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One Hundred Years of Groups Research: Introduction to the Special Issue

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This special issue looks back at a century of progress in understanding groups and their dynamics. The articles in the issue, by selectively reviewing topics that dominated researchers' efforts over the past century, offer answers to 7 key questions about groups: What forces bind members to their groups? Who will lead and who will follow? When do groups excel at the tasks they attempt? How do groups influence their members? Do groups influence their members' self-conceptions? How can relationships between groups be improved? And how can groups be used to enhance psychological adjustment and well-being?

Sages and scholars have long been fascinated by groups. A search back through antiquity finds discussions of the nature and dynamics of groups in the writings of the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle, who posed questions concerning humanity's social and political nature (Ettin, 1992). William Shakespeare filled his plays with recommendations and analyses of groups and leadership (Corrigan, 1999). Niccolo Machiavelli, early in the 16th century, developed insightful analyses of how power could be used in groups to influence leaders and the led (Jinkins, 1998). In the 1800s, scholars like Craik (1837) and Le Bon (1895/1960) published intriguing analyses of how people, when part of large groups, can respond unpredictably.

But the *scientific* study of groups is scarcely a century old. Ancient scholars may have asked many questions about the dynamics of groups, but only in the 20th century did investigators seek to answer these questions through the application of scientific methods. Cartwright and Zander (1968), in their classic analysis of the roots of the field, suggested that researchers were slow to take up the study of groups because many felt that the dynamics of groups was a private affair, not something that scientists should lay open to public scrutiny. Others felt that group behavior was too complex to be studied scientifically, particularly when the psychology of individuals remained so little understood. Still others questioned the reality of groups, implying that they could be understood entirely if one only understood the psychology of the individuals who comprised them (Allport, 1924).

This issue of *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, published as the 20th century draws to a close, looks back at a century of progress in understanding groups. Although that history is checkered with theories and methods that, after initial promise, ultimately generated little in the way of concerted empirical interest, this issue considers topics that have remained at the center of the field for nearly a century: group cohesion (Dion, 2000), leadership (Chemers, 2000), performance (Sundstrom, McIntyre, Halfhill, & Richard, 2000), social identity (Hogg & Williams, 2000), influence (Crano, 2000), intergroup relations (Gaertner et al., 2000), and group approaches to adjustment and change (Barlow, Burlingame, & Fuhriman, 2000). It raises, and provides answers to, seven questions about groups as complex, adaptive, dynamic interpersonal and task systems (McGrath, 1997).

What forces bind members to their groups? Although early theorists speculated about the foundations of group solidarity, it was Lewin (1943) who used the term *cohesion* to describe the forces that keep groups intact by pushing members together and countering forces that push them apart. Since that time, this concept has been applied by researchers interested in studying all aspects of groups, including performance, development, therapeutic impact, and

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influence. Dion (2000) reviews prior studies of cohesion, tracing its evolution from a relatively ambiguous Lewinian concept to current conceptual representations. His review contrasts a group-level approach to cohesion to models based on one-to-one attraction processes and offers clear advice for researchers who wish to assess cohesion in the groups they study.

Who will lead and who will follow? In the 19th century, the historian Thomas Carlyle's (1841) "great-man" theory of history asserted that leaders possess certain characteristics that mark them for greatness. The contrasting view, often attributed to the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy (1869/1952), argued that leaders come to prominence because the spirit of the times—the *Zeitgeist*—is propitious for the dominance of a single individual and the qualities of the person are largely irrelevant to this rise to power. These two themes, as Chemers (2000) notes in his review, provided researchers with their first models for studying leaders. Chemers traces the influence of these two fundamental conceptions of leadership through initial contingency approaches to leadership, cognitive approaches that considered how group members conceptualize their leaders, and more recent work looking at the cultural and transformational nature of leadership. Chemers then offers a functional model of leadership that stresses the tasks that leaders must accomplish, including creating an image of authority and competence, establishment of positive relationships with followers, and the strategic management of the group's processes given the organizational environment.

