

COMMUNICATION IN SMALL GROUPS

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Abstract. *The last decades have seen a plethora of books and scientific articles on communication, in general, and on communication in small groups, in particular. Group and small group, as well as communication in small groups, have been defined in a variety of ways. However, a few issues seem to focus the particular attention of scientists: features of group, types of group, group roles, group norms, group leadership, group talk, and cultural features of communication in small groups. This paper analyses the features of communication in small groups from these perspectives.*

Keywords: *communication, group, small group*

INTRODUCTION

Most people are part of one or more of the following types of groups – *civic group, family group, political group, professional group, religious group, social group, sports group, work group*, etc. – and the single features all these group types seem to share is **communication**.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The **research method** used in this paper is *analytical*. We defined group and small group and then analyzed the most important issues related, directly or indirectly, to **communication in small groups** – *group features, group types, group roles, group norms, group leadership, group talk, and cultural features of communication in small groups*.

The **material** used consists in *books, articles, BA, Master and PhD theses on communication in (small) groups*, materials published all over the world in the last two decades and made available to the wide public via the Internet.

RESEARCH RESULTS

1. Definition of Group and of Small Group

Group has been defined as “a collection of (3-12) individuals who have regular contact and frequent interaction, mutual influence, common feeling of camaraderie, and who work together to achieve a common set of goals” [2].

Small groups are open, complex systems interacting with *smaller systems* (group members) embedded within them and *larger systems* (collective members) within which they are embedded [11, 13].

2. Group Features

Groups are characterized by:

- **Cohesiveness/wholeness** (a sense of connection and participation) [7];
- **Common goal** [7];
- **Identity** (boundaries of a psychological and/or physical nature – feelings such as *cohesion, disappointment, disapproval, disgust, embarrassment, inclusion, pride, or superiority* “experienced by group members based directly on their group membership”, which distinguishes group members from non-group members) [10];
- **Interdependence** (its members depend on each other, which makes impossible group existence maintenance and goal achievement) [7];

- **Purposeful interaction** (meant to *solve problems, play roles, build a team, and build trust* type) [7];

- **Shared norms** (expectations of the members of a group, established by these members for acceptable behaviour: they are developed through explicit verbal statements made by a member of the group in spoken or written form; it can be sanctioned on a member of the group member; it is generally emerged after several meetings of the group) [7, 10]:

- *Task norms* enable the members of a group to focus on task accomplishment;
- *Procedural norms* indicate the guidelines for the group to follow;
- *Social norms* govern the engagement of the members of a group in *interpersonal communication*;

- **Size** (at least 3 members, no more than 15; ideally 5 to 7) [10];

- **Synergy** (which allows us to do things that we could not accomplish on our own) [7];

- **Task** (an activity not governed by externally correct decision; its completion depends on the acceptance of the members of the group) [10]:

- *Additive task* require the members of a group all on a task or one task);
- *Conjunctive task* (requiring the members of a group to coordinate all their efforts).

3. Group Types

[7] and [10] classify groups depending on the rationale for forming and on the needs they serve: **Activity group** is a group formed for the purpose of doing something [7]; **Learning group** is a group focused on getting new information and knowledge (e.g. a painting class, a yoga class, etc.) [7, 10]; **Personal growth group** is a “small set of people which utilizes encounter techniques, like games, re-enactment, and confrontation, for self-discovery and the growth of the members’ potential” [12]; **Primary group** is a social group (family, circle of friends) with a high degree of affective interpersonal contact and a strong influence on the social attitudes/ideals of the individuals [9], characterised by *interpersonal communicative behaviours* such as empathy, perceived understanding, self-disclosure, trust, etc. [10]; **Problem-solving group** “a group of individuals assembled to work on a project that involves resolving one or more issues that have already arisen or to deal effectively with issues as they arise” [2]; **Public group** is a group whose members act for the audience’s benefit” (e.g. governance board, panel discussion, public forum, symposium, TV news programmes, etc.) [10] **Residential group** a group whose member share the same residence [10]; **Secondary group** “a social group characterized by conscious collective interest and formal association” [9]; **Self-help group** is a group whose members share a common problem, a life situation (e.g. Alcoholic Anonymous) [10]; **Service group** is a group of volunteers who invest their energy, effort, and time to help disadvantaged people [10]; **Social group** is a group that shares common interests, that engages in common activities (e.g. fraternity, honour society, intramural sports team, sorority, etc.) [10]; **Treatment group** a group that undergo the same treatment [10]; **Virtual group** is a group of people who work alone on a task, from different physical locations via communication technology that, evolving into a virtual community/group that meets regularly in cyberspace to share their experiences, knowledge, and opinions on particular topics/interests [10]; **Work group** is a group completing a common task for the benefit of an organization (e.g. fraternity, honour society, intramural sports team, sorority, etc.) [10].

