

GROUP COMMUNICATION IN CONTEXT



STUDIES OF NATURAL GROUPS

EDITED BY

LAWRENCE R. FREY

GROUP COMMUNICATION IN CONTEXT

Studies of Natural Groups

Edited by
Lawrence R. Frey
Loyola University Chicago



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GROUP COMMUNICATION
IN CONTEXT

Studies of Natural Groups

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Introduction The Call of the Field: Studying Communication in Natural Groups

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From birth to death, small groups are interwoven into the fabric of our lives. We are born with the help of a team of doctors and nurses, raised in a family, and, for 13 years or so, the state educates us in relatively small classroom settings. Peer groups in high school and at the university exert powerful influence, helping to define who we are and what we value. We work in organizations where decisions are made by task groups and teams. We meet a significant other and marry in the presence of our family and friends. We spend some of our most cherished moments socializing with friends and neighbors, and join support groups that offer the depressed, the overweight, the drug and alcohol addicted, and many others opportunities to share and confront their problems. In the twilight of our years, we may retire to a nursing home, and, as a final farewell, our friends gather together at our funeral to pay their respects.

The small group is clearly the tie that binds, the nucleus that holds society together. Groups of workers dispose of garbage, fly airplanes, fight fires, and grow much of the food that feeds the nation. Parties in dispute often seek to resolve their differences through mediation and arbitration, while a group of peers decides the legal fate in many criminal and civil trials. Government committees decide what policy proposals will reach the floor of the Senate and

House of Representatives, while political action groups (PACs) work furiously behind the scenes to influence these decisions, and the Supreme Court interprets the constitutionality of the laws passed. The army, navy, air force, and marines train men and women in combat teams, while representatives from nations at war negotiate peace settlements in group meetings. We are, as philosophers throughout the ages have noted, first and foremost, social beings.

Can there also be any doubt about the centrality of communication in the lives of small groups? Although many factors certainly affect groups, including members' personality traits, the nature of the tasks groups confront, the resources available to them, and so on, communication is the lifeblood that flows through the veins of groups. Communication is not just a tool that group members use; groups are best regarded as a phenomenon that emerges from communication. A group is much more than a physical container; it is a significant symbol of our relational connection that is reaffirmed every time group members communicate with one another.

Given the importance of groups to the social, political, economic, educational, and moral fiber of our society, and the centrality of communication to group life, it is surprising that group research in general and group communication research in particular has virtually disappeared from research agendas. In a review of articles published in journals sponsored by the International Communication Association, the Speech Communication Association, and the regional communication associations, I (Frey, 1988) found that only 4.2% were devoted to group communication—hardly indicative of a thriving research community.

What is even more distressing is that, given the wealth of natural groups that are available to study, the vast majority of group communication researchers have chosen to study student, zero-history groups in a laboratory setting solving artificial tasks assigned by researchers (Frey, 1988). Cragan and Wright's (1990) review of the literature published during the 1980s confirms the lack of research on natural groups, as only 13% of the studies sampled groups in organizational and applied settings.

The body of knowledge generated from much of this research is questionable, primarily because these studies demonstrate what Farris (1981) called a "social psychological error": the tendency to explain groups from observations independent of their context. The ability to generalize from student, zero-history, laboratory groups to real-life groups is limited, primarily because the laboratory setting does not mirror the significant contextual factors that impinge on groups in the real world (e.g., a group's decision-making history, members' relationships, status differences, and a group's position in the hierarchy of an organization), and because students, unlike their real-world counterparts who depend on groups for their livelihood, emotional support, and many other needs, have little investment in these laboratory groups and the tasks they are asked to solve.

The extant research is also problematic because of the almost exclusive focus

on secondary groups (i.e., task groups that make decisions and solve problems). Indeed, all but 4.3% of the group communication research published during the 1980s focused on decision-making groups (Frey, 1988). Researchers have virtually ignored primary groups, those formed to meet interpersonal needs (e.g., inclusion and affection), such as families, friendship cliques, social clubs, support groups, children's groups, church groups, deviant or fringe groups, and many more. Consequently, group researchers have also ignored a host of communication processes that characterize these groups, such as how communication is used to create and sustain group identity, socialize new members, provide social support, develop high-quality interpersonal relationships, and enact changes in group processes.

