and processes in the area. While differences in definitions and conceptions are tolerable and perhaps inevitable in the early stages of investigation of an area, we cannot in truth claim to understand meaningfully that area until these divergencies have been synthesized, and major definitions brought into as close agreement as possible with the empirical world (and therefore with each other). Only from a base of precisely defined, empirically valid, and comprehensive definitions of basic concepts can we proceed to organize and integrate knowledge in an area of inquiry.

It is the purpose of this paper to attempt to provide a precise, empirically useful, and relatively comprehensive definition of the concept of "group," and thereby hopefully to contribute to the integration of knowledge about groups. Small groups are the empirical focus *par excellence* for social psychology and related areas of sociological inquiry, since many important phenomena—perception, interaction, socialization, roles, deviant behavior, and social control—occur and can be readily studied empirically in this context. Yet there is a striking lack of consensus about the definition of "group," which has produced important divergencies in the conceptual treatments of and empirical data about groups. These differences in definition and resulting knowledge are especially frustrating in view of the importance of the phenomena.

Also, the specification of the basic characteristics of groups would allow for an integration of laboratory findings

concerning "groups" with material about "real groups" (e.g., Whyte, 1955). Present and past disputes about the validity of experimental studies of groups are unresolvable until there is a specification of and consensus about those characteristics which differentiate groups from other social congregations, such as aggregates, crowds, and societies. Once "group" is systematically defined, the validity or relevance of material collected in various settings becomes a question of the extent to which the characteristics of laboratory groups, aggregates, crowds, and the like are the same; this is potentially answerable empirically, negating the need for verbal controversy.

Two techniques will be employed to attempt to arrive at an adequate definition of the concept of group. First, a sample of the extant formal definitions will be presented and analyzed, in order to determine the properties or characteristics of groups which are most frequently included in such formal statements. A second approach to determining similarities in conception is to analyze the variables which researchers have employed in empirical studies of groups. Whereas the former method focuses on the formal definitions of workers in the field, the latter allows a characterization of what they actually do. An interesting question is the extent to which behavior matches verbalizations.

FORMAL DEFINITIONS OF GROUP

In the realm of formal definitions, it is instructive to note first that a major textbook dealing with small groups makes no attempt to formally define the concept (Cartwright and Zander, 1968). However, an indication of the characteristics of groups which these authors consider important for purposes of analysis is given by those to which they give primary treatment: pressures to uniformity, power and influence, leadership and performance of group functions, motivational processes, and structural properties of groups.

These five allow for a fairly comprehensive treatment of the available literature, but they are not presented as defining properties of the concept. More importantly, they lack the unidimensionality which is important in a theoretically and operationally adequate definition.

Bales (1953) defines a "small group" as

> any number of persons engaged in interaction with one another in a single face-to-face meeting or a series of such meetings, in which each member receives some impression or perception of each other member distinct enough so that he can . . . give some reaction to each of the others as an individual person, even though it be only to recall that the other was present.

This is obviously a research-oriented definition. Its principal fault seems to lie in its generality. It is quite probable that a group of strangers waiting at a bus stop who converse for a few minutes could recall the presence of each of the others. A definition such as this seems too inclusive, classifying temporary aggregations together with stable groups.

According to Cattell (1951) "a group is a collection of organisms in which the existence of all (in their given relationships) is necessary to the satisfaction of certain individual needs in each." Again, this is overly general, so much so that it would appear to include animal social groups. While animal groups may show some similarities to human ones, classifying them within the same definition is only justified if it can be demonstrated empirically that they are the same on all dimensions considered important.

For Homans (1950),

> a group is defined by the interaction of its members. If we say that individuals A, B, C, D and E form a group, this will mean that . . . A interacts more with B, C, D, and E than he does with M, N, O . . . who we choose to consider outsiders or members of other groups.

In essence, each member must interact more frequently with other members than he does with anyone else. There are

many difficulties with such a strictly quantitative definition, the foremost being the application of it in any real situation. Frequency counts would have to be made of each "member's" interactions with every other individual, perhaps over a considerable period of time—an expensive, if not impossible, task. Second, this definition implies that each person has only one major group membership; it is not readily apparent how such a definition allows for the phenomenon of multiple group membership, so characteristic of complex societies and an important factor in individual behavior. Further, the lack of specification of the content of interaction makes it difficult to draw any implications about the psychological aspects of group membership. This, however, is consistent with Homans' sociological orientation toward groups.

