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## **Intragroup Conflict and Cooperation**

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and Lisa Troyer

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**Michele Marie Grossman Alexander (1966–2003)**

This special issue is dedicated to Michele Alexander who devoted her career to the understanding of prejudice, stereotyping, and inter- and intragroup relations. We will never know the full effect that her career would have had on social psychology, but we do know that in her few short years she made distinguished contributions to research and service, and she had a lasting influence on her students. She is greatly missed by her colleagues and friends. Social psychology lost a unique voice on December 16, 2003.

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## **Dedication of the Issue to Michele Grossman Alexander**

**Judith A. Ouellette**

*State University of New York College at Cortland*

Michele (Grossman) Alexander was born in Dallas, Texas, on October 25, 1966. She received her BS in 1990 and her PhD in 1996, both from Texas A&M University. As an undergraduate, Michele immediately fell in love with social psychology; she then launched into graduate school with Wendy Wood as her Advisor. Wendy said of Michele, “she was an excellent scholar and a researcher of the first caliber.” With Wendy, she published four articles on gender and emotion. In this work, she devised slide presentations to disgust, horrify, and charm men and women in order to capture the multiple dimensions of emotional experience, including physiological reactions, subjective experiences, and reports to others. Her research on sex differences in emotion remains at the forefront of the field.

It was at Texas A&M in 1990 where I met Michele. Michele and I were both Wendy’s students, and we worked in the same lab for our graduate assistantships. Michele’s energy was infectious and working with her was always delightful. With Michele around, even the most remedial of tasks was fun. I recall phoning her late one evening while she was working in the lab. I was struggling with some data and needed to express frustration, and when she answered the phone I asked her what she was doing; she happily replied, “I’m counting eye blinks.” That moment brought clarity and perspective to my frustration; I realized that I could handle any task before me if she could sit late into the evening staring at video tapes coding eye blinks. That situation easily demonstrates Michele’s work ethic, integrity, and commitment to research—she did not see any limits to what was possible and accepted each task with enthusiastic rigor. In other graduate work she investigated minority influence, group dynamics, and physiological correlates of stress and emotion. She also learned German and spent a year studying at the Johannes Kepler University in Linz, Austria.

After her graduate study, Michele spent a year as a visiting professor at Colby College where she fell in love with the state of Maine. She then spent 4 years at

the Ohio State University–Mansfield, where she formed a close and productive scholarly relationship with Marilyn Brewer; they would produce together many important articles, including their seminal research on group relations and image theory. It was also at OSU where she collaborated with Teri Fisher. Their research, using the bogus pipeline to examine sex differences in self-reported sexual behavior, received widespread media attention by news organizations such as the *New York Times*, *CNN*, *The London Times*, *National Public Radio*, and was featured in a special on the *Discovery Health Channel*. She left OSU when she was offered an opportunity to reestablish a graduate program in social psychology at the University of Maine; she was elated to return to Maine where she had dreamed of living, building a career, and starting a family.<sup>1</sup>

In the classroom, Michele's enthusiasm was infectious, and she soon became one of the University of Maine's most popular professors. She was a dynamic and exuberant teacher who students described as "inspiring." Because of her exceptional teaching, she was honored with an Outstanding Teacher Award. In addition, because of her talent and dedication to research, the Department of Psychology at the University of Maine annually confers the Michele Alexander Scholar Award. Her passion for sharing psychology through teaching and research still propel her students to excel in scholarly and community endeavors.

Michele was not only an outstanding scholar and teacher, but was also committed to service by sharing her knowledge with others in local, regional, national, and international venues. Early in her professional career, Michele became an active member and later a council member of SPSSI. Through her work in SPSSI, Michele met and collaborated with Shana Levin, with whom she co-chaired the program for the 1998 SPSSI Convention and co-edited a special issue of *JSI* on "Understanding and Resolving National and International Group Conflict." Because of her outstanding achievements in scholarship, teaching, and service, SPSSI posthumously honored Michele with a Distinguished Service Award and also created the Michele Alexander Early Career Award for Scholarship and Service.

