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INTRODUCTION
The Relational Side of Groups

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Think of your best and worst groups. Similar to many people, your memories of these groups hinge on the relationships you developed in those groups. Relationships with other group members have the capacity to cast our recollections in both positive and negative ways. For this reason, I have been arguing that group scholars, regardless of discipline, need to focus on relational issues in groups to the extent that they focus on group tasks (Keyton, 1999). Beyond the camaraderie of a friendship circle and the conflicting interactions of family members, group relational issues, positive and negative, extend to groups in all contexts—work teams, counseling or therapy groups, sports teams, and performance groups. In articulating these concerns with my more task-oriented group colleagues, I often make reference to Hackman's (1990) collection of case studies. From these analyses, he declared that one dimension of group effectiveness is the "degree to which the process of carrying out the work enhances the capability of members to work together interdependently in the future" (p. 6). Group member relationship development and maintenance are the primary processes that enhance or detract from how group work is carried out. Simply, groups in all contexts engage in some type of communication, interaction, or behavior from which emerge some degree and quality of group member relationships.

Elsewhere I have argued that relational communication, the "verbal and nonverbal messages that create the social fabric of the group" (Keyton, 1999, p. 192), plays an essential role in groups. These verbal and nonverbal messages promote or inhibit relation-

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ships between and among group members. Traditionally, this has been referred to as the *affective* or *expressive* dimension of group communication as opposed to the *instrumental* or *task-oriented* dimension. I am not convinced, however, that relying on our traditional views of the affective or expressive dimension is satisfactory. This dimension needs critical assessment, not blind acceptance, and certainly deserves to be considered as a dimension equal in importance to task orientation.

THE CALL FOR ARTICLES

To explore these issues, *Small Group Research* announced a special issue devoted to the relational side of groups. Intended to focus on the social or interpersonal connections, ties, or bonds among group members, the call encouraged articles that explored the positive and negative consequences of group members' relationships. Of particular interest were articles that examined group member affiliation (e.g., cohesiveness) and identification as well as relationship development within groups. Other topics suggested as being of interest included: (a) how group members develop rapport, (b) how relational dependencies and/or interdependencies develop among group members, and (c) how relational issues affect group member and overall group performance. These topics were not exclusive but merely suggestive of the interests of the special issue. Empirical articles as well as position articles were invited, and all methodologies and group contexts were welcome.

THE IMPORTANCE
OF RELATIONAL ISSUES IN GROUPS

Why are relational issues in groups important? Our relationships with other group members provide keys to our identity and how we fit in our social networks. Our relationships are consequences of the individual status, power, and influence we posses and how we comingle with other group members on these constructs. The atti-

tudes we hold about our relationships with others in a group have a strong effect on our task motivation. Group tasks are not accomplished by task knowledge or skill alone.

How has the group literature treated relational issues? Early on, group scholars (Bales, 1950, 1953; Benne & Sheats, 1948) identified task and relational concepts in group interaction. This task-relational distinction continued for the next 20 to 30 years (Bales & Cohen, 1979; Hare, 1976). Some scholars saw task and relational dimensions as separate; others acknowledged their interdependence. Regardless of how the two dimensions were theoretically framed, researchers primarily focused on the impact of relational messages on decision making or other group tasks and outcomes.

Relational development also figured prominently in early group scholarship (Bion, 1961; Schutz, 1958; Stock & Thelen, 1958). This work continues today (e.g., see Wheelan, 1999, who edited a special issue of *Small Group Research* on group development, and Wheelan et al., 1994), and is the most closely aligned with relational issues featured in this issue.

At a more micro level, scholars have developed conceptual frameworks and operationalizations for relational constructs such as satisfaction and cohesiveness. Despite being widely studied, we are still contesting the conceptualization and measurement of these constructs (see "Special Section on the Measurement of Cohesion," 2000).

Clearly, relational issues have not been ignored. But in most cases, relational issues are seen as secondary or supplementary to group task concerns. Why? First, it is easier to identify, and thus examine, task activity. Most groups, or surely the types of groups studied, produce outcomes (e.g., decisions and reports) that can be measured for quality and quantity. Moreover, group tasks can be configured in such a way that one task output represents all group members, which in turn simplifies measurement of outcome variables. In critiques of this approach to studying groups, some scholars argue that such a focus is inevitable in research that has long been grounded in a male tradition (Meyers & Brashers, 1994; Propp & Kreps, 1994) favoring task activity and task discussion.