When do groups excel at the tasks they attempt? The impact of a group on its individual members is nowhere more apparent than in work groups. This realization, often ignored by management methods that focus on individual incentives, supervision, and worker-specific goals, was shaken by the Hawthorne studies of group productivity conducted in the 1920s (Mayo, 1945). As Sundstrom et al. (2000) note, the Hawthorne researchers initially assumed that physical characteristics of the workplace determine productivity. But as they varied conditions with a small group of workers in an experimental test room, they noted that group dynamics—not lighting, temperature, breaks, and so on—determined performance. Sundstrom and his colleagues review how researchers have followed in the Hawthorne tradition by studying groups working in organizational contexts. They focus not on the voluminous findings obtained in that research but on the research itself by categorizing the types of groups that have been studied, the strategies used by investigators, and the ways researchers have measured group effectiveness. Their review concludes by making recommendations regarding the continued analysis of teams and other collaborative forms of work structures in organizations.

How do groups influence their members? Group members influence one another in many ways, but these processes were not subjected to serious analysis until Sherif (1936), Asch (1955), and Milgram (1963) began to examine how groups influence the actions of individual members. These studies provided compelling evidence of the power of groups, but they also hinted at the other side of social influence. Participants often willingly submitted to the demands of the group situation, but they also displayed an independence and capacity to withstand group pressures. In his review of social influence, Crano (2000) integrates the work of researchers who focus on the group's impact on the individual with the work of researchers who examine the minority's impact on the group. He offers his leniency model as an overall conceptual framework that can account for both minority and majority influence. This model integrates cognitive approaches to attitude change, such as elaboration likelihood theory, with social identity theory to better predict the flow of influence in small group settings.

Do groups influence their members' self-conceptions? In the early years of the 20th century, researchers debated the relative influence of group and interpersonal forces on individuals. Although some suggested that humans are, by nature, individualists whose self-conceptions are sustained largely through introspection and personal experiences, other perspectives suggested that self and identity are intimately connected to one's groups and interpersonal relations. Although individualism is the hallmark of Western thought, group-centered approaches have suggested that members' sense of self and identity changes when they become members of groups, or when their membership in a group that they already belong

to becomes salient to them. Hogg and Williams (2000) provide a concise review of how these various lines of theoretical and empirical work are integrated in social identity theory. This perspective, which is consistent with models of self developed by sociological, social psychological, and personality theorists, is generally traced back to the work of Henri Tajfel (1984). Tajfel argued that group members derive much of their social identity from their group identities, and that group membership therefore sets off a complex of cognitive, affect, and motivational processes (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Hogg and Williams (2000), in tracing the historical roots of Tajfel's social identity theory back to early thinkers, clarify the relationship between social identity theory and related work on self-categorization and identify weaknesses in the general model.

How can relationships between groups be improved? When two groups meet, the encounter often ends in conflict rather than cooperation. This tendency for group relations to be hostile rather than amicable was confirmed many years ago by Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, and Sherif (1961) in their classic study of two groups of boys competing for prizes and territory at a campsite in the United States. Gaertner and his colleagues (2000) revisit this study, examining its findings in light of more recent theory and research. They find that many of the causes of intergroup conflict highlighted by contemporary models of intergroup conflict and prejudice were present at the Robbers Cave, but they also suggest Sherif et al. were able to reduce conflict during the study by taking advantage of such mechanisms as decategorization, recategorization, and mutual intergroup differentiation.

How can groups be used to enhance psychological adjustment and well-being? Group psychotherapy, like all psychological therapies, did not become a legitimate means of treating people with psychological problems until the 20th century. Initially, physicians began to meet with their patients in groups where members discussed their illnesses, and these methods were used with people suffering from both physical and psychological difficulties. This early application, as Barlow et al. (2000) note in their article, was only the beginning of a concerted and more systematic application of groups to help people improve their well-being. Barlow and her colleagues review the history of group treatment methods, as well as the history of research efforts aimed at better understanding, and improving, such applications. On the basis of their analysis, they conclude that group psychotherapy is a relatively effective treatment, but they also offer suggestions for future work in the area.

These articles, although they focus on seven central domains within the field of groups and group dynamics, only hint at the tremendous progress made by theorists and researchers in the past 100 years. The scientific study of groups is only reaching its adolescence, but despite its youth it has compiled an impressive body of theoretical, empirical, and practical knowledge about groups. As Shaw (1981, p. 450) concluded in his comprehensive review of the field,

> A beginning has been made, and available data reveal the great complexity of small group behavior. The interrelations among the many parts of the group and the variables that influence group process almost defy comprehension. But hope springs external; we are beginning to gain some understanding of this multiplex phenomenon.

These seven articles summarize the tremendous advances in understanding gained in the past century, but they also serve as reminders of how much more needs to be done.

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