It might have been her early experiences growing up in the South and watching ethnic prejudices firsthand that cultivated Michele's interest in intra- and intergroup conflict; however, it was Michele's natural understanding, appreciation, and empathy for others that informed her conviction that these problems could be understood and solved. This special issue presents research by close friends, colleagues, and students of Michele's, such as Alexander Chizhik, Estella Chizhik, William Crano, John Dovidio, Jeffery Goodman, Mikki Hebl, Shana Levin, and Radmila Prislin, who share Michele's interest in and commitment to solving issues of intra- and intergroup relations that influence the quality of each of our lives.

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<sup>1</sup>The pleasure of her work was eclipsed only by the joy of the birth of her son 11 months prior to her untimely death. In honor of Michele and her motherhood, the Camden Alexander Scholarship Fund was established: Bangor Savings Bank, 110 Park Street, Orono, ME 04473.

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## **Intragroup Conflict and Cooperation: An Introduction**

**Alexander W. Chizhik\***

*San Diego State University*

**Robert K. Shelly**

*Ohio University*

**Lisa Troyer**

*University of Connecticut*

The human endeavor consists of solving problems that are sociohistorically constructed and mediated by tools and symbols that, themselves, are sociohistorically constructed. Much of human problem solving occurs in group settings as groups of various sizes work together to solve social problems. In the modern world, even endeavors that were considered individualistic a decade ago, like computer programming, are now collaborations among small and large groups (Canfora, Cimitile, Garcia, Piattini, & Visaggio, 2006). Similarly, in the recent past, teachers planned during solitary time for their instruction; in the modern world, principals and school districts use their precious resources to open time for

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This issue developed over the years since Michele Alexander's untimely death in 2003. I met Michele upon our arrival at University of Maine where we quickly became friends and close colleagues. Our collaboration led to a series of experiments funded by the National Science Foundation; we were completing one of the manuscripts associated with these experiments when Michele died. Since Michele was an active officer in the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) and an up-and-coming researcher whose work on stereotypes was breaking new ground, I thought that the *Journal of Social Issues (JSI)*, SPSSI's premier publication, would be not only the most appropriate outlet for this work, but also an important place that can serve as a platform from where to call out to social psychologists to continue on the research path that Michele was helping to construct. Once I discovered that *JSI* only accepts proposals for complete issues, I contacted a series of colleagues whose work fits with our focus on intragroup conflict and cooperation, thus beginning the long process that is represented in this issue as a tribute to Michele. Alexander Chizhik.

teachers to collaborate in their lesson planning (Spanneut & Ford, 2008). Over 50 years ago, Kurt Lewin (1947) indicated that, “We know that no one can answer today even such relatively simple questions as what determines the productivity of a committee meeting” (p. 9). While research in social psychology has substantially advanced our understanding of group dynamics over the past century, the complexity of such questions remain at the forefront of modern research agenda. What we do know, however, is that the complexity of groups is exacerbated by the complicated interrelations between two focal processes that occur in groups—conflict and cooperation (Gersick, 1991; Sherif, 1966; Tuckman, 1965). On the one hand, these processes may be at odds with each other; while on the other hand, they are often complementary, and both may jointly contribute in both positive and negative ways to group performance. In this issue, we focus on the two interrelated processes through a collection of articles that demonstrate the complex interrelations between the two and how each (independently and jointly) affects group outcomes.

### *Framing Intragroup Conflict and Cooperation*

If we can better understand conflict, cooperation, and their interrelations, then it should be possible to enact organizational policies that make workgroups, in Lewin’s terms, “more productive.” Conventionally, cooperation has been seen as adaptive in group problem solving, while conflict has been seen as maladaptive. The articles in this issue, however, represent conflict and cooperation among group members as a complex and nuanced process. While the goal of problem solving in groups may be to solve socially constructed problems, intersubjectivity regarding goals and methods as well as the relative status of group members contribute to the emergence of both conflict and cooperation.

