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The Existential Center of Small Groups: Member's Conduct and Interaction

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Abstract

In every society groups rather than individuals are given responsibility for producing results that individuals potentially could produce just as well, but without the benefits of group effort. Once a small discussion group is convened, the members can be counted on to interact, often at length and sometimes contentiously, incontrovertible evidence that their interaction accomplishes something over and above what comes about because of characteristics of the task, cognitive processing, and context. And in order for members to achieve the collaboration and interdependence that make them a group rather than co-present individuals, they must interact. Hence, it is essential for small group researchers to examine behavioral data (by which we mean interactional conduct) if we are to understand what gives small groups the distinct utilities with which they are credited. This position does not mean that individual motivation, cognition and information processing, and other related phenomena should be ignored. It means rather that these matters are secondary to and contingent on interactional conduct and processes.

Keywords

group interaction, decision-making, data analysis, social cognition

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Small groups are ubiquitous in human affairs. This is prima facie evidence that acting in concert—collaboration in group effort—is a human universal, an indispensable part of our social landscape that serves essential cultural and institutional functionalities. As Gastil (2010) notes, these functionalities are diverse and open-ended within and across cultures, including not only the wide range of practical matters that groups work on in organizations and communities but also the intellectual, social, cultural, and ceremonial matters that depend on group collaboration, from classrooms to athletic teams, support groups to social clubs, and so on.

The core reality of any small group is that the members have to interact with each other to carry out whatever responsibility, activity, or task with which they are collectively charged. The benefits of assigning such responsibilities, activities, and tasks to groups rather than individuals are well understood, such benefits, for example, as canceling out the biases and special interests of individuals, and ensuring at least some measure of communal representativeness in whatever results from the group's effort. When people interact, they progressively provide each other with opportunity spaces that constrain what can and cannot relevantly be said and done. Interacting with others is thus a matter of making talk and other conduct responsive to and anticipatory of what others in the group say and do, not just expressing whatever is on one's mind regarding the matter at hand. Hence, paraphrasing Sanders (1997), in the give and take of interaction, people end up saying things it might not otherwise have occurred to them to say and take positions it might not otherwise have occurred to them to take. This is the logic of focus group interviews as well as the basis of any rationale for charging a group of people with bringing about something that an individual could bring about more efficiently. On this basis we contend that attention to the *behavior* (by which we mean, the visible conduct and interaction) of members is essential for small group research and that reductionist efforts to account for what happens in small groups just in terms of the cognitions and information processing of members are inherently bound to come up short.

Another way to ground our position in this colloquy is to consider that whether a group transcends being a copresent collection of individuals to function as a group, and how well it then performs as a group, depend on whether members persist in joint, collaborative efforts to reach some end point—completion of the task or activity in which they were engaged, and agreement that they have reached it or cannot do so. This is the primary, possibly the only, requirement for minimally adequate group performance (see Laughlin, 1999; Laughlin & Ellis, 1986). Such sustained collaborative effort is itself an achievement, prior to and essential for whatever result

the group's effort brings about. This position stands in contrast to more psychological approaches to understanding the transition from a collection of individuals to groups, in which constructs such as cohesion, group mind, information centrality, and the like take center stage. We do not doubt that there is some consequence, for example, of cohesion on how group members act or the quality of their product. But the fact that group members visibly persist in interacting with each other as group members is the key, regardless of how the participants feel about each other or the group, or whether the end they reach was innovative and unexpected or fully predictable.

The Influence of Members' Interaction on Group Outcomes

Although we do not think the issue this point/counterpoint addresses should be an issue at all, this is not its first appearance. It was recently debated (Bonito & Sanders, 2009; Gouran, 2009; Hewes, 2009a, 2009b; Meyers & Seibold, 2009; Pavitt, 2009) around the proposition, promulgated primarily and eloquently by Hewes (1986, 1996), that we have no better than equivocal evidence that group outcomes are contingent on members' conduct and interaction (communication). The colloquy that was produced around this proposition turned on the mediated/constitutive conundrum.

The mediated view assumes that communication is simply a channel through which individual cognitions (e.g., preferences, opinions, arguments) are made manifest (see also Pavitt, 1999). On this view, communication contributes nothing to process and outcomes that cannot be accounted for by preexisting conditions, such as individual differences and dispositions, the task, and context. In fact, in some quarters it has been argued that communication can only subtract from the possibly salutary influence of preexisting conditions, as in, for example, Steiner's (in)famous equation: actual productivity = potential productivity – process loss. This argument carries through other influential models, including Lorge and Solomon's Models A and B (see Pavitt & Curtis, 1994). From that perspective, rather than collect behavioral data, it makes more sense to identify factors exogenous to discussion and match them with a predefined set of outcomes from which a group is instructed to choose, and then ask how communication allowed groups to perform to their potential.