Given these problems with traditional group communication research, it is not surprising that scholars are calling for researchers to move away from the friendly confines of the laboratory and study real-life groups and enlarge the scope of their research to include a wider range of groups (see Cragan & Wright, 1990; Poole, 1990; Putnam & Stohl, 1990; Sykes, 1990). For example, Poole claimed that although basic small group communication textbooks testify to our concern with practice, there has been little systematic attempt to study real-life groups. Cragan and Wright concluded, "There is a great need for research that takes existing small group communication theory and demonstrates its utility to small group problems in applied [natural] settings" (p. 228).

GROUP COMMUNICATION IN CONTEXT: STUDIES OF NATURAL GROUPS

This edited text responds to this need by showcasing original communication research studies conducted on natural groups. Each of the studies documents the importance of communication practices in the life of a real group, demonstrating the value of moving the locus of research from the lab to the field and offering suggestions for future research.

The text is divided into five sections that examine important processes that characterize natural groups: (a) how groups create and sustain their identity, (b) the effects of the context on group communication, (c) group developmental processes, (d) destructive group communication patterns, and (e) decision-making group interaction. Within these sections, the researchers examine some important questions about communication across a wide range of real-life groups (listed in the order they appear in the text, with the author[s] listed in parentheses):

- How communication practices within an AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) facility create and sustain community life. (Adelman & Frey)

- How gang communication, densely coded and deliberately opaque, creates an enclosed space—a “hood”—that offers marginal members of society a homeplace and family for refuge from a hostile world. (Conquergood)
- How a witches’ coven uses consciousness-sustaining communication and metacommunication to stabilize and sustain itself and weather the storms of change over time. (Lesch)
- How members of a city council frame the context of their decision-making discussions, thereby acquiring and using power to influence the outcome of the discussion. (Barge & Keyton)
- How communication processes coordinate the work activities and role definitions of members of an interdisciplinary health-care team. (Berteotti & Seibold)
- How communication tactics employed in the evolution of a PAC help articulate a community perspective for revitalizing the city of Detroit, Michigan. (Brock & Howell)
- Whether groups operating within the same interactive system of a conference demonstrate evidence of mirroring, developing patterns of communication in similar ways over time. (Wheelan et al.)
- How secrecy, duplicity, and the strategy of ambiguity produced an overall climate of confusion that led to vacillation in President Kennedy and his advisors’ group discussions about Vietnam. (Ball)
- How the Watergate cover-up by President Nixon and his closest advisors can be explained as flawed group interaction processes that demonstrate the “illusion of unanimity” symptom of groupthink. (Cline)
- Whether early elementary children experience much naturally occurring task-group communication outside of the classroom, and what happens when first graders are left on their own to engage in conjoint group decision making across a series of task discussions. (Socha & Socha)
- Whether organizational decision-making groups actually engage in much decision-making talk as implied by the research literature based on student, zero-history, laboratory groups. (Scheerhorn, Geist, & Teboul)
- How technology, in the form of a computerized group support system, constrains and enhances argumentation within organizational decision-making groups. (Brashers, Adkins, & Meyers)

The chapters also demonstrate some of the diverse methodological approaches that inform the study of natural groups. Frey, O’Hair, and Kreps (1990) pointed out that as communication researchers move from the laboratory to the field, they inevitably must rely less on experimental methods and use alternative methodologies. This is especially true if the goal is to study natural, as opposed

to controlled, group interaction., The methodological approaches employed in this text include archival/historical research methods, content analysis (quantitative coding of texts), conversation analysis (qualitative analysis of group interaction), ethnography (both participant observation and in-depth interviews), interaction analysis (quantitative coding of group interaction), rhetorical criticism, and the survey method (both questionnaires and interviews). Many of the chapters also demonstrate how various methods can be employed in a triangulated, multimethodological study of a natural group. As a unique feature, two of the chapters (Adelman & Frey; Conquergood) have video ethnographies that accompany their work; the video, "The Pilgrim Must Embark: Living in Community," for Adelman and Frey's chapter, is available separately from Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. (See ordering information on enclosed card.)