Intersubjectivity is a term that emanates from Vygotsky’s (1934/1962) theory of higher-order psychological functioning, which posits that people perceive sociocultural activity, go through the process of internalizing the activity, and then reconstruct their version of the activity in the same setting where the activity was first observed or in new, similar, settings. The extent to which different people perceive, internalize, and reconstruct a particular activity in similar ways is referred to as intersubjectivity. Co-construction of solutions in groups, therefore, is facilitated by the extent to which group members have intersubjectivity regarding the task at hand, especially regarding the nature of the problem and the pathway to a solution.

At the same time, however, social psychologists have consistently noted that intersubjectivity is itself the product of social interaction. Mead (1934) posited the important role that language as well as exchanges of symbols and gestures play in helping social actors achieve a shared understanding of social situations and their roles within them. Indeed, for Mead, the ability to achieve intersubjectivity is what

sets humans apart from other organisms. While he viewed language as the source of intersubjectivity (i.e., the ability to exchange significant symbols characterized by commonly held meaning), social psychologists have subsequently come to recognize the role of paraverbal and nonverbal displays (especially emotion) in establishing intersubjective understanding (e.g., Denzin, 1985; Scheff, 1985). Thus, while Mead posited intersubjectivity as a largely cognitive outcome (resulting from the mental processing of words and their meaning), social psychologists have increasingly pointed to intersubjectivity as the outcome of social interaction. Along these lines, Goffman (1959) provided a rich ethnographic account of how actors work to achieve and preserve intersubjectivity, which he deemed a “working consensus” that helps facilitate social interaction and allows co-actors to achieve mutually sought ends. An interesting contribution of Goffman’s work is the insight that a working consensus—the agreed-upon definition of a situation and actors’ roles in it vis-à-vis one another—is provisional and not necessarily an understanding that is privately held as valid. That is, actors may privately dismiss the working consensus as an accurate portrayal of reality, but they nonetheless recognize the importance of developing and adhering to it in the course of interaction to successfully achieve collective outcomes (see also, Moore, 1985; Troyer & Younts, 1997). Without a working consensus, social interaction is hopelessly fractured, and even the most basic of social exchanges and collective action becomes difficult, if not impossible.

Along the lines of successful collective action, Freire (1970) believed that under a unified goal to rise up against oppressors, an oppressed group can cooperate to educate themselves to develop and implement a revolution. The key to successful collective action in Freire’s thinking is a superordinate goal, to which all members of the group can subscribe. The notion of superordinate structures provides a mechanism through which the tensions between individual and collective outcomes can be mediated. For example, social psychologists have worked to examine how unified superordinate identities can work to destabilize stereotyping and discrimination within groups (Dovidio, Gaertner, Hodson, Houlette, & Johnson, 2005; Houlette et al., 2004). Gustafson et al. (1981) reiterated this notion as they outlined several processes that groups utilize to unconsciously develop intersubjectivity of goals and methods. In fact, contemporary approaches to team building in organizations (e.g., Dyer, 1987; Katzenbach & Smith, 1993) continue to emphasize the importance of establishing superordinate goals and identities as a first step in the process of developing and maintaining high-performance work teams.

The notion that social interaction is characterized by unified and opposing forces is not new. Kurt Lewin (1947) represented group problem solving as a system of social forces that are unified toward the same goal, oppose each other, or resist any direction of problem solving. Lewin believed that to understand intragroup dynamics, one must understand a complex social space or field that

involves values of and relationships among individuals, subgroups, and the shared perception of the situation held by the individuals in the situation. Moreover, Lewin proposed that social forces depend on cooperating and conflicting goals of group members. In particular, he saw the workplace where bosses and employees interacted in a social space as an important applied testing ground for research on group dynamics. It is the management of opposing tensions that gives groups "locomotion"; that is, groups move through social space by resolving conflicting interests, in part, through the development of superordinate goals that foster cooperation. In this issue, we emphasize both the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in groups, detailing how each contributes to and detracts from group performance.

