DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 165 209 CS 502 364

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TITLE Response to "The Paradox and Promise of Small Group Research," Revisited.
PUB DATE Nov 78
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (64th, Minneapolis, Minnesota, November 2-5, 1978); Not available in hard copy due to marginal legibility of original document

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 Plus Postage. HC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication (Thought Transfer); Group Discussion; *Group Dynamics; *Group Relations; *Interaction Process Analysis; Research Methodology; *Research Needs
IDENTIFIERS *Communication Research

ABSTRACT

An example of how the quality of research on small groups could be enhanced is to develop a framework of scholarship around a series of hierarchical guiding questions concerning the functions of communication in the small group, the characteristics of the behavior and of the producers of that behavior that determine the extent to which particular functions are served, the way in which functions of communication are affected by the context in which they occur, and the interrelationships of the functions of communication in the small group. Such a structure of questions would make it possible to build a meaningful inventory of extant scholarship; would better equip researchers to respond to and overcome criticisms advanced about the field as a whole; would increase the importance of the role of theory; and would increase the potential for synthesis, comparability of research findings, meaningful criticism, and construction of methodological tools for advancing knowledge in a rigorous and systematic fashion. (TJ)

"RESPONSE TO 'THE PARADOX AND PROMISE OF SMALL GROUP RESEARCH,'" REVISITED

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During the years that have passed since I originally responded to Bormann's "The Paradox and Promise of Small Group Research," I have discovered that identifying deficiences in scholarship is far more easy than overcoming them. I believe, moreover, that I have also developed a much greater appreciation of the need for criticism to move beyond the mere identification of weaknesses. As a result, in accepting an invitation to participate in this program, I have given considerable thought to what would constitute a constructive commentary. The remarks that follow are a product of that effort. Specifically, I have attempted to focus on the need to develop a framework for inquiry within which our scholarly interests might be more meaningfully pursued. In so doing, I intend neither to proselytize nor debunk but only to explore one possible avenue of future activity.

In spite of the progress which Cragan and Wright have noted (and I agree with them that it has been substantial), the basic problem of a lack of consensus about what interested scholars want to know from their inquiries remains unabated. Somehow the question, "What are we attempting to discover by investigating communication in the small group?", eludes any reasonably uniform measure of response, which is a particularly enigmatic happenstance for a group of people who study the process by which others attempt to achieve their goals. It would be a dull enterprise, of course, were every

practitioner to answer the question in identical fashion; nevertheless, it seems reasonable to assume that if a collective identity is warranted, more than a thread of commonality in the seemingly diverse interests of those attracted to the field must exist. I say this in full recognition of the fact that a wide assortment of sociological and non-scholarly constraints partially determine who will be investigating group process at any given time and his or her motives for studying it. But that is true of any division of any discipline; hence, we should not attach too much importance to these types of factors in trying to address the problem. Even in their absence, the difficulty would still exist.

Although a collective goal is by no means essential for research to move forward, most of the criticisms we hear frequently voiced stem from this issue. Reduced to its lowest common denominator, the criticism amounts to the charge that the volume of activity far exceeds its contribution. To put it more bluntly, the research does not add up to very much relative to the energy expended in producing it.

Acknowledging a lack of consensus on the goal of small group research is not to imply that it is impossible to achieve. On the contrary, we have every reason to believe there is potential for such consensus and that once recognized it can be articulated by those who share it. What seems to inhibit its emergence, however, are the premature commitments we make to particular theoretical and methodological positions. As a result, we are predisposed to pass over the fundamental consideration of what it is we want to know in order to demonstrate our sophistication in how we come to know it. In so doing, we tend to generate interests on the basis of what a given theoretical or methodological position suggests are the researchable questions. I cannot otherwise understand how it is that some of the questions pursued in research

have come into existence, for they would have little probability of arising out of any natural curiosity or experience. If this assessment is accurate, then the problem I have been addressing appears to be a case of the proverbial placing of the cart before the horse. Not only does this condition suggest a needed realignment in priorities, but it obscures the vision of one's destination as well.

It would be presumptuous to argue on this occasion what the consensus, whose absence I lament, should be, but it is nevertheless possible to present an example of what it conceivably could be and from that starting point to discuss its implications for the future of research. Given the substance of the scholarship to which Cragan and Wright have alluded, one might expect that small group researchers could agree that they are interested ultimately in producing a better understanding of the role communication plays in the performance of groups; that is, how it serves to shape and influence the ways in which people composing groups fulfill the purposes for which they are assembled. Although this is certainly not the implication of all of the research done in the area, the comparatively large proportion reflecting an interest in the relationship of communicative acts to other such acts and/or to various types of outcomes suggests that the expectation is not without foundation.