Second, it is impossible to study relational development, maintenance, and dissolution when scholars rely on zero-history groups of college students who interact for as little as 30 minutes with no intention of ever interacting or seeing one another in the future (Seibold & Meyers, 1988). Simply, scholars cannot substantiate relational issues as worthy of study when these restrictive settings prevented or discouraged relational issues from unfolding.

Third, group scholars have adopted many research traditions that favor study of the individual group member rather than the group as an entity or unit. The dynamics of relationship issues cannot be studied when independence rather than interdependence is favored.

Despite these traditions in the study of groups, broadening our contextual interest in groups is paramount to our learning more about relational issues in groups. Scholars could address contexts (a) in which relational issues are more prominent, (b) on which individuals' social or identity needs are met, and (c) for which the primary consequence of the group's existence is the development of relationships. Using these criteria as a guide, we would include families, adult friendship groups, children's playgroups, poker or other card groups, wedding and baby showers, college fraternities and sororities, self-help groups, gangs, social support groups, and community living groups. Each of these provides the opportunity for long-term membership so attention can be drawn to relational issues in groups. By expanding the landscape of group types and group contexts, we will surely come to question the notion of relational issues being subordinate to those of task. With the group structure so central to societal, familial, work, recreational, educational, religious, and governmental structures, group scholars in all disciplines will have plenty of reason and opportunity to explore the relational side of groups.

RELATIONAL ISSUES TO BE EXPLORED

What could be studied with an emphasis on group relational issues? What could be achieved? One goal of scholars could be to

develop macro theories of relational development, maintenance, and dissolution in groups. Taking advantage of the literature that explores culture in societies and in organizations, many of these same concepts need to be explored in long-term groups to help group scholars move beyond the current focus on relational issues at the micro level. By pulling back the examination lens to allow a more inclusive or holistic view of how groups operate, we may generate a better view of the micro processes as they interweave and unfold or even discover new micro relational elements. For example, we know little about how trust, intimacy, and humor, all of which are based on relational history, are developed or maintained in groups. Lack of trust is often central to a group's poor performance, yet one group member cannot mandate that trust be given or accepted. The use of intimacy in groups has been virtually ignored although this self-revealing technique is often strategically used. Humor often dictates the quality of group member relationships. Who can tease? Who are benign targets of humor? What can be joked about? Exploring issues and questions such as these across group contexts should reveal a great deal about the relational structure of groups.

Besides these relational constructs, a processual distinction between surface relational structures (e.g., politeness) and deeper relational structures such as trust, mentioned earlier, should be explored. Diversity among group members may be an entry point for distinguishing between surface and deep structures. On the surface, diversity can easily be codified. Yet, in long-term groups that are meaningful to participants, diversity must be managed to ensure group longevity. Studying concepts such as these should provide greater understanding of relational markers or those behaviors that signal the existence, quality, and direction of group member relationships.

We also need greater understanding of how a group member simultaneously develops and manages many separate intragroup relationships. Dyadic relationships in groups develop at different speeds and for different motivations, needs, and strategic reasons. Thus, relational accumulation or critical relational events need to be studied. For example, how do overt relational overtures by one

group member to another group member affect his or her relational development and maintenance with a third group member? Looking at this dyadic relational complexity would only be a beginning. We must also acknowledge the three- and four-member subgroups that exist with their own relational network inside the group's larger membership. I believe these processual relational activities would be of interest to those studying work teams as well as blended families.

Group scholars interested in relational issues would, I think, also need to study the lack of relational development or its absence. Indifference in groups is a relational issue that needs understanding in any type of group with mandated membership.

Theoretically, group scholars might use Giddens' (1984) structuration to address a group's relational system and structure (see Poole, Seibold, & McPhee, 1985, for its application to decision-making groups). Putnam and Stohl's (1990, 1996) bona fide group perspective could guide group scholars in the pursuit of relational issues and concepts. This perspective acknowledges a group's fluid boundaries, the multiple and competing group memberships of every group member, and mandated as well as voluntary changes in group membership. Both of these theoretical frameworks are broadly devised and not discipline specific and may provide an alternative to our overreliance on system theory. Scholars in many disciplines have used system theory, but its use has not helped researchers achieve a relational focus. I would not dismiss it, but other theoretical approaches might create more productive research in this area.

