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"Being a Part and Being Apart": A Dialectical Perspective on Group Communication

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Dialectics and Group Communication

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In recent years, interpersonal communication scholars have begun studying and theorizing about personal relationships through the lens of dialectical theory. This metatheoretical perspective highlights the mutually defining and processual nature of dialectical tensions that exist within, and form the context of, interpersonal relations. The application of dialectical theory to the study of interpersonal communication has engendered innovative scholarship that has recast theoretical assumptions, proposed alternative means for understanding and assessing relationships, and encouraged methodological eclecticism. To date, however, little systematic effort has been made to apply a dialectical perspective to the study of group communication. The purpose of this essay is to extend the metatheoretical insights of scholarship on dialectics to the concerns of group communication scholars, practitioners, and group members. In the sections that follow, we (a) provide a description of dialectics (from our view), (b) examine some specific ways this perspective can help expand our understanding of group communication, and (c) offer some important considerations for using this approach in group communication research. In so doing, it is our hope that this chapter inspires the reader to see and study group communication in new ways.

DIALECTICAL THEORY IN COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

Before we begin a discussion of the dialectical dimensions of group communication, the word "dialectic," which has an expansive

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history and carries varied connotative meanings, needs to be clarified. Dialectical theory has a rich history; here, we provide only a brief orientation to the literature, not an exhaustive review (for such a review, see Baxter & Montgomery, 1996).

Discussions of dialectic in the Western academy date back to ancient Greece. The word "dialectic" comes from a Greek word usually translated as "the art of debate." Plato privileged dialectic (i.e., debate) over rhetoric (i.e., persuasive monologue) as *the* means for reaching well-reasoned conclusions for action in civic and personal affairs. With its emphasis on reasoning and the use of contradiction and opposing positions to pursue the discovery of "Truth," dialectic was perceived by Plato to be in some sense superior to rhetoric. Aristotle, however, considered dialectic to be the counterpart to rhetoric and conceded that the general public did not have the time, patience, or education to participate in the sort of technical and tedious discourse that constituted dialectic; hence, he directed attention toward the art of speaking persuasively to public audiences on matters (preferably) decided through prior dialectic (debate). Aristotle recommended dialectic as the preferred method for debating propositions but encouraged ethical uses of rhetoric to deliver these conclusions to the public.

The ancient idea of dialectic as debate, particularly in the Aristotelian tradition, is largely epistemological; that is, it is a means for gaining insight and knowledge that, with few exceptions, remained the special province of philosophers until the 19th and 20th centuries when it was revived as a means of viewing human social processes. Most particularly, through the original and extended works of Hegel (1812-1816/1929, 1807/1931), Marx (1867/1906), Mead (1934), Burke (1962), Beauvoir (1968), and Bakhtin (1981, 1986), among others, dialectic was gradually transformed from a method of epistemic inquiry into an ontological framework and axiomatic, pragmatic social consideration. The view of dialectic as a method of reasoning has, thus, shifted to include new views—ones suggesting that dialectic is inherent to all social phenomena. Although these new conceptualizations of dialectic have branched off from traditional thinking of dialectic as debate, they have retained an explicit emphasis on inherent elements of debate (particularly opposition and interaction) in human communication. Contemporary uses of dialectic in communication, then, include both the traditional form of epistemic inquiry (dialectic as debate) and more recent forms that examine ontological and practical relational exigencies that are present and pressing in all human communication (dialectic as "dialogue"). As we discuss in greater detail shortly, the "dialectic as dialogue" view considers social phenomena to be derived from and literally constituted within what are variously termed dialectical tensions, oppositions, or contradictions. These tensions (e.g., the tension between autonomy and connection—between remaining an individual and blending with another/others) are thought to be inherent to all relationships and serve to inspire our communicative behavior.

Recent use of dialectic in communication theory is prevalent in contemporary discussions of qualitative methods, particularly those inspired by feminist approaches to inquiry. Indeed, the second wave of feminism, inspired, in part, in the 20th century by Beauvior's (1968) work, can be viewed in one sense as the study of the dialectical tensions (i.e., inherent contradictions) and relational exigencies existing for women within modern patriarchal social systems that divide and hierarchize the sexes. Indeed, much feminist work has investigated the contradictions of women's lives, particularly as women struggle to find their "voice" and a self in relation to others while not being bound to oppressive notions of femininity and domination (see, e.g., Bartky, 1990; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982). Growing out of a heritage of public persuasion and interpersonal consciousness-raising for women's liberation, some contemporary feminist inquiry is inherently and characteris-

tically dialectical in that it seeks to understand, through dialogue, the fundamental tensions that exist in women's lives and how women negotiate them (Westkott, 1979). In meeting others and generating knowledge, in finding one's "voice" and yet remaining connected to others, this feminist sense of dialectic is grounded in communication (Lorde, 1984). Through the work of feminist theorists (and many other social theorists), dialectical theory is being shaped and transformed to describe the everyday pragmatics of interpersonal interactions within contexts of human difference.

