The Social Psychology of Groups and Group Psychotherapy: One View of the Next Century

Donelson R. Forsyth[1,2]

Will fields that study *groups in general, such as social psychology, and fields that* use *groups to achieve therapeutic goals, such as group psychotherapy, move toward unification in the future or will they drift apart? One possible future assumes that these two approaches to groups will become better integrated as (a) societal changes increase individuals' reliance on groups; (b) research and theory on group processes become more sophisticated; and (c) basic and applied researchers work together more closely in examining groups. Such unification requires, however, changes in the training, outlook, and procedures used by both practitioners and researchers.*

The twentieth century will be remembered as the era that produced both the scientific study of groups by social psychologists and the systematic use of group treatments by psychotherapists. During the 1900s researchers carried out the first experimental and field studies of groups, and they began to construct general theories to explain the behavior of individuals when in groups. The era also witnessed the first treatment sessions conducted by trained therapists, refinements in treatment methods, and the rise in popularity of self-help groups where group members sought support and insight into their psychological problems from peers (Forsyth & Corazzini, 2000).

But despite the two fields' overlap in interest and objectives, as the 20th century ends the social psychology of groups remains distinct from the use of groups

[1]Virginia Commonwealth University.
[2]Correspondence should be directed to Donelson R. Forsyth, Ph.D., Department of Psychology, 810 W. Franklin Street, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA 23284-2018; e-mail: jforsyth@vcu.edu.

to achieve therapeutic goals. Group therapy and social psychological analyses of groups should be intertwined, but as Klein (1983) concluded, the findings generated in social psychology are largely irrelevant to the therapeutic uses of groups. The skilled group practitioner knows what works in a group and what doesn't, but rarely are such interventions informed or refined by findings gathered by social psychologists (Forsyth & Leary, 1997). Indeed, when I recently reviewed a collection of social psychologists' analyses of adjustment and well-being, I found little of value for the practitioner, and judged that "the bridge between social psychology and mental health" is "too weak to traverse" (Forsyth, 1993, p. 932).

The century's end, however, calls forth speculation about what the next 100 years hold in store for groups. In one possible future, the 20th century traditions will remain firmly ensconced, with group therapy and social psychology disconnected. An alternative future, however, finds individuals who study groups and individuals who use groups to promote adjustment working together in a unified approach. I, personally, predict a future where unification flourishes, and base this optimism on the anticipated changes in society, and psychological science, and practice, as discussed below (also see Bernard, 1993).

GROWTH OF COLLECTIVISM

Most researchers, theorists, and practitioners of the 20th century, as they searched for the causes of psychological adjustment, dysfunction, and change, looked first at the individual and his or her personal qualities. To explain why individuals become depressed, addicted, or engage in aberrant actions they scrutinized internal psychological qualities; personality traits, genetic factors, past events, biological processes, and the like (Forsyth & Leary, 1991). This individualistic orientation stands in sharp contrast to a collectivistic orientation. Whereas the individualistic approach stresses the person, the collectivistic outlook stresses the group. Group-oriented theorists, like Lewin (1951) and Foulkes (1964), embraced the Gestalt dictum "the whole is greater than the sum of the parts" by arguing that whenever a group comes into existence it becomes a unified system with emergent properties that cannot be fully understood by piecemeal examination (Forsyth, 1999).

Throwing caution to the wind, I predict that the collectivistic orientation will gain adherents in the next century. This shift toward collectivism will parallel a general societal shift away from individualism to collectivism. Although Western countries such as the U.S. and Great Britain traditionally stress the equality of separate individuals and the rights of the individual over the group, this cultural norm will change with increased contact between individualistic cultures and collectivistic cultures (Triandis, 1990). Corporations will continue to evolve into multinational organizations, and with that global perspective will come increased exposure to collectivistic values. Educational settings will stimulate heightened

awareness of collectivistic outlooks with curricula that stress multiculturalism and non-Eurocentric traditions. Communication technologies, including the media and Internet, by easing communication across national boundaries, will also raise awareness of cultures with collectivistic orientations.

This general increase in collectivism at the societal level will parallel an increase in collectivism within the discipline of psychology. This shift will occur as theorists increasingly stress the role that groups play in individuals' psychological lives, rather than each person's individuality. Instead of considering themselves unique, autonomous people who exist separately from other people, future generations will stress roles above personalities, and relationships rather than individual attributes. They will think of themselves as group members first and individuals second. This shift will be hastened by the entry of more women and minorities into the field of psychology, for they will bring a more inclusive, relationship-focused perspective to bear on psychological topics (Cross & Madson, 1997; Phinney, 1996).

THE EVOLUTION OF GROUP THEORY AND RESEARCH

Shaw (1981), after carefully reviewing the results of nearly a century of empirical study of groups, concluded that the "greatest need today is an adequate theory of the organization of data, so that the implications of the data at hand can be spelled out more definitively and deficiencies revealed more clearly" (p. 450). He argued that the field, to advance, must show "a greater concern for the theory" (p. 451).

