Small Group Research

The Naturalistic Paradigm: Studying Small Groups in the Postmodern Era

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This article advocates the need to balance group research by rejecting the dominant paradigm that drives research—positivism—and adopting an alternative paradigm—the naturalistic paradigm. After critiquing positivistic group research, the philosophical assumptions and methodological practices of the naturalistic paradigm as they apply to small group research—the research setting, type of natural group, research foci, methodological procedures, and researchers' relationship with members of natural groups—are described. The author's research program on creating and sustaining community in an AIDS residential facility is used to illustrate the conduct of naturalistic group research and the rich insights that can be obtained about group process. The article concludes that the naturalistic paradigm and its practices potentially can infuse group research with a renewed sense of purpose and urgency.

THE NATURALISTIC PARADIGM
Studying Small Groups
in the Postmodern Era

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Given the significance of the small group to the social, political, economic, educational, and moral structures of society, group research would be expected to flourish. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Consider, for example, the status of group communication research. Long an integral and vibrant area of research within the communication discipline, group research virtually has disappeared from the literature. Frey (1988), for example, in a review of articles published between 1980 and 1988 in journals sponsored by international, national, and regional communication associations, found that only 4.2% were devoted to group communication— hardly indicative of a thriving research area.[1]

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There undoubtedly are many reasons for why group research has waned,[2] but perhaps Poole's (1990) critique of group communication research sums it up best:

> The failure to attract more group communication researchers stems from the current generation's inability to generate the social prerequisites for a thriving research community. For the most part, group communication research has failed to inspire the imagination, to pose puzzles that are really interesting, and to link its studies to pressing social questions. (p. 241)

This essay argues that one reason for this failure may be due to the philosophical assumptions and methodological practices that have come to dominate small group research. There is a reflexive relationship between the conceptual and operational levels of research; theory guides method, but method also directs theory. Although we might like to think that one always fits the method to the question, the questions we view as important invariably are influenced by the methods we consider acceptable. Therefore, one potential way of generating renewed interest may be to challenge and change the assumptions and practices that are privileged in group research. Although the dominant paradigm has generated much information about small groups, there is a richness about groups that is missing from this 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.

This essay begins by critiquing the dominant philosophy-method complex that drives group research and the resulting research that is produced by those who adopt this paradigm. An alternative philosophical paradigm for the study of groups that shifts significantly the questions asked and the methodological procedures used is then examined. The goal of this essay is thus to infuse group research with a perspective that can answer at least two of the questions posed for this special issue: What innovative group methodologies and research techniques are available? What could we study if we had more appropriate research methods and techniques?

THE STATE OF THE FIELD: CURRENT GROUP RESEARCH

Every historical period has valued some ways of asking ques-
tions and acquiring answers over other ways. The dominant para-
digm today in the study of small groups is *positivism*. Proponents
of this paradigm believe that

1. Reality is single, tangible, and fragmentable.
2. Knower and known are independent, a dualism.
3. Time- and context-free generalizations (nomothetic statements)
   are possible.
4. There are real causes, temporally precedent to or simultaneous
   with their effects.
5. Inquiry is value-free. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 37)

This paradigm, like all paradigms, dictates both ways of thinking
about group phenomena and methods that are considered appropri-
ate for answering the questions asked. Consequently, group re-
searchers have adopted the methodology of the physical sciences
and its concomitant emphasis on quantitative, controlled laboratory
research. Consider the following statistics about group communi-
cation research cited by Frey (1988):

1. The majority of group communication research studies student
   (72.3%), zero-history groups (64.1%) in a laboratory setting
   (59.6%), solving artificial tasks assigned by the researcher.
2. Even though a significant portion of group communication re-
   search is conducted in the field (41.4%), 50% of this field research
   studied groups that were created for classroom purposes. Re-
   searchers thus continue to rely on student groups, and the field is
   still the university setting rather than nonacademic contexts.
3. The studies employ primarily quantitative methods (80.8%) that
   frame explanations in terms of relationships between independent
   and dependent variables. All studies, with the exception of four
   descriptive studies that used qualitative methods, investigated
   such relationships.
4. The majority of research is based on a single group observation
   (72.3%). Even when additional observations are made, the average
   number is only 2.75. Thus there is almost no longitudinal group
   communication research.[3]

The body of knowledge generated from much of this research is questionable, primarily because the ecological validity of these studies is suspect. The ability to generalize from student, zero-history laboratory/classroom groups to real-life, bona fide groups is limited, primarily because students, unlike their real-world counterparts, have little investment in these groups and the tasks they are asked to solve, and because the laboratory/classroom setting hardly mirrors the significant contextual factors that impinge on groups in the real world. As Farris (1981) argued in a statement that continues to be salient, group analyses too often demonstrate a "social psychological error"—the tendency to explain groups from observations independent of their context.