One of the most significant influences on the transformation of dialectical theory toward a notion of dialogue is the work of Russian intellectual and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1986). Bakhtin's dialogic view has only recently become the focus of scholars studying relational communication, but it provides an approach that promotes relational equity and the potential for tensions to be conceived of and managed as ongoing, omnipresent social forces rather than as recurrent problems needing resolution. The use of a dialectical/dialogical frame to study the pragmatics of interpersonal relationships has been significantly deepened in recent years through the systematic work of interpersonal communication scholars, such as Baxter (1988, 1990, 1993), Goldsmith (1990), Montgomery (1993), and Rawlins (1983, 1989, 1992). For example, Rawlins (1983) examined 10 intensive case studies and found that dialectical tensions were inherent to the strategic maintenance of close friendships. As he explained,

> Many decisions to reveal or conceal are situational or topic-centered and involve accumulated knowledge of the other person, relational precedents, and tacit agreements regarding discretion.... Appropriately managing the persisting dilemmas of candor versus restraint engenders a mode of mutual interaction simultaneously expressive and protective that permits the ongoing exchange of personal ideas and emotions between two people. (p. 13)

As Rawlins's work showed, dialectical tensions such as candor/restraint are at the core of ongoing friendships, and awareness of these tensions is crucial to the successful negotiation and maintenance of these relationships.

Baxter's (1988, 1991, 1993) early investigations of dialectical tensions in romantic relationships have progressed from a more dualistic approach toward a dialogic stance (cf., Baxter 1988, 1994; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). In her early studies, Baxter demonstrated that romantic relations (and, presumably, other relations as well) manifest a number of dialectical tensions, including autonomy/connection, openness/closedness, and novelty/predictability. She also found that couples manage these tensions in different ways, with some management processes said to be more effective than others at maintaining the relationship. Later work demonstrated how relationships themselves are constituted in talk inspired by negotiations of relevant relational dialectics (see Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996).

Recently, Baxter and Montgomery (1996) developed a thorough and compelling explication of dialectical theory for the study of interpersonal communication. Here, we draw on their work, relying on the four central tenets of contradiction, change, praxis, and totality, to lay the basic foundation of a dialectical perspective useful for the study of group communication.

Contradiction

In dialectical thinking, contradiction (also termed "opposition" or "tension") is the driving force underlying all social interaction. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) described social interaction as "the dynamic interplay between unified oppositions" (p. 8), and they indicated that attributes of sociality gain their meaning and significance to interactants

through their interpreted relationship to other attributes. For example, the notion of "relational connection" of one partner to another has meaning because of its relationship to "autonomy"—disconnection from others. Similarly, "certainty" has meaning because of its relationship to "uncertainty," and "openness" has meaning because of its relationship to "closedness." However, these relational attributes are not clearly defined and concrete ("A/Not A"); each might best be viewed as a "fuzzy set" of concepts intricately related to other fuzzy sets ("A/B-Z . . . "). For example, the complex idea of certainty might be opposed by unpredictability, novelty, mystery, excitement, uncertainty, and so forth, in ways that generate unique but pragmatic meanings (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). These tensions do not function in a dualistic way, with choices made between mutually exclusive polar opposites, but as ongoing "pulls," with each tension exerting continual pressure in opposing directions on relational partners and creating exigencies that must be negotiated through communicative action. Thus, there is a simultaneous draw toward seemingly contradictory forces such as certainty and mystery, autonomy and connection, predictability and novelty. These forces aren't simply polar opposites; rather, they are inextricably related, with an "inseparable interconnection and struggle of the opposite(s)" (Cornforth, 1971, p. 69) that suggests each force gains its significance from the other in an inherent, ongoing relationship. These relational tensions, or dialectics, create a complex web of forces, intertwined so that adjustments to one have an impact on others. One might picture a set of strings meeting centrally (a "hub" or a "knot," as Cornforth, 1971, p. 111, suggested) and stretching out in all directions. Should the hub be adjusted (via a specific communicative behavior chosen in response to a dialectical tension) toward one end or another of one of the strings (e.g., toward greater connection and away from personal autonomy), the other strings are affected, and thus, new adjustment is required. This process of adjustment continues with each shift, regardless of size or intent, creating the need for additional adjustments. For dialectical theorists, then, relationships are literally constituted by the communicative responses to these various tensions, and each behavioral choice represents an adjustment that "plucks the strings" and, thereby, creates a cacophony of relational tensions, exigencies, and adjustments.

To illustrate this "dynamic interplay of tensions," consider the case of a romantic couple (familiar to one of the authors) who dated nearly a year. One partner, a devout Catholic, envisions a future raising children within the Catholic faith, whereas the other partner, devoutly Jewish, envisions raising children within the Jewish faith. In their day-to-day efforts to manage tensions related to openness/closedness (choosing at times to/not to discuss their conflicting views of faith, visions of the future, etc.), they inevitably experience in varying intensity tensions related to autonomy/connection (i.e., "Should we stay together despite our differences or separate because of them?"). Their ultimate decision to break off the relationship (a life-changing response to the autonomy/connection tension), despite their sincere desire to remain together "out of love," might well have come in response to their choices regarding openness/closedness (and, of course, other tensions, such as "ideal/real"). The female partner stated, "I just couldn't lie to him or me anymore. I had to tell him how I felt, and it meant we couldn't be together. We hate it, but we know that's what it means." Thus, the tensions experienced, and the behaviors chosen in response to them, created a complex web of opposition and adjustment, managed moment to moment by these partners throughout the course of their relationship.

Change

To remain intellectually honest, a dialectical theorist cannot simply say, "Relationships continually change." Change must be viewed as existing dialectically with stability. As Baxter and Montgomery (1996) explained,

"Stability punctuates change, providing the 'baseline' moments by which change is discerned. Put simply, dialectical change is the interplay of stability and flux" (p. 10). Although some relational conceptualizations view "positive" changes as those that are made toward greater relational connection or openness and "negative" changes as those that are made away from connection or openness (e.g., Altman & Taylor's, 1973, social penetration theory), a dialectical perspective is not similarly teleological in nature. There is no ideal end-state toward which a relationship progresses; instead, dialectical tensions always exist, and relationships are crafted within and through them. Hence, the goal is not stability or even little change; rather, the goal is understanding and working flexibly and effectively within a fluid, changing web of human tensions and responses.

