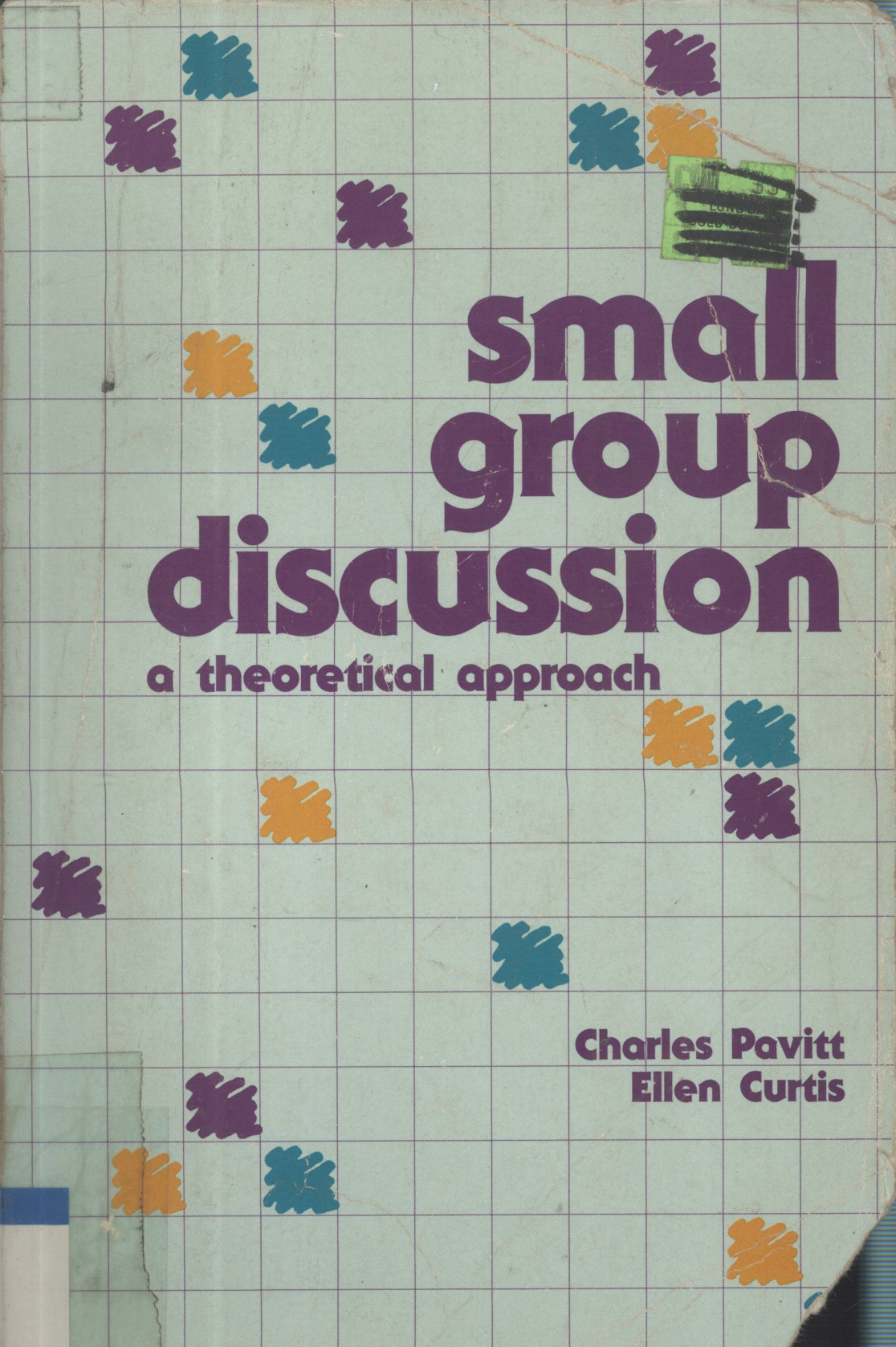
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a theoretical approach
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2

small group discussion

a theoretical approach

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Preface

As Spitzberg and Hecht noted in 1984, it is reasonable to assume that if a person desires to communicate competently, he or she requires, at least to a certain degree, these three attributes: motivation, knowledge, and skill. The first of these attributes—the motivation to be a competent communicator—must come from within the person. Motivation occurs when someone desires to present himself or herself favorably. Thus, in the end, this first attribute is the responsibility of the communicator alone. In contrast, the second and third attributes—knowledge and skill about communication—are not solely the domain of the person communicating. Other people share the responsibility when, whether intentionally or not, they serve as teachers and models for a person who is learning to communicate.