The constitutive view is that members' conduct and interaction (communication) contributes to process and outcomes that could not occur otherwise, whether by reifying, modulating, or overriding, factors exogenous to discussion. Perhaps the most telling case is Meyers' (1989a, 1989b) research on group argument, in which arguments made during discussion, including their quality and sequencing, could not be accounted for by members' preexisting knowledge.[1] What groups achieved, on this view, can only be accounted for by what types of arguments members jointly, interactively, and interdependently produced.

We have argued elsewhere (Bonito & Sanders, 2009) that the mediated/constitutive argument is a red herring. Even if we adopt the mediated view and do not consider members' conduct and interaction to be the basis of the outcome they achieve, it does not make their conduct and interaction irrelevant. Discussion is the basis for there being a group effort at all rather than independent individual efforts. Perhaps for that reason, in many institutional and cultural contexts, evidence of group effort itself (collaboration, deliberation) provides a valued authority or validation for directives, policies, and actions. Even though it would have been more efficient, and possibly have made no difference to the result, it is hard to imagine, for example, British Prime Minister Asquith during the initial states of the First World War making use of his war cabinet (which included, among others, future Prime Ministers Winston Churchill and David Lloyd George) by having them vote on a set of preexisting strategies but not talk about them. In fact Churchill, cited in (Jenkins, 2001), wrote that Asquith "sat [in Cabinet] like the great judge he was, hearing with trained patience the case deployed on every side" (p. 510). Of course, adopting a purely constitutive view does not mean that individual differences, task characteristics, and group features (e.g., composition) have no bearing on what happens. But, as noted below, these issues should be examined in the context of identifiable features of interaction. Consider Churchill's subsequent remarks about Asquith's open-mindedness (or lack thereof): "With Asquith, either the Court was open or it was shut. If it was open, his whole attention was focused on the case; and if it was shut there was no use knocking at the door" (p. 510).[2]

The focus in much research on input–output covariance is, in part, responsible for the misplaced concern with the mediated/constitutive dichotomy. It is fairly easy to see how members' conduct and interaction appear to have a mediated role if, for example, one discovers reliable associations between group composition and a very circumscribed set of outcomes. This is precisely the mechanism posited by social decision scheme approaches (Davis, 1973; Stasser, 1998), among others, in which communication serves only to

make prediscussion preferences, knowledge, and arguments known, with predictable effects. Consider the case of minority influence on an intellective task. Minority influence is likely to occur when (a) the task has a demonstrably correct answer, (b) members possess sufficient skill and motivation to recognize the correct answer, and (c) the minority is motivated to present the answer in a way that can be grasped by the rest. So, for example, a student group working collaboratively on a math problem that has a least one member who knows the Pythagorean theorem should be able to solve for the hypotenuse of a right triangle (if given the length of the remaining two sides). When groups fail to adopt the solution advocated by the knowledgeable members(s), it is easy to attribute such failures to lack of motivation, making it easy to also attribute success to sufficient motivational levels.[3] But this seems to us the wrong tack. Instead, we would ask how features of interaction make possible (or not) correct group-level judgments, because in lieu of telepathy or some other metaphysical processes, even something like a fairly circumscribed, laboratory-based task requires that members talk about it. We think it important for researchers to identify, specifically for intellective tasks, but for all tasks in general, how members (a) convey that they have the right or correct answer, (b) identify and address motivational issues in the group, and (c) describe solutions in graspable ways that are also persuasive.

We are not suggesting that motivation, confidence, and pluralities do not matter—obviously, they do. But to us the larger issue is how such interaction supports the development, maintenance, and modification of these types of input factors. We address this issue below.

The Intersection Between Basic and Applied Research on Small Group Interaction

If one concludes that the mediated/constitutive dichotomy is unhelpful, as we do, it might be more fruitful to think of juxtaposing properties of conduct and interaction with features exogenous to discussion in terms of basic and applied research. From the perspective of basic research, the ubiquitous formation and reliance on groups across cultures and institutions indicates that generally they do succeed naturally, without interventions, in achieving a minimally adequate level of performance (however determined). The focus, then, for basic research is how it comes about that members' conduct and interaction is sufficiently acculturated before the fact, and perhaps also through actual participation in group effort, that they can participate competently in the group tasks and activities with which their community and their work presents them. From the perspective of applied research, the specifics of

members' conduct and interaction, and thus the quality of any group's performance, are contingent and improvable. What is then of interest is the ways in which the interaction of the members of groups that engage in specific tasks or activities can be cultivated to enhance the quality of the group's performance.