Praxis

How do relational partners manage various dialectical tensions? As Baxter and Montgomery (1996) explained,

> [Dialectical theorists] emphasize communication as a symbolic resource through which meanings are produced and reproduced. Through their jointly enacted communication choices, relationship parties respond to dialectical exigencies that have been produced from their past interactional history together. At the same time, the communicative choices of the moment alter the dialectical circumstances that the pair will face in future interactions together. (p. 14)

Dialectical tensions in social relationships, thus, produce exigencies to which members must respond if the relationship is to continue (given, again, that relationships are constituted within these tensions and responses). Communicative behaviors (varying in mindfulness and intention) are chosen in response to the dialectical tensions at work in the relationship within the relevant contexts. Over time, patterns of behavior emerge from the communicative choices partners make as they attempt to return to those communicative behaviors that have successfully served to manage tensions in the past. However, the nature of the given situation, the present influence of new or recurring struggles and tensions, and the continuing creation of narrative relational culture may serve to make such communication patterns more or less effective over time, producing the need for ongoing behavioral adjustments. The notion of praxis refers to the (mindful or mindless) efforts of relational parties to respond to dialectical exigencies and, thereby, play out the "dynamic interplay of oppositions" in lived experience. As the relationship continues, ritualized responses to relational tensions come to constitute the relations themselves—that is, they become part of the relational culture (Wood, 1982).

In the example given previously of the interfaith romantic couple, the partners engaged in various avoidance behaviors during the early part of their relationship regarding issues of religious faith. These behaviors became ritualized and facilitated the continuance of the relationship, but at a later point in their relationship, in response to new exigencies created by pressing changes in employment and locale, their behaviors changed, as evidenced by the woman saying, "I just couldn't lie to him or me anymore." The changes in the ways they attempted to manage the tensions—what Baxter and Montgomery (1996) called "praxis patterns"—thus, came in response to changes in context.

Totality

In dialectical theory, *totality* suggests a way of viewing the world that does not seek generalizations of behavior or the search for predictable and certain variables. Instead, the social world is understood as a world in process—one that is fleeting and shifting, with phenomena understood only in relationship to other phenomena. Communication (not merely cognition) is the foundation of reality and relationships, and interpreted meanings and subsequent actions are critical compo-

nents in evaluating situational communication competence. Behavioral choices, relational partners, and social forces all must be viewed in context (within a given time and place), because context influences the tensions that are present and pressing, and it shapes the communicative resources members can bring to bear in responding to those exigencies. The time and space of the interactions—or "chronotope" (Bakhtin, 1981)—become crucial considerations in how interactional partners interpret and respond to dialectical exigencies.

A dialectical perspective is, thus, fundamentally rooted in the dynamic interplay of ubiquitous tensions and relational exigencies grounded in the constitutive functions of communication. Dialectical tensions and exigencies are inherent to social interaction and inspire communicative adjustments by interactants to the choices they make moment by moment, day by day, to define their relationship. To understand "the relationship," we must consider the partners, their behaviors, and the dialectical tensions all together, within a given context of time, place, and history (i.e., chronotope). In contrast to the totality of a dialectical approach, traditional atomistic approaches provide a comparatively limited view of communication. In a dialectical perspective, however, totality suggests that the synergistic whole (partners, tensions, responses, and context) must be considered to gain an adequate view of situated social interaction.

THE TANGLED WEBS OF GROUP INTERACTION

The question of what is a small group has been answered variously by scholars, with definitions focusing on elements of members' commonality, goals, fate, structure, or interaction (see Shaw, 1976). Adopting a dialectical perspective offers new opportunities for defining groups and provides additional ways to address some of the essential "why" and "how" questions asked about group communication. Specifically, the dialectical perspective proposed here provides a view of the small group as being born from contradiction and change and founded on mutual and ongoing member influence. The primary foci are on the tensions and exigencies inherent in group interaction and on members' communicative behaviors (including their interpretations of their own and others' communication) as responses to them.

An essential starting point for applying dialectical theory to the small group is with the theory's conceptual "messiness." This is not a theory that lends itself to simple models of group interaction or platitudinous statements that provide "keys" to successful group membership. Rather, dialectical perspectives thrive in abstractness and deliberately break with the traditions of social-scientific research to make group communication processes (processes that are, themselves, messy, ambiguous, and in flux) understandable in new ways. As Murphy (1971) suggested, dialectical theory is "destructive of neat systems and ordered structures, and compatible with the notion of a social universe that has neither fixity or solid boundaries" (p. 90). Groups and their communication processes are constituted within the inherent tensions—and efforts to respond to those tensions—present in human interaction. Such tensions are not limited to dyadic relationships, as studied in current interpersonal communication scholarship, but extend to all social interaction, including that which occurs in groups.