Under the circumstance that consensus along these lines might emerge, then a possible hierarchy of related issues almost immediately arises. The most obvious of these is the question, "What functions does communication in the small group serve?" At what level of specificity scholars might choose to focus in dealing with this question I cannot say, but if our objective is to simplify understanding, a fairly global or macroscopic approach might be warranted.

In any event, this type of question would necessitate the development of a nomenclature that reflects an appreciation of the consequences of communicative behavior or acts rather than with the characteristics we often assume to represent a given function; for example, a statement judged to be antagonistic would not necessarily antagonize, yet many would assume that because the properties attributed to it suggest that it possesses the potential to antagonize, it therefore does. For an act to serve a function, however, it must have consequences for someone or some thing. The identification of communication functions to be meaningful, then, would need to reflect this kind of concern. In grammatical terms, functions would be represented as verb/object constructions rather than as adjectives. In addition, the functions would need to be stated in terms of consequences in the behavior of others; for example, the expression "elicits information" would be a more appropriate designation of a function than the expression "asks for information." The latter is more properly the characteristic of an act that might or might not serve the function the former expression represents. Such a notion would undoubtedly cast the old standbys of "task oriented, maintenance, and procedural functions" into a new light. Terminology such as, "resolves conflict, creates understanding, and reduces tension," would be used to represent these types of functions, which heretofore have frequently been focused on the stimulus and its originator rather than on the consequences to its target.

A further implication of trying to identify the functions of communication in the small group involves the unit of analysis. Perhaps we have too long been in search of the ideal unit that would fit all conditions of interaction when, more realistically, we may settle for a variable unit of analysis in order to understand more completely the nature of the process with which we are concerned. Whereas a single act may be sufficient to create hostility

within a group, for instance, the function of building cohesiveness more likely would be the product of numerous acts, no one of which alone could possibly be sufficient to produce condition in question. In short, some functions that are important simply cannot be inferred from the same unit of analysis as others, and to presume that they can may be to permit their presence to go unobserved.

Assuming that the functions of communication in small groups can be identified and appropriately indexed, it will be possible to address a second question; that is, "What are the characteristics of the behavior and the producers of that behavior that determine the extent to which particular functions are served?" If a group participant's behavior serves, let us say, a procedural function, such as refocusing the other members' attention on their agenda, then it would seem worthwhile to examine the characteristics of the act or acts that served the function and to determine further whether such characteristics appear with any degree of regularity whenever the function is successfully executed. In this particular instance, one might expect that directness would be a characteristic frequently in evidence when a procedural function of the type described is served, but he or she might find that subtlety in many instances is a distinguishing characteristic.

In addition to identifying the qualities of behavior that are associated with the functions the behavior serves, it would be well to focus on the characteristics of the interactants. In our efforts to distinguish the communication approach to small group research from others, some of us may have gone too far in ignoring the characteristics of message producers. Although this trend has been healthy in certain respects, it has probably outlived its usefulness. We know, for example, that a superior making a request of a subordinate is more likely to elicit compliance than another subordinate making

the same request. Some of our more recent research appears to discount this type of factor, however. As a result, we are at a loss to explain substantial irregularities in the sequence or flow of communication and retreat to the comparative safety of probabilistic interpretations. My point is that in the case of the example cited, it is the combination of characteristics of the source and the request that determine the function the communication serves. To disregard the agents in this type of transaction could result either in the inappropriate identification of an act/function relationship or in many erroneous predictions about what kinds of behavior have specific consequences in the performance of small groups.

From the first two questions and the directions in which they lead us, comes a third: "How are the functions of communication affected by the context in which they occur?" It appears that some of the functions communication serves in groups are relatively free of contextual influences, whereas others are significantly affected by them. One might think, for instance, that a statement such as, "Why don't you come down off your high horse?", would generally serve to intensify poor relations within a group and, thereby, retard its progress. On the other hand, in a therapeutic setting, the very same utterance might be occasioned by a need to release repressed hostility so that the group, rather than arresting its progress, can actually move forward.

That act/function relationships should vary as a result of contextual influence seems intuitively sensible, but I am afraid that such differences are too often reported and interpreted as inconsistencies or error variance when in fact they are not. As an illustration, a consistently high level of cooperativeness might be the characteristic of communication that enables a decision-making group to resolve an issue to the members' satisfaction,

but in a bargaining situation, the same attribute could result in a very poor disposition of issues. Should this type of possibility go unrecognized, then our potential for understanding is correspondingly reduced. I personally would hate to see us chalk up as error or random factors what may actually be explainable variance.