Both basic and applied research interests warrant attention not only to what observably takes place as group members work together but also to such underpinnings of group performance as individuals' cognitive processing, social skills or social competence, decision processes, social psychology, task structure, social and institutional environments, acculturation, and so on. But attention to such matters cannot be detached from (though it sometimes is) attention to the observable interaction of group members in naturally occurring small groups. Nor can attention to such matters be pursued on the strength of unexamined assumptions about what takes place, or normative expectations about what should take place, as group members interact (though this sometimes happens).

Several examples highlight the juxtaposition of basic and applied group research. Gulliver's (1979) critique of game theory and other such formal models of interdependent decision making and conflict demonstrated that the presuppositions of such models oversimplify, and in fact are empirically false to, the practical realities that beset people in actual conflicts. Most centrally, these models overlook that in actual conflicts there are multiple, simultaneous problems being addressed, and their solutions often compete with each other. The task for people engaged in actual conflicts is, therefore, not simply to rationally weigh the costs and benefits of particular solutions but to collaborate with each other on managing, prioritizing, focusing, interrelating the topics and problems they have before them. How people go about working with each other to do this, if they attempt it at all, is an empirical question that requires attention to the actual conduct and interaction of disputants.

Without close attention to the specifics of group members' conduct and interaction, it is easy for oversimple generalizations and unexamined assumptions to go unchecked, and to overlook that members' conduct and interaction is the basis for much that does not happen, as well as what does happen. For example, just because the conditions for conflict arise, actual conflict does not necessarily occur. Bonito and Sanders (2002) found that people who were collaborating on a writing task had discursive ways of maintaining their position when there was a disagreement without confronting the other person and engaging in conflict. A more complicated example is that the realities of interaction that underlie the generalization that small groups form and enforce working norms turn out to be an unexpectedly contingent matter. It seems

that this is something that has to be worked at by group members in a sustained way and its success is not assured. Sanders and Bonito (2010) found that a common use of the judge's instructions by jurors in a murder trial was to cite them in making normative correctives of the arguments of other members (e.g., "We can't talk about that," "We have to stick to the facts," etc.). However, because of the ambiguities of the text of their instructions, and in the absence of a judicial authority to clarify them, the deviant juror at whom these were often directed could cite the same instructions to defend his or her position and arguments. In short, the generalization that groups form and enforce norms conceals that this can be done well or badly and that there are particularities and contingencies in the communication involved in doing it that need to be considered.

An unexamined assumption that is contrary to observed conduct underlies Price, Cappella, and Nir's (2002) study of the influence of exposure to positions and arguments opposed to one's own. They found from a survey of the American public that the more that persons were exposed to positions and arguments contrary to their own, the more able they were to produce reasoned arguments and anticipate disagreement. This finding seems to shed light on how it is that people are acculturated, and can be trained, to participate more competently in certain group tasks (those that involve deliberation about policies and their implementation). However, this research presupposes that people conduct themselves in a deliberative environment in a way that turns out to be quite different from what behavioral data reveal is actually the case.

For one thing, even when a group member is prepared to make a sustained argument, and intends to do so, he or she may miss the discursive opportunity. Sanders (2007) examined the efforts of a senior vice president in a company meeting of senior managers to advocate a restructuring plan he had devised in accordance with management's agenda to prepare for the retirement of the company's founder and CEO. Although the senior vice president's plan arguably had merit, his advocacy of the plan failed because a competing issue arose and he failed to recognize and seize the one opportunity that presented itself in the flow of the discussion to merge those issues. Second, it seems that when people do have differing views, they do not necessarily engage in a debate-like exchange of arguments. Sanders, Pomerantz, and Stromer-Galley (2010) examined the discussion of a student group charged with addressing policy issues that arise in collisions between police actions and 4th Amendment protections. They found that to the extent arguments are made at all, they are made in fragments, incrementally, woven into the give and take between members about what the issues are. Moreover, when members *take issue with each other* (a broader, more descriptively

accurate, concept than *disagree with each other*), they often do so in indirect, sometimes unmarked, ways, such as asking another for a clarification that exposes an unexamined, possibly indefensible, premise or upshot in what the other has said. Hence, collecting behavioral data reveals that the advocacy of a position in a group involves more than the intellectual task of analyzing the problem at hand and marshaling evidence and arguments. It also involves what Sanders terms *interactional competence* to keep diverse issues from becoming discursively tangled and to recognize and take advantage of sometimes fleeting discursive opportunities to advance one's position.