Speech communication is a discipline that has always taken upon itself the responsibility of providing instruction designed to help students communicate competently in various settings. These settings include public forums and, more recently, private, or interpersonal, situations. Any responsible training will attempt to provide both the skills and the knowledge that students need to communicate effectively. However, there will always be controversy regarding which facet the instructor should stress most, skills or knowledge. How does this controversy affect this book?

There are students of speech communication who examine what factors can best teach people how to be effective communicators. Some of these students (such as Wiemann, 1977, footnote 1) apparently believe that skill is the most important factor because they think that knowledge is useless without the skill necessary to apply it. If we take this belief to its logical conclusion, problems develop. This hypothesis seems to be the philosophical underpinning for multitudes of textbooks about such things as, for the most relevant example, small group interaction. In actuality, these books are thinly disguised "how to" guides. There is a potential danger with these kinds of textbooks. Students may learn, for example, a repertoire of leadership skills without gaining a necessary understanding of the circumstances under which they should use these skills.

This kind of dilemma brings to mind the story of a gorilla who had the reputation of consistently hitting a golf ball 400 yards. Someone entered the gorilla into a professional golfing tournament. At first, the human contestants were terrified after the gorilla proved his prowess by hitting a tremendous drive on the first hole. However, they became considerably calmer when the gorilla

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stepped up to the green for the second shot and again drove the ball 400 yards. As you can see, not only did the gorilla not know how to putt, but he also did not know that he should *not* drive on the green. In essence, the gorilla did not know when it was appropriate to apply his skill.

People have said that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. It may be more dangerous when a little knowledge is combined with a lot of skill and motivation. The gorilla had skill and the motivation to use it, but not the knowledge of when to effectively use the skill. Similarly, a communicator who wishes to be a leader, for instance, may have leadership skills and the motivation to use them, but not the knowledge of when to effectively apply the skill. Intuitively, humans understand that behavior that is appropriate in one situation is not correct in another. Pavitt and Haight conducted research in 1986 that empirically supported this claim. For instance, we would consider a certain type of behavior competent when a person is meeting strangers at a party. In contrast, we would believe that the same kind of demeanor is incompetent if the person is helping a friend work through a personal problem. How can a person know what communication skill is appropriate? Knowledge is the key.

Hence, in this book, we assume a particular view of what constitutes competent communication. This viewpoint differs significantly from the conventional view. We believe that instructors should teach knowledge about how small groups operate before they teach students the skills they can use in a small group setting. Communication skills are both useless and dangerous without the knowledge of when and how to use them. In addition, people who communicate effectively in small groups do so on many levels. This is something that the "how to" guides completely ignore. We believe that competent communicators are able to do more than participate well in small groups. They are also able to analyze and evaluate these groups, both as participants and as outside observers.

With all this in mind, we can state that the goal of this book is to help teach students how to decide when they should use a particular communication skill and when they should not.

This book consists of a series of discussions that cover various topics that are central to an understanding of decision-making discussions in small groups. Primarily, the chapters review theory and research that is relevant to such groups. However, we have restricted ourselves to topics that have practical import for small group participants. By necessity, we have not covered every topic that has interested theorists and researchers. Nevertheless, we have attempted to provide as broad a range of areas, and as broad a discussion of these topics, as is feasible.

In general, the chapters build on one another. In other words, each chapter's discussion assumes that the reader has an understanding of the material of previous chapters. Therefore, an instructor who does not assign chapters of this book in sequential order may, from time to time, need to help his or her students with certain concepts. If the assigned chapter takes it for granted that the students already understand concepts that earlier chapters have covered, the instructor may need to prepare students by discussing these ideas.

Acknowledgements

The roots of this book go back a long way. They begin with a course entitled "Theory and Practice of Small Group Discussion" that I taught for the first time in 1979 when I was a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Dissatisfaction with the textbooks that were available for use in the course led me to begin to write my own after I finished my graduate degree. The resulting book, also entitled *Theory and Practice of Small Group Discussion,* was finished and subsequently published by myself in 1984 and revised in 1987. *Theory and Practice* was a direct predecessor to the present book.