How can Shaw's mandate be carried out in the 21st century? In one possible future, investigators work to develop two types of theoretical models: specific microtheories and more general macrotheories. The microtheories will offer insights into specific aspects of groups, such as the cognitive mechanisms that allow group members to compare themselves to one another, the affective determinants of group cohesion, or the factors that determine when members accept or reject feedback from other group members. Macrotheories, in contrast, will provide integrative frameworks for understanding groups in general. Systems theory, for example, provides a conceptually elegant means of integrating the individual, group, and intergroup variables, and it may emerge as a widely shared perspective that explains individuals' actions when they are in groups (Agazarian, 1997; McGrath, 1997). Social identity theory, too, provides a way of synthesizing individualistic psychologies with collectivistic psychologies. This perspective, which is consistent with models of self developed by sociological, social psychological, and personality theorists, argues that group members derive much of their social identity from their group identities, and that group membership therefore sets off a complex of cognitive, affective, and motivational processes (Hogg & Williams, 2000).

These theoretical elaborations will be complemented by growing methodological sophistication. As Seligman (1996) notes, all therapeutic interventions,

no matter how intellectually alluring, must be tested using procedures that meet the field's scientific standards. But for reasons identified both by social psychologists (Steiner, 1974), and therapeutically-minded psychologists (Bednar & Kaul, 1979), studying groups is more difficult than studying individuals. Groups change rapidly with the passage of time, becoming different entities with different qualities as members join and depart and as norms and roles evolve. The processes that unfold within groups, including leadership, communication, and influence, are difficult to document objectively through surveys, observation, or experimentation. Researchers who study groups must also deal with unique statistical problems. For example, because each member's responses are dependent on other members' responses, group researchers must use data-analytic techniques that do not require the data units to be independent of each other (Forsyth, 1998).

These problems will be surmounted in time as researchers who study groups develop new methodological and statistical methods. Some of these methods will be quantitative, and will help researchers disentangle individual effects from group-level effects and enhance the precision of their measures. Examples of these methods include hierarchical linear modeling (Moritz & Watson, 1998), social relations modeling (Marcus, 1998), and consensus-estimating procedures like those described by Conway and Schaller (1998). Others innovations will focus on improving the validity of data generated through qualitative procedures. Qualitative methods, like quantitative methods, generate data, but the data are often textual rather than numeric, and may include verbal descriptions of group interactions developed by multiple observers, interview responses collected through open-ended surveys, notes from conversations with group members, or in-depth case descriptions of one or two groups. Given the extraordinary complexity of groups, and the value of both qualitative and quantitative methods for exploring group processes, future investigators will integrate both procedures in their research programs (Forsyth & Strong, 1986).

THE MULTIDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVE ON GROUPS

My third prediction regarding the future is the riskiest of all, for it envisions group dynamics as a truly interdisciplinary field, with investigators and practitioners united in their efforts to understand and make use of groups rather than divided by parochial, disciplinary, issues. Although there are many noteworthy exceptions, scientists in such fields as social psychology, anthropology, business, communication, education, and psychiatry rarely integrate their efforts. Communication researchers study the dynamics of group discussions. Social psychologists explore the polarization of opinions in groups. Sociologists explore the reasons people join large groups that achieve social change. Business researchers examine the productivity of teams in organizations. Clinical researchers develop measures

of the therapeutic factors operating in group psychotherapy. They all publish their findings in their own disciplines' journals and present their findings at conferences with colleagues from their own fields, but only rarely explore connections between their work and the work being done in other disciplines. Although much can good be gained from cross-discipline collaboration, these fields remain isolated from each other.

What will this unified approach to studying groups involve? One vision of such a reformulated field is based on a model of science that stresses connections among disciplines across seven domains: educational, professional, practical, methodological, theoretical, metatheoretical, and epistemological (Forsyth & Leary, 1991, 1997). Training programs must nurture social psychology students' interest in groups in general and therapy groups in particular. Practitioner training, too, must provide more extensive analysis of groups of all types, in addition to those designed to promote change. Professional identities must also be reconfigured, so that the gap between practitioner and researcher is closed. Curiously, when psychology emerged as a mental-health field after World War II many practitioners were psychologists who specialized in the study of either personality or group processes. Over time, however, the professional identity of group researchers and group therapists divaricated, and now their shared roots are nearly unrecognizable. This lost link can be restored in many ways, including (a) national and international meetings focused exclusively on groups and group processes; (b) the growth of professional associations that, like Division 49 of the American Psychological Association, focus on groups in all types of settings; (c) improved communication among scholars by email and the world wide web.

Practical linkages require integrated, collaborative attempts to solve individual and societal problems. Although social psychologists who study groups have traditionally applied their work in business and organizational settings, the field of social psychology is increasing its focus on issues of adjustment and mental health (Snyder & Forsyth, 1991). Social psychological researchers may, in the future, be able to offer practitioners useful information about change-promoting groups. The promise of a stronger group therapy/group dynamics interface is a more robust set of treatment procedures.