Krech and Crutchfield (1948) define "group" as

> two or more people who bear an explicit psychological relationship to each other. This means that for each member of the group the other group members must exist in some more or less immediate psychological way so that their behavior and their characteristics influence him.

This definition emphasizes mutual perception and influence. A major problem is the failure to specify interaction as a necessary property; this implies that nonexistent persons could form part of a group, a difficult problem to deal with in empirical studies.

According to Merton (1957),

> The sociological concept of a group refers to a number of people who interact with one another in established patterns. . . . One *objective* criterion of the group . . . [is] frequency of interaction. A second criterion . . . is that the interacting persons *define themselves* as members, i.e., that they have patterned expectations of forms of interaction which are morally binding on them and on other "members." . . . The correlative and third criterion is that the persons in interaction be *defined by others* as "belonging to the group."

There are several problems with this definition. First, while the term "patterned" is emphasized in relation to both

interaction and expectations, its meaning is not clear; a criterion is needed which states at what point expectations or interaction becomes "patterned." With respect to the third criterion, definition by others, a critical empirical issue is the specification of those "others." Does each member of the group have to define each other as a member, or does one only need to be considered a member by a majority of the others? If the former, research studies would continuously face the problem of how to treat persons who are not unanimously defined as "members," perhaps a common phenomenon empirically. Further, no relation between self-definition and definition by others is specified. If, as Merton implies by his use of the word "correlative," these should be in agreement, there is still the question of how much agreement. Thus, the major problems with this definition revolve around its lack of specificity.

Finally, Newcomb (1963) states that

> the distinctive thing about a group is that its members share norms about something. The range covered by the shared norms may be great or small, but at the very least they include whatever it is that is distinctive about the common interests of the group members. . . . They also include, necessarily, norms concerning the roles of the group members—roles which are interlocking, being defined in reciprocal terms.

Thus, the critical properties of a group are that its members share norms about their common interests and that its members have roles—i.e., structured and interdependent relationships which are agreed upon.

In analyzing these formal definitions, there are three characteristics which recur as defining properties.

First, several authors include or focus on *interaction* as a defining property. Bales (1953) and Homans (1950) include interaction explicitly; for the latter, frequency of interaction is the sole defining property. Newcomb's (1963) definition presupposes interaction, through its emphasis on shared norms and interlocking roles. Merton (1957) stresses inter-

action, albeit of a more limited but undefined type–i.e., "interaction in accord with established patterns."

The second common characteristic is *perception.* Bales' definition requires that members perceive one another as individuals, and that of Krech and Crutchfield (1948) seems to refer in part to perception in requiring that members exist for each other in an "immediate psychological way." The authors differ over whether these perceptions must be shared by the members or may be individualized. Merton and Newcomb both state that it is shared perceptions which are necessary, either shared perceptions ("definitions") of membership (Merton) or shared norms (Newcomb).

The third characteristic is *interdependence.* For Cattell (1951), it is interdependence in the satisfaction of needs. Cartwright and Zander (1968) view interdependence as a prerequisite for group performance and the basis of group structure. Newcomb stresses interdependence due to the interlocking roles of group members.

ANALYSIS OF VARIABLES

Another approach to explicating the common properties of groups, as viewed by the scientist, is to analyze those variables employed by small group researchers. Specifically, one can look at the conceptual statement of these variables, assuming that the choice of variables reflects at least in part the scientists' conceptions of major group properties.

Such an analysis was carried out as part of a larger study of conceptual orientations toward the small group (DeLamater et al., 1965). An attempt was made to develop a classification system which would encompass the content of some 160 independent and dependent variables which have been used in small group research. After trying several such systems, the following five-category scheme was elaborated, and it was judged most adequate for that sample of variables.

Affect: This class included all variables which were defined or conceptualized as internal affective states, both positive and negative.

Cognition: This class contained all variables defined or conceptualized in terms of cognitive states or processes, including beliefs, attitudes, and perceptual variables.