Extant group communication scholarship has, with few exceptions (see Adelman & Frey, 1994; Frey, 1994; Poole, Seibold, & McPhee, 1985), employed approaches that are either monologic (unidimensional, unidirectional, with singular variables) or dualistic (bidirectional, involving static polar opposites—such as Bales, 1950). Monologic approaches are well illustrated in group communication pedagogy. Students of group communication learn about, for example, members who adopt roles, behave according to norms, follow leaders, and use various decision-making

methods to solve problems. They hear about cohesiveness (with more cohesive groups said to be more effective), group maturity, and the development of group culture as progressing through stages in a fairly linear manner (e.g., Fisher, 1970; Tuckman, 1965). Dualistic approaches are also well illustrated in research that studies group concepts paired with their polar opposites. For example, Bales's (1950, 1970) classic interaction process analysis for studying group communication is based on dichotomies such as "seems friendly/seems unfriendly" and "agrees/disagrees." Such views are appropriate and useful, but the picture they paint of groups is hardly complete. Our desire here is to move from monologic and dualistic conceptualizations of the group toward a dialectical conceptualization—one that values the pragmatic adjustments members make through their communicative responses to the dialectical tensions and exigencies of group life.

From a dialectical perspective, a group might be conceived as follows: *A group is constituted in the dynamic interplay of dialectical tensions, exigencies, and communicative responses among members of an assembly within its relevant contexts.* The emphasis in this description is on the tensions—the dialectics themselves—and on the communication that constitutes and manages these tensions. People begin responding to these dialectics immediately upon entering a group through their communicative behavior and, thereby, create other dialectical tensions and exigencies; thus, the sum of the tensions and members' responses, within the group's relevant contexts, literally *is* "the group." The tensions may vary from group to group (and even from context to context within the same group), and members' efforts to manage these tensions are diverse and vary in magnitude of influence, but the focus on these elements is the heart of a dialectical perspective.

Consider, for instance, the first moments of a "leaderless, zero-history, task-oriented group." It is axiomatic that the initial minutes of such a group are typically uncomfortable for members, involve tentative communication, and are formative in shaping future group practices. But why is this so? Dialectical theory approaches these moments with a focus on the tensions that characterize social interaction and examines how the group members begin to manage them through communicative behavior. By maintaining the focus on tensions, responses, and contexts, dialectical scholars can follow a group's history from its first moments and observe how and why the group becomes what it becomes and does what it does.

Group Norms as Communicative Responses to Dialectical Exigencies

As one way to further envision what a dialectical approach "looks and sounds like," we begin with an examination of the familiar notion of group norms, as informed by the tenets of contradiction, change, praxis, and totality. *Norms* are commonly characterized as implicit or explicit guidelines that establish limitations for group members' behavior. Bormann's (1990) concise definition of norms as "shared expectation of right action" (p. 180) alludes to the expectation of conformity by group members to what is perceived as "correct" behavior. Conformity to group expectations has remained a prominent theme across the decades in group scholarship, with research often focusing on the development of norms and their enforcement with violators (e.g., Festinger, Schachter, & Back, 1968; Katz, 1982; Moscovici, 1985; Sherif, 1936). Such definitions and corresponding research, however, obscure the dialectical nature of norms and their development within groups. They suggest that norms are developed and followed by group members in a fairly clean, linear manner, with some behaviors on the "right" side of a line and some behaviors on the "wrong" side. But what makes some behaviors right and others wrong within a group, and why does that change? In fact, why do groups establish norms at all, and why do members adhere to them? Such ques-

tions are usually addressed via general, rather than specific, assertions (e.g., "The human animal apparently has a strong desire to follow the herd," Ellis & Fisher, 1996, p. 128). A dialectical perspective, in contrast, reframes entirely the notion of group norms and, thereby, offers opportunities to explore such questions in new and fruitful ways.

Norms are perhaps the clearest evidence of the influence of dialectical tensions on group members' behavior. At their very essence, norms represent group efforts to respond to contradictions; that is, norms are developed as members experience dialectical tensions and attempt to manage them through their communication. These ongoing tension management attempts result in patterns of communicative behavior; if these patterns prove effective at managing tensions at any given time, they may well be repeated. The tensions, of course, are not eliminated at this point. As a group's history continues, the patterns of behaviors are either repeated or not, depending on their perceived effectiveness, as responses to the ongoing presence of tensions within a changing context. Hence, adopting a dialectical perspective allows an initial answer to the question of why groups create norms: Quite simply, groups create norms (patterns of communicative behavior) as responses to ongoing dialectical tensions and exigencies.

Viewing norms from a dialectical perspective means moving away from the idea of shared, self-governing behaviors on either side of a "line of correctness" to behaviors created in response to a web of tensions and relational exigencies. A norm isn't a tangible "thing" (i.e., an implicit code that differs from an explicit rule only because it has not been written or otherwise formalized) to which one does or does not adhere; rather, it is the result of the dynamic interplay of tensions created by and constituting a group. This complex set of tensions is not easily reduced to simple oppositions (e.g., norms/chaos), but rather, at each end of each dialectic is a somewhat fuzzy set of pressures, all intricately intertwined with the others, that serve to guide group members' behaviors through conformity issues. Hence, following a norm isn't akin to choosing whether to step over a specific line; rather, a single norm involves members in complex processes of negotiation and choice making within dialectical exigencies. As members choose their communicative behaviors, the various relational and contextual influences create further tensions to which they must adjust. In addition, the range of possible communicative behaviors is indeterminate, and any given behavior might serve to violate a norm in one instance and adhere to it in another, further complicating members' choices. To violate a norm is to respond in a manner that creates new tensions that must then be managed, that increases the awareness (and, therefore, influence) of already prominent tensions, or both. Because tensions can be quite strong and may create significant discomfort as they are experienced by group members, it seems likely that members typically enact those behaviors that seem to manage the tensions most effectively (i.e., reducing the discomfort) at any given time.