How Did We Get Here?

All of this leads us to wonder why the question about taking members' conduct and interaction into account is being asked. We suspect that the question is driven, in part, by several recent assessments of the small groups literature (Moreland, Fetterman, Flagg, & Swanenburg, 2010; Moreland, Hogg, & Hains, 1994; Wittenbaum & Moreland, 2008) that have concluded that "behavioral assessment is gradually disappearing from group research" (Moreland et al., 2010, p. 47). In fact, approximately 29% of the more than 4,000 studies examined by Moreland et al. included direct behavioral assessment, only a subset of which, not quantified in the study, presumably focuses on verbal interaction data. This follows a more general pattern in social psychology (see Baumeister, Vohs, & Funder, 2010) and, although we have no direct evidence, probably of most other cognate disciplines as well, including our home field of communication. So the question appears at first glance appropriate given that fewer group studies examine interaction data, which gives the impression that the field thinks it unnecessary to collect and analyze verbal interaction data.

A potentially more useful question to ask is why group research, more often than not (especially recently), poses questions about groups that excludes, or at least minimizes, the role of members' conduct and interaction. The answer is derived from the recent trends in group research that, according to Moreland et al. (2010), emphasize cognitive structures and mechanisms, for example, those related to intergroup relationships (e.g., social identity theory) and before that, information processing (Hinsz, Tindale, & Vollrath, 1997).[4] We do not doubt that in-group differentiation and information processing and management are important influences on what (at least some) groups accomplish. What we do not yet know, and we think is important to know, is how group members interact in ways that make in-group–out-group distinctions relevant or irrelevant and how such interactions play a role in

what a group decides. Similarly, we know that group members exchange certain types of information more regularly than others and that some interventions affect which information is mentioned and when (for reviews, see Stasser & Titus, 2003; Wittenbaum, Hollingshead, & Botero, 2004), but, as Bonito (2007) demonstrated, we know little of the interaction mechanisms that make the discussion and evaluation of information relevant. These issues are not specific to information sharing and intergroup research. It makes little sense to ask, for example, how climate mediates leader–member relationships (Kivlighan & Tarrant, 2001) or how communication medium and member familiarity influence decision accuracy (Adams, Roch, & Ayman, 2005) without knowing something about the interactional characteristics and options inherent in those situations.

It seems to us that some researchers posit cognitive mechanisms prior to understanding the specifics of the conduct and interaction flow from them (if indeed an effort is made to find that out at all). But as Waldron and Cegala (1992) noted, this is putting the cognitive cart before the interaction horse. In fact, scholars in discourse-related fields have been working on this problem for quite some time and have come to the conclusion that it makes more sense to first ask about the features of interaction and then, once those are well understood, theorize about the related cognitive structures rather than reverse. Schegloff (2006), among others, has wrestled with this issue, writing that

> What is needed is not an analysis of interaction trimmed to meet the available cognitive science, but an account of how humans grasp the world and interact with it that takes account of the resources of interaction, on the one hand, and contributes to understanding its workings and capacities, on the other. (pp. 143-144)

For example, it is not clear how one's preexisting repertoire of arguments (e.g., Vinokur, Trope, & Burnstein, 1975) maps onto the contributions one makes to discussion, and even if we knew something about that, there are certainly many options for developing arguments during discussion that no set of experimental interventions, based on general principles of cognition, can plausibly predict (Seibold & Meyers, 2007). But to ask about the features of argument that are observed during discussion first, and then hypothesize about the underlying cognitions related to argumentative strategies, seem far more appealing because it places practical limits on what kinds of cognitions are potentially relevant for interaction. In lieu of this kind of approach, researchers are likely to find associations between tried and true general sets of cognitions that have little or no bearing on what participants say and do.

Conclusion

It should be evident that some other term besides *behavioral data* is needed to refer to the data that we consider of core importance in small group research. The term *behavioral* is ideologically loaded and connotes a focus on objective, observable behavior (an etic analysis), rather than conduct that is socially meaningful (an emic analysis) but not objectively observable. At the same time, we do not consider that it is feasible or desirable to insist that close attention to the socially meaningful conduct and interaction of group members has to be limited to analysis of the kind of qualitative data from naturally occurring interactions that we have used as illustration. Data have to be quantifiable in order to make comparisons that reveal the influence of such variables as argument types (Seibold & Meyers, 2007; Vinokur & Burnstein, 1978), conflict negotiation strategies (Weingart, Brett, Olekalns, & Smith, 2007), participation (Bonito, 2001), proposals (Pavitt & Johnson, 1999), information sharing (Stasser & Titus, 2003; Wittenbaum et al., 2004), and management of particular interaction functions (Gouran & Hirokawa, 1996). And such comparisons are where the interests of most small group researchers lie, and the methodological expertise and experience. Hence, it is commonplace for the phenomena that a detailed qualitative analysis reveals to be transformed to quantifiable phenomena by coding it into categories. We simply have two cautionary points to make about this otherwise routine practice.

