When we meet together, face to face or online, in small- or medium-sized assemblies, associations, bands, clubs, cliques, and the like, we engage in group communication. As members of groups, we permit a part of our identity and goals to exist as part of a small collective, and the convergence of these parts of our individual lives gives the group a coherent meaning, boundary, purpose, structure, and norms. Group communication theory examines the formation, dynamics, and dissolution of such small groups, and it examines the mutual influence that occurs between the individual and the group.

General Features

From its inception, theories of group communication have aimed to develop practical knowledge about group behavior that can aid us as group participants and facilitators. This applied emphasis has steered group theory and research toward common and purposeful group settings, particularly decision-making entities (e.g., juries and councils) and task-oriented bodies (e.g., athletic and work teams). The development of theory in a university setting with limited research funding has also led to an emphasis on student groups with limited shared history and straightforward assignments. Though recent research has moved in wider directions, these constraints meant that group theories had relatively little to say about principally social/emotional groups (more commonly studied in social work and psychotherapy) and long-lived clans, collectives, and organizational groups (regularly studied in sociology, anthropology, and industrial-organizational psychology).

Epistemological and methodological traditions have also shaped group communication theory. Group communication scholars have principally developed theory within an empiricist approach to knowledge. That is, group communication theorists have sought to develop general propositions about group behavior, or at least context-dependent statements about how and why groups behave the way they do. By contrast, relatively few group communication theories have concerned themselves principally with the interpretation of action (i.e., the hermeneutic investigation of the subjective experience and meaning of group life). Even rarer are critical theories of group behavior, which provide philosophical advances in our understandings of moral/ethical questions, such as modes of domination and exploitation within groups. Significant exceptions to these tendencies exist in modern approaches, particularly the more recent move toward studying bona fide groups, discussed below, and feminist critiques of group theory and practice.

Methodologically, group communication scholars have confronted formidable obstacles that have alternately spurred innovation and stunted the growth of group research. From the outset, group communication scholars had to decide what constituted group behavior; after all, a group does not have its own brain, which contains the motivations, memories, mores, and meanings that shape behavior. To rectify this problem, group researchers have pioneered means of aggregating individual-level data, such as questionnaires, to identify group-level attributes. Within-and-between statistical analysis helps theorists distinguish between in-group variance (i.e., members’ divergent levels of satisfaction with a group decision) and between-group differences (i.e., between wholly satisfied and unsatisfied groups). Group theorists have also foregrounded the concept of the decision rule (e.g., consensus vs. majority rule), a means whereby a group itself (and researchers) can determine the aggregate will of a group’s members.

The methodological demands of group theory have also spurred the creation of intensive behavioral observation and coding systems. One of the most famous and widely used
systems is the interaction process analysis tool created by Robert Bales in 1950 (refined as Systematic Multiple Level Observation of Groups in 1970); this tool permitted efficient categorization of each individual statement made by the members of a group. Subsequent advances made possible not only the classification of individual actions but also the recognition of patterns of communication behavior over the course of a group's life span. This allowed theorists to model how one member's statement might influence the next utterance, ultimately producing complex sequences and chains that shape the character of the group and its outcomes.

**Early Developments**

Among the earliest instances of group communication theory was the work of group discussion scholars in the early 20th century. The field of speech communication had experienced a shift from a focus on individual eloquence through oratory to a more balanced emphasis on a range of rhetorical skills, including the ability to lead and participate effectively in group discussions. Perhaps as an echo of the progressive era that preceded it, this period emphasized a collaborative, participatory view of democratic citizenship in which individuals could aspire to play an active role in the affairs of the day by studying and learning together in groups and arriving at their own informed, reasoned judgments. In the modern day, deliberative democracy theorists have revitalized the moral-philosophical thread in this work, but group communication theorists principally carried forward the interest in the mechanics and outcomes of effective discussion.

Social psychologist Kurt Lewin shared this interest in the efficacy of group discussion and developed a wide range of original concepts and theories, as well as the National Training Laboratory, which continues to shape group practice to the present day. In the 1930s, Lewin and his colleagues compared the consequences of three different group leadership styles—autocratic, democratic, and *laissez faire*—on children's groups. The core finding was that a participatory, encouraging, and egalitarian leadership style yielded the best student decisions and behavior, and this single finding grounded an optimistic approach to theory and practice that valorized democratic practices (e.g., using majority rule or consensus) and assumed that such democratic behaviors generally characterized any high-functioning group.

A separate study Lewin conducted for the National Research Council during World War II showed another direction that small-group research would take. To aid the war effort, Lewin showed that homemakers would more readily accept the idea of cooking with sweetbreads (organ meat) after participating in a group discussion than after listening to a lecture on the subject. Though Lewin viewed these findings as a useful insight consistent with democratic discussion principles, it foreshadowed a growing concern about the potential damage group pressure could wreak on otherwise independent-thinking individuals.