AN ALTERNATIVE PARADIGM FOR GROUP RESEARCH

As this cursory review of group research suggests, the positivistic paradigm prescribes certain methodological procedures and, consequently, proscribes other methods. Seibold and Meyers (1988) argue that our research settings, methods, and variables have become the way we think about groups. Our contrived, self-contained models, using artificial tasks with student, zero-history groups in the laboratory/classroom shape the type of questions we ask, the way they are posed, and the definition of legitimate group research.

There clearly is a need for an alternative paradigm that will chart a different path for group research. This is not a call for abandoning the positivistic paradigm; there simply is a need to balance group research through the use of an alternative paradigm. This is thus a call for a fundamentally different approach to group research.

The paradigm that is being advocated goes by many names, but here it is referred to as the *naturalistic paradigm*. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), proponents of the naturalistic paradigm believe that

1. Realities are multiple, constructed, and holistic.
2. Knower and known are interactive and inseparable.

3. Only time- and context-bound working hypotheses (idiographic statements) are possible.
4. All entities are in a state of mutual simultaneous shaping, so that it is impossible to distinguish causes from effects.
5. Inquiry is inherently value-bound. (p. 37)

STUDYING SMALL GROUPS USING THE NATURALISTIC PARADIGM

The naturalistic paradigm, like any paradigm, privileges particular methods. The remainder of this essay explores some significant methodological consequences for the study of small groups that result from adopting the naturalistic paradigm.

The research setting. The first commitment is to studying natural groups in context, that is, making observations in situ (Redding, 1970). Laboratory research decontextualizes groups, often on purpose, so as to increase the generalizability of the findings. The laboratory, however, must be regarded as simply another context that influences group behavior. Hoffman (1979) argues that laboratory groups are "cultural islands" divorced from the mainland of natural groups, whereas Back (1979) sees group laboratory experiments as staged dramas. Many of the processes that occur in these groups, consequently, are the result of the contextual effects of the laboratory setting itself, and it is surprising that researchers generally have ignored such effects. Couch, Katovich, and Miller (1987) believe that

[Researchers'] failure to use the laboratory in a reflective manner stems, in part, from an overriding concern with displaying their scientific (it might more accurately be called scientistic) mantle than with displaying their sociological tradition or imagination. The obvious shortcoming of this approach is that in our own everyday life, failure to pay attention to our surroundings is defined as a form of lunacy—autism. (p. 170)

Studying single meetings of zero-history student groups in the laboratory or classroom simply cannot account for the significant contextual features that influence natural groups. Barge and Keyton (1994), for example, provide empirical evidence that group history affects explicitly social influence processes in small group discus-

sions. Their study of a city council showed that members frequently used their shared history as an argument for framing the context of their discussions to influence the outcome of the discussions. This finding provides support for an enactment view of context that rejects viewing context as an objective entity independent of group interaction, and argues instead that group members create and structure their context through the messages they exchange. Only by studying groups in their natural environment can researchers produce such contextually sensitive insights.

Type of natural group. Studying natural groups in context is a necessary but not sufficient condition for meeting the goals of naturalistic research. Putnam and Stohl (1990) believe that "simply changing context or altering the population sample from which we draw group members may not reap the dividends of real-world significance" (p. 248), because many characteristics of the real world can be replicated in laboratory settings (see Fromkin and Streufert's [1976] guidelines for creating naturalistic simulations in the lab), and many natural groups mirror zero-history laboratory groups in that they work on a project and then disband. Field researchers also often study self-contained groups, those established primarily for research purposes and whose actions, therefore, are not crucial to the lives of the members (McGrath, 1986).

Putnam and Stohl (1990) urge researchers to study *bona fide groups*, groups that are characterized by stable yet permeable boundaries and are interdependent with their context. The first criterion references the fluidity of membership in natural groups. Permeable boundaries occur through

> (1) communication between groups (i.e., connectivity), (2) overlapping group membership (i.e., embeddedness enacted through multiple formal roles), (3) relationships among group members in other contexts (i.e., embeddedness enacted through multiple informal roles), and (4) fluctuations in membership within groups (i.e., rotation of members, absenteeism, or turnover). (Putnam & Stohl, 1990, p. 257)

The second criterion references the interdependence of groups with their environment—that is, their larger social system. "Inter-

dependence develops from a referencing system of interlocked behaviors, message patterns, and interpretive frames within and between groups" (Putnam & Stohl, 1990, p. 258).

Studying bona fide natural groups potentially can infuse group research in new and significant ways:

> Reliance on the criteria of stable yet permeable boundaries and interdependence with immediate context can help us remove the static container metaphor that underlies small group research, can add ecological validity to our studies, can reframe traditional group concepts, and can revitalize research through the addition of new puzzles that inspire the imagination of small group researchers. (Putnam & Stohl, 1990, p. 262)

Research foci. Small group research has focused almost exclusively on group decision making (all but 4.3% of the group communication research that Frey [1988] reviewed focused on decision-making activity), as if this were the only thing that groups do. Although decision making will continue to be important within a wide range of real-world groups (especially in business settings), other types of groups and important processes that characterize them deserve attention. Researchers virtually have ignored such groups as families, support groups, children's groups, church groups, deviant or fringe groups (such as gangs), and many more. Researchers have also ignored such processes as how group members create and sustain group identity, socialize new members, provide social support, develop high-quality interpersonal relationships, and make changes in group processes. Even such long-time recognized variables as norms, roles, and conformity, variables that have faded from group research agendas, need to be reconsidered.