As is always true with this sort of undertaking, this book would not have been possible without the help of many people. Some of these people are personally unknown to me; they are the authors and editors of books that have been fundamental sources of information for myself and for other scholars—classics in the small group field, so to speak. For their contribution both to this book and to the study of small groups in general, I would like to thank Marvin E. Shaw (1981), Dorwin Cartwright and Alvin Zander (1968), James H. Davis (1969), and James T. Tedeschi and Svenn Lindskold (1976, for material integral to chapter 5).

As for people who have played a more personal role in the events that led to this book being written, I would like to thank Dean Hewes, who is responsible both for the outline of the small group discussion course on which this book was based and for much of the content in the book itself (particularly in chapter 4). I would also like to thank the other instructors in the course during this era, particularly Scott Poole (at whose feet I sat to learn the lore of the course), Sue Fallis (who, in sitting at my feet learning the lore two years later, allowed me to take part in both roles of the ritual of teacher training), Karen Tracy (for agreeing with me about how the course should be taught), and Larry Haight (for disagreeing with me about how the course should be taught). Kathy Kellermann deserves note for her bibliography of the decision theory literature without which chapter 11 would be much poorer. Others who have been very helpful in suggesting revisions and additions to the book include Frank Boster, Scott Poole, Brian Spitzberg, and Howard Sypher. I also wish to extend my gratitude to Kathy Kellermann, Mary Anne Fitzpatrick, and Brian Spitzberg for adopting *Theory and Practice* for their classes and to Joe Cappella, Mary Anne

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Having rejected other conventional publishers in the past, I was pleased to come into contact with Gorsuch Scarisbrick, who have without fail shown respect for the intent behind the book. Jane Sudbrink was precisely the type of editor I was looking for, and I appreciate the manner in which she worked with me during the beginning phases of the project. First among Jane's contributions was asking Ellen Curtis to work with me in the completion of the present book. Ellen deserves much credit for turning my academese into English, and I have been constantly amazed at her ability to figure out what I am trying to say when I have been vague. Carol Hunter and Jan Krygier did a wonderful job editing our manuscript. I have also found John Gorsuch a pleasure to work with over the months, and I appreciate his commitment to the book.

I would like to thank the technical aid given to me by Irene Pavitt, who tried to teach me how a book editor works. Last and most, this book would not have been possible without the contributions of Elaine Gilby and Matthew Pavitt. It remains dedicated to both of you.

— *Charles Pavitt*

Contents

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1

First Considerations

This chapter will discuss:

1. How scientific theories are the products of scientists' perspectives of the world.
2. How scientific theories and perspectives lead to definitions.
3. How definitions of what constitutes a "group" can be classified as coming from three major scientific perspectives.
4. What elements theories about small groups must include in order to be valid.

INTRODUCTION

This book was written with two goals in mind: (1) to present theories about how small groups function, and (2) to help the reader gain an understanding of how scientists create these theories.

The two goals are related, but we can examine each in turn.

Goal #1

Our first goal is to describe a collection of theories about small group discussion and to give the reader an understanding of the best theories that we have for explaining the features of small group decision making. Before we begin this task, however, it is important to explain what we mean by the term "theory." To do that we will begin by looking at the bases for this book.

This book provides an introduction to the manner in which small groups reach decisions. Its material is based on the work of scientists in the fields of

communication, psychology, sociology, and business administration. In performing their research, these scientists have four aims in mind:

1. *To describe the various "features" exhibited in small group decision making.* For example, "What are the sorts of tasks that small groups can perform?" or "What does it mean to succeed or fail at each of these tasks?" are questions that, when answered, can help a scientist describe the different aspects and variables of the small group decision-making process.
2. *To predict the extent to which a group exhibiting certain features will exhibit other features as well.* For example, one feature of a certain group may be that it has four members. A scientist's goal could be to predict that the group should succeed at performing some tasks and fail at performing other tasks because of its size.
3. *To explain the reasons why a group that exhibits certain features will also exhibit other related features.* Continuing with the example of the group with four members, a scientist may be able to explain why a group of four members is unable to perform some tasks successfully.
4. *To potentially control certain features of the group in order to affect other resulting features.* For example, a scientist might change the number of people in the four-person group so that it may become successful at tasks that it could not perform with only four people.

These scientific aims are ordered one to four for a definite purpose. As one moves from the first to the fourth, achieving each aim becomes increasingly more demanding. Each step requires a greater "understanding" of how small groups work. In order to help them gain the understanding necessary to move ahead, scientists create a *theory* pertaining to the features under study.