In an academic setting, **group communication** in a **learning group** identifies rather with *interpersonal communication* than with *organisational communication* [8]. The teaching-learning methods used with small groups illustrate this [14, 15]: *Brainstorm*

sessions aim at generating “ideas from the group to foster lateral thinking, with no criticism of ideas until they are logged” [6, 15]; *Buzz groups* “ask two or three people to discuss an issue for a few minutes, followed by comments shared with the group” [6, 15]; *Cross-over groups* “are used for brief discussions, followed by transfers between groups” [6, 15]; *Fishbowls* are “small groups formed within a large observation group, followed by discussion and reversal” [6, 15]; *Free discussions* are discussions in which “topic and direction come from the group, while the tutor or leader observes” [6]; *Games/Simulations* are structured experiences “in real/imaginary roles, in which guidelines on the process are important and feedback is critical” [6]; *Laboratory sessions* are “structured practical sessions where experiments may be conducted, observations made, data collected and analysed, conclusions drawn, work reported, and skills introduced and practiced” [14]; *Open-ended enquiries* ask students to determine the structure and report back on outcomes [6]; *Peer tutoring* refers to “students learning from one another and teaching one another” [6]; *Problem-based tutorial groups* involve “small groups using problem-based learning” [6]; *Pyramidings/Snowballings* are processes in which pairs become small groups and then large groups [6, 15]; *Role-plays* use allocated or self-created roles, facilitating students to enter and come out of role [6]; *Rounds* refer to going around everyone in the group asking them to respond [15]; *Self-help groups* “are run by and for students, while the tutor may be a resource” [6]; *Seminars* are group discussions of papers presented by students [6]; *Silent reflections* are sets of a few minutes to think about a problem or issue [15]; *Step-by-step discussions* “are planned sequences of issues/questions led by the students or tutor” [6]; *Structured enquiries* are activities in which “the tutor provides lightly structured experiments and guidance” [6]; *Syndicates* “involve mini-project work, followed by reporting to the full class” [6, 15]; *Three minutes each way* refers to asking students in pairs to speak for three minutes on a given topic [15]; *Tutorials* are “meetings with a very small group, often based on feedback to an essay or assignment” [6]; *Tutorless groups* are “groups that appoint a leader and that may report back, focusing on discussion or on completion of some other type of set task” [6]; *Workshops* are structured “sets of activities which provide opportunities for learning through reflection, analysis, problem solving and discussion, usually in a group context” [14].

4. Group Roles

No matter the group type, group members play different roles either within the same group or from one group to another. **Group roles** can be ranged within four broad categories – *individual*, *procedural*, *social-emotional*, and *task* [7]:

- **Individual roles detract from group goals:**
 - *Aggressor*, the person engaged in *forceful or dominating communication* to put others down or initiate conflict with other members, *a communication style that can cause some members to remain passive or silent*;
 - *Blocker*, the person that “fusses or complains about small procedural matters that are irrelevant for the group’s desired outcome; he/she often blocks the group’s progress by not letting them get to the task”;
 - *Clown/Joker*, the person using inappropriate humour or remarks, thus steering the group away from its mission;
 - *Playboy/Playgirl*, the person that “shows little interest in the group or the problem at hand and does not contribute in a meaningful way, or at all, while getting credit for the work of the group”;
 - *Self-confessor*, the person that “uses the group as a setting to discuss personal/emotional matters irrelevant to the group/task, viewing the group as a setting for group therapy”;

- **Procedural roles** are “roles concerned with how the group accomplishes its task”:

- *Facilitator*, the person that “manages information to keep the group working”;
- *Gatekeeper*, the person that “attempts to maintain proper communicative balance, and also serves as the point of contact between times of official group meetings”;
- *Recorder*, the person that “tracks decisions, group ideas, and progress, keeping, maintaining and sharing group notes”;

- **Social-emotional roles** focus on *building and maintaining relationships among group individuals*:

- *Compromiser*, the person that “mediates disagreements or conflicts among members by encouraging others to give in on small issues for the sake of meeting the goals of the group”;

- *Encourager*, the person that has good listening skills to create a safe space to offer suggestions or share ideas;

- *Follower*, the person that “does what he/she is told, going along with decisions and assignments from the group”;

- *Social-emotional leader*, the person that maintains and balances group members’ social and emotional needs, tending to play as many roles in this category as possible;

- *Tension releaser*, the person that “uses humour, or can skilfully change the subject in an attempt to minimize tension and avoid conflict”;

- **Task roles** are roles that help/hinder a group’s capacity of accomplishing goals”:

- *Devil’s advocate*, the person that “argues a contrary or opposing point of view in a *positive*” (in an effort to ensure he taking into account of all perspectives) or *negative* (when there is unwillingness of a single person to participate in the group’s ideas) way;

- *Energizer*, the person that provides energy, motivation, positive encouragement for the group;

- *Information gatherer*, the person that seeks and/or provides the factual information necessary for evaluating ideas, problem solving, and reaching conclusions, and that is a liaison with other leaders group work expectations;

- *Opinion gatherer*, the person that seeks out and/or provides subjective responses about ideas and suggestions, taking into account the attitudes, beliefs, and values of the members of the group;

- *Task leader*, the person that “keeps the group focused on the primary goal or task by setting agendas, controlling the participation and *communication* of the group’s members, and evaluating ideas and contributions of participants”.