The decision to study any aspect of small group behavior must be regarded as a political act, because there are ideological stances that underlie methodological practices. Wyatt (1993), for example, argues that privileging task groups over other types of groups is grounded in male conceptions of what counts as important and mirrors the traditional separation between "productive" work life and "reproductive" home/social life. She further points out that the parts of discourse that get counted as contributing to effective group decision making are linear, propositional, task-oriented statements

associated with "men's talk," whereas "women's talk" that prizes emotional connections through the sharing of personal stories becomes of secondary importance to making decisions. She urges us to root out any implicit forms of sexism that are embedded in our theories about, and methods for studying, small groups.

The very construct of decision making itself carries important ideological values. Frey (in press) admonishes group researchers for being co-opted by business organizations (undoubtedly because of the lure of consulting money), and argues that group decision-making research within business settings typically promotes man-agement's bottom-line philosophy.

There are thus important values underlying what we choose to study in group research. Focusing on group decision making is important, but focusing on it to the exclusion of other significant group processes and outcomes prevents us from asking new and important questions about group behavior.

Methodological procedures. The positivistic paradigm privi-leges the researcher's voice over the subjects' voices. Conse-quently, there is a tendency to rely on experimental and survey methods (surveys ask questions primarily about what researchers want to know). Researchers simply have neglected the voices of the group members themselves, and we must find a way to give room to their voices in our research reports. An important goal must be to capture as fully as possible the ways in which group members construct their group. Guba (1990) argues that research should "*reconstruct* the 'world' at the only point at which it exists: in the minds of constructors" (p. 27).

Methodologically, this reconstruction necessitates using herme-neutics and dialectics. "The hermeneutic aspect consists in depict-ing individual constructions as accurately as possible, while the dialectic aspect consists of comparing and contrasting these exist-ing individual (including the inquirer's) constructions" (Guba, 1990, p. 26).

Meeting these goals will require more studies that employ quali-tative methods, "an umbrella term covering an array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise

come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world" (Van Maanen, 1983, p. 9). The primary methodological techniques used by qualitative researchers are observation and in-depth interviewing. As Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993) explain,

> Through interviews, the researcher often gains a first insight into the constructed realities that are wrapped up in the idiolect of the respondent. Through observations, the researcher gains a partially independent view of the experience on which the respondent's language has constructed those realities. The interview provides leads for the researcher's observations. Observation suggests probes for interviews. The interaction of the two sources of data not only enriches them both, but also provides a basis for analysis that would be impossible with only one source. (p. 99)

Marshall and Rossman (1989) also note, however, that naturalistic researchers use archival and historical methods, unobtrusive measures, content analysis, and even questionnaires and surveys sometimes are used.[4] Qualitative researchers also value attempts to triangulate their findings by employing multimethodological procedures, for "the best way to elicit the various and divergent constructions of reality that exist within the context of a study is to collect information about different events and relationships from different points of view" (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 31).[5] Gastil (1993), for example, recently employed a multimethod approach involving historical information, participant observation, videotaping and transcription, questionnaires, interviews, and informal conversations with the staff of a 24-year-old grocery cooperative to examine obstacles that groups encounter in their attempts to practice democracy.