The social space of the workplace is also an important setting to examine another powerful social force in group dynamics: the relative status of group members. Joseph Berger and his colleagues (Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972) developed status characteristics theory to explain how group members in task-oriented and collectively oriented social space use perceived relative status to form expectations of each others' relative quality of contributions and, in so doing, organize group dynamics. According to status characteristics theory, status characteristics may be either diffuse or specific. Diffuse status characteristics are social identities that have a range of values within the larger society at the macro-social level, like ethnicity or education level, and can affect group members' expectations for performance on a wide range of tasks at the micro-social level. Specific status characteristics are social identities that have a range of values within a specific social space, like perceived mathematics ability, and can affect expectations for tasks that are believed to require a set of skills associated with the specific status characteristic.

Both diffuse and specific characteristics are associated with expectations held by individuals in the group for the relative value of contributions of various members of the group. Members held in higher regard are expected to contribute more to the group product, are often evaluated positively regardless of the value of their contributions, and are frequently more influential than others in the group. Conversely, individuals who are held in lower regard are expected to make fewer and less valuable contributions, are evaluated negatively by others, and are less influential. These differences in expectations are reflected in a variety of measures. More highly regarded individuals talk more in open interaction groups and have their ideas adopted more by others. Individuals held in lower regard talk less in open interaction groups and are likely to adopt the ideas of the more highly regarded members of the group.

Moreover, recent developments in expectation states theory suggest that new status characteristics can develop when they are associated with existing diffuse status characteristics as the new status characteristic becomes socially validated and a part of the social milieu (Berger & Fisek, 2006). Over the last few decades, many lines of research have used expectation states theory and associated

theoretical formulations to explain how relative status organizes group interactions that involve conflict and cooperation. For instance, recent research has explored the role of both diffuse and specific status characteristics in the workplace (Bunderson, 2003; Cohen & Zhou, 1991) and school classrooms (Chizhik, Alexander, Chizhik, & Goodman, 2003; Cohen & Lotan, 1997). The results of investigations in laboratory and field settings highlight the importance of existing social patterns and the emergent quality of hierarchies in task-oriented groups in determining patterns of conflict and cooperation in important social contexts.

A second application of concepts employed to analyze relational differences in group settings is represented by contemporary research on social identities and how membership in groups organizes various forms of behavior. The origins of this tradition reside in work by Tajfel and his collaborators on what has come to be known as the minimal group paradigm (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In this tradition, membership in groups has been associated with rewarding in-group members, punishing out-group members, and the formation and enactment of stereotypes. Findings in this area have proven to be robust across cultures and situations, with reports of such favoritism appearing in the research literature in a number of countries and in a number of different social contexts. A variety of applications of these ideas are possible. For instance, it is of substantial interest how experience in social environments affects the process of in-group identification, the development of favorable attitudes toward in-group members, the development of derogatory attitudes toward out-group members, and the enactment of behaviors that reflect these predispositions in intergroup conflict and in-group cooperation.

### **Organization of the Issue**

The articles in this issue take on Lewin's challenge to examine the complexities of group dynamics by considering the large context of the social field.

#### *Conflict and Cooperation within Diverse Groups*

In the first section, King, Hebl, and Beal (2009) have reviewed research on conflict and cooperation of diverse small groups in the workplace. They document the central role that group diversity plays in generating both positive and negative outcomes for groups. For instance, on the one hand, group diversity becomes a source of conflict, competing agendas, and such adverse outcomes as turnover in organizations. On the other hand, however, diversity is central to creativity and quality in group problem solving. Furthermore, as King et al. (2009) have described, once diversity is recognized for its positive contribution to group performance, it can become a source of group cohesiveness, leading to higher levels of cooperation and group satisfaction. This work highlights the important insights

of Lewin (1947) on how both conflict and cooperation are critical precursors to group performance.

Levin, Sinclair, Sidanius, and Van Laar (2009) have examined how experience in a social environment in which actors are repeatedly cast as members of a single group may lead to the subordination of previously activated group identities. Their research highlights how members of groups develop overarching identities in situations where multiple conflicting group loyalties may define individuals as they enter a new social situation. In their article, the authors wrestle with Freire's and Gustafson's notion that divergent goals and interests are strong forces acting to stir up conflict among a diverse group of people involved in a joint enterprise. Other work has highlighted how this process occurs in highly constrained social settings such as the military (Dyer, 1985), but understanding how this may occur in open situations is key to developing social interventions to ameliorate prejudice and discrimination.