This is what we mean by the term "theory" as we use it in this book: It does not mean something of the size and complexity of a theory such as one finds in mathematics or the physical sciences. Very few of these theories exist in the area of small groups, and even if they do, we do not need them for our purposes. What we mean by "theory" is only a common-sense analysis of how and why the various features of small groups relate to one another as they do. Scientists create such theories as they pursue the four above-stated aims.

Based on this understanding of the term "theory" we can rephrase the first goal of this book as follows: To provide the reader with an introduction to theories about the manner in which the "features" of small groups relate to one another. We will support the theories we discuss by relevant research findings whenever it is feasible.

Criticisms

In considering the first goal of this book, we realize that at least some readers will consider such a theory-and-research-based approach somewhat irrelevant and impractical. We wish to respond at this point to both of these criticisms that might arise.

Relevancy. First, we admit that much small group research can be irrelevant for the practical purposes of the average small group participant. However, *this is true only when the research is taken at face value.* The intention behind much research is not to examine obviously relevant features of small groups. What research does instead is evaluate a proposed theory or compare two or more competing theories with each other. True, the research itself may not be applicable for practical purposes, but the theories it evaluates or compares may be extremely relevant to small group work. The value of the research lies in what it tells us about the trustworthiness of the theories it examines.

For example, an experiment examining the number of times women place qualifying tags (such as "I think" or "maybe") on their sentences may not seem very relevant to the participants in the group. However, that research may lead to very important findings for a theory concerning the way in which women interact in various group settings.

Practicality. Second, one often hears the charge that scientific theories about people are impractical and cannot be applied to the "real world." Again, we admit that this charge is valid in some cases. However, when this is true, the intention of the scientist(s) responsible for the theory may differ from that of the practitioner. If that is the case, trying to make the scientist's research fit a practical purpose would be like trying to compare apples and oranges. Nevertheless, even though the theory may have no practical value *in itself*, it may have some very practical *implications* for the practitioner.

For example, a scientist might set up what he or she thinks is a purely theoretical research project to discover the effects of different patterns of group interaction on group success or failure at its task. A member of a group takes the results of this research and realizes, apart from the scientist's theory, that the interaction patterns in his or her group are similar to the interaction patterns of groups in the scientist's study that failed at their tasks. As a result of this realization, the group consciously changes its interaction patterns to be more similar to groups that succeeded at their tasks. In such a scenario, theory and practice have met, even though the scientist perhaps did not intend for that to happen.

In addition it must be said that most theories about small groups *are* practical when taken simply at face value. Such theories give the practitioner a way to manage the features of a group in order to increase the likelihood that the

group will successfully perform its task. Theories give information on how to "control" the group's features. The best tools that a practitioner can have is a set of relevant theories about how certain features of a small group relate to successful performances. He or she can then use the knowledge to change the features to achieve positive results.

Goal #2

The second goal of this book is to help the reader develop an understanding of how scientists work and think. It is essential to know the story behind a theory in order to consider the theory's plausibility intelligently.

It is important to note that one can regard even the best of theories as only tentative. A theory is an attempt to make sense of the world as the researcher sees it. However, others may often see the world differently. In the following pages we will be reaching definite conclusions about small groups; our findings will be based upon our best knowledge of the subject. Even so, these conclusions are not the gospel truth. We expect the thoughtful reader to doubt some of what he or she will read.

However, such doubt is laudable only if the reader understands the reasons the theorists had for reaching their conclusions. An understanding of our best theories and their supporting research is incomplete if the reader does not also understand the *origins* of the theories. In order to help the reader do this we will discuss the issues behind the theories and research by answering questions such as:

1. How was the experiment performed?
2. What does the theory implicitly assume about people?
3. Why was the experiment performed, or the theory proposed, in the first place?

DEFINITIONS OF "SMALL GROUP"

To begin, a scientist cannot study small groups without first defining what a "small group" is. The process of creating a definition is a complicated one. In order to examine this process, we will first discuss where definitions come from generally. We will look at how people see the world and how these viewpoints affect the ways that they define everything around them. We will see how societies can come to share common ideas about things based upon common experience. Then we will explain various perspectives, along with their accompanying definitions of "small group," that provide the bases for the theories in this book. Each perspective consists of a specific way in which scientists have come to view groups. Even so, our discussion of the various perspectives will reveal that many different interpretations can come from a similar viewpoint. Each per-

spective contains numerous explanations and variations on definitions for the term "group."

