

Group Dynamics

Authored by
mohammad looti

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Group dynamics is the study of groups, and also a general term for group processes. Relevant to the fields of psychology, sociology, and communication studies, a group is two or more individuals who are connected to each other by social relationships. Because they interact and influence each other, groups develop a number of dynamic processes that separate them from a random collection of individuals. These processes include norms, roles, relations, development, need to belong, social influence, and effects on behavior.

In organizational development (OD), or group dynamics, the phrase "group process" refers to the understanding of the behavior of people in groups, such as task groups, that are trying to solve a problem or make a decision. An individual with expertise in group process, such as a trained facilitator, can assist a group in accomplishing its objective by diagnosing how well the group is functioning as a problem-solving or decision-making entity and intervening to alter the group's operating behavior.

Because people gather in groups for reasons other than task accomplishment, group process occurs in other types of groups such as personal growth groups (e.g. encounter groups, study groups, prayer groups). In such cases, an individual with expertise in group process can be helpful in the role of facilitator.

Well researched but rarely mentioned by professional group workers, is the social status of people within the group (i.e., senior or junior). The group leader (or facilitator) will usually have a strong influence on the group due to his or her role of shaping the group's outcomes. This influence will also be affected by the leader's sex, race, relative age, income, appearance, and personality, as well as organizational structures and many other factors.

Key theorists

Gustave Le Bon was a French social psychologist whose seminal study, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1896) led to the development of group psychology.

Sigmund Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, (1922) based on a critique of Le Bon's work, led to further development in theories of group behavior in the latter half of the twentieth century. Theodor Adorno reprised Freud's essay in 1951 with his *Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda*, and said that "It is no an overstatement if we say that Freud, though he was hardly interested in the political phase of the problem, clearly foresaw the rise and nature of fascist mass movements in purely psychological categories."

Jacob L. Moreno was a psychiatrist, dramatist, philosopher and theoretician who coined the term "group psychotherapy" in the early 1930s and was highly influential at the time.

Kurt Lewin (1943, 1948, 1951) is commonly identified as the founder of the movement to study

groups scientifically. He coined the term group dynamics to describe the way groups and individuals act and react to changing circumstances. Group dynamics can be defined as a field of enquiry dedicated to the advancing knowledge about the nature of groups, the laws of their development and their interrelations with individuals, other groups and larger institutions. Based on the feelings and emotions members of a group form a common perception. The interactive psychological relationship in which members of a group form this common perception is actually "Group Dynamics".

The phrase "Group Dynamics" contains two words- (i) Group- a social unit of two or more individuals who have in common a set of beliefs and values, follow the same norms and works for an establishable aim common. The members of the group share a set of common purpose, task or goals. (ii) Dynamics- the flow of, coherent activities which as envisaged, will, in toto, lead the group towards the establishment of its set goals.

William Schutz (1958, 1966) looked at interpersonal relations from the perspective of three dimensions: inclusion, control, and affection. This became the basis for a theory of group behavior that sees groups as resolving issues in each of these stages in order to be able to develop to the next stage. Conversely, a group may also devolve to an earlier stage if unable to resolve outstanding issues in a particular stage.

Wilfred Bion (1961) studied group dynamics from a psychoanalytic perspective, and stated that he was much influenced by Wilfred Trotter for whom he worked at University College Hospital London, as did another key figure in the Psychoanalytic movement, Ernest Jones. He discovered several mass group processes which involved the group as a whole adopting an orientation which, in his opinion, interfered with the ability of a group to accomplish the work it was nominally engaged in. His experiences are reported in his published books, especially *Experiences in Groups*. The Tavistock Institute has further developed and applied the theory and practices developed by Bion.

Bruce Tuckman (1965) proposed the four-stage model called Tuckman's Stages for a group. Tuckman's model states that the ideal group decision-making process should occur in four stages:

Forming (pretending to get on or get along with others)

Storming (letting down the politeness barrier and trying to get down to the issues even if tempers flare up)

Norming (getting used to each other and developing trust and productivity)

Performing (working in a group to a common goal on a highly efficient and cooperative basis)

Tuckman later added a fifth stage for the dissolution of a group called adjourning. (Adjourning may also be referred to as mourning, i.e. mourning the adjournment of the group). This model refers to the overall pattern of the group, but of course individuals within a group work in different ways. If distrust persists, a group may never even get to the norming stage.

M. Scott Peck developed stages for larger-scale groups (i.e., communities) which are similar to Tuckman's stages of group development. Peck describes the stages of a community as:

Pseudo-community

Chaos

Emptiness

True Community

Communities may be distinguished from other types of groups, in Peck's view, by the need for members to eliminate barriers to communication in order to be able to form true community. Examples of common barriers are: expectations and preconceptions; prejudices; ideology, counterproductive norms, theology and solutions; the need to heal, convert, fix or solve and the need to control. A community is born when its members reach a stage of "emptiness" or peace.

Richard Hackman (2002) develops a synthetic, research-based model for designing and managing work groups. Hackman suggests that groups are successful when they satisfy internal and external clients, develop capabilities to perform in the future, and when members find meaning and satisfaction in the group. Hackman proposes five conditions that increase the chance that groups will be successful. These include:

Being a real team: which results from having a shared task, clear boundaries which clarify who is inside or outside of the group, and stability in group membership.

Compelling direction: which results from a clear, challenging, and consequential goal.

Enabling structure: which results from having tasks which have variety, a group size that is not too large, talented group members who have at least moderate social skill, and strong norms that specify appropriate behavior.

Supportive context: that occurs in groups nested in larger groups (e.g. companies). In companies, supportive contexts involves a) reward systems that reward performance and cooperation (e.g. group based rewards linked to group performance), b) an educational system that develops member skills, c) an information and materials system that provides the needed information and raw materials (e.g. computers).

Expert coaching: which occurs on the rare occasions when group members feels they need help with task or interpersonal issues. Hackman emphasizes that many team leaders are overbearing and undermine group effectiveness.

Dimensions of group process

Aspects of group process include:

Patterns of communication and coordination

Patterns of influence

Roles / relationship

Patterns of dominance (e.g. who leads, who defers)

Balance of task focus vs social focus

Level of group effectiveness

How conflict is handled

Emotional state of the group as a whole, what Wilfred Bion called basic assumptions.

Groups of individuals gathered together to achieve a goal or objective, either as a committee or some other grouping, go through several predictable stages before useful work can be done. These stages are a function of a number of variables, not the least of which is the self-identification of the role each member will tend to play, and the emergence of natural leaders and individuals who will serve as sources of information. Any individual in a leadership position whose responsibilities involve getting groups of individuals to work together should both be conversant with the phases of the group process and possess the skills necessary to capitalize on these stages to accomplish the objective of forming a productive, cohesive team.

Various theories of group development exist. The model below combines elements of theories by Jones (1973), Tuckman (1965), and Banet (1976). In this model, each phase of group development is looked at with respect to group members' concerns with task and personal relations (process) functions.

Application

Workgroups applications

Group dynamics is a critical factor in group performance. Understanding how the group works and if and how it is developing will help the team leader to lead the team better. In organizational development context, the need for managing or improving the group dynamics will lead to an intervention based consulting project, where tools such as team building or Sociomapping are used.

Therapy applications

Group dynamics form a basis for group therapy, often with therapeutic approaches that are formed of groups such as family therapy and the expressive therapies.

Virtual group applications

Increasingly, group dynamics are of interest in light of online social interaction and virtual communities made possible by the internet.