In the 1950s, Solomon Asch devised an experimental paradigm that showed the extent of precisely this danger. Like many of his contemporaries in social psychology, such as Stanley Milgram and Theodor Adorno, Asch hoped to understand the processes that could lead people to embrace fascist ideology or authoritarian rule, as had occurred in the Axis powers during World War II. Asch had individuals look at a card featuring three lines and asked them to identify which line was longest. In his experiment, the group members each answered in turn, with all but the last individual being *confederates*, trained actors whom the other subject(s) mistakenly thought to be fellow participants. Each confederate would give the same wrong answer, and if the final member also gave the wrong answer, Asch took this as evidence of conforming to an (incorrect) group judgment. As Asch had theorized, some
people did, indeed, conform, but the majority of study participants did not; moreover, Asch found that if a single confederate gave the correct answer, that act typically would embolden the last group member to give the correct answer instead of conforming.

The legacy of Asch’s research, however, was an enduring concern about the prevalence of group conformity and misperception. Reinforcing that anxiety, among the lay public as well as scholars, in the late 1970s Irving Janis blended social-psychological theory with archival historical research to discover that many U.S. foreign policy blunders traced back to groupthink. Groups falling victim to this malady reached a premature decision as a result of their insularity, rigid thinking, biased leadership, and conformity pressure. The key factor for Janis was high cohesion—the mutual attraction and bonding that can occur in groups. Subsequent researchers clarified that cohesion, per se, does not limit a group's productivity, but many investigations confirmed that cohesive groups could fall into groupthink if they also featured a constellation of other structural defects.

Much of the work that followed the path blazed by Lewin, Asch, and Janis kept sight of the fact that groups can yield widely varying outcomes depending on their procedures, as originally suggested by the group discussion pioneers who preceded them. By the 1970s and continuing to the present day, studies investigate the efficacy of a wide range of group practices, such as different ways of polling members, voting, taking speaking turns, or structuring a discussion. Practices such as devil's advocacy (being responsible for articulating a dissenting point of view), round robins (taking turns one by one around a group), and trained facilitation (keeping groups on task, monitoring a group's social/emotional behavior) have become commonplace in the contemporary practice of small groups in everyday life as a result of these studies.

**Modern Communication Theories**

In spite of the fruits of these and other social-psychological theories, the volume and visibility of small-group research declined in the fields of psychology and sociology during the 1970s and 1980s, leaving a widening vacuum. Filling this vacuum were small-group theories originated within the field of communication. Interdisciplinary studies of small groups had failed to study carefully certain aspects of group interaction, and group communication theorists developed original theoretical frameworks and study designs that complemented the existing body of social-psychological theories.

Ernest Bormann's *symbolic convergence theory* brought insights from rhetorical scholarship to bear on the study of group behavior. Bormann found that groups invariably gravitated toward a shared set of self-descriptions and self-understandings—what he called a symbolic convergence. Careful examination of discussions revealed that groups came together through a kind of dramatic negotiation. When a member used a rhetorical device, such as a word play or a metaphor, it could shape the group's symbolic reality if one or more of the other group members picked up on, amplified, and reinforced it. Once a symbolic identity emerged, it could shape the group's trajectory, such as when a group takes on an achievement-oriented identity that pushes its members to bring more energy and effort to its tasks (or a playful group runs the opposite course).

Dennis Gouran and Randy Hirokawa also advanced the group literature by developing a functional theory of group decision making. Drawing on earlier writings by the American philosopher John Dewey, Gouran and Hirokawa theorized that the same steps taken in rational thinking would be critical for arriving at effective group decisions. In their view, the
function of task-oriented communication is to lead group members through these necessary analytic stages—from defining the problem to arriving at a final judgment. Among the many findings their research yielded were that groups too often fail to explicitly consider which evaluative criteria should be used to judge alternatives. Also, the most effective decision-making groups typically devote considerable effort to weighing the potential negative consequences of potential decisions, a sober exercise that contrasts with the wishful thinking and avoidance of dissent characteristic of dysfunctional groups. Gouran and Hirokawa also linked their theory to others by identifying the various individual and contextual constraints on decision making that cause groups to fail to engage in rigorous discussion.

Marshall Scott Poole and his many collaborators introduced another set of influential ideas. Poole's initial research dispelled the commonly held belief that groups routinely developed through a series of stages, such as Bruce Tuckman's poetic sequence of forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning. Some groups do mature in this way, but many others follow different courses as they develop over time.