It is interesting to note that “top-ranking group members spoke 15 times more frequently than the lowest-ranking group members and nearly five times more than the next highest-ranking members” [1].

5. Group Norms

Groups are characterised, among others, by specific, more or less formalised, *shared norms* (“expectations of the group members, established by the group for acceptable behaviour”). **Norms** influence communication with other members and also the outcome of participation”. There are two broad categories of **group norms** – *general* and *role-specific*: **general group norms** “direct the behavior of the group as a whole” [7]: how meetings run, meeting times, the division of tasks, etc.; **role-specific group norms** for individual members of the group such as the leader of the group [7].

Group communication is a *small-world communication structure* [3]. It is closely associated with *interpersonal communication* and *organizational communication*.

6. Group Leadership

In a professional or work context, the most important group role is that of **leader** whose **communication choices** (and, implicitly, *outcomes of communication choices*) depend on the **leadership style** – *authoritarian, democratic, or laissez-faire*: **The authoritarian leadership style** indicates a leader that seeks complete control over a group “by assigning members to specific tasks or duties; controlling group processes; or making decisions without consulting all group members – which may cause group members to be less committed to the outcomes of the group process than if they had been a part of the decision-making process”; **The democratic leadership style** indicates a leader that exerts a moderate level of control/influence having the group’s permission, sharing *the decision-making power among group members who need to spend considerable time sharing and listening to various positions and weighing the effects of each*, which may determine the members of the group to be committed to the outcomes of the group, more creative and participatory, and increase the amount of time necessary to a group to accomplish its goals; **The laissez-faire leadership style** characterises a leader who exerts little to no control over a group, a leader that takes a laid back or hands-off approach because of his/her opinion on his/her skills; he/she feels uncomfortable being a leader; or the group does not require much formal direction from a leader because it is efficient, highly skilled, and motivated.

7. Group Talk

According to [10], **group communication** comprises four *types of talk*: **Consciousness-raising talk** “centres on group identification and pride and is essential to group development, identity, and morale”; **Encounter talk** consists of *communication between individuals* (empathy, responsiveness, self-disclosure, etc.), thus developing a supportive communication climate; **Problem-solving talk** centres on accomplishing the group task through discussion techniques and informal interaction; **Role talk** “centres on the specific role that each member of the group plays in the group, which determines both the content and the relational aspect of the communication”.

8. Cultural Features of Communication in Small Groups

Communication in small groups differs across different cultures. Are particularly relevant such features as *high- vs. low-context communication, individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. femininity, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and worldview*: **high- vs. low-context communication**: “*high-context communication* is communication in which the primary meaning of a message is conveyed not by verbal, explicit part of the message, but by features of the situation/context; *low-context communication* is communication wherein the primary meaning of a message is carried by the verbal or explicit part of the message”; **individualism vs. collectivism**: “*in individualism*, the needs and wishes of the group are neglected; *in collectivism*, the needs and wishes of the group predominate over the needs of any one individual”; **masculinity vs. femininity**: “*masculinity* values assertiveness and dominance; *femininity* values nurturing and caring for others”; **power distance**, i.e., “the degree to which a culture emphasizes status and power differences among members of the culture: *in high power-distance cultures*, status differences are emphasized”; **uncertainty avoidance**, i.e., “the degree to which members of a culture avoid or embrace uncertainty and ambiguity: *cultures high in uncertainty avoidance* prefer clear rules for interaction”; **worldview**, i.e., “a comprehensive conception or image of the universe and of humanity's relation to it [2], one’s beliefs about the nature of life, the purpose of life, and one’s relation to the cosmos, manifest in: *activity orientation* (the extent to which a culture emphasises *being* – going with the flow – or *doing* – taking charge); *beliefs, customs, and habits; values*”.

Diversity in groups – age (boomer generation, builder generation, net generation, X generation), collectivistic vs. individualistic culture, history of working together for a longer period of time, integration-and-learning vs. equality and fairness perspective, psychological safety, race, socioeconomic class, etc. – may either disrupt group functioning or be the source of collective creativity and insight [5].

CONCLUSIONS

- Most authors make a distinction between group and team, one hand, and between **group** and **small group**, on the other hand;
- There are at least nine **group features** (*cohesiveness/wholeness, common goal, identity, interdependence, purposeful interaction, shared norms, size, synergy, and task*);
- There are at least fourteen **group types** (*activity, learning, personal growth, primary, problem-solving, public, residential, secondary, self-help, service, social, treatment, virtual, and work*);
- **Learning groups** rely on a wide range of teaching-learning methods;
- There are four broad categories of **group roles** (*individual, procedural, social-emotional, and task*);
- There are two broad types of **group norms** (*general and role-specific*);
- There are three **group leadership styles** (*authoritarian, democratic, and laissez-faire*);
- There are four **types of group talk** (*consciousness-raising talk, encounter talk, problem-solving talk, and role talk*);
- There are six **features of communication in small groups** (*high- vs. low-context communication, individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. femininity, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and worldview*).

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