

GROUPS AND HUMAN BEHAVIOR (Excerpt)

from
Groups: Interaction and Performance

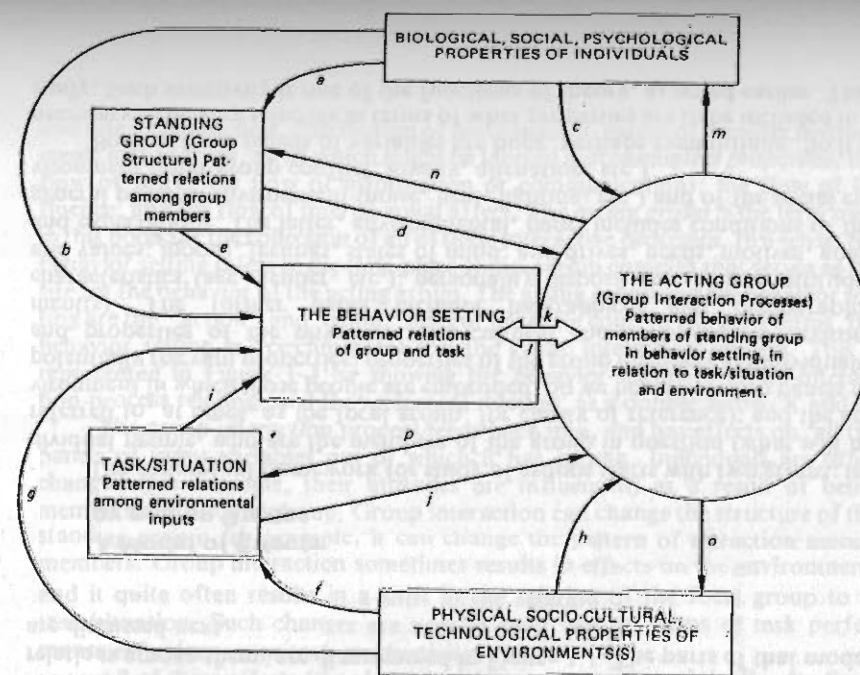
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A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY OF GROUPS

There are many different perspectives from which one can view a group, and many ambiguities already noted in defining groups and their membership. For such a complex and ambiguous set of concepts, it is often useful to adopt a frame of reference, a map, that models or lays out systematically the various parts of the topic as a research problem. This section offers such a conceptual model for the study of groups (see Figure 1-1).

The point of such a model is to lay out the underlying logic of the problem in a way that can serve as a guiding framework for exploring the problem in its various aspects. For a complex problem, you cannot study everything at once, you cannot think about everything at the same time. This kind of model lets us take the total problem apart, so we can think about and examine evidence about a manageable chunk of it, and then be able to fit the parts back together again. Furthermore, such a framework tells us what batches of things to look at—what sets of variables are likely to be important—and at the same time offers a logic for deciding what sets of relations among these variables are likely to be important to consider.

Note that this is intended to be a model of the problem (i.e., studying groups systematically), rather than a theory or model of groups. Such models are sometimes called "metatheories." They reflect a way of looking at the problem that encompasses a whole family of possible substantive theories. But they do not specify any one particular theory. Here, we are talking about *classes* of properties or variables, and the logical relations between those classes. But there is no specification of specific sets of relations between specific sets of variables—as there would be in a substantive theory.



| Arrow in the Model | Relations Implied |
|--------------------|---|
| a | Member composition of focal group. |
| b and c | Extramember effects of individuals on Behavior Setting and on Group Interaction Process. |
| d and e | Effects of Standing Group (group structure) on Behavior Setting and on Group Interaction Process. |
| f | Environmental factors as they structure the Task/Situation. |
| g and h | Extratask effects of Environment on Behavior Setting and on Group Interaction Process. |
| i and j | Effects of Task/Situation on Behavior Setting and on Group Interaction Process. |
| k and l | The dynamic relation between the Behavior Setting and Group Interaction Process. |
| m and n | Effects of Group Interaction Process on members, and on the Standing Group. |
| o and p | Effects of Group Interaction Process on Task/Situation, and on the Environment. |

FIGURE 1-1 A Conceptual Framework for the Study of Groups

Main Classes of Variables

The central feature, the "essence," of a group lies in the interaction of its members—the *behaving together*, in some recognized relation to one another, of two or more people who also have some past and/or future relation to each other. So *group interaction process* is the centerpiece of the model.