Qualitative methods have gained increased acceptance in the social sciences over the past 10-20 years, but there still are many social scientists who perceive these methods as lacking methodological rigor, as defined, of course, by positivists' conceptions of what counts as valid and reliable data. There certainly is, however, a method to this perceived madness. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), naturalistic studies have a characteristic pattern of flow or development (see Figure 1).
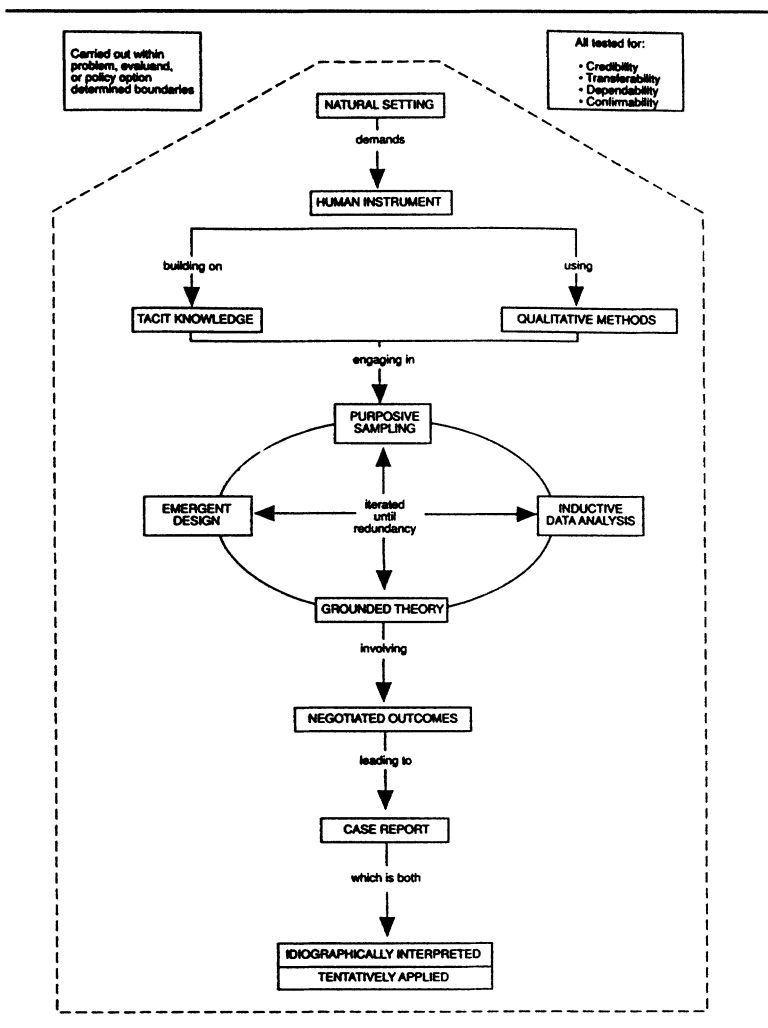
Figure 1: The Flow of Naturalistic Inquiry
SOURCE: Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 188). Copyright © 1987, Sage Publications, Inc. Used by permission.

A naturalistic small group study begins, as argued above, by focusing on a group(s) in its natural environment because this group cannot be understood apart from its context. The researcher uses him- or herself (as opposed to paper-and-pencil questionnaires) to

gather data by relying on tacit (intuitive, felt) knowledge in addition to propositional knowledge (expressible in language form) and using qualitative methods (symbolic as opposed to numerical data-gathering techniques) because these methods are more likely to capture multiple realities, human meanings, and group interactions from the insiders' perspective. There are, of course, many specific qualitative techniques for capturing human meanings. Wong, Tjosvold, and Lee (1992), for example, used the critical incident method to investigate how groups of Chinese immigrants handle conflict in the workplace, asking them to describe in detail recent significant incidents when they were in conflict with a colleague at work. In-depth interview schedules can also be developed from a number of other perspectives, including phenomenological inter-views, protocol analysis, stimulated recall, and episode analysis.

The naturalistic researcher employs purposive (also called stra-tegic or judgment) sampling, selecting informants for a specific reason (see Johnson, 1990) to maximize the representation of particular realities that may be difficult to obtain through random sampling procedures. Patton (1990) explains that

> The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting *infor-mation-rich cases* for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term *purposive sampling*. (p. 169)

The naturalistic researcher analyzes the data inductively with the goal of building grounded theory, theory that emerges from the data (see Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The term *presuppositionless research* is often used to describe the inductive nature of naturalistic re-search, although Anderson (1987) argues that

> This term does not mean that the researcher is somehow a cultural blank without norms, values, and ideology. It means that the re-searcher makes his or her own norms, values, and ideology apparent and does not assume that they are those of the members. (p. 242)

Purposive sampling, inductive data analysis, and grounded the-ory are practiced within an emergent design that unfolds during the research process rather than being constructed in a lock-step fash-

ion prior to conducting the research. Throughout the process, the researcher negotiates with research participants the meanings and interpretations of their beliefs, values, and behaviors to construct reality from their point of view.

The findings from naturalistic research are reported in the form of a case study, a detailed examination of a single subject, group, or phenomenon (Borg & Gall, 1983). Yin (1989) defines a case study as an empirical inquiry that

- investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when
- the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which
- multiple sources of evidence are used. (p. 23)

Yin (1989) explains that the "distinctive need for case studies arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena. In brief, the case study allows an investigation to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events" (p. 14). Case studies are thus the preferred form for reporting naturalistic research. After all, as Turner (1978) claimed, "New theoretical wine requires new presentational bottles" (p. xv).

Finally, the findings from a naturalistic study are an idiographic interpretation, a particular reading of one case. Naturalistic researchers, therefore, are extremely cautious in generalizing from their case studies.