One can identify particularly potent dialectical tensions and exigencies by examining the norms most readily apparent at a given time. Consider a brief example:

> One member of a stoic, highly task-oriented business group begins to cry and blurts out that he has received a preliminary diagnosis that suggests he has a life-threatening illness. This group has never before discussed personal issues in meetings, and the members are initially baffled about how to respond; they sit there for several moments in stunned, uncomfortable silence.

This member's startling openness not only serves to reemphasize previously experienced tensions, thus far managed through the use of low levels of self-disclosure, but it may also serve to establish the significance of new tensions—for example, warmth/coldness, caring/disinterest, or approach/avoidance. Thus, norms are not only a way to define group behavior ("a shared expectation of right action"); they can also be viewed as manifesta-

tions of group members' efforts to manage the many tensions within which their interaction is created. Norms become obvious in their repetition (or absence) as patterns of communicative behavior and, thereby, make relevant dialectics more readily apparent.

To make this more clear, while simultaneously highlighting its complexity, here is another specific extended example drawn from a set of observations and student journal entries collected by one of the authors:

> Upon assembly, one undergraduate student group in a small group communication course created norms of minimal social interaction, strong task focus, and high productivity. They worked longer, faster, and were awarded higher grades on assignments during the first half of the course than any other group. A few of the other class members ridiculed the group members because of their behavior, calling them "brownnosers." Although most members of this particular group did not find these external pressures compelling, two did. Their performance within the group subsequently diminished, and the group itself became much less productive and the members became much less satisfied overall.

According to students' journal entries, the initial norms seem to have been derived from strong tensions related to esteem (from how one is perceived by fellow group members), with several members viewing themselves as top students in competition with one another. The other students in the group responded by raising their own levels of performance as well. (One student wrote, "This group has really helped me work hard . . . harder than I do for most classes. . . . I mean, it's not like I want them to think I'm stupid.") The dynamic interplay of tensions such as apathy/investment or inclusion/exclusion (among many others), and member management of these tensions as initiated by the higher achievers and adopted by the lower achievers (possibly in response to other face-related tensions), created expectations for group members to work hard and achieve their goals. However, when pressures from outside the group increased (as other students teased members of this group), the lower achieving members adjusted their behavior, and ultimately, the group norms changed. These students experienced tensions from both within and outside the group that inspired their behavioral adjustments; these adjustments, in turn, created new tensions in the group that, of course, again required management. (The same student quoted previously later wrote, in reference to other group members, "I don't care what they think of me.")

Several important insights about dialectical tensions and their management can be gained from this example. First, as we have mentioned, the idea of contradiction includes the assumption that each dialectical tension is composed not of clear, distinct poles but of interconnected, opposing pressures. To conform to a group norm is not usually as simple as choosing between two specific behaviors. Conformity in the preceding case might include tensions such as remain/leave, investment/apathy, and comply/defy all at the same time, each a slightly different manifestation of similar tensions. The presence of apathy (which is fuzzy in the sense that it could involve issues such as punctuality, time commitment, and disinterest) gives significance to the conformity pressure for investment (similarly fuzzy), and this interconnectedness creates the ongoing nature of group member communication. These group members didn't simply resolve the tension by conforming to the group's initial task norms and then moving on. Rather, the tensions that inspired the initial norms continued throughout the group's life and created the need for ongoing choice making. That is, the members didn't solve this tension by putting in high-level effort throughout the course of the group's life; at each moment, members chose the amount of effort they would put forth, choosing again and again, meeting to meeting and task to task.

Hence, a dialectical view of norms examines more than simply conforming/not conforming in regard to any specific behavior. A dialectical perspective sees norms as patterns

of communicative behavior established and continued (or not) as responses to ongoing tensions. When a member violates a norm, new tensions are created and adjustments are required. Sometimes the behavior is quickly extinguished—by self-reflection or sanction from others—because the discomfort the tension creates is too much for the group members to manage. Other times, the behavior is initially disruptive but then quickly embraced, and members adapt to the tensions by adjusting expectations and creating new patterns of communicative behavior (e.g., as one student wrote, "We never teased each other before, but after Bob ripped on Eric that way and everyone, even Eric, laughed, teasing became normal"). Overall, members make complex, sometimes difficult choices as they manage conformity tensions that are, at their essence, group-established attempts to manage dialectics.

The complex web of dialectical tensions and responses that constitute group communication is intricate and likely obscured by static evaluations of groups. The previous example focused on just one set of behaviors within a particular group. We could have chosen to expand our consideration to include the group members' sense of humor, the roles played by specific members, or the final task products of this group, and considered the web of tensions and its influence on each, or all, of these (or other) elements. Moreover, each individual members' communicative behavior might also be examined as a response to tensions, or certain types of communication behaviors (e.g., those related to decision making or leadership) might be considered. Overall, though, the notions of change and totality suggest that applying a dialectical viewpoint requires more than a simple identification of two or three relevant tensions that seemingly explain an aspect of group life. Instead, this perspective involves scholars, educators, practitioners, and group members in a holistic, in-depth study of tensions and responses across several levels of a group's experience and within its relevant contests.