Not coincidentally, Poole's attention turned to structuration theory, a grand theory (i.e., an overarching set of theoretical concepts and models) developed by British sociologist Anthony Giddens in the late 1970s. Poole, along with Robert McPhee and David Seibold, suggested that group researchers view groups in structurational terms: in choosing what to say or do, each group member draws on his or her own understanding of how society operates—the structures of meaning, norms, and power perceived to exist. When deploying these structures in interaction, group members are often reproducing existing social structures or, other times, challenging and potentially altering them. Small groups, in this view, play a uniquely important role in society as one of the most tangible contexts in which individuals can apprehend societal-level structures (i.e., speaking norms, patterns of authority, linguistic conventions) and either sustain or subvert them. This fluidity inherent in structuration theory provided an account of group behavior that could explain both regularized patterns and deviations, such as the ones Poole had earlier uncovered.

Poole also advanced group communication theory by narrowing the scope and meaning of this approach to create an adaptive structuration theory. This theory explained how groups adapt to new technologies, particularly the group decision-support software systems that Poole himself helped develop. This particular research program also presented group communication scholars with a new model of research that combined systematic experimentation, licensed software innovations, and major grant funding from the National Science Foundation—a synergy that could support intensive, sustained inquiry and rich theory development.

As group communication scholars developed and refined these theories, they came to define a new approach to studying small groups—one focused on the content of group discussion, not merely the structural features of the group or the personalities of individual members. Contemporary small-group research continues along this same trajectory, with the most ambitious work using detailed direct observations, videotapes, and transcripts to understand the complex structure of discourse that leads to group decisions, role structures, cohesion, and other group outcomes.

**Future Trajectories**

The most striking trend in small-group research, however, traces back to the aforementioned bona fide group perspective. Developed by communication scholars Linda Putnam and
Cynthia Stohl, this is not so much a set of theoretical propositions as it is a governing set of assumptions and methodological commitments. In this view, the bulk of real groups have long histories embedded in richly textured natural settings; groups and their members have multiple interdependencies with other groups that shape their behavior. To understand a laboratory group is to understand an exceptional kind of zero-history group—an assemblage of strangers who tackle a single task and then dissolve. Although such groups do play important roles in society, such as in the case of the American jury, strong group theories need to look at groups in their natural settings.

Adopting this orientation leads group researchers to adopt an intensive case study approach to see the full complexity of a single group, rather than measuring some of the surface features of a sample of groups. This naturalistic approach often involves participant observation, ethnographic interviewing, and archival research, along with traditional transcription and survey research methods. From this multimethod mountain of data, one often aims to develop a grounded theory, one built from the details in the “ground” (i.e., raw data) up to the level of more general theoretical statement.

The clearest evidence of the ascendance of this approach is the proliferation of widely varied case studies that populate the group communication field's edited volumes, journals, and conferences. Original studies now exist on a much wider range of small groups, including such diverse group forms as musical troupes, covens, Bible-study groups, support groups, and criminal gangs. Intensive group case studies predated the bona fide movement, such as the aforementioned studies by Janis and Helen Schwartzman's landmark book *The Meeting*. This approach, however, has become common—perhaps even the norm—in small-group research, particularly within the field of communication.

The other movement reshaping group communication theory is the emergence of a coherent field that encompasses but reaches far beyond the communication discipline. The Interdisciplinary Network for Group Research (INGRoup), which first met in 2006, has fostered the cross-pollination of concepts, theories, and methods among group researchers who come from different academic traditions. If successful, INGRoup and other interdisciplinary initiatives simultaneously will enrich group communication theory and widen its influence.

It may also be possible to forecast the topical direction of small-group researchers, thanks to a recent survey of this field’s leading theorists. The highest research priorities for these scholars included many traditional topics—leadership, status/power, decision making, social identity, and conflict in and between groups—but interest has grown in the understudied subjects of creativity, diversity, and technology in groups. Researchers also intend to pay greater attention to cross-cultural variations in group behavior and the relationships between groups and their larger organizational and social contexts.

In the end, theoretical advances in each of these areas will likely continue to serve the same aim initially proposed by group discussion pioneers—effectively participating in and facilitating the many groups that populate our lives. Given the ubiquity of group discussion, the public creation and distribution of this knowledge not only meets our practical needs but also could help us better secure a social and political commitment to democratic group process.

- group communication theories
- group communication
- group theory
communication theory
group behavior
discussion groups
structuration theory

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See also

- Bona Fide Group Theory
- Deliberative Democratic Theories
- Functional Group Communication Theory
- Group and Organizational Structuration Theory
- Groupthink
- Structuration Theory
- Symbolic Convergence Theory

Further Readings