These procedures undoubtedly cause much concern and consternation for methodologists who advocate criteria for evaluating research studies in line with the positivist paradigm. They see naturalistic researchers as being too biased because they are the instrument through which the data are acquired. There is, however, plenty of bias that can affect experiments (see Orne, 1962; Rosenthal, 1966; Tajfel, 1972), survey research (see Sudman & Bradburn, 1982), and historical research (see Gottschalk, 1969). Positivistic researchers also find fault with the use of purposive sampling in naturalistic research because this limits the ability to generalize from a sample to a population. The problem of nonrandom samples,

however, certainly applies to the majority of social science research conducted in the laboratory, given the continued use of convenience samples of college students. For example, Applbaum (1985), Applbaum and Phillips (1977), and Rossiter (1976) found, respectively, that 65.5%, 77%, and 75% of the subjects used in communication research were college students. Such samples once led McNemar (1960) to label social science research "a science of the behavior of sophomores," whereas Rosenthal and Rosnow (1969) pointed out that actually it was "a science of just those sophomores who volunteer to participate in research and who also keep their appointment with the investigator" (p. 110). Finally, many also question the value of idiographic case studies for shedding light on general behavior, but the lack of generalizability to populations applies equally well to a case study of a natural group as it does to a single study of a laboratory group. Tukey (1969) pointed out, quite accurately, that no single study, regardless of where and how it is conducted, can establish a generalization; only through replication can the findings from a study be extended reliably. Because of the lack of generalizability for both case and laboratory studies, Yin (1989) concluded that "case studies, like experiments, are generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes" (p. 21).

Case studies of naturalistic groups, moreover, are especially valuable for studying group behavior (see recent case studies of natural groups by Frey, 1994; Hackman, 1990; Janis, 1989; and Neustadt & May, 1986). Gouran (1994) identifies at least eight ways in which case studies of decision-making and problem-solving groups can be helpful:

1. Showing how actual groups make decisions and solve problems.
2. Identifying antecedent influences on choice-making behavior.
3. Revealing informational deficiencies and how they contribute to ineffectual choices.
4. Illustrating common errors in judgment to which decision makers and problem solvers are prone.
5. Indicating how the role and status structures of groups affect patterns of interaction and influence choices.
6. Providing insights into external sources of influence.

7. Suggesting models of what and what not to do.
8. Illuminating the ethical dilemmas and conflicts members confront, as well as the means they employ in resolving them.

In conclusion, naturalistic researchers use the methodological procedures described above to capture the complexity of natural group life. These procedures are designed to maximize the external validity of researchers' claims by bolstering their "capacity to convince us that what they say is a result of their having actually penetrated (or, if you prefer, been penetrated by) another form of life, of having, one way or another, truly 'been there'" (Geertz, 1988, pp. 4-5). Their methods result, ideally, in "thick" and richly detailed accounts of groups and group members' behaviors.

RESEARCHERS' RELATIONSHIP WITH MEMBERS OF NATURAL GROUPS

Proponents of the naturalistic paradigm view research as inherently value laden. For example, research is influenced by the inquirer's values, the paradigm adopted, the substantive theory used to guide the research, and the values that inhere in the context being studied (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

One of the most important values is the relationship that researchers should strive to establish between themselves and those they study. Too often, researchers have treated research participants as objects to be studied instead of coparticipants in the research process. To counteract this tendency, three general principles are proposed here for the study of bona fide natural groups.

First, the relationship between researchers and research participants should be viewed as a *partnership*. Miller et al. (1984) find it "useful to view the relationship between researchers and the community members as a partnership in which each party makes a contribution to the other. In other words, the relationship is based on an *exchange* of resources" (p. 55). Researchers too often have negotiated outcomes that are favorable to them but do little to help the groups being studied. Miller et al. (1984) conclude that

> Researchers must move from a position of exclusive concern for theory-building and knowledge development to a position that includes a commitment to promoting community development and well-being. In other words, researchers must maintain a stance of giving as well as taking from the field setting. (p. 56)

Second, one way to negotiate an equitable exchange of resources is to see research as a tool for *social action*, that is, as "a practical means of assessing community needs and choosing the most effective available course of action" (Miller et al., 1984, p. 57). Mills (1979) points out that Kurt Lewin's vision of small group research was dual: "Research led to social action; action should serve research" (p. 408). Group research should thus yield products that are useful not only to researchers (e.g., journal articles), but, equally important, to the group being studied and/or to those who work with natural groups. Researchers might, for example, instruct group members in new skills for working in groups, produce a documentary that highlights group members' voices, write promotional materials to be used by the group and/or organization studied, or write a training manual for practitioners working with similar groups.

Third, naturalistic methods favor *sustained interactions* between researchers and research participants, which means developing longitudinal programs of group research as opposed to one-shot case studies. Longitudinal research facilitates a relationship between researchers and research participants that maximizes the validity of the data gathered. "Collecting data for long periods," write Goetz and Le Compte (1984), "provides opportunities for continual data analysis and comparison to refine constructs and to ensure the match between scientific categories and participant reality" (p. 221). During longer observational periods, people become less self-conscious about a researcher's presence and are more likely to exhibit natural behavior, making the research less susceptible to the Hawthorne effect (people changing their behavior because they know they are being studied), and thereby maximizing the internal validity of the findings.

In the final analysis, naturalistic researchers believe that research ultimately should empower, not disempower, those who participate.

Sustained interactions between researchers and participants as part-
ners in a social action research program best guarantees achieving
this goal.