Our first cautionary point is that coded categories of conduct and interaction are not themselves data about the meaningful conduct and interaction of group members—that is, they are not behavioral data. They are transformations of such data and may easily misrepresent the empirical realities. For Bales (Bales, 1970, 1950a, 1950b) to segment the phases of a group's decision making in terms of the relative frequency of such conduct (or actions) as seeking information, giving opinion, and so on, is all very well for his purposes. But we know little from that about the actual conduct and interaction that is exhibited under those categories, especially how difficult or constrained it is for people to engage in them, whether there are variations in the competence with which they are done, and what difference variations in the way they are done and their sequential placement make. *Giving opinion* can be done to support another's position or oppose it or preempt further discussion. That any or all of these may happen with greater frequency in later phases of a group's discussion than others (Bales & Strodtbeck, 1951; Hirokawa, 1983) does not tell us much about exactly what is happening in those phases and whether it is the same thing across discussions (see Keyton & Beck, 2009).

This leads to our second cautionary point. There needs to be sustained attention across the methodological divide here to the work being done in the other camp. Researchers whose data consist of coded categories stand to benefit from attention to qualitative studies that may reveal the need for new, different, or additional categories, or improved criteria for coding. Analysts who examine the qualitative particulars of individuals' conduct and interaction stand to benefit from taking into account the work of researchers who rely on coded categories for what their work reveals or overlooks about the particulars and interconnections of individuals' conduct and interaction. For example, a useful index of the extent of engagement of group members with each other and the task may be the amount of disagreement that occurs (Stromer-Galley, 2007). To quantify the amount of disagreement, a coding scheme has to be devised for categorizing utterances as expressions of disagreement, perhaps whenever an utterance is prefaced with such overtly negative discourse connectives as "No," "But," "On the other hand," and "I disagree." However, such coding schemes may be improved by attention to the work of qualitative analysts that reveals more indirect ways of expressing disagreement that would be missed, such as responding to another's assertion with a question like, "Are you serious?" Reciprocally, the work of qualitative analysts may be improved by attention to the work of quantitative researchers on such coding schemes, which may introduce new questions such as what makes expressions of disagreement recognizable to participants in interaction if there is no overt discourse connective that marks them as such.

We are on the side of the social scientific debate about what counts as data that contends that it is only through examining visible conduct, and examining it in terms of its meaningfulness—its functionality—that we can achieve the scientific goal of finding order and systematicity in what people do and what happens between them. In studying small groups, it is only such data that reveal, for example, that members have ways of side-stepping confrontation when the conditions for conflict arise; that enforcing norms is an interactional, contingent, process; and that discursive opportunities to advance one's case may be fleeting and may go unrecognized. And we consider that they are such data that have to be the focus of work that concerns itself with task structures, problem analysis, institutional demands, and underlying cognitive and sociocultural processes that enable (or interfere with) members' competent and productive participation in a group's task or activity. Hence, our position in this colloquy can be restated as *close attention to the socially meaningful conduct and interaction of group members is essential* for investigating what people do, relative to what the task or activity at hand requires

them to do, not just to perform competently, but to constitute themselves as a small group, and for the group to be stable and fulfill its charge.

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Notes

1. A common criticism is that participants actually knew the arguments but did not express them during pretests. This is likely in some cases but not in others.
2. The fact that both Churchill and Asquith would be out of office long before war's end, and that the war would end under George's tenure as Prime Minister, does not change the fact that discussion, often contentious, was a key part of strategy development.
3. As an example, see Stasser's (1998) discussion of Hinsz's (1990) study of group performance on recognition tasks, in which the effects of interaction on outcomes is explicitly discounted. We find this an odd claim given that Hinsz did not measure or analyze interaction.
4. Moreland, Fetterman, Flagg, and Swanenburg (2010) also argue that the relative ease with which cognitive data are collected and analyzed has something to do with the shift away from interaction data, which are inherently difficult and time consuming to collect, code, and analyze (see Weingart, 1997). There is likely more than a modicum of truth to this, but we prefer to keep our argument on more substantive footing and, in so doing, hope to show why focus on group interaction is essential for understanding groups in general.

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