



GROUP PROCESS, GROUP DECISION, GROUP ACTION

Robert S. Baron
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and Norman Miller

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FOREWORD

There has long been a need for a carefully tailored series of reasonably short and inexpensive books on major topics in social psychology, written primarily for students by authors who enjoy a reputation for the excellence of their research and their ability to communicate clearly and comprehensibly their knowledge of, and enthusiasm for, the discipline. My hope is that the *Mapping Social Psychology* series will meet that need.

The rationale for this series is twofold. First, conventional textbooks are too low-level and uninformative for use with senior undergraduates or graduate students. Books in this series address this problem partly by dealing with topics at book length, rather than chapter length, and partly by the excellence of the scholarship and clarity of the writing. Each volume is written by an acknowledged authority on the topic in question, and offers the reader a concise and up-to-date overview of the principal concepts, theories, methods and findings relating to that topic. Although the intention has been to produce books that will be used by senior level undergraduates and graduate students, the fact that the books are written in a straightforward style should make them accessible to students with relatively little previous experience of social psychology. At the same time, the books are sufficiently informative to earn the respect of researchers and instructors.

A second problem with traditional textbooks is that they are too dependent on research conducted in or examples drawn from North American society. This fosters the mistaken impression that social psychology is a uniquely North American discipline and can also be baffling for readers unfamiliar with North American culture.

To combat this problem, authors of books in this series have been encouraged to adopt a broader perspective, giving examples or citing research from outside North America wherever this helps to make a point. Our aim has been to produce books for a world market, introducing readers to an international discipline.

In this volume, Robert Baron, Norbert Kerr and Norman Miller provide a thorough introduction to the social psychology of group processes. The study of group processes is one of the cornerstones of social psychology; indeed, some of the earliest experimental studies in social psychology (those by Triplett and by Ringelmann) were investigations of the influence of groups on individual task performance. It is, nevertheless, fair to say that over the years the social psychology of groups has undergone quite dramatic shifts in popularity as a research topic. In the 1940s, 1950s and the first half of the 1960s, the study of social groups was one of the key research topics in social psychology. However, with the 'cognitive revolution' in psychology that took place in the 1960s, and which affected social psychology as much as other sub-disciplines, mainstream research became highly individualistic. Because cognitive processes were assumed to take place within individuals, rather than between them, theorists and researchers who were interested in understanding such processes were for the most part unconcerned with the workings of social groups. The decline in interest in groups was such that one leading groups researcher, Ivan Steiner, was prompted to write a paper under the title 'Whatever happened to the group in social psychology?' More recently there has been a slow, but steady revival of interest among social psychologists in the study of group processes, such that it now once again occupies a somewhat more central position within the sub-discipline.

Baron, Kerr and Miller have written a book that successfully blends the older and newer research traditions in this field. They have organized the material historically, beginning with those topics (such as social facilitation) that attracted the attention of social psychologists relatively early and ending with topics (such as stress and social support) that have only comparatively recently come to be studied by social psychologists. The book can be seen as falling into three sections. After an introductory chapter, Chapters, 2, 3 and 4 are all concerned in one way or another with the impact of groups on the task performance of individuals, examining such issues as whether the presence of an audience has a beneficial or detrimental effect on task performance, whether groups are more

productive than individuals, and whether groups inevitably reduce the motivation – and therefore the performance – of their individual members. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 are concerned chiefly with social influence processes in groups; here the focus is on whether group members conform to the perceived expectations of others, how individual group members move from initial disagreement to a group decision, and how conflicts between personal gain and collective benefit are resolved. Finally, Chapters 8, 9 and 10 are concerned with more obviously ‘applied’ topics that are related rather directly to social problems and issues, namely aggression and conflict between social groups, the way that people can provide social support for individuals who are under stress and the psychological consequences of living in densely populated environments. Each of the authors is a leading exponent of research on social groups, and the three of them have neatly dovetailed their wisdom and experience to produce a volume that is highly readable, very interesting and right up to date. It will serve as an excellent introduction to this area, but it is also sufficiently thought-provoking to be a stimulating read for those who regard themselves as well versed in research on social groups.

Tony Manstead
Series Editor



PREFACE

Groups are a key element in human experience. Whether the group is a family, a street gang, a work group, an ethnic minority or a network of friends, group membership and influence represents one of the most powerful forces shaping our feelings, judgments and behaviors. While group processes can lead to destructive and aggressive outbursts, so too are they the source of some of our most noble actions such as love, achievement, nurturance, loyalty and sacrifice. Despite the ubiquity and importance of groups for human existence, scholarly research on group topics is a relatively recent phenomenon. While some of the earliest research on groups focused on how groups affected task performance (Triplett 1898; Ringlemann 1913) for the most part, systematic research on other topics did not become widespread until the 1940s and 1950s. Therefore, it is not surprising that group research is still very much an emerging field. As such, it provides the excitement that derives from new theory and fresh empirical phenomenon as well as the challenge (and frustration) that stems from the fact that there still is a good deal of ambiguity and uncertainty regarding many fundamental aspects of group process.

