



December 1974

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### Recommended Citation

Gentry, Martha E. (1974) "The Social Psychology of Small Groups: Relevancy of Social Work Practice with Groups," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 2 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol2/iss2/6>

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THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF SMALL GROUPS:  
RELEVANCY OF SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE WITH GROUPS

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Inclusion from the social sciences to broaden the knowledge base of social work is an accepted fact. In the professions' experience with group practice such reliance is not new, and extends at least to the efforts of Coyle who saw the usefulness of the small group field in social psychology as early as 1930.<sup>1</sup> More recently, Hartford's book provides a text which bridges small group theory and social work practice with groups.<sup>2</sup> An examination of diverse conceptualizations of group practice reveals differential reliance upon small group findings.<sup>3</sup>

As the small group is increasingly chosen as the context and means for change, it would appear that this one major knowledge source from the social sciences, namely, the small group field, should be examined critically. Scarcity of this knowledge is not at issue, but the extent to which it is directly usable in practice for such diverse purposes as: (1) a means for changing individual behaviors; (2) a social unit engaged in neighborhood and/or community development; (3) task units within organizational contexts may be at issue.<sup>4</sup>

This article examines knowledge generated by the small group field within social psychology which should provide guidelines for continued use of findings, directions and cautions for research in social work, and a sociological perspective from which to view knowledge building efforts within social work. Critiques and consequences of practitioners drawing exclusively from psychoanalytic theory for explanations of phenomena and change strategies for diverse purposes are well known to those who primarily engage in dyadic interaction.<sup>5</sup> Given this historical event, a look at the social psychology of the small group field is particularly timely as an initial attempt to develop a spirit of intellectual inquiry at least into one area of imported knowledge.

Using two sets of analytical concepts, the culture of the small group field is described. Findings are presented which suggest that the social context in which a researcher works interacts with and effects the results. Subsequently, certain socio-historical influences are extrapolated which appear to shape knowledge produced by the small group field. Two are selected; namely, the influence of wars and the influence of big business and industry. Relationships between these socio-historical influences and knowledge building in the small group field are examined. Finally, implications are drawn for social work. It is assumed that the *genesis* of knowledge is socially conditioned, and, as Mannheim suggested, the *development* of knowledge also is influenced by social processes.<sup>6</sup>

## Culture of the Small Group Field

Leading journals and readers in social psychology were examined with the result that few critiques of knowledge development about small groups were located.<sup>7</sup> Findings about small groups were found in McGrath and Altman's Small Group Research which analyzed 2,699 small group studies in the period 1910-1959 in the United States.<sup>8</sup> Forty-nine of the 501 pages were devoted to a description and critique of the field. Interestingly, this section was added after the authors developed a classification system for small group studies; their initial impression from work on a classification system spurred them to a systematic inquiry leading to the critique. Findings presented in this section are based upon a sample of 250 studies. A summary of their work is presented since it provides some data from which social influences may be extrapolated.<sup>9</sup>

Location and Support. Over 75% of small group studies in McGrath and Altman's review sample were conducted by researchers affiliated with academic institutions. Some special financial support was acknowledged by over 80%. Most of these funds came from governmental sources, predominately from parts of the defense establishment. Of all studies, over 50% were supported by Navy, Air Force or Army funds (in decreasing order of extent of funding). McGrath and Altman speculated that the use of military and other governmental funds to support small group research was more common late in the time period covered than earlier. (The expansion of the total federal budget follows a similar time sequence. It is interesting to note in the Preface of their work, that credit is given to the Behavioral Sciences Division of the Air Force Office of Scientific Research for financial support to the research program resulting in the publication of their text.) Within the armed services, differences appeared between "in-house" as opposed to "extramural" research programs. The Air Force equally funded programs within the two general locations; whereas, the Navy primarily funded extramural programs located in the university settings.

Cottrell presented a paper at a meeting of the American Sociological Society in 1955 as a part of the session on Social Research With Reference to Defense Programs. He discussed the problem of in-house research programs as it related to knowledge building. Three major points were made which appear relevant today.

1. The productivity of research imagination and planning depends heavily on the conceptual climate within which it occurs
2. There is a problem in planning a systematic, coherent research program when there exists an unintelligible allocation of the responsibility among various agencies of the government. Each agency carries its own budget and scientific research problems in this field. Scientific research problems cannot be cut and bent to fit bureaucratic budgets.
3. It is difficult to build upon and expand current knowledge in the field by those outside of government, since government

research findings are not immediately available when classified as secret.<sup>10</sup>

Rate of Production. Within the period examined (1910-1959), a sharp rise in the rate of production of small group studies occurred in the 1950's. As judged by the number of studies, the field grew tenfold in this period as compared with the total previous period. McGrath and Altman suggest that the trend has continued.