Behavior: All variables which referred to the overt behavior of individuals or groups were classified in this category, including interaction and group achievements through member efforts.

Position: This class included variables which dealt with a given individual's relationships to other persons in the group—e.g., variables dealing with one's role, sociometric status, and leadership position.

Structure: This class included all variables referring to the location or distribution of parts within a unit—e.g., the distribution of roles. This category is the group-level equivalent of the position class; the positions of members taken collectively comprise the structure of the group. Thus, variables in this class occurred only at the group level in the original analysis.

Therefore, the relevant substantive content categories are affective, behavioral, cognitive, and position/structural variables. The latter three are highly similar to the common properties discussed in connection with formal definitions: interaction (behavior), perception (cognition), and interdependence (position-structure). The failure to include affective ties or reactions explicitly in any of the formal definitions considered above is worthy of note. This is perhaps partly due to the predominance of laboratory studies of the small group. Affective reactions are perhaps not significant influences in a twenty- to thirty-minute interaction with strangers when one is *playing the role of a subject.* In the laboratory setting, task and structural variables often account for so much of the variance that researchers and theorists overlook the importance of affective reactions. At the same time, persons playing the role of a subject may not have strong emotional reactions toward other subjects.

Although theorists do not include affective factors in formal definitions of group, several of them do introduce affect in more extended discussions as an important determinant of behavior in groups. For example, those who follow the group dynamics tradition consider affect in their focus on cohesiveness, defined as a positive attraction to the group arising from attraction (i.e., liking) toward other members, the group task, or the group's prestige (Festinger, 1960). Similarly, Bales (1965) recognizes socioemotional or affective factors as one of the three basic aspects of group structure and function. As a final example, Homans (1950) distinguishes the "external system" of the group, the demands of and behavior oriented toward the task and the environment, from its "internal system," the interpersonal relations within the group. The failure to include affective ties in formal definitions is even more interesting in light of the attention it has received in these conceptual analyses.

A TENTATIVE DEFINITION

Thus, an analysis of formal definitions and a systematic study of the variables employed in small group research point to four important defining properties of a group. *A comprehensive definition of "group" can be formulated in terms of the following properties: interaction between individuals, perceptions of other members and the development of shared perceptions, the development of affective ties, and the development of interdependence or roles* (i.e., group structure).

Interaction, as employed here, refers to face-to-face contact between persons in which each individual's behavior is affected by the behavior of others. Thus, imagined associations, considered by some as "reference group" phenomena, are not included.

Perception refers not only to the fact that we perceive those with whom we interact in an immediate sense, but also

to the perceptions which each member develops concerning group norms, perceptions which are typically shared (compare Newcomb, 1961). It also refers to perceptions of the personalities of each of the other members, which may or may not be shared.

By *affective ties* are meant the positive and negative feelings which each member develops vis-à-vis other members as he interacts with them. These emotional reactions are partly influenced by how the others perform their roles, whether their behavior meets group norms. But an often stronger determinant is how the individual perceives the personalities of others, what he views them to be like as individuals. To the extent that affective reactions are due to such personal factors, they are less likely to be shared, to be common to other group members.

Interdependence can be viewed as basically interdependence with respect to the completion of some task(s) or goal achievement. This interdependence is the basis of the group, since members are attempting to achieve something which would be harder or impossible to achieve as individuals. The goal may be the exchange of affect, of cognitive orientations, and attitudes toward the world, the production of a product, or any of the multitude of outcomes toward which groups strive. If the group is to be stable over time, there must be continual goal-directed activity, and it is the nature of the goal which gives coherence and direction to perception and behavior, while one is part of the group. As the basis of organization, it is the group's goal(s) which determine the role structure to a large extent. The role system—the positions and activity of group members—is designed (consciously or not) to fulfill in a stable and reliable fashion the functions necessary to goal achievement. The role system may be formal, with rights and duties written down for each position to which all adhere, or it may be informal, with a (perhaps unspoken) consensus about who does what. It is in this informal sense that we sometimes speak of roles

in friendship groups—e.g., the "joker." Thus, because the role structure exemplifies and is determined by the interdependence of members, that structure provides a good logical and empirical criterion of that interdependence.