METHODOLOGIES FOR STUDYING
RELATIONAL ISSUES IN GROUPS

The articles presented here in the special issue represent the disciplines of clinical psychology, communication, and social work. Not surprising to me, authors provided more compelling views of relational issues in groups through qualitative research methodologies. The articles in this issue represent a variety of these—field

observation, interviewing, participant observation, and qualitative case analyses—as well as a review of literature.

Selection of qualitative approaches offer greater insight into how and why relationships develop in group contexts. On the other hand, quantitative methodologies appear more suited for indicating what relationships are, if they exist. In some ways, quantitative methodologies have frozen group member relationships and in essence caused us to examine them as consisting of static traits rather than being of dynamic qualities.

On the whole, qualitative methodologies provide greater ecological validity as they allow researchers to dig more deeply into the framing and consequences of the group's context. By exploring relational issues in their naturally occurring environments, these methodologies allowed researchers to place greater emphasis on the emergence of participants' explanations than on their own predictions. To some degree, the articles presented here take us outside traditional small group research that continues to sanction static measurement and zero-history task groups. I would argue that qualitative methodologies are more suited for explaining relational processes in their complexity to the extent that they uncover the untidy ways in which group members relate to one another.

These articles demonstrate that relational development, maintenance, and dissolution are not between one group member and another but among group members with influences—present and past—from individuals inside and outside the group's boundary. Qualitative methodologies are likely to be more successful in capturing relational issues in groups for three reasons. First, they are more sensitive to the reality that any group member has multiple relationships within a group as a member of dyads, triads, and so on. Second, qualitative methodologies acknowledge that these multiple relationships are simultaneously developed and managed. Third, qualitative methodologies are more sensitive to concepts not before named such as relational alertness, relational attentiveness, and relational savvy.

I am not suggesting that group scholars dismiss quantitative methodologies. Rather, we need to acknowledge that our current use of quantitative methodologies has limited or constrained our

understanding of relational issues in groups. For the study of groups, choice of methodology is not an either/or decision. Rather, the two are integrative and reciprocal. Qualitative approaches would allow us to address macro group processes that reveal the intricacies best later examined with more micro, and perhaps, quantitative approaches. Group scholars too tightly oriented to one methodology or the other will certainly miss part of a group's relational life. (See McGrath, 1997, for his critique of methodological limitations of group research in social psychology and Poole, Keyton, & Frey, 1999, for their review of key issues in designing and conducting group communication research.)

THIS ISSUE

This special issue presents three empirical studies and one literature review. They were chosen for inclusion in the special issue on the relational side of groups because they address, ask, and offer new questions. The issue begins with Fraser and Russell's investigation of how women in a self-defense class use relationships developed there to enhance both their physical and psychological empowerment. The authors found that the context of the self-defense class allowed women to develop supportive relationships with one another and, paradoxically, resolve feelings of betrayal by women in their pasts. Fraser and Russell's analyses demonstrate that joining a group for task reasons can also provide a venue for questioning, developing, and maintaining relational bonds.

Next, Whatule investigates a men's anger treatment group. His analyses reveal that the anger group provides men, who by the essence of their membership admit to communicative and relational dysfunction, the opportunity to heal by breaking the traditional stereotype of the male image. In this treatment group, men self-disclose the intimacies of their lives and simultaneously create bonds with other men. Whatule suggests that this group's use of symbols, ritual, and stories created a group consciousness that supported their more positive adaptation to relationships outside the group.

Ajrouch moves beyond traditional contextualizations of groups to an ethnic identity group. She examines a group of adolescent children of Lebanese immigrants who have strong social, educational, and community ties for the ways in which the group influences their acculturation and negotiation of ethnic identity. Her study is an example of how group scholars can extend their research to groups whose primary tasks are relational concerns.

Finally, the research team of Barker, Abrams, Tiyaamornwong, Seibold, Duggan, Park, and Sebastian offers a review of the literature that addresses new and interesting directions in group research. Focusing on the family, interculturally diverse groups, and computer-mediated groups, they advance propositions to stimulate scholars' exploration of these contemporary and changing group structures.

THE LAST WORD

Let me end with something I found while searching for the term *effective group communication* on the Web. I could not make the point more clearly:

> One of the interesting things I have observed in watching groups meet, and also being involved in my own group meetings is that when the meeting focus shifts primarily to business at hand, and relationship building is reduced or eliminated, problems often emerge. . . . I also would say that if you ignore the interpersonal bonding needs of groups, it will very likely come back and bite you when you least expect it. (Sanderlin, 1994)

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