Research Settings. The experimental laboratory was the dominate setting for the conduct of work. Less than 5% of the studies examined were conducted in natural settings. As Swingle has pointed out, the laboratory social situation is artificially created by the researcher to manipulate variables under conditions of precise control to clearly observe behavior associated with the variables.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the laboratory situation does not claim nor should be assumed as a miniature simulation of real life social situations. Minimally, this suggests need for knowledge bridges from the experimental culture of the laboratory to the practice social work world.

Theory and Method. Beginning in the late 1940's and 1950's there was a noticeable decrease in emphasis upon theory in favor of methodology. (Important exceptions are found in the work of Thibaut and Kelley, Homans, Festinger and a few others.) Simultaneously, practically no studies were replicated, with the probable consequence of not ruling out false positives in the findings. Few researchers made any attempt to tie their work conceptually to any other work. Increased methodological rigor was in ascendancy. This trend appears to have maintained into the decade of the 1960's as predicted, which resulted in more sophisticated designs and statistical analyses through utilization of computer hardware and greater awareness of the potential bias of the laboratory itself, particularly as transmitted through the experimenter.<sup>12</sup> Such advances are welcomed by researchers in social work who, it is hoped, will appropriately reflect methodological refinements and use of advanced statistical tests to address the complex and multivariate nature of the phenomena of social practice, for such are only tools for theory development and refinement which will be useful for practice.

Publish or Perish. The norm of publish or perish influences knowledge building since the location of much of the work is carried out by academics in university settings. Publication is an important criterion for promotion and tenure decisions. One effect is heavy demands placed upon journals for article acceptance. It appears that editors have responded by making judgements about the degree of methodological rigor evidenced in the study and favoring those with a high degree. This may result in devaluation of *substance* vis a vis *method*. "Thus paradoxically, our concern with the requirements of the commercial market has led to our emphasis on procedure rather than substance, for it is method, not concepts, that we are selling."<sup>13</sup>

Methodological rigor as such is certainly not to be devalued. But, as this emphasis is viewed simultaneously with an imbalance in theory building, use of

concepts inadequate or completely without definition, repeated study of the same phenomenon identified by each researcher with his own label; then it would appear that indeed theory and method are out of balance. Furthermore, the publish or perish norm of the university community, quantitatively and not qualitatively valued, is contributing to this against the university's own self interest in attainment of a professed fundamental goal--generating and seeking knowledge. Examination of bibliographies shows that the same study normatively appears in several published forms; the original research report to the funding agency; paper presented at a professional meeting; paper later published as a journal article; and as a chapter in a reader appearing in each subsequent edition. A conclusion should not be drawn that these criticisms are limited to the small group field; nor only to social psychology in general or other disciplines, in fact, there is beginning evidence to suggest a similar trend in the profession of social work.

McGrath and Altman suggest that small group researchers, as a result of the commercialization of their research, engage in the research process in reverse order; asking *first* the questions of uniqueness, techniques, methodology, and *last* that of problem formulation. Furthermore, "instead of being creative inspired artist-scientists, we are tending to become (and to breed through students) commercial technicians who apply energy and resources to the production of products (publications and renewed grants) rather than to the production of stimulating ideas." 14

McGrath and Altman summarized the criticism of small group researchers by labeling the values and norms to which they adhere as the "entrepreneurial ethic." This ethic calls for:

1. Quantity at the expense of quality;
2. Rigor of method at the expense of creative theoretical aspects of science;
3. Research funds at the expense of research ideas.

The entrepreneurial ethic says to the researcher as a creative artist, "paint what sells. Paint for the highest bidder. Paint as fast and as furiously as you can. Believe in what you paint. Get a good sales force and an efficient home office behind you." 15

Ring views social psychology (in which the small group field rests) as dominated by a conceptualization that he labels "fun and games in social psychology" which is derived from the premise that social psychology ought to be and is a lot of fun. The latter, however, comes not from the learning but from doing. Clever experimentation on exotic topics with a zany manipulation seems to be the guaranteed formula for success. He suggests that implicit values result in guidelines which produce this sort of research. Rules for the game are:

1. Experiments should be as flashy and flamboyant as possible.
2. If you can think of an effective manipulation fine; if you can

- think of one that is also amusing, even better.
3. If the topic selected for study is itself prosaic, you should reconsider. If you go ahead, at least study it cleverly.
  4. Never make an obvious prediction. 16