The text concludes with three epilogues that answer the question of what these cases teach us about the study of groups. Putnam and Stohl's (1990) seminal article urged researchers to study *bona fide* groups, by which they meant natural groups that are characterized by stable yet permeable boundaries and are interdependent with their context. In the first epilogue, Stohl and Putnam examine how these case studies help us understand the promise of, and the difficulties involved in, studying *bona fide* groups, and how they expand our thinking about the characteristics of *bona fide* groups. In the second epilogue, I address some of the more salient methodological challenges faced by researchers who study natural groups and ways of responding to these challenges, using these researchers' experiences to illustrate the points. Finally, Gouran explores how the case study method, as illustrated by the studies in this text, sheds light on understanding group decision making and problem solving.

CONCLUSION

Small group communication research clearly is in need of a shot in the arm. By extending research to the natural setting, this text seeks to demonstrate ways of reframing research that may help revitalize the study of small group communication. Poole (1990) claimed that:

The failure to attract more group communication researchers stems from the current generation's inability to generate the social prerequisites for a thriving research community. For the most part, group communication research has failed to inspire the imagination, to pose puzzles that are really interesting, and to link its studies to pressing social questions. (p. 241)

Seibold and Meyers (1988) contended that our research settings, methods, and variables have become the way we think about groups. "Our contrived, self-contained models, frequently using artificial tasks within zero-history groups,

shape the type of questions we ask, the way they are posed, and the definitions of legitimate group research" (Putnam & Stohl, 1990, p. 260).

This text hopes to inspire researchers to study real-life groups. It poses new and fruitful questions about the communication processes that are so vital in the everyday life of natural groups, and offers alternative ways of shedding light on these questions. These are large goals for any one text; I hope you find that the case studies you are about to read reveal some of these promises.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Whoever said "A committee is a *cul de sac* down which ideas are lured and quietly strangled" didn't have the pleasure of working with this group of scholars. From the time I issued the call for manuscripts to the final versions of the chapters, ideas and discussion of them flowed freely. Indeed, it was merely a matter of harnessing the ideas into a coherent whole. The result, I believe, is a set of chapters that will stimulate and challenge those who study small group communication.

I attribute this high-quality effort to the people with whom I worked. I am deeply impressed with, and thankful for, their commitment to scholarship, to the people they studied, and to their desire to broaden the field of group communication research. Some of the authors I did not know before starting this project; some I knew only by name and reputation; and some I knew quite well and consider my friends. I am grateful to all of them for the way they responded to my incessant letters and telephone calls filled with questions, suggestions, and directions, because I am the first to admit that I truly am a demanding editor. I consider myself fortunate to have worked with these authors; I have learned an awful lot from them that will serve me well in studying small group communication. I hope they feel the same way.

I am also grateful to W. Barnett Pearce, chairperson of the Department of Communication, Kathleen McCourt, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, and James L. Wiser, senior vice president and dean of Faculties at Loyola University Chicago, for their support of this project through a research leave; and to Jeanine Mellinger and the staff at Loyola University's Center for Instructional Design for help with translating computer disks. I also want to express my appreciation to Hollis Heimbouch, senior editor at Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, for her support of this project from the very start. I hope this is the beginning of a long relationship. Finally, I hope that all my group experiences, and all of yours, are as rewarding as this one.

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I

CREATING AND SUSTAINING GROUP IDENTITY

Some group experiences are not voluntary; members may perceive themselves as having little choice because of work requirements or social norms. Other times people choose to enter and remain in groups voluntarily. In these instances, groups cannot rely on external forces for their existence; instead, members must find ways to create and sustain the group.

Creating and sustaining a group certainly demands physical resources, such as the time and place to meet. However, the more important question is how a group symbolically constructs an identity that sustains members' passions. This question forces one to examine how communication enables members to define and enact a sense of self and their group.