It is important that the reader understand the ways in which these perspectives work. We will show how the scientists have shaped and refined their perspectives about small groups. Learning about these processes will give the reader a good base of information to use throughout this book. Therefore, we will dedicate a great deal of this chapter to our discussion about, first, the general process of creating a definition, and, second, the manner in which scientists create their perspectives and their various definitions within those perspectives.

Sources of Definitions

> *"Once upon a time," as all good fables begin, "four blind men crossed paths with an elephant. They were curious about what the elephant was like. Since they could not see, the four men attempted to describe the elephant by sense of touch. The first blind man chanced upon one of the elephant's legs. He decided that the elephant must be like a tree trunk. The second man touched the animal's body and compared it to a brick wall. The third and fourth men, in turn, found the elephant's tail and trunk and believed that it must be like a rope and a snake."*

The moral of the story, of course, is that none of the men correctly described the elephant. Each description was true, but each was incomplete without the others.

People have long used the fable of the blind men and the elephant as an analogy for science's attempts to describe reality (B. A. Fisher, 1974). Scientists are human. They base the way in which they perceive an object on their beliefs about the object and the world around it. It is an inescapable fact that humans base their perceptions as much on their beliefs as on the actual object they observe.

One can see these different beliefs in the contrasting words we use to describe things. What an employer might call "sound business practice" might be called "exploitation" by the worker. Armed groups are "freedom fighters" if they are on our side and "terrorists" if they are on the other side. Behavior that is "assertive" from an average-sized man becomes "aggressive" if performed by a woman, or symptomatic of a "Napoleonic complex" if a particularly short man does it. Such labels are very different even though they refer to what should be the "same" thing. They indicate analogous differences in beliefs about the significance and merit of the behavior. It is no wonder that women insist on *not* being called "ladies" or "girls." The hope is that some day women will not be viewed as "girls" if they are not so labeled.

It may not be surprising that our beliefs so strongly affect what we say. What may be surprising is the effect that these beliefs have on what we actually see and do not see, hear and do not hear. For a graphic illustration of this, try watching a sporting event played between arch-rival teams. When you do, observe the behavior of rabid fans for each team. Soon you will note how the fans of one team will "see" infractions committed by the rival team that the rival fans "miss." (For an experimental demonstration of this actual circum-

stance, see Hastorf & Cantril, 1954.) After you've watched such fans at work it is best not to feel too superior. You should not think for a second that you would be any more "objective" than they if you had a strong rooting interest in one of the teams!

Sources of Beliefs

As we can see, our beliefs strongly influence the way we perceive our environment. These beliefs come from three sources. Two of the sources are basic ones, and one is secondary.

Learning

The first basic source is learning. Somewhere along the line we learn, for example, that something is "bad." We may learn that one or more "isms"—such as communism, capitalism, fascism, Judaism, Catholicism, humanism, and so on—are bad. How do we learn this? We learn primarily from our parents, siblings, friends, and teachers. On a secondary level, we may learn from television, books, newspapers, and magazines.

Experience

The second basic source of beliefs is personal experience. Let us continue with the example of the "isms." One day we chance upon Joe Blow arguing for fascism. We come to believe that "Joe Blow likes fascism." This belief is based upon our direct experience. We saw Joe arguing for fascism.

Inference

The secondary source of beliefs—inference—now comes into play in this example. We have learned to believe that fascism is bad. We observe the "fact," which is really still a belief in practice, that "Joe Blow believes in fascism." From this "fact" we might infer that "Joe Blow is bad." In other words, fascism is bad, Joe Blow likes fascism, so Joe Blow must also be bad. Inference is the process by which we establish new beliefs based on the implications of previously held beliefs and experiences.

We call inferential beliefs "secondary" only because we wish to point out that they are based on beliefs resulting from learning and experience. We do not want to imply that they are any less important. On the contrary, inferential beliefs are often very powerful, for they can color our entire interpretation of an experience. For example, we may see Joe Blow helping an old woman cross the street. We might have learned that this is a good thing to do. However, if we think Joe Blow is bad, we may decide that he must have some bad ulterior motive in helping the woman. Our inferred belief that Joe Blow is a bad person because he likes fascism will affect our perception of everything we see him do.

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