In addition to examining how macro-social structures influence micro-social group processes, it is also important to examine the micro-social group processes in detail. To this end, Shelly and Shelly (2009) have examined properties of group speech turns to investigate the emergence of inequality in participation among group members as they solve different types of problems in groups. This fine-grain analysis draws our attention to yet another complexity in factors contributing to conflict and cooperation as well as the research methods that can be used to investigate phenomena involved in intragroup interactions.

### *Influence and Conflict of Factions within Group Decision Making*

The second section of the issue addresses processes of influence of various group factions on the group decision-making process. Crano and Seyranian (2009) have tackled this issue head-on as they review research on minority influence on group decisions that began about 40 years ago with Moscovici's (1976) work (Moscovici, Lage, & Naffrechoux, 1969). Investigating intragroup interaction from a perspective that examines differential goals and power structures sets up the goal of this issue to be comprehensive in considering complex and integrative factors that organize intragroup interactions.

In conjunction with Crano and Seyranian's (2009) review, Alexander, Chizhik, Chizhik, and Goodman (2009) have presented findings from an empirical study where minority influence research is expanded to include influence of lower-status individuals working in small groups. In this research, they discover that not only do contributions of lower-status group members influence divergent and private thinking of other group members, but also that the structure of the group task contributes to the magnitude of this influence. These findings, in a tribute to Lewin, add to the complexity of ways to examine individual contributions to group decision-making processes. Moreover, the complexity is further expanded

as the findings from this research show empirical evidence that the nature of the group task mediates interactions within groups.

While the decision-making processes within groups is important to investigate, it is also important to investigate group members' perceptions of the decision-making process. To this end, Jacobs, Christensen, and Prislin (2009) have examined how minority and majority factions within groups perceive the fairness of the decision-making process. By presenting findings that point to the contextual nature of perceptions as to what is fair, the authors indicate that such perceptions can work to organize intragroup interactions through an affective filter that can modulate the perceived level of conflict and cooperation.

Troyer and Youngreen (2009) have proposed that, while there is evidence that sometimes conflict can be detrimental to group productivity, conflict can also be a source of creativity. In their work, they demonstrate that rather than quelling dissent, innovative groups manage it. Their research points to how group members can constructively disagree with one another in ways that calls attention to shared interests as opposed to individual differences. An important strategy in managing dissent, according to Troyer and Youngreen, is how dissent is delivered. When the target of dissent is an idea, rather than an individual (and the idea is decoupled from its individual source), then groups become more innovative, owing in part to the emphasis on intersubjectivity that the group achieves. In contrast, when the individual (as an idea source) is the target of dissent, participation in group brainstorming declines and innovation suffers, owing, in part, to the emphasis on conflicting perspectives that occurs.

The issue closes with Dovidio, Saguy, and Shnabel (2009) examining the articles in this issue as a whole. They have eloquently concluded that when examining the relations between two subgroups that belong to and interact within the same group (i.e., society or organization) the traditional distinction between "intergroup" and "intragroup" processes is blurred, as both processes are highly interwoven. Furthermore, in these cases both cooperation and conflict are important developmental processes in the life of the group, rather than alternative outcomes. Dovidio and his colleagues have described how groups are composed of advantaged and disadvantaged subgroups whose different needs, motivations, and perspectives often bring about important conflicts that, if appropriately managed, can contribute positively to group development. Particularly, they posit that conflict is often manifested as a result of a disadvantaged subgroup's desire to promote equality among the subgroups and, thus, reform the existing hierarchy. Cooperation, in contrast, may be achieved at the expense of silencing disadvantaged groups and, thus, denying the group as a whole of potential benefits of diversity. Moreover, they point out that to achieve constructive dynamics among subgroups, organizational policies should recognize the different orientations of members of higher- and lower-power subgroups and take into consideration the advantaged subgroup's need for acceptance as well as the disadvantaged subgroup's need for empowerment.



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