The Multidimensional Nature of Dialectics in Groups

As suggested in the previous example, dialectics function simultaneously at different levels for members of groups. This multidimensionality means that dialectics in groups are not readily ascertained by using static models of explanation or formulas. In addition to dialectics within the group, dialectics exist between a group and those outside of it. Moreover, interpersonal-level dialectics are intertwined with group-level dialectics. Dialectics are also present in group discussion as members find the very content of their work fraught with conflict and collective decision-making dialectics. Hence, doing a dialectical analysis means creating a fluid, multidimensional image of a group that accounts for tensions across a variety of levels and in a manner that facilitates ongoing study. It also necessitates viewing the locus of the tensions as based in relationships rather than in the individuals. Dialectical tensions are jointly shared by interactants, regardless of whether that relationship is at the interpersonal, multipersonal (group), intergroup, or societal level. Although it is possible, even typical, that members' experiences of the same dialectics are dissimilar, the tensions themselves are "owned" by the relationships created via the formation of a group (see Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Members behave in response to these tensions, sometimes in harmony with the choices of other members and sometimes in ways that are "out of sync" with those of others. In this way, tensions are both created and managed in the group members' ongoing interaction.

One of the central differences in applying a dialectical approach to groups as opposed to interpersonal relationships (as has primarily been the case thus far in communication scholarship) is the complexity created by the multidimensionality of a group; hence, the importance of developing a multidimensional view to study groups needs to be highlighted even further when using a dialectical ap-

proach. Here, we assert that dialectics operate on at least three internal levels (within a group), and on at least one external level (i.e., between a group and those outside it). Considering each of these levels, and their interrelationships, is an essential part of applying a dialectical perspective to the study of groups.

Internal dialectics. On at least three levels, dialectics exist within a group and influence members' behavior. First, as discussed earlier, there are interpersonal dialectics (see, e.g., Altman, 1993; Altman, Vinsel, & Brown, 1981; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Rawlins, 1992). Group members frequently engage in interpersonal dialogues, sometimes even talking about the group itself with another member. The dialectical tensions that create and are created by interpersonal relationships do not disappear when relational partners join a group; rather, they remain and influence (and are influenced by) group interaction. For example, two people who have worked together for an extended period of time and who have over the years become close friends might find their willingness to disagree with one another openly in a work group meeting either reduced or enhanced by their close relationship. In turn, other members who perceive the familiarity between these two friends might sense their communicative choices (going easier on or being tougher on one another than they are on other group members) and attempt to compensate for the friends' closeness by adjusting their own communicative behavior. Either way, the interpersonal dialectics are influenced by the group context and have influenced the larger group dynamics.

Second, there are dialectics between individual members and a kind of "generalized-group-other" audience (see Mead's, 1934, "generalized other" or Bakhtin's, 1986, "superaddressee"). When someone begins a meeting by saying, "Okay, let's get started. Is there any new business we should consider?" these comments are likely influenced by a sense of the group members as a whole, as though addressing a composite or "average" group member. The person's communicative choices may be directed by a sense of what he or she believes "they" expect or how "they" might react. When members speak up, they sometimes direct their comments to other individuals (and, thus, are influenced by interpersonal dialectics), but they also maintain a sense of what the larger group thinks as it (the generalized-group-other) observes. This relationship between the one and the combined many creates a set of dialectics to which members must respond and that might be perceived as both interpersonal and group level in nature. This also creates an abstract level of tensions for members, because individual communicative behaviors are now often chosen (somewhat self-reflexively) in relationship to a generalized "them." Evidence for the existence of this level as distinct from other levels exists in roles and role-specific norms. Scholars suggest that individual group members begin to exhibit unique behavioral patterns that serve various functions within the group, with these patterns typically called *roles* (e.g., Benne & Sheats, 1948; Hare, 1994). Associated with most roles are individualized expectations of each member by the larger group; hence, individual members relate to the group differently, and the group relates to each individual differently. Various tensions are more or less potent for each individual, and behavioral choices (and responses to these choices) are made with this unique relationship in mind. As individual members create patterns of behavior that vary from the overall patterns acceptable for the group in general, the group's communicative behaviors serve to encourage or discourage these patterns based on the tensions they create. When these unique individual patterns are accepted (and even rewarded), despite their variance from the larger group's more accepted patterns, the group and its members have responded to tensions operating on distinct (although intertwined) levels.

Third, there are group-level dialectics that influence and are influenced by all the members of a group and that are related most

closely to norms (as previously discussed). The unique, synergistic nature of groups and the patterns of communication developed within each individual group provide evidence of dialectics at this level. As Ellis and Fisher (1996) suggested, "A group almost has a 'mind' of its own—a way of thinking and a pattern of emotions quite separate from those of the individual members" (p. 6). Groups manage tensions that relate to their social interaction, their members' willingness to express ideas, and their members' personal involvement in the group goals, among countless others. It is likely that numerous dialectics of varying degrees of significance potentially influence members' behavior in any given group at any given moment in the group's life.

External dialectics. The complexity of dialectics is not limited to multiple levels within a group; tensions are also created by the group's relationship with outsiders. The existence of these dialectics, which might be termed "external" dialectics (see Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 16), finds support in the work of scholars who adopt the bona fide group perspective, with their assertions of permeable group boundaries and the interdependence of a group with its context (see Putnam & Stohl, 1990, 1996; Stohl & Putnam, 1994). External dialectics can exist between a group and its parent organization, a community, or the society in which it is embedded. For example, members of a university committee respond not only to tensions present between the committee members themselves, but the committee's permeable boundaries mean that the members also consider the views of the larger faculty, administrators, various communities within which the university resides, and perhaps the larger professional societal groups to which members belong. At each level, dialectics are present and influence members' communicative choices. One example might be found in a committee established to hire a new university president. Such committees are typically composed of members of the board of trustees (or other administrators), faculty, staff, and students. As the committee meets, it works within the internal dialectics discussed earlier. However, the committee (or individual members of it) may also interact with the current university president; receive feedback from other board members, administrators, faculty, staff, or students; and hear comments from community members about the kind of person who should be hired. These various voices (internal and external) create a kind of chorus of tensions within which this group must operate and from which the group is derived. Literally, the group both is and becomes its responses to the dialectics at every level. Group members choose communicative behaviors in response to this chorus of tensions, and these behaviors, in turn, define the group.