Certain things go into that group process. For one thing, there are participants, or group members. They come to a group interaction with all their "properties" (traits, characteristics, beliefs, habits, etc.). A member may be strong, or extroverted, or wise, or old, or female, or bellicose, or clumsy, or many other things. *Some* of these properties of members may affect group interaction. So, if one wants to understand and perhaps predict aspects of group interaction process, one must take these group member properties into account.

These participants make up the group being considered, and one can think about the pattern of relations among group members, *prior* to any group interaction process, as another batch of potentially important properties or variables. Do group members like each other? Do they have differential influence on each other (for example, does one person exercise more leadership or dominance than the others)? How many members are there and how long have they belonged to this group? Group members are related to each other in many ways; a lot of those relations affect how they behave in relation to one another when they interact. These patterns of relations among members—*aspects of group structure*—also must be taken into account if one wants to understand and predict group interaction process.

Group interaction takes place somewhere, in some *environment*. It may involve a group of workers doing their jobs in an assembly plant; a set of executives holding a conference in a company meeting room; a County Planning Board having its monthly meeting; a family eating dinner on a Wednesday evening in April; a football team getting a dressing room talk between halves of a game; a group of kids playing with some old tires in a dump; two couples at a night-club; an airplane crew flying from Texas to Toronto; a Broadway company rehearsing in a theater. In all of these cases, the group interaction is taking place in an environment that includes both physical and social aspects. Many of these can make a difference in how members behave, hence can alter group interaction process.

Group interaction not only takes place somewhere, it involves the group *doing something*. One very important aspect of all of those settings just enumerated is the "task." Any group interaction (actually, any intact portion of such an interaction) can be characterized in terms of the task(s) that the group (or its members) is trying to carry out: giving (and receiving) a lecture or a sermon or a play; processing steel; assembling an auto; choosing a new vice president; deciding on a zoning variance; preparing a budget justification; arbitrating a grievance; enjoying dinner; having a good time at the nightclub, on the backpacking trip, or in the dump. The task, as you can see from those examples, involves informally assumed goals (e.g., having a good time) as well as assigned jobs (e.g., assembling an auto). What the group is doing, or trying to do, as well as where this is taking place, affects group interaction process in

many ways. So, the task situation represents another class of "factors" one must take into account if one wishes to understand and predict group interaction process.

These major classes of inputs—properties of group members; properties of the standing group (group structure); properties of the task/situation; and properties of the surrounding environment—set the conditions under which group interaction takes place. Furthermore, the effects of these four sets of properties, singly and in combination, are forces that shape the group interaction process.

The group interaction process itself is both the result of these shaping forces and the source of some additional forces. While group interaction is greatly affected by those sets of input variables—properties of members, of the group, of the task, and of the environment—it is also patterned, in part, by forces internal to (or indigenous to) the interaction process itself. The latter part of this chapter delves further into the internal forces of group interaction process.

Furthermore, the interaction process and its results represent sources (forces) that potentially lead to changes in those very input conditions: changes in the members themselves; changes in the group structure, or the patterns of relations among members; and changes in the relation of the group to its tasks and to its environment. So, these sets of outputs (or outcomes, or consequences) of group interaction process are parallel to the input classes and, in fact, represent changes in those input variables.

These classes of factors, or "panels" of potentially important variables, are related to one another in relatively complex ways. These panels, and the relations among them, are diagrammed in Figure 1-1. The parts of that model are discussed next.

A Model of Effects by and on Groups

The conceptual framework for study of groups starts with two givens: individual people, who are the members of the group in question (what will be referred to, at times, as the focal group, for clarity of reference); and the environment in which those people are embedded. So we begin with two panels of potentially relevant properties: properties of the group members as individuals; and properties of the physical, socio-cultural and technological environment(s). The former panel includes biographical and demographic characteristics (age, gender, etc.); personality dispositions; beliefs, attitudes and values; moods, feelings, states of mind; and drives, needs, motives, goals and expectations. The latter, environmental, panel includes conditions of the general physical environment (noise, heat, lighting, etc.) and of the social environment (inter-group conflict, loyalty, alienation, etc.).