Social psychology, group psychotherapy, and related disciplines must also generate stronger methodological, theoretical, metatheoretical, and epistemological interfaces. As noted earlier, although a number of theoretical models have been developed, few try to bridge the theoretical abyss between group therapy and group dynamics. Yalom (1995), for example, proposes that certain therapeutic factors underlie effective psychotherapeutic groups. He gleaned these factors from his clinical experience and empirical research, but rarely draws on studies of the various psychological and interpersonal benefits of groups in general to refine his theoretical thinking. Leadership, group development, social learning, self-insight, social influence, social provisions, and other group processes that

undergird change in therapeutic groups are often the focus of intensive study by social psychologists, and much can be gained by developing a general theoretical orientation (Ettin, 1996).

Similarities in researchers' and therapists' metatheoretical and epistemological outlooks must also be exploited. Group therapists and social psychologists adopt many of the same assumptions about human nature, how change can be facilitated, and how knowledge of group behavior can be expanded. Both stress interpersonal causes (sociogenicism) over psychological causes (psychogenicism), and both recognize the group's power to produce change (Forsyth, 1992). Whereas the traditional one-on-one therapist focuses on individual differences and psychological causes, the social psychologist and the group therapist are struck by the way in which surprisingly different individuals change when they become part of a group that changes.

The two fields' epistemological commonalities should also be explored. How do we come to understand groups? Do qualitative methods of investigation provide useful information about groups, or should we rely on quantitative methods? Can we identify general, nomothetic statements about groups? Do groups require a single-case, ideographic description? What role do exploratory, inductive procedures play in the generation of knowledge? These questions will be raised, debated, but probably not answered as researchers and practitioners explore their epistemological assumptions and philosophies of science.

MODELS OF RESEARCH FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

What kinds of research will promote the kind of unity the field needs? How can clinicians, in the course of developing therapeutic interventions and tracking their patients' progress, also collect data that will shed new light on groups and their change-promoting processes? How can researchers conduct research that is more relevant to both the questions raised by therapists and their own scientific goals?

One model calls for mutually beneficial collaboration between therapists and researchers. Researchers are good at asking questions, collecting data, and drawing conclusions, but only rarely do they craft interventions that are helpful for clients. Therapists are good at instigating group experiences that promote change and linking those experiences to each group members' goals, but only rarely do they document group processes or their impacts. When researchers and therapists form teams to study group psychotherapy, they exploit their mutually exclusive strengths and share the work involved in carrying out research. Marmarosh and Corazzini (1997), for example, used this team approach in their study of social identity and change in groups. They were personally interested in a technique they had used frequently in their groups, in which they told members to "put the group in your pocket" as a way of coping with adversity and stress between sessions. In discussing

the method with me, I suggested that the method may work by substantiating a group identity in the stressful context, and that the group identity provided a buffer against threats to a given individual's sense of self-worth. When they applied this conceptualization in their therapy groups, they discovered that interventions that stressed the value of the collective experience increased members' sense of self-worth. Both the therapists and the theorists prospered from their collaboration.

Another model, which has proved useful in medical research, requires the development of more comprehensive procedures for tracking therapeutic applications and their effectiveness. In many medical fields practitioners routinely collect extensive amounts of information about their patients. Although the practitioners may not analyze these data, researchers can mine these records for information to test their hypotheses about the causes of illness and the differential effectiveness of various types of treatment with different patients. This model, applied to groups, would argue in favor of establishing large-scale databases where practitioners could routinely enter data pertaining to their groups and their processes. The variables to be assessed would be established by a panel of expert researchers and therapists, but it would include data pertaining to personality, dysfunction, group composition and process, and interventions undertaken. Once the data base was sufficient in size and scope, then investigators could test hypotheses pertaining to groups in general and therapy groups specifically by reanalyzing the existing data.

These models may serve the field well in the next century, but it should be noted that the speculations offered here about possible research paradigms are only that: speculations. Indeed, McGuire's warning against trying to predict the course of research within the field should be heeded:

> I feel somewhat uncomfortable here in trying to describe in detail what the next, radically different paradigm will look like. It will be hammered out by theoretically and empirically skilled researchers in a hundred eyeball-to-eyeball confrontations of thought with data, all the while obscured by a thousand mediocre and irrelevant studies which will constitute the background noise in which the true signal will be detected only gradually (1973, p. 450).

ANOTHER POSSIBLE FUTURE

What does the future hold for the study and use of groups? One possible future calls for a greater unification of fields that study groups in general, such as social psychology, and fields that make use of groups to achieve therapeutic goals, such as group psychotherapy. But will this unification occur, or will these disciplines remain distinct and unmeshed? Indeed, prior attempts to forecast the future of the field of group dynamics (e.g., Shaw, 1981) erred in their optimism. Yet, unity is within our reach. Despite differences in perspective, background, outlook, and goals, group researchers, theorists, and practitioners recognize the value of groups. People, through membership in groups, define and confirm their values and beliefs and take on or refine a social identity. When individuals face uncertain situations, they seek out groups to gain reassuring information about

their problems and security in companionship. In groups they learn about relations with others, the impressions they make on others, and how to relate with others more effectively. Given their central importance, researchers and therapists must join together to study therapeutic groups: both their change-producing properties and their properties as groups per se.

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