Findings. Various means were undertaken to examine the findings of small group researchers to locate areas of interest and trends. The following observations were drawn from an examination of research reports, bibliographies, journals, and readers, and critiques of the field. Content analysis of titles of journal reports in a major bibliography was attempted to obtain a frequency count of variables studied. This procedure was abandoned, however since it was determined that major variables were not necessarily identified in the article title. In general, it was found that one or two independent variables are manipulated under controlled conditions and their effects are measured in relationship to a dependent variable in controlled laboratory settings. Most studies utilized college students as subjects. With the exception of Bales' work, few studies utilized the internal processes occurring within the groups, since before and after measures are usually obtained and inferences made to explain results.

Under the category of "Characteristics of Group Members," developed by McGrath and Altman, authoritarian attitudes was a popular study variable. Their analysis of this set of studies showed that inconsistent results were obtained in relation to a variety of other variables. Favored outcome variables were labeled group task, group performance, group productivity and group efficiency. Frequently studied independent variables were group processes of competition and cooperation. Group conflict rarely was studied within a group and dealt with infrequently on an inter-group basis. Leadership was also a study favorite, comparing differences in results around group satisfaction and/or productivity under conditions of authoritarian or democratic leadership modes. This work follows in time the publication of The Authoritarian Personality.

Smith comments on the current vogue of research on the risky-shift phenomenon as an example of fads engendered in part, by aspects of graduate training patterns, pressures for publication, and academic advancement that serve a "self-perpetuating priestcraft rather than the advancement of science." 19 The field is described by Ring as being in a state of intellectual disarray; findings are spewing outward rather than building upward into a cumulation of knowledge. He described social psychology as a field composed mainly of frontiersmen, but with few settlers.20

Small group studies, then usually have the following characteristics:

1. Highly controlled experiments in laboratory settings.
2. Subjects who are college students;
3. Manipulation of one or two variables with observation of the results on one;
4. Before and after measures with inference as to process;
5. Concepts poorly defined both conceptually and operationally;
6. Minimal attempts to tie concepts into any theoretical

- statements;
7. Methodological sophistication;
  8. Questionable statements of generalization.

Furthermore, examination of the findings in terms of their clustering as to content suggest clear socio-historical influences which are examined in the next section.

### Socio-historical Influences

Clusters of interest by small group researchers appear in sequential relationships to certain identifiable historical events. Such a relationship is examined with respect to two selected events--the influence of wars and the rise of big business and industry.

The Influence of Wars. The most well known and comprehensive works immediately from World War II are the volumes of The American Soldier.<sup>21</sup> Far less in scope, but noticeable in frequency and directly related to wars, are specific small group studies as exemplified by the following:

- "Civilian Morale and the Training of Leaders" (1942)
- "Forecasting Officer Potential Using the Leaderless Group Discussion" (1952)
- "A Study of Leadership Among Submarine Officers" (1953)
- "Social Influence on the Aircraft Commander's Role" (1955)
- "Group Norms Among Bomber Crews: Patterns of Perceived Crew Attitudes, 'actual' Crew Attitudes, and Crew Liking Related to Aircrew Effectiveness in Far Eastern Combat" (1956) 22

As noted earlier, a preponderance of financial support from the federal government and, in particular, the Navy, Air Force and Army sections was found. Here are found examples of the probable interrelationship of historical events, funding support, and knowledge building. Such studies may have provided the basis for asking additional questions which are then pursued in a systematic way. An example is the work of Schein who reported that his conceptual model about the maintenance of social relationships grew out of his studies of Chinese Communist techniques of controlling civilian and military prisoners during and after the Korean conflict.<sup>23</sup> All too often, however, studies appeared to be isolated events rather than as a link opening up new or testing known ideas about small group behavior.

Additional clusterings of interest can be identified which are traceable to the forms of communication and of their content deemed important to a war-time society. Studies related to influencing attitudes and behaviors of people to gain their support to the war effort and/or help them withstand enemy onslaughts can be located. These studies dealt with propaganda, psychological warfare, and brain-washing. Lewin's famous study, comparing the effectiveness of the methods of lecture versus discussion as measured by behavioral change, stemmed from the

scarcity of regular meat cuts. The outcome variable was the number of housewives (gate-keepers) who increased their purchase of less popular but available meat cuts. 24

Reference was previously made to The Authoritarian Personality, which, containing the F (facism) scale among others, was used frequently by small group researchers. This major work itself signals another area of interest. Many efforts were made to examine and explain the Anti-Semitic Behaviors of a mass of people, particularly in Germany, which led to the persecution and annihilation of millions of Jews just prior to and during World War II. In the United States a large body of this work was conducted, often engaged in by German-Jewish refugee scientists. Various attempts were made by social scientists in general and by the small group researchers, in particular, to measure the extent of and knowledge about the development of prejudicial attitudes and behaviors. Initially focused on Jews, the content of the work later focused on blacks. 25 Examples just presented on content categories demonstrate the interrelationship of knowledge building and the pervasive influence of wars.