Both of these panels of variables are huge, perhaps even infinite. So it is necessary to be very selective in terms of what properties are to be included in a study. Such selectivity is one of the functions of theory, as noted earlier. That

is, theory functions as a guide to the investigator in selecting variables for study that are thought to be germane to the problem.

When people become interrelated, as when they are members of a group, they develop patterned relationships among themselves—patterned in terms of status, of power, of affection, and of many other aspects. These patterned relationships among group members constitute a group structure. There are many such patterns, such group structures—as many as there are variables or properties on which members can be connected to one another. These include, *at least*: structures defined in terms of composition of members; structure defined in terms of division of labor on tasks; communication structures; power structures and interpersonal relations structures. In the model, the *collection* of all these structures is called the *standing group* (to distinguish it from the *acting group*).

Environmental properties, too, are patterned; and one particular portion is of special importance in the present discussion. That important part is the set of environmental demands/constraints/opportunities that combine to form a particular task and situation. Environmental properties “play into” more than one task/situation, of course, and even more than one at the same time, just as group members “belong to” more than one group, and even more than one at the same time. So, for clarity, we probably should designate our referent as the focal task/situation, recognizing that the environment abounds with “tasks.”

We can consider the juxtaposition of the standing group and the task as the Behavior Setting. The term, behavior setting, is borrowed from the work of Roger Barker and his colleagues (Barker, 1965; Barker & Wright, 1955). But the reader should be warned that I am changing the use of that term in one important respect. When Barker talks of the behavior setting, he is dealing with individuals behaving in environments, or individuals behaving in task/situations; but Barker does not use concepts of group, group structure, or group process at all. Barker sees individuals, and their behavior, as related to one another primarily through the demands of the situation.

In the model, the behavior setting represents a pattern—a fit—between the group as a structured entity (the standing group) and the task/situation as a structured set of requirements/demands/opportunities/possibilities/constraints. Notice, too, that the framework has both properties of individuals and properties of the environment “playing into” the behavior setting directly, as well as indirectly through the group and the task. This is equivalent to saying that, while a particular concert (behavior setting and group interaction process) is to be viewed as *mainly* a juxtaposition of a particular orchestra (standing group) with a particular set of musical compositions (task/situation), properties of the orchestra members (M) and of the concert hall, the city, and perhaps the time of year (E), can also have effects on the results.

All of these form the “inputs” for what I am calling group interaction process (GIP), or the *acting group*. GIP refers to the *processes* that take place when group members actually interact, in behavior settings that carry task structures and environmental effects. Such activity can be described in terms of many processes, including (at least) general structural properties such as level

and rate of interaction, distribution of participation, extent of member involvement, and so forth, all of which might be labeled *morphological properties*; the flow of work; the flow of information or communications; the flow of influence; and the flow of interpersonal affect. The *acting group* is the term used in this book for the collection of all of these interactive processes. In a sense, the behavior setting refers to the time-place-thing-person complex that serves as the site for the behavior of the acting group. The acting group and the behavior setting are the “action” and “state” sides of the same coin. In Barker’s terms, the behavior setting is “circumjacent to” the group interaction process. This is represented in Figure 1-1 by showing the behavior-setting-to-group-interaction-process relation, and the reciprocal relation, as a double arrow, K and L.

The group interaction process feeds back into, and has effects on, all the panels of input variables out of which it has sprung. Individuals are often changed (for example, their attitudes are influenced) as a result of being members of an acting group. Group interaction can change the structure of the standing group; for example, it can change the pattern of attraction among members. Group interaction sometimes results in effects on the environment; and it quite often results in a shift in the relation of the focal group to its task/situation. Such changes are usually dealt with in terms of task performance effectiveness or task productivity.

All of these effects (the eleven input arrows, *a* to *k*, and the five feedback arrows, *l* to *p*, in Figure 1-1) are important in principle, and are worthy of study. But many of them have been more thoroughly studied than others, and some of them are of more theoretical or practical significance than others. So the organization of later parts of this book will reflect selective treatment of some of these classes of relations more thoroughly than others. One basis for the selection of particular sets of relations for special attention is my particular conception of the interaction process and what it entails. That conceptualization will be presented next.

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