These variables need not be conceptualized as possessing only two states, as either present or absent. Such an "all or none" approach creates the need for arbitrary logical and empirical cutoff points, on one side of which a set of persons does not have the characteristic and is not a group, while on the other side it does and is. The determination of these qualitatively differentiating points can be extremely hard, and, when accomplished, the criterion chosen may not be truly meaningful. An approach in terms of dimensions, viewing each variable as a dimension capable of assuming a range of specific values, avoids these problems and perhaps accords better with reality. Also, the integration of large segments of the research literature on small groups would be facilitated by such a dimensional approach. It is for this reason that affective ties, perception, and roles are stated above in terms of development, a development which may produce varying degrees of affect among members, different amounts of consensus concerning roles, and different degrees of sharing of perceptions.

For example, many laboratory groups are characterized only by interaction initially, with perhaps some norms and roles specified by the investigator. A fuller consensus on roles, shared perceptions, and affective ties may only develop and stabilize over time, as is suggested by the work of Bales and his associates (Heinicke and Bales, 1953). The critical difference between laboratory and "real" groups, therefore, may lie in the absence of strong affective ties and the low degree of differentiation of and consensus about roles in the former. A definition which allows for degrees of these characteristics may be able to synthesize the information about these two superficially different kinds of groups. Similarly, the primary versus secondary group distinction

popular in sociology may be basically a matter of different strengths of affective ties, with primary groups characterized by stronger ones.

In addition, each of these properties can be readily operationalized using existing research methods. Interaction can be experimentally manipulated by providing or withholding opportunities for specific people to interact, or through the use of written communication and the manipulation thereof. In "real" groups, interaction could be studied by recording who interacts with whom, about what, and so on. Mutual perception can be measured by questionnaire methods (e.g., Newcomb, 1961), asking each S to predict the answers of the other members and analyzing the resulting correlations. The development of norms and roles (group structure) can also be studied by measuring the extent of agreement in the group over time on issues such as the appropriateness of specific behaviors and who should perform what duties in the group. In formal organizations, the "line chart" will provide some indication of the roles of group members, but should be supplemented by the study of "informal roles." Finally, the development of affective ties can be measured through the use of the sociometric question, "Who do you like?" or variations such as "Who do you confide in?" Over time, each member's nominations should become stable.

Thus, a definition of group which comprises four dimensions—interaction, mutual perception, affective ties, and interdependence or roles—has considerable promise as both an adequate theoretical formulation of the concept, since it includes the major conceptual and empirical properties in work in this area, and an operationalizable research concept. The precise relations among these four would have to be specified in an elaborated theoretical formulation concerning groups. One could define group in terms of the presence and stability of all four characteristics, developing other concepts to encompass aggregates with roles and shared perceptions

but no strong affective ties (such as classroom groups), or aggregates with strong affective ties and shared perceptions but no roles (such as some friendship groups). Alternatively—and the strategy favored by the author—it would seem best to define "group" in terms of the degree of development of each property, and analyze differences between groups with different configurations.

Such an approach, using degree of development of each characteristic, could produce a very fruitful typology of groups if combined with systematic empirical data. Such a typology, using the four dimensions proposed here, would readily encompass many of the distinctions common in social science regarding sets of people. Thus, as indicated above, the primary versus secondary group dichotomy is, in the present formulation, a case of groups characterized by different degrees of affective ties. Similarly, the terms "interest group" and "public" are commonly used to describe people with shared perceptions (attitudes) and goals but who do not interact (and probably have few affective ties). A "role system" or "organization" is a fairly large group in which there are shared goals, perception, and interaction, but relatively low degrees of affect. "Crowd" has long been used in social psychology to refer to aggregates with interaction and shared perceptions, but no roles or affective ties between members. Thus, the dimensions of definition advocated not only encompass the formal and empirical characteristics of groups as viewed by social scientists, but seem to echo the distinctions we make in informal discussions of social phenomena.

Since definitions are relatively arbitrary and partly a function of one's theory, it is unlikely that the definition proposed here will be universally adopted. However, it would be of great benefit to future attempts at synthesis if empirical studies of groups would systematically measure each of the four dimensions. While one or more of them may prove nonessential to a definition, past theoretical and empirical

work suggests that each is an important factor in understanding the behavior of individuals in groups.

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