Perhaps the best groups in which to study such processes are those at the margins of society. Because the members of these groups perceive themselves as being outside the mainstream views of the dominant culture, they must work hard to create and sustain themselves. Group survival depends literally on the extent to which members successfully forge a group identity that nurtures and sustains their interactions over time.

The following chapters examine ways in which three marginalized groups create and sustain identity. In chapter 1, Adelman and Frey show how members of an AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) residential facility try to forge a sense of community. The term *community* bespeaks of strength and cohesion, rarely of fragility and loss. However, the greatest threat to any community is the loss of its members, and this loss is an ongoing threat to community life for persons with AIDS. To understand how residents forge a sense of community in the face of these odds, Adelman and Frey conducted

in-depth interviews with 21 residents and spent several years as participant-observers. They identify central dialectical tensions that residents face as they live together with illness and death, the formal communication practices employed by the community to massage these tensions, and how successful these practices are for creating community. They conclude with personal reflections of what they have learned as researchers about the fragility of communal life and about their own.

In chapter 2, Conquergood presents an ethnographic study based on 4 years of participant-observation fieldwork of the communication practices of street gangs in northwest Chicago, one of the most multicultural neighborhoods in urban America (where more than 50 languages are spoken at the local school). His study (a) situates gang communication within and against mainstream and dominant representations, (b) explains its communitarian and transgressive underpinnings, and (c) unpacks its complexities and contradictions. Conquergood walks us through these neighborhoods, both verbally and visually, showing along the way how gang graffiti are a complex, highly structured way of inscribing the urban landscape. Gang communication, hooded in the dialectic between display and disguise, spectacle and secrecy, creates a strong boundary against the outside world while celebrating interconnectedness and strong attachments within the gang. Therefore, the communicative task of the gang group is to transform somewhat marginal, forbidding space into cultural space—a “hood” or a “turf”—that offers a home, a family, and a dwelling for these marginalized members of society. Conquergood concludes with a call for a communication approach that awakens and rallies communities and public policymakers to a sense of social justice to these youngsters and their families.

In chapter 3, Lesch describes a group that identifies itself as feminists and witches. Based on participant observation, interviews with members, and analysis of the group's journal, Lesch shows how spontaneous storytelling episodes in which all group members participate, facilitate a shared consciousness that allows the group to negotiate changes in, stabilize, and sustain itself over time. The group was going through a transition after the loss of a member, and some of the meetings featured exhaustive metacommunication rich with stories about the group's history and handling of change in the future. Other meetings centered around the practice of witchcraft, with rituals that featured highly symbolic communication and stories that defined the group's identity as a coven. The group members are seen as rhetors attempting to engage others in stories that result in shared consciousness. The chapter concludes by examining how any group, whether its purpose is task, social, or even therapeutic, might benefit from articulating its vision clearly. Within the stories that members share are the tools to develop effective consciousness-sustaining strategies that will help groups weather the storms of change.

1

The Pilgrim Must Embark: Creating and Sustaining Community in a Residential Facility for People With AIDS

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It was appalling. They would come in as walking skeletons—they were too weak to stand in food lines, so they didn't eat. Their families were terrified of taking them home. They weren't getting care. Nursing homes wouldn't take them. They were living in laundromats and empty buildings . . . in an abandoned car . . . in a barbershop chair.

—Elinor Polansky, on admitting people with AIDS [PWA] to Bailey House, the largest residence for PWA in the United States (cited in Brown, 1992, pp. 49–50)

Few illnesses evoke the full force of social stigma, emotional distress, and physical devastation as does AIDS. Its social construction is so powerful that AIDS has become a societal metaphor for paranoia and chaos (Sontag, 1989). It has created a two-class system—the innocent and the stigmatized (Albert, 1986; Treichler, 1987). The latter, which includes homosexuals and drug users, bear a double scarlet letter, casting them beyond society's margins. AIDS is so imbued with fear that even loving family members are afraid to visit dying sons and daughters, professional caregivers ostracize patients, and those who assist the