The Organization Man. The decade of the 1950's has been described in many ways. Characteristics to be dealt with here are some effects of the increase of big business and industry, and the shift of the population to the suburbs from the city. The work of Homans is interesting to examine in time sequence as it appears to shift in content from the influence of war to the influence of the profit-economy period of the decade. Examples which support this trend are:

"The Western Electric Researchers." in Fatigue of Workers: Its Relationship to the Industrial Production. (1941)

"Human Factors in Management" (1946)

"A Conceptual Scheme for the Study of Social Organization" (1947)

"Status Among Clerical Workers" (1952)

It is not surprising, therefore, to find that a work of some theoretical influence upon small group researchers was produced by him in 1958. "Social Behavior as Exchange." 27 Within the context of a capitalistic economy, elementary forms of behavior or, interactions between men in their purest form, are postulated as a system of exchange whereby each person acts rationally to maximize his profit by decreasing costs and increasing rewards. (Profit = Rewards - Costs)

Problems and applications which appear of interest to large corporations are examined by small group researchers. Some examples are: performance in alone and together situations; evaluation of group decisions as against individual decisions in terms of risk-taking and quality; and forms of communication systems in hierarchies. The studies simulate task-oriented groups.

Applied use of small group findings by business through academic consultants and through management consultant firms continues. No attempt will be made to trace the development and influence of what is known as the National Training Laboratory at Bethel, Maine. In brief, however, this organization has influenced both knowledge building and the application of knowledge about small groups. By



the late 1950's and continuing into the 1960's, emphasis was on application instead of research. Through groups variously called process-oriented or sensitivity-training groups improvement of human relations has been the professed goal. An examination of these conceptualizations of group, given their overwhelming support by business can only lead one to suspect that the primary function was to keep workers happy and satisfied in their work so that the corporate machinery would run smoothly and profits would increase. Small group studies which focused on *instrumental* activity as a means for increasing efficiency as found in earlier periods of time appear to have shifted to an emphasis on the *affective* aspects of group interaction to accomplish a similar goal.

The move to and the creation of the suburbs by white middle and upper income families drastically altered social relations and it occurred simultaneously with the rise of "the corporation." Criticism of some of the effects was found in songs and in books by writers who pointed to the period as one of conformity. Conformity as a variable of interest in small group research shifted from the dependent variable to the independent variable; that is, studies early in the decade appeared to focus on how to induce conformity and later studies appeared to focus on the effects of conformity upon selected group and individual variables. One could speculate that small group researchers shifted their efforts from gathering data to *support* the existing social order to a position of *criticism* of the social order.

No examination of the 1950's should exclude attention to the rise and acceptance of structural-functional sociological theory as developed by Parsons.<sup>28</sup> His central postulate of equilibrium appears highly congruent with the general tenor of the times. The theory influenced the work of Bales whose conceptualization of the group interaction over time, phase shift movement, also rests upon equilibrium.<sup>29</sup> Not to be overlooked, Parsons, Bales, and Homans were colleagues at Harvard University. Their work in totality reflects a climate of ideas of the 1960's.

Technology. Some beneficial effects for small group researchers of developing technology have been more accurate measures of variables, and computer programs for analysis of data which permit inclusion of more than a few variables in each study to provide a greater approximation to real life situations. Smith, however, points out that resulting literature provides us with descriptions of statistical interactions and not of social interactions.<sup>30</sup> It has been argued that the imbalance between methodology and theory has serious knowledge building consequences. No matter how sophisticated the methodology, "research guided by irrelevances can only end up by being irrelevant."<sup>31</sup> It appears that we have methodological sophistication for its own sake in an era when emphasis upon technology is highly valued.

Knowledge produced by small group researchers has been examined within a socio-historical context. No claim is made that this examination was exhaustive in terms of knowledge nor in terms of all socio-historical influences. However, from an examination of the publications derived from the field in relationship to major social influences during one span of time in the United States, a clear interaction

of the two is apparent.

