

What is a group/team?

Paula Wellings

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The question “What is a group/team?” represents the evolution of the social sciences beyond its early origins in the 1920s, when the question “Do groups exist?” was a highly contested issue. Cartwright and Zander describe the claim advanced by social psychologist Floyd Allport, that “‘Group mind’ refers to nothing but similarities among individual minds, and individuals cannot be parts of groups, for groups exist only in the minds of men (p. 12, Cartwright & Zander).” To counter this claim of group non-existence Lewin prompted scientists to engage in experimental research. “The taboo against believing in the existence of a social entity is probably most effectively broken by handling this entity experimentally (p. 12, *ibid.*).”

Thus, early research in the area of group phenomena lead to an evolution of methods, technologies, and techniques that successfully yielded findings that differentiates individual phenomena from that of group phenomena. Three crucial early studies include Sherif’s systematic theoretical analysis of the concept of social norms, Newcomb’s investigation of social norms and social influence processes via the establishment of sociometry, and W. F. Whyte’s detailed ethnography of group dynamics on a Boston street corner. A significant aspect of these three early studies is the variety of methods utilized in deriving findings, from laboratory observation, to interviews and attitude measurement to ethnographic field observations. It will be found throughout the development of the study of group dynamics that evolving techniques and technologies have enabled the development of new findings and theory. The impact of these early studies of group phenomena lead to the establishment of the field of inquiry into group

dynamics and yielded the empirical evidence that makes possible the consideration of the question “What is a group/team?”

Levine and Moreland’s review of the literature on small groups divides the characteristics of small groups into five major topic areas: group composition, group structure, conflict in group, group performance, and the ecology of groups. These areas represent dimension upon which group phenomena can be differentiated from individual phenomena. This listing of topic areas raises the question of whether a set of characteristics can suffice as a definition. Helpful in considering this question is a framework for definitions introduced by Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein suggested that complex concepts may not be best served by the necessary and sufficient conditions usually utilized in the manufacture of a definition. Instead, Wittgenstein introduced the notion of family resemblance, where there may be a number of characteristics that a family as a whole has in common, but any one person within the family may draw on only a select number of these characteristics. For example, two brothers may draw characteristic from both their mother and their father, but still have few characteristics in common with each other. In the case of defining a group, it may not be a unified set of characteristics that define a group, but rather a collection of features from a large characteristic set.

This approach aligns with Levine and Moreland, who state that instead of dwelling on distinguishing groups from non-groups, “a better approach might be to think about ‘groupiness’ or social integration as a quality that every set of people possess to some degree.” In this manner, Levine and Moreland introduce their series of empirically validated characteristics of ‘groupiness’ that represent a multidimensional and dynamic investigation of groups.

Having a broad and somewhat inductive approach to defining groups has proven to be generative for the field of group dynamics. However, the field also experiences challenges associated with this perspective. For example, McGrath has “argued that research findings about groups [in the 1950s] accumulated more quickly than theoretical insights, creating uncertainty among social psychologists about whether and how to proceed.” (p. 416, Levine & Moreland) Commenting on inquiry within group dynamics more recently, Mortensen, through the investigation of the concept of team membership, illuminates a faulty assumption in existing research that team membership boundaries are considered definite and understood in similar ways by both researchers and study participants. It may be that the lack of a specific definition of groups limits the aggregation of findings into more general theoretical insights and limits researchers’ perspectives on group phenomena.

Klein, Dansereau and Hall address this challenge of specificity in their work on the alignment of levels of theory with data collection, analysis, and interpretation practices. By investigating group dynamics at the levels of differences between groups, differences between members independent of groups, and the differences within groups, the authors seek to provide a more deductive framework from which to construct theory. Weingart also introduces framing mechanisms in the form of research methods that consider group processes as dynamic and time/phase based in advance of previous perspectives that attempt to measure group processes from a more static, cumulative behavior perspective. By committing to a dynamic framing of group processes, Weingart questions previous research methods that have ignored the impact of sequence and influence as an on going phenomenon. In both of these examples, researchers are

attempting to provide theoretical tools that solidify specific characteristics of groups such as all groups have levels of differences, and all groups have sequence oriented dynamic processes.

The initial question, “What is a group/team?” has two components, “What is a group?” and “What is a team?” Levine and Moreland, while hesitant to provide one definition, forward the idea that a group is “several people who interact on a regular basis, have affective ties with one another, share a common frame of reference, and are behaviorally interdependent (p.415, Levine & Moreland). In the current readings, no such definition for team has been provided. The usage of team in most cases appears to inherit the qualities and analysis associated with “group”. Team appears to refer to groups of people engaged in a work task of some kind, but this definition is based entirely on inference. It is likely that as the field of group dynamics continues to evolve generalizable theoretical findings will influence the definition of group. However, it is also possible that the notion of group is of such complexity that Wittgenstien’s family resemblance framework will best suit the concept of group, and sub-levels of this concept will be the level upon which generalizable theory is evolved.

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