PRACTICING WHAT WE PREACH:
AN EXAMPLE OF GROUP RESEARCH
USING THE NATURALISTIC PARADIGM

This essay is both an argument and a general explanatory frame-
work for conducting group research using the values and practices
advocated by proponents of the naturalistic paradigm. I want to
illustrate these methods, the rich data that can be acquired, and the
valuable conclusions that can be drawn by highlighting a research
program conducted by Mara Adelman and myself that we hope
serves as an exemplar of naturalistic group research.

   Our research program is concerned with how community is
created and sustained at Bonaventure House (BH), a residential
facility for people with AIDS. BH is a bona fide natural group
because its boundaries are permeable (there is, for instance,
constant turnover due to death, and the staff and many of the
residents are boundary spanners) and it is interdependent with its
larger social context (for example, its opening was delayed for 2
years while trying to convince local middle-class neighbors of its
value to the community, and it depends on financial support from
various federal agencies, religious groups, philanthropic institu-
tions, and businesses).

   When people choose to enter and remain in a group voluntarily,
such as at BH, the group cannot rely on external forces for its
existence; instead, members must find ways to create and sustain
the group. This is especially true for members of groups at the
margins of society, those who perceive themselves as being outside
the dominant culture. Such groups must work hard to construct an
identity that sustains members' passions; their survival depends on
the success of these efforts.

   BH is a very fragile group, on the borders of society, that
constantly experiences the death of its members, and this loss poses

the greatest threat to forging community life. BH is also a very diverse group—its members come from all walks of life, because AIDS cuts across racial, ethnic, and educational lines—making it difficult at times to sustain group cohesion and community. Our research seeks to shed light on how collective practices at BH mediate the tension between individuals' needs and the group's needs to create and sustain a sense of communion out of the chaos that characterizes this diverse and fragile community. Most important is the goal of explaining these practices from the members' perspective. The following discussion references one of our studies (Adelman & Frey, 1994) in some detail, and then addresses how this and our other work are used by community members.

Access to BH was obtained by Adelman, who has been a volunteer there for the past 5 years, working a weekly shift, sponsoring various events for residents, and providing communication training for volunteers. In fact, this research program grew out of her involvement as a volunteer rather than from her interests as a researcher; she did not conduct research for the first year, and only began a research program after being invited by house administrators. This research program thus arose from needs identified by members of this community and serves a social action research agenda that is based on the equitable exchange of resources (studies and reports for house administrators in exchange for scholarly research studies).

I was invited to join the research project with the agreement that I would remain relatively detached at first from the residence. This combination of etic and emic approaches proved helpful for getting a balance between an inside and outside view of the community. I am now more involved actively in the residence, both as a volunteer and as a researcher.

Adelman's five years of participant observation gave her ample opportunities to observe the inner workings of BH. In addition, she conducted in-depth interviews (often ranging over the course of several days) with 21 of the 30 residents. The interview protocols examined a wide range of residents' experiences, including their life situation prior to entering BH, expectations about life at BH, initial impressions on entering, reactions to the practical, social, and

spiritual aspects of living at BH (including involvement in and perceptions of collective communication practices, such as support groups and bereavement rituals), relationships with other residents, volunteers, staff, and administrators, reactions to and ways of coping with illness and death, and general impressions about community life at BH.

We employed a dialectical perspective to understand the tensions that BH residents spoke about during the interviews. As Littlejohn (1992) explains:

> A *dialectic* is a tension between two or more contradictory elements in a system that demands at least temporary resolution. Dialectical analysis . . . looks at the ways in which the system develops or changes, how it moves in response to these tensions; and it looks at the strategic actions taken by a system to resolve dialectical tensions. (p. 280)

Five tensions were revealed: private life-public life, individual identity-group identity, residents' autonomy-staff control, wellness-illness, and attachment-detachment. These tensions were found to be mediated by formal social practices at BH that are designed to foster commitment to group life. BH has developed many group practices, including a buddy system (in which newcomers are paired with a veteran resident for the first few weeks), support group meetings, weekly house meetings, and an elected residents' council that represents residents' concerns to the staff and administration.

The most difficult time for the house is coping with the loss of its members. The challenge of coping with constant death is captured in one of the resident's own words:

> A resident here said she sat down in the dining room while everybody was eating and when she looked up all [she] saw were tombstones and everybody behind their tombstones as they were eating. I looked around and saw the same thing she saw. That's the way I kind of look at it too. (Adelman & Frey, 1994, p. 14)

We examined in some detail how residents cope with death and dying. Using root metaphor analysis, two powerful root metaphors emerged from informants' comments: mirrors and walls. *Mirrors* describes how residents project themselves onto sick or dying

members, seeing themselves in that condition and reflecting on their own fates and their ability to handle death. *Walls* describes how residents distance themselves from others, and the defense mechanisms they use to protect themselves from becoming too vulnerable.

These two responses to death and dying create a *depression bind* for residents, a conflict experienced due to the need to grieve the loss of fellow residents juxtaposed with the fact that extended or dysfunctional grieving can lead to depression of their immune system. The irony here is that what bonds residents into a community—illness and death—also pushes them apart.