Gergen would argue that such a relationship should be expected, for social psychology is primarily an historical inquiry dealing with social facts that are largely non-repeatable and which fluctuate over time. Therefore, to expect social psychology (and, therefore, the small group field) to accumulate knowledge in the usual scientific sense is erroneous, since knowledge cannot transcend its historical context. If the study of social psychology is primarily an historical undertaking, then he suggests alterations in direction for work, including the small group specialty. One suggested avenue is research which focuses on behavioral stability, from a perspective of a continuum of historical durability. This approach would attempt to identify those processes highly susceptible to historical influence ranging to those more stable social processes. The focus would require suitable different methodologies than those usually employed by the field. Theory building efforts would be required to deal with the interrelation of events over extended periods of time.<sup>32</sup>

A description of the small group field clearly demonstrates influence from sources of funding, location of knowledge building efforts, and norms of the university and professional affiliations. This description suggested that larger social forces were at work. An analysis of content areas was undertaken with their relationship to selected social forces identified within the last three decades. From this examination one can only conclude that an intellect, floating free from social existence, appears not to have created nor developed knowledge in the small group field. Is this to be expected in any field?

### Conclusion

A social psychological analysis of the small group field provides cautions in at least two general areas; namely, the validity of the findings and the generalizability of the findings. The selection of problems investigated may primarily be a function of social influences upon the researcher. The findings, therefore, may be invalid due to the social time-boundness of the characteristics of samples studied. For example, findings obtained from Harvard sophomores in 1953 may be invalid for Harvard sophomores twenty years later due to changes in that student population. Additionally, tasks introduced into the experimental situation to provide the content or stimuli to generate the interactions investigated could invalidate findings for later use because of the inherent nature of their obsolescence. Furthermore, relatively recent recognition of the probable influence of the experimenter upon results warrants skepticism.<sup>33</sup> Finally, the larger social context of academic settings within which most experiments were conducted must be examined for possible influences upon investigator/subject interaction (faculty and students) at least in terms of informal communication channels, statuses, and relative power.

From reading Abstracts of Doctoral Dissertations in Social Work, it is apparent that very little research about group practice is conducted as compared with other areas within the profession.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, social work journals publish rel-

atively few reports of research which is in disproportion to the use of groups in practice and to the emphasis upon groups in the graduate professional education of social workers.

The artificial nature of the laboratory setting compared with social work practice phenomena is sufficient to suggest that direct statements of generalization to social work are inappropriate. Attention has been directed to the use of college age subjects. However, it may be profitable to speculate what identifiable subject characteristics were essential to the variables under study and then consider whether or not these characteristics hold for the social work population and problem to be investigated. Research questions may be significant in the small group speciality, but may be essentially ill-conceived for group practice.

Prior analysis of findings highlighted clusters of variables of particular interest. Noticeably lacking in the basic design of the experiments was the inclusion of an influence person who might resemble a social worker. If response to warnings about experimenter effects includes explicit intervener attempts, then a major deficiency for minimal generalization to social work will have been modified. Furthermore, continued use to methodologies which obtain before and after measures to infer internal group processes rather than direct observation and analysis of the internal processes themselves, may not only be invalid, but retards needed knowledge development for the small group field and for applicability to social work.

It is clear that knowledge building through research is required to transform findings from the artificial nature of the laboratory to more nearly replicable social work practice instances. Such a process should maintain methodology in its appropriate place as a tool. It is obvious that importing knowledge from the social sciences into social work should not be engaged in uncritically, but with full awareness of the power and the flaws of each concept or set of ideas. Familiarity and critical examination of the ideas as known in their field of origin is at least a requisite for initial use.

An analysis of the small group field may leave one with a strong repugnance toward the guiding values which are starkly revealed. Silverman wrote that from 1956-1964 little use was made of these findings by social group workers as revealed in a study of the social work literature.<sup>35</sup> Recent popular group practices of the experiencing and "touch and go" variety pay minimal attention to group level concepts except for norm adhering behaviors which are highly valued and stringently enforced. Combined with prior emphasis upon psychoanalytic constructs as applied to groups, the era of reductionism may be in full-flower in group practice in social work. Some would argue that the values implicit in the concepts upon which this form of practice is based are more consonant with social work professed values and, therefore, more "legitimate" knowledge from which to draw. Such pious words, however, need examination in light of recent huckstering by educators and practitioners in social work. The "entrepreneurial ethic" of the social psychologist may be alive and thriving in the "Well-Being Institute" of today.<sup>36</sup> Given that both the genesis and development of knowledge is socially conditioned, then

we must conclude that a sociological analysis of social work--its knowledge base and its practice--would also reveal our social-boundness and hidden values.

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