The example given previously of students pressured by other students in class shows another illustration of the presence and influence of external tensions. In this case, the intertwined set of tensions pulled continually on the group members. They had to choose their behaviors from within these competing claims and manage the tensions in the group as they simultaneously managed tensions from outside. Some students in this group clearly found the influence of these external dialectics more and more compelling and eventually changed their initial patterns to manage within the group both the internal and external tensions. This decision, of course, created new tensions within the group, and the ongoing process of adjustment continued.

All of this complexity may lead one to wonder why, with so many levels and such conceptual fuzziness, a dialectical approach to the study of groups would be advocated. Is such an approach even possible on a practical level? We believe it is both possible and valuable for furthering our understanding of group communication. Ultimately, what we (and a few others, such as Barge & Frey, 1997; Frey, 1999; Smith & Berg, 1987, whose work on paradoxes in groups led to the notion of individuals' desire to be both a part of a group and apart from it, which we adopted for the

chapter title) are advocating is a means of viewing group communication using (instead of ignoring) the paradoxical nature of social phenomena. A dialectical view looks at members' communicative behaviors, but it does not see them apart from the tensions that inspire them. It provides a different means of seeing below the surface of the traditional linear view into the nature and effect of group communication itself. Yet the question of how one might conduct a dialectical analysis of group communication remains. How might this perspective be enacted in research to develop greater insights into the communicative processes of groups? We now turn our attention to answering this question and drawing together our considerations of the multilevel nature of dialectics in groups.

Methodological Eclecticism

Applying a dialectical approach to the study of groups is undoubtedly a complex endeavor. However, the rewards go beyond identifying a specific aspect of relevant group communication or creating a model to help groups make decisions more effectively. A dialectical analysis involves the researcher in a comprehensive study of group communication and members' motivations for enacting selected communicative behaviors. It takes the researcher beneath the surface and into the foundation of a group.

One of the most tempting first steps in taking a dialectical approach is to attempt to assemble a list of *the* primary dialectics that characterize all groups. It seems, at first glance, as if identifying fundamental dialectics that groups experience would be the best initial course of action, with other elements (such as identifying methods of tension management) following later. Applying Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) assertions about interpersonal research to the study of groups, we suggest that the development of such a taxonomy should be a later, rather than an earlier, course of study. It may be that, after extensive time researching various groups, some consistent primary dialectics will emerge. However, it is possible that there are countless dialectics, with each group a unique assembly of tensions and responses. That is, what might be a core dialectic in one group may be a minor dialectic in another. In addition, dialectical theory is not a static theory; it is grounded in the continual tension between stability and change. Hence, what may be a primary dialectic for a group today may become a tertiary dialectic for it tomorrow.

What is most needed at this early stage of dialectical research on groups is the pursuit of the *processes* by which dialectics are created and managed. Although identifying relevant dialectics for a specific group can be illuminating and useful, more useful is understanding how a group creates and manages those tensions—that is, how members create and recreate their group day to day within the tensions they experience. As one example, Adelman and Frey (1994, 1997), in their work on communication and community building at Bonaventure House, a residential facility for people with AIDS, have both identified relevant dialectics and examined the processes by which they are created and managed. Adelman and Frey identified important tensions, such as attachment/detachment, but the main contribution of their research is the focus in greater depth on how members of this particular group respond to those tensions using collective communicative practices and, thereby, maintain their group despite constantly changing membership. Such insights are useful to scholars, practitioners, and group members, as well as to members of other groups as they consider their own group processes.

Researching groups from a dialectical perspective places several demands on the researcher. First, it is essential that those who research dialectics be methodologically flexible. Because of its inherent complexity, dialectical analysis demands an eclectic approach that uses multiple methods to explore a group and its communication. The utility of diverse methods is highlighted by Montgomery and Baxter's (1998) edited work on using dialecti-

cal approaches in researching personal relationships. Their text contains essays on using ethnographic, narrative, and even quantitative approaches, among others, to study social phenomena using a dialectical frame. The diversity of methods in that text indicates both the complexity and opportunity of adopting a dialectical approach.

In addition to methodological flexibility, several elements seem essential to studying a group using a dialectical approach. First, whenever possible, a researcher should study a group from within as a participant-observer or should at least have a confederate who understands the project and can serve as both group member and observer. Observing a group in action, viewing patterns of behavior firsthand, seeing the intricacies of context, and even experiencing the dialectics personally when possible add vital depth to the research.

Obtaining the comments and interpretive insights of group members is also essential, even when the researcher or a confederate is a member of a group. Other members may see issues differently, experience tensions uniquely, and possess hidden motivations, and a researcher may discover such insights through interviews or possibly even questionnaires. A thorough dialectical analysis, therefore, will explore the communicative behaviors, motivations, perceptions, and feelings of group members. Furthermore, because participating personally in a group can potentially produce a myopic view, a researcher should pursue the members' perspectives to expand personal understanding. Group members can provide insights into what they intended by a specific comment or behavior, how they were feeling at a given time, or why they responded in a certain way to the comments of another.