These difficult transition times are facilitated by community coping rituals. For example, a balloon ceremony that occurs after someone has died at BH has become an integral bereavement ritual. People attending are given colored balloons, write final messages about the deceased that they attach to long ribbons tied to the balloons, and then the balloons are released in unison. This ritual affirms the resident's life and acknowledges his or her release from the struggle with AIDS and symbolizes a letting go for the bereaved in a joyous way. As Daniel, one of the residents, commented about the ritual, "We come into life with a celebration and we end life with a celebration." This ritual not only helps group members remember one of their own, but it helps them "re-member" as a surviving collective.

Finally, our analysis focused on residents' views of community life at BH. Because residents used metaphors during the interviews to characterize various aspects of life at BH, we used metaphor analysis to analyze the data. A coding scheme for analyzing metaphors was developed based on the interview schedule and preliminary readings of the transcripts. Eighteen coders were trained to use the coding protocol, and each transcript was coded independently by two readers. Using a reiterative process, consensual validation (mutual agreement between the coders) served as the criterion for the content analysis of each transcript. An entry for each category was placed on a separate index card. Cards for all transcripts were then aggregated under each coded category and further analyzed for emergent themes and metaphors.

The analysis reveals that for some, the root metaphor was *family*, whereas for others it was *institution*. Differences between these metaphors, we suggest as a working hypothesis, are related to the extent to which residents participate in and perceive the value of the collective group practices, the extent to which residents form meaningful relationships with other residents and staff, their compatibility with group living, and their willingness to deal positively with the disease.

By using the research methods associated with the naturalistic paradigm, this study captures poignantly the experience of living in this group setting from the point of view of the residents themselves. In some cases, this point of view is discovered in spontaneous discussions in hallways, over dinner gossip, in residents' private rooms where possessions elicit personal revelations, and in a myriad of often fleeting, but profound, commentary on coping with daily life. These observations serve to contextualize the more formal interviews, embedding these bracketed interactions within the larger frame of social life.

What does this research contribute to the study of small groups? We believe that this study makes several substantive contributions to understanding behavior in this and other natural group settings, and offers some promising directions for future research.

First, this research demonstrates the value of studying group living situations. In the United States, the need for adequate housing, health care, and social services for diverse populations is increasing rapidly. Group living offers a viable solution for meeting this challenge for many individuals, including the aged, the sick, and the homeless. We know little, however, about the dynamics that characterize life in these group settings.

AIDS residential settings, in particular, are a unique and compelling context for studying community life. As the AIDS pandemic reaches further into the poorer segments of society (thus affecting more of the homeless), more homes will need to be created. The lessons learned at BH can help foster high-quality community living in other residential facilities.

Second, the concept of community itself is a compelling but elusive group process that deserves scholarly attention. Although it

has received some attention in popular texts (see, for example, Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985), it has been woefully ignored in the group literature. The concept of community, moreover, is filled with real-world significance because it speaks directly to the debate between the individual and the collective that pervades American culture.

Third, community living is best understood as a precarious balance between dialectical tensions. There are multiple dialectical tensions that exist within groups, including those that exist at the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and intergroup levels (see Altman, 1993). Some of the tensions found in this study, such as private versus public life or individual versus group identity, are undoubtedly characteristic of all group life (see Smith & Berg, 1987), whereas others, such as residents' autonomy versus staff control, wellness versus illness, and attachment versus detachment, are more endemic to this particular group of people, and perhaps others with life-threatening illnesses. Furthermore, these tensions must be viewed as healthy, rather than as dilemmas that need to be resolved. There is no one dominant ideal for group cohesion and solidarity; instead, there are a variety of voices that must be accounted for.

Documenting the existence and understanding the significance of dialectical tensions in groups is made possible only by using the naturalistic methods described in this essay. Such tensions simply cannot be captured by quantitative scales that force people to choose between opposites (e.g., semantic differential items) or consider contrary answers to related questions as demonstrating a lack of reliability.

Fourth, this research documents the primary role that communication plays in creating and sustaining group life. Rothenbuhler (1991) argues that "communication and community grow in each other's shadows; the possibilities of one are structured by the possibility of the other" (p. 76). Group communication practices help foster a sense of community by mediating the tensions that group members experience. Conquergood (1992) argues that "people need concrete symbols through which they can grasp elusive meaning and discharge deep and contradictory feelings" (p. 107). These practices, however, both facilitate partial resolution of these

tensions and exacerbate them. As we argue, "Thus, the tensions between the individual and the structural features of community life are not to be resolved; at best they are massaged" (Adelman & Frey, 1994, p. 21).

