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Nobody Studies Groups Anymore

Donelson R. Forsyth, University of Richmond



“Social psychology has always been ambivalent about the study of groups per se.”

-- E.E. Jones, 1985 (p. 77).

When Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa was asked about the level of gang activity in his city, he explained “I’m not a sociologist or an anthropologist, so I can’t share with you the root causes of gang violence that you see in urban areas” (Sims, 2007). He did not include “social psychologist” on his list of experts on gangs, because social psychologists don’t study gangs—in fact, social psychologists don’t even study groups anymore. That is why Lee Ross, Mark Lepper, and Andrew Ward (2010), in their chapter on history in the *Handbook of Social Psychology* concluded that (a) the study of groups used to be called “group dynamics” and (b) “there is still a relative paucity of work on groups per se” (2010, p. 4).

Their pronouncement leaves me wondering why I still subscribe to the APA/EPF journal *Group Dynamics*. I’m also wondering why, within the field of social psychology, there is a journal that focuses on relationships (*Personal Relationships*), social cognition (*Social Cognition*), influence (*Social Influence*), and the self (*Self and Identity*) but three that examine group-level processes (*Group Dynamics*, *Small Group Research*, and *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*). And why is the 2010 *Encyclopedia of Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* edited by John M. Levine and Michael A. Hogg a 2 volume, 998 page, compendium of over 300 entries?

But Ross, Lepper, and Ward’s verdict is one that has been bandied about ever since the great Ivan Steiner asked “Whatever happened to the group in social psychology?” in his cleverly titled *Journal of Experimental Social*

Psychology paper in 1974. He lamented the golden age of group dynamics—the 1950s—with its studies of communication networks, leadership, group decision-making, and performance in groups. (Hard as it may seem to believe today, Leon Festinger’s 1955 Annual Review chapter was titled “Social Psychology and Group Processes.”)

Steiner’s dismal outlook has been repeated by many commentators in the intervening years. Gwen Wittenbaum and Richard Moreland (2008), themselves researchers who study groups, admit the field is nearly static. Richard Hackman and Nancy Katz (2010, p. 1208) explain “small group research has migrated to the periphery of the field”. Brooke Harrington and Gary Alan Fine (2000) similarly conclude that researchers in social psychology, both in the sociological and psychological traditions, “express little interest in small groups as an organizing principle of social life” (p. 313).

Yet, others express a more Panglossian perspective on groups. John Levine and Richard Moreland, in 1998, hope that “research on small groups is experiencing a renaissance within social psychology” (p. 448). In that same year Dominic Abrams and Michael Hogg wrote that “research in group and intergroup processes is being published at a disproportionately accelerating rate compared with the increase in social psychology as a whole” (p. 7).

One reason for this diversity in opinions regarding the health of groups research is ambiguity about the definition of a group. Levine and Moreland (2012), for example, don’t think dyads are groups, and so they exclude any studies using paradigms that involve two interacting individuals from their analyses. Never mind that the study might be testing some theoretical perspective pertaining to influence, social comparison, power, leadership, communication, or some other group-level process—dyads aren’t groups. Kipling Williams (2010), by the way, takes a different perspective, in part because he considers his work on ostracism—which often involves one person rejecting another person—to be groups research (so did the Annual Review of Psychology, which nested his review of Ostracism under the heading “Small Groups”). He probably also thought he was studying groups in his work on social loafing (which in many cases involved two people working to contribute to a shared resource).

A second reason for the differences in conclusions about the state of group dynamics as a field is ambiguity about what processes qualify as group processes and which ones don’t. Wittenbaum and Moreland (2008), for example, focus on five topics when they offer up their comprehensive review of the state of groups research: group composition, group structure, group performance, conflict in groups, and the ecology. They also add, grudgingly, intergroup processes, but exclude others: affiliation, aggression in groups, collective behavior (e.g., crowds, gangs, etc.), conformity, contagion, crowding, family dynamics, group formation, group development, group-based identity, groups and therapeutic change, inclusion/exclusion, justice, leadership, negotiation, obedience, ostracism, perceptions of groups (entitativity), power, social comparison, social identity, social network analysis, status and hierarchy, and teams. Some of these topics may not fall squarely into the realm of group research, but all explore processes that are relevant to understanding the behavior of individuals when in groups.

Perhaps the conclusion “interest in studying social processes within small groups has diminished over time” (Wittenbaum & Moreland, 2008, p. 187) is only reasonable when the list of groupy topics has been whittled down to a select (and, arguably, most boring) few. A more generous interpretation of the field’s rightful domain of interests yields a far more positive conclusion. For example, Georgina Randsley de Moura, Tirza Leader, Joseph Pelletier, and Dominic Abrams (2008) reviewed 90,827 articles pertaining to social psychological topics published between 1935 to 2007 in over 60 journals. They discovered that a healthy percentage of those papers, 16.5%—about 15,000—pertained to groups. When they examined annual publication rates they found evidence of a linear increase over time with a particularly dramatic increase from the 1990s onward attributable, in part, to the increased integration of groups with studies of social cognition. This increase was particularly pronounced when they focused on the leading journals within the field of social psychology. They went back, through the preceding 10 years, and located the 10 articles from each year with the highest impact as measured by Total Cites from Thomson’s ISI Web of Knowledge. Of the 881 top-ranked articles, fully 35.2% pertained to a group-level topic (which they defined, fairly conservatively, as pertaining to intergroup relations, social identity, stereotyping, stereotype threat, social influence, entitativity, group performance, group decision making or productivity, social dilemmas, leadership, structure or ecology of groups, power in groups, and conflict in groups). Although Randsley de Moura, Leader, Pelletier, and Abrams live on the same planet as Wittenbaum and Moreland, they conclude, “The progress of group processes and intergroup relations based research is steady and sure, both in terms of quantity and impact” (p. 591).

A final reason for the pronounced differences in opinions regarding the state of the field of group dynamics is the interdisciplinary interest in groups. No one discipline holds the exclusive rights to the study of groups. Scientists in such fields as anthropology, communication studies, education, engineering, fields devoted to mental health, political science, sociology, sports and recreation, the legal profession, and, of course, business, all study groups. When the work of scientists in these fields is recognized, then the actual level of interest in group-level processes can be more fully appreciated (Hackman & Katz, 2010; Sanna & Parks, 1997). Consider, for example, the study of teams—which, by the way, are groups. A search of the phrase *social cognition* yields a healthy 226,000 hits in Google Scholar. Search for the word *team*, in contrast, generates 3,730,000.

In sum, it is not clear that the study of groups is, or even ever was, moribund. In fact, the exact opposite may be the case. Ross et al. offer up a bleak assessment of the study of groups, but they do not mention the findings reported by F. D. Richard, Charles Bond, and Juli Stokes-Zoota in their 2003 meta-analysis of meta-analyses in social psychology. When they examined 100s of prior meta-analytic studies of various social psychological processes, they discovered that the average effect size in those studies was .21, a low to moderately strong effect. But, when they looked more closely across topics, they discovered that some relationships were particularly paltry, whereas others were more robust. Studies of the relationship between personality and behavior, for example, are often considered relatively unsubstantial by social psychologists, but as personality psychologists have maintained all along they were consistently stronger ($r = .22$) than the relationships documented in studies of influence ($r = .12$), attribution ($r = .14$), and expectancies ($r = .16$). And what one area of study has yielded the strongest support for predicted relationships between the variables specified in its theories? Leading the way, across all 18 topics identified by Richard and his colleagues: The scientific study of groups and their dynamics, with a mean r of .32.

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