If it has not yet become evident, the preceding analysis was intended to represent a progression in the hierarchy of questions to which I alluded at the outset. By first identifying the functions communication serves and then moving to a consideration of the behavioral characteristics and contextual influences that determine how and how well they are served, it should be possible to investigate with much greater precision the question, "How are the functions of communication in the small group interrelated?" At this level of understanding, I think we can more justifiably maintain that we have begun to unravel the process.

Functions are obviously not served in a vacuum, but that is often how small group researchers appear to view them. We want to know what contributes to consensus, productivity, member satisfaction, cohesiveness, and the like without seeming to appreciate that those types of outcomes are in all likelihood the result of a highly interrelated and delicately balanced set of underlying functions, each of which has to be served in a particular way in order for the outcome to be in a particular state. Hence, to ask a question, such as, "Does giving orientation promote consensus?", and discovering that it does fails to enlarge our understanding of the process that produces this type of outcome in any appreciable way. We would merely have accumulated another set of facts. More to the point would be the type of inquiry that establishes what it is that contributes to the kind of climate in which it is possible for the type of behavior identified to serve the

function it apparently does. For example, I can conceive of (indeed I have observed) circumstances in which such a reasonable request as, "Shouldn't we be dealing with the causes of the problem rather than the solutions first?", is either ignored by other group members or actually serves to antagonize them, in which case the probability of reaching a desired outcome would be reduced if its achievement were dependent on the order of analysis implied in the question. My point is that for the behavior in the illustration to serve the function it is intended to serve, some other function, such as building mutual respect, would have to be performed at another juncture in the proceedings. Without some eventual effort to establish the interrelationships among communication functions, my guess is that we would never succeed in generating information that possesses much practical or theoretical significance.

Given the type of structure of guiding questions I have been describing, it would be well to reflect briefly on some of its possible advantages. First, it would enable us to build a meaningful inventory of extant scholarship. If nothing else, it would clarify what we actually know about communication in the small group. In the absence of such a framework, I am not sure that anyone can adequately answer the question. An equally important outgrowth of this kind of development is the revelation of what remains to be learned in order to make the kinds of generalization we might wish to make about the subject of our concern.

A second advantage of developing knowledge within the kind of framework described is that we may better equip ourselves to respond to and to overcome the criticisms advanced about the field as a whole, such as capriciousness in variable and question selection, ad hoc versus continuing groups, and the lack of generalizability in laboratory findings. To illustrate my point,

let's consider the frequently voiced criticism that the type of subject employed in the typical laboratory investigation is unrepresentative of so-called "real" groups. In some instances, this is undoubtedly true, but if the purpose of our inquiry is to identify functions and the relationships among functions, there is no good reason to assume that a particular relationship is necessarily unique to the laboratory experience or to the type of subject studied. Were we to discover, for instance, that groups in which expressions of congeniality serve the function of building cohesiveness which, in turn, permits one to make unchallenged procedural demands that facilitate movement toward the group's objective, I would be hard pressed to argue that this type of pattern could characterize college sophomores only. On the other hand, I could appreciate the possibility that expressions of congeniality might manifest themselves differently among other types of people, but that would in no way negate the principle.

A third way in which scholarly inquiry could be positively affected by the type of perspective I am proposing is that the role of theory might begin to take on increased importance. For every behavior/function relationship we identify, the question, "Why should this be so?", would be an appropriate response. As a result, with this type of question pervading our scholarship, we can begin to assess more easily the theoretical principles that best account for our observations, which somehow seems to be more useful than the current practice of using theory to generate questions. Discussion sections of research reports might even begin to become genuine explanations rather than the summary statements that they typically are.

A final, and possibly the most important, advantage of developing a hierarchy of guiding questions is that we increase the potential for synthesis, comparability of research findings, meaningful criticism, and

construction of the types of methodological tools necessary for advancing knowledge in a rigorous and systematic fashion. Identifying the collective contribution of individual studies, determining whether observed relationships are probable or improbable in the light of competing evidence, ascertaining the deficiencies in a line of research, and improving our methods of inquiry would each be facilitated by fitting research findings into a framework of general questions to which the scholarship is addressed. In the absence of such a structure, however, I can see little hope for ever fully understanding what our scholarship reveals about the role of communication in the small group.

As I mentioned at the outset, I am presenting only an example of the way in which the quality of scholarship on small groups could be enhanced. That my example is the best way of approaching the matter is not a proposition I would care to defend at the moment. This issue can be successfully addressed only through the meaningful interaction of those involved in the enterprise. I do feel that whatever will best serve as a framework within which to pursue our interests must be forthcoming if the potential most of us believe exists is to be realized. If ten years hence I were asked to present a paper on "Response to the 'Paradox and Promise of Small Group Research,' Revisited," Revisited, I would like it to be as a celebration of our accomplishments and not as a recitation of our deficiencies.