The study described above demonstrates the value of using the methodological procedures associated with the naturalistic paradigm to study group process, in this case community building. Finally, it is important to keep in mind that this study is part of a larger, longitudinal social action research program that is a collaboration between BH administrators, staff, and residents and the research team that has resulted in a number of research studies. Adelman (Adelman & Schultz, 1991), for example, was granted the opportunity to work with a resident to produce an ethnographic videotape of community life at BH and has also conducted a study of the role of personal possessions and their exchange with fellow residents and staff in coping with death and dying (Adelman, 1992). Frey and Adelman currently are conducting a longitudinal study in which the majority of residents and staff agreed to complete questionnaires and be interviewed.

This collaborative relationship has also resulted in a number of projects that benefit those who live and work at BH. House administrators, for example, make a point of giving the essay described above to new staff and volunteers to help them understand the tensions of daily life at BH, and use Adelman and Schultz's (1991) videotape for public education and fundraising efforts. Profits from this video are also donated to the residents' fund to be used as they choose. At the request of BH administrators, Frey and Adelman (1993) wrote a chapter on building community for a manual that is used to establish similar homes across the country. Prior and current research includes a separate report submitted to BH administrators that offers recommendations for improving house practices. The researchers have obtained grants that provide financial compensations for residents (many without any disposable income) who participate in the research studies. Finally, and most important from our perspective, all of the written reports, articles, and the documentary video strive to capture members' views of their group and community from their perspective. Twenty of the 21 residents

interviewed for the study described above have passed away; this report gives those residents a voice, even in death.

CONCLUSION

Small group theory and research once flourished; its growth was tied to the perceived importance of groups in society and the belief that research could make a difference in people's lives. Group discussion was seen, for example, as fundamental and essential for democracy, and group research promised a way of ensuring that democracy would prevail over totalitarianism.

Back (1979) asks why we study small groups, and his answer speaks volumes: "One of the reasons is that here we can have a small model of social interaction that is applicable to the whole society and to the whole of human life" (p. 292). Unfortunately, much of the research during the past years has divorced itself from the real-world issues and concerns that imbued group research with significance in the first place. Researchers have traded real-world significance for perceived methodological rigor—a false dichotomy if ever one existed. The result is research that often is internally sound, but empty of life. Is it little wonder, then, that interest in group research has decreased significantly?

Small groups are no less important today than they have been at any other time in history; it is the research that is less relevant. If group research is to recapture its place at the forefront of research, it needs a substantial shot in the arm. This essay argues that one promising way to recapture what has been lost is by studying real-life groups using the philosophical assumptions and methodological practices advocated by the naturalistic paradigm. Elms (1975) maintains that the crisis in the social sciences is not simply one of confidence, but more profoundly, of paradigm. We do not need more sophisticated ways to conduct laboratory research; we need an entirely different kind of research that is grounded in alternative assumptions and procedures.

Zander (1979) once wrote, "The innovativeness of research in group dynamics has been on a plateau for a few years. It will not

stay on that level long when new needs and means stimulate new developments among students of group behavior" (p. 281). Lakin (1979) believes that growth depends ultimately on methodological innovation: "How to look at groups rather than what to look at in groups is the collaborative task of the next generation of investigators of small group processes" (p. 427). This essay offers one proposal for corrective and innovative action that hopefully will renew interest in group research by scholars, practitioners, and the general public alike.

NOTES

1. The decline in group research is neither new nor unique to the communication field. Goodstein and Dovico (1979), for example, reported a startling decline in the percentage of small group theory and research articles published in the first 14 volumes of the *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* (a journal founded by the National Training Laboratories and viewed generally as devoted to the study of groups). During the first 2 years, small group articles accounted for 53% of the total number of articles published, whereas for 1978-1979 they accounted for only 8%.

2. See for example Vol. 13, No. 3 of the *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* (1979), a special issue that addresses the question, What's happened to small group research?

3. Lest it be assumed that these statistics apply only to group communication research, articles published in *Small Group Research* during the 1990s (from Vol. 21, No. 1 to Vol. 24, No. 3) in which an actual group was studied (literature reviews, editorials, and survey studies were excluded) were content analyzed. The results are remarkably similar to those that characterize the group communication literature: 66.1% of group research used students, 67.2% studied groups in a laboratory setting (37.3%) or in the classroom (29.9%), and 82.6% employed quantitative methods. (Note: This last figure would have been boosted had the survey studies, which all used quantitative methods, been included.) The mean number of observations was not calculated due to large variance in time, from a study of 30- to 40-minute group meetings to a study based on 17 years of observation of a single group. Most of the quantitative research studies, however, employed only one or two rating periods.

4. Erlandson et al. (1993) are quick to point out that naturalistic inquiry is not equivalent to qualitative methods: "The operational differences between the two types of research [positivistic versus naturalistic] are not so well defined by their different methodologies as by the reasons for which methods are selected and by how the data obtained from them are intended to be used" (p. 35). However, as Guba (1981) points out, naturalistic researchers favor qualitative methods, primarily because they produce thick data that capture the complex interrelationships and multiple realities that characterize a setting.

5. It should be pointed out that positivistic researchers also sometimes triangulate their findings by using multiple quantitative methods.

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