A dialectical analysis should also seek to explore the complexity hidden within the various levels of internal and external tensions. For example, to understand a specific group (and its relevant tensions) within an organization, one might need to be familiar with that organization, its rules, and its history, as well as the roles of that specific group within the organization. If, for instance, one were not aware of an organization's history of firing whole employee groups that are unproductive, one could easily miss an important set of intense tensions during an analysis of a particular task group within that organization. A researcher should also examine the interpersonal dynamics and history among group members (prior to group membership if potentially relevant), because any such relationships will likely contribute to the group's dialectics. Overall, the researcher should consider as many levels of dialectics as possible and, thereby, demonstrate an expansive breadth in the research.

Ultimately, the goal of a dialectical analysis should involve more than a singular theoretical discovery or confirmation of a specific hypothesis; it should explicate the pragmatic processes by which group members create and manage tensions. Moreover, it should consider relevant dialectics throughout a group's history (or throughout as much of that group's history as possible). The relevant dialectics would likely change as the group changes, with new tensions resulting from ongoing adjustments in members' behavior. In the end, a substantive dialectical analysis will have theoretical value, pedagogical value, value to members of the group studied, and value to other such groups. Through its depth and breadth, it will explore beneath the surface to reveal the tensions and the processes they engender in a group. Such processes may be discussed in relation to group outcomes, such as effectiveness or satisfaction, but care should be taken in doing so to avoid conducting an analysis dialectically and then presenting results in a linear manner (e.g., "An effective group is one in which members use *X* communication practices to manage dialectic *Y*").

RESEARCH CONSIDERATIONS

A dialectical analysis involves in-depth exploration of group members' behaviors, perceptions, and motivations. Researchers who adopt this approach confront issues of confi-

dentiality and potential personal harm to group members, because having a researcher examine members' views of one another, their individual and collective views of an organization (or supervisor), or their personal motivations is clearly a loaded enterprise. As a result, research itself becomes a dialectical endeavor. A researcher's relationship with group members potentially creates many tensions, as does the researcher's relationship with other scholars (e.g., tensions related to integrity, productivity, identity, privacy, and openness). Care must be taken, in the management of these tensions, to reduce the potential of harm to those studied.

A dialectical analysis of a group also requires several other important considerations. First, as discussed, the multiple levels on which dialectics occur among group members need to be examined. Although the preceding discussion highlights internal and external dialectics, the prominence of differing levels of dialectics will be unique from group to group. For example, a committee of officials assembled to review policies or procedures that could affect tax revenues for a geographical area would likely find external dialectics to be more prominent than, say, a group of college students engaged in an evening of movie watching. Such emphases do not mean the other levels aren't important to consider; rather, certain levels of dialectics are likely to be more influential than others at given times in a group's history.

This consideration leads naturally to another: A group is a work in process—an ongoing creation and re-creation that occurs through social interaction. This understanding places a researcher within a dialectic of sorts between the present and the future, between stability and change. The researcher must, of course, study a group within the moment of its present context (or chronotope), yet the researcher must also be aware that the group will continue to change. Specific levels and processes of dialectics are likely to be more prominent than others at any given point in a group's history, and they change as the group changes over time. The researcher, therefore, has no choice but to create findings in a here and now that changes continually.

A third consideration involves methodological rigor. If a group is changing continually, what does that suggest about making reliable and valid observations? That is, how can one replicate findings and/or be certain one is measuring what one purports to measure within a theory that holds change as a central tenet? Questions of reliability and validity in interpretive research have been adequately addressed by numerous scholars of qualitative methods (see, e.g., the essays in Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; also see Lincoln & Guba, 1985) who suggest that researchers can examine ongoing social processes in an appropriately rigorous manner despite an inability to stop or fully capture them. With dialectical analyses, as with any good research, methodological rigor is achieved through thorough, careful, and in-depth study. Although a group changes continually, evidence can certainly be gathered in support of conclusions drawn at any given time. In addition, the group members themselves can provide useful resources for examining conclusions. Given that members' motives, thoughts, and feelings are an integral part of a dialectical analysis, asking them to review conclusions (making "member checks") can often increase the validity of the research. For example, Adelman and Frey's (1994, 1997) research at Bonaventure House (cited previously) was a cooperative venture in which house members' responses to initial written drafts of research reports were incorporated into the final version. Indeed, the contract they worked out with house administrators mandated that such a review of participant perceptions occur. This *in situ* study is exemplary in nature and shows both some means and significance of applying a dialectical frame in group communication research.

CONCLUSION

A dialectical perspective is not new, nor are we the first to propose its application to social interaction. However, this perspective has not been applied sufficiently to group com-

munication, and that is unfortunate, for it has much to offer this field. Recent attempts by scholars to inspire creative group communication research have met with some success, but we still have much to learn about group communication. Although group communication researchers have observed how leaders and decisions emerge, constructed lengthy lists of member roles, developed prescriptions for effective decision making, and espoused theories about social influence, they have too seldom gone beneath the surface in groups to study the interpretive, adaptive, and ongoing social processes that constitute and maintain them. Dialectical theory provides communication scholars, in particular, with an important means to study what and how a group becomes and remains a group. Examining dialectical tensions, and members' communicative responses to those tensions, provides group communication researchers with a new way to observe how communication constitutes groups rather than simply studying what groups do with communication.

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