This book is designed for advanced undergraduate students in courses such as group dynamics and social psychology. In this volume we attempt to share with the reader both the excitement and the challenge of conducting research on group phenomenon. Where possible we attempt to provide historical context for the research (what inspired it, what obstacles were overcome, what controversies stimulated continued research), as well as the applied significance of what these laboratory findings mean in terms of

our everyday life. Our primary objective, however, is to familiarize the reader with the theoretical perspectives and data that provide researchers with a means of interpreting group phenomenon. We place special emphasis on several aspects of group experience that we feel are of particular significance. These include processes of social influence (Chapter 5); group productivity (Chapters 2, 3 and 4); group decision-making (Chapters 5 and 6); and intergroup conflict and prejudice (Chapter 8).

The book is organized historically with early chapters presenting those research areas that first captured the attention of researchers and later chapters (crowding, social dilemmas, social support, group aggression and intergroup conflict) depicting areas that became active far more recently. Chapter 1 introduces a number of basic concepts (e.g. group structure, norms, definitional issues) fundamental to understanding group research. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 then address one of the earliest and most basic issues of group research; how groups effect the task performance of individuals. Chapter 2 focuses primarily on non-interacting groups (i.e. where one simply works in the presence of others without any need for coordination), while Chapter 3 focuses on groups that work together for some common goal and Chapter 4 discusses how group situations can suppress productivity by lowering motivation. This last topic covers some of the most recent research on group productivity. Chapters 5 and 6 cover areas of social influence and group decision-making, traditionally topics of central importance in group research and social psychology in general. The remaining Chapters (7-10) examine a number of distinctly applied topics that have captured the interest of group researchers in recent years. It is our hope that this organizational structure will aid the reader in appreciating the complexities, challenges and insights that have characterized group research since its inception.



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1

INTRODUCTION

Groups play a crucial role in human affairs. They dramatically shape our perceptions and attitudes, provide support in times of distress, and affect our performance and decision-making. Group processes can produce everything from destructive mob behavior to selfless loyalty. In this introductory chapter we will consider how social scientists define the term 'group'. Then we will discuss several important group characteristics that provide us with a means of both understanding and describing different forms of group experience.

The defining of a group

A mob of football (soccer) fans in Spain runs amok just prior to the World Cup; seventeen die. Soldiers in Beirut are coached to spread out when moving along a roadway; shelling begins and they group together, huddling against each other for comfort. A campus political group meets to discuss their next group action; as the discussion progresses, the group comes to embrace a more radical position than they did previously and eventually they agree to committing an act of terrorism.

These instances all illustrate principles of group dynamics. Yet the groups in question vary widely in their characteristics. These differences illustrate the difficulty of deriving a single definition of 'group' that is entirely satisfactory. Not surprisingly, a good number of definitions have been proposed. Some stress that groups must have some permanence, structure and psychological meaning for

members, thereby creating a feeling of belonging. In contrast, other writers are far more flexible in their definition, arguing only that some form of communication or mutual social influence need occur if a collection of individuals are to be viewed as a group. As an example, Forsyth (1983) defines a group as 'two or more individuals who influence each other through social interaction' (p. 81).

Numerous other definitions of 'group' exist, but it seems clear that over the years, researchers have tended to feel more comfortable with the more flexible conceptualizations such as the one offered by Forsyth (1983). Thus, much of group research has focused on temporary groups which have no clear structure or lasting relationship to each other, but whose members are bound only by some brief period of mutual influence or subtle communication. The research we discuss in later chapters on mob action, bystander helping, audience impact and crowding illustrate such work.

Explaining human reliance on groups

Theorists have offered a number of reasons why groups play such a major role in human affairs. One straightforward view – *the social learning perspective* – is that since most of us are raised in a family setting, we learn to depend on others for aid, information, love, friendship and entertainment. *Social comparison theory* suggests a less obvious view. According to this theory (Festinger 1954) we feel very strong pressure to have accurate views, both about our environment and our abilities. One way to verify our views is to compare our opinions and ability-related performances to those of others. In other words, if physical reality is ambiguous we create a social reality. Therefore, according to a social comparison perspective, at least one reason we group together is to gain comparative information in an attempt to protect ourselves from inappropriate decisions and judgments.

One theoretical perspective, *exchange theory* provides a somewhat different social psychological view of group formation. It argues that groups which provide the greatest 'gains' will be most desired by members. According to this theory, group membership involves exchanging both rewards and costs with other group members. Rewards are positive elements gained through social exchange. They can be material goods or psychological goods, such as love or approval. A key feature of group interaction is that