

15 Groups, Teams, and Decision-Making

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The research and theorizing on teamwork and decision-making in organizational communication has been shaped by multidisciplinary perspectives that intersect around the processual and structural aspects of group interaction. As such, the study of groups and teams across disciplines – such as psychology, sociology, management, information studies, education, social work, political science, public policy, and urban planning – reflects a deeply communication-focused site of scholarship. Indeed, [Poole \(1998\)](#) argues that the small group should be *the* fundamental unit of analysis in communication research because of its key characteristics related to interaction: individual actors can be easily discerned (unlike at macro-levels of analysis) and yet social context comes into play (unlike at micro-levels of analysis). Poole’s provocative argument is even more apt for organizational communication scholarship because groups are a site where organizational scholars and practitioners can discern agency, varying cultures, and see the constitutive aspects of communication in organizations up close. Notably, [McPhee and Zaug \(2000\)](#) highlight subgroup processes as central to activity coordination – one of the four message flows that constitute organizations (see [Chapter 3](#)).

In this chapter, we offer an overview of the group and teamwork literature, especially as it relates to decision-making. We begin by defining groups and teams and pay particular attention to theoretical developments over time, specifically the contributions of communication theorists. Throughout, we consider the approaches taken to communication and to organization, noting the attention to culture, and trace how various literatures consider the communication-organization cycle and the role of agency that shapes groups, teamwork, and decision-making in organizational contexts.

Groups, Teams, and Decision-Making in Organizational Life

A consideration of groups, teams, and decision-making in organizational life highlights the role of smaller social collectives in organizing – like formal teams and informal coalitions – and the divergent objectives each may have that often require difficult decisions about which goals to privilege, when to execute them, and how to do so.

Across the literature, membership in a *group* is defined by shared dependence on a common resource base. This dependence can arise through assignment to a formal team that holds a particular budget to fund members’ activities. The common resources that members of a group share can also be informal. For example, members may seek social resources – perhaps they gather to talk about parenting issues or social justice and DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) – or skill-based resources, as when organizational members come together as communities of practice ([Wenger, 1998](#)) to solve a problem shared across various teams.

In this chapter, we discuss methods and approaches to studying each of these types of groups (i.e., formal and informal).

In addition to relying upon shared resources, *team* members’ activities also evidence commitment to a shared purpose. So, all teams are groups – an entity designation (O_3) – but not all groups are teams, which reflects both structural (O_2) and processual (O_1) designations. Additionally, teams rely upon formal and informal structures to accomplish their tasks: this is observed, in popular parlance, as *teamwork*. Their communication is both task-oriented and concerned with managing the social and emotional needs of group members. In terms of these formal and informal communication structures and the processes that they enable and constrain, then we can also say, more precisely, that while not all groups carry out teamwork processes, all teamwork necessarily arises through group interaction.

The related decision-making focus that characterizes much of the group literature is owed to the fact that teams often face multiple and often incompatible instrumental and interactive goals and objectives. Nonetheless, not all of the literature focuses solely on decision-making in teams. Below we choose three prominent traditions in group and team communication research – one focused on decision-making and formal task-oriented groups, the second focused on the role of communication in creating the team itself, and the last focused on both formal and informal team membership. Throughout, we pay particular attention to how instrumental and interactive goals and objectives are communicatively managed. See [Table 15.1](#) for an overview of the three perspectives – *functional approaches to group decision-making*, *symbolic-interaction perspective*, and *network approaches*.

Table 15.1 The Treatment of Communication, Organization, Agency, and Culture Across Traditions

Tradition	Communication (message, meaning, constitutive)	Organization (process, structure, entity)	C-O Cycle with Agency	Culture
Functional perspective and decision- making	The focus on communication as message is reflected in early models of communication that were prominent at the time that this perspective emerged.	The primary focus is on the decision-making process, and structure is considered in the ways that it informs process.	Early treatments addressed agency; however, the focus in much research is on outcomes and not agency.	Culture is generally not considered.
Symbolic- interpretive perspective	This perspective pays special attention to meaning creation given its focus on symbol use. It also views the group as communicatively constituted through members’ symbolic activities.	The interplay among structure, process, and entity is vital. The focus is on how the entity is (re)shaped through symbolic processes. This process (re) produces structures that enable and constrain members’ interaction.	The role of agency is central to this perspective.	Culture is relevant as it is part of the lens we use to constitute meanings. It is one of the structural factors that enable and constrain agency.

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Table 15.1 (Continued)

<i>Tradition</i>	<i>Communication (message, meaning, constitutive)</i>	<i>Organization (process, structure, entity)</i>	<i>C-O Cycle with Agency</i>	<i>Culture</i>
Network perspective	The focus is on the tie among and between individuals and groups – rather than a particular message or meaning – as the constitutive feature of social collectives.	Structure and entity are considered simultaneously. Process is not the focus of the network perspective, with notable exceptions.	Communication and organization are highlighted. Agency is often overlooked in this perspective, with notable exceptions (e.g., MTML, Monge).	Culture is considered as one of the many factors which shapes networks and characterize different systems.

Multiple Traditions of Group and Team Scholarship in Organizational Communication

The study of teamwork and group decision-making was highly influenced by early work at the Tavistock Institute in T-groups, or training groups, popularized within the human relations tradition of management scholarship (see [Chapter 6](#)). The focus originally centered on psychological variables, but interest among group scholars soon moved into decision-making and influence.

Based on this backdrop, we begin our review below with the earliest tradition and describe new developments in the study of groups, teams, and decision-making over time. However, this is not primarily a chronological review because the perspectives have origins in different disciplines that developed without reference to (or knowledge of) the others in some cases, often in parallel or overlapping fashion. (In fact, because so many different group and team scholars were working in similar areas without opportunities to learn or benefit from work in other fields, the Interdisciplinary Network for Group Research [INGRoup] was formed in 2006 to remedy this problem and integrate group research.) Thus, in the following pages, the prominent organizing principle for our review highlights differences in the treatment of communication (such as message, meaning, or constitutive), organization (entity [O₃], process [O₁], and structure [O₂]), culture, and the communication-organization cycle with agency. Particularly, we begin with perspectives that historically took more limited conceptions of communication and organization and move on to perspectives that more clearly attend to the mutually constitutive nature of communication and organization.

Functional Approaches to Group Decision-Making

Origins

The functional perspective and interest in group decision-making can be traced over time through the early work of philosopher John [Dewey \(1910\)](#), sociologist Robert Freed [Bales \(1950\)](#), and psychologist Irving [Janis \(1972\)](#). First, Dewey's reflective

thinking method was used to teach group discussion. The method contained five steps – it begins with identifying a felt difficulty, determining its cause and definition, suggesting potential solutions, problematizing the solutions, and concluding the best course forward.

Next, Bales' work on problem-solving groups (which began in the 1940s) led to the development of Interaction Process Analysis (IPA) as a method to study group performance. IPA epitomizes the functional perspective and is still widely used by group researchers today. Bales proposed that groups strive for equilibrium and that varied communication acts – both verbal and nonverbal – indicate either a lack of equilibrium or are used by group members to (re)establish equilibrium. IPA was a means through which recorded group interaction could be classified into 12 different categories that reflect a variety of functions – including 3 categories concerning positive reactions, 3 concerning negative reactions, 3 concerning the task, and 3 concerning responses to questions – all of which supported this ultimate goal of equilibrium.

Finally, Irving Janis' popular work on groupthink centered on decision-making and, particularly, the reasons for faulty decision-making among governmental groups. Janis (1972, 1982) highlighted that groups often make faulty, unsound decisions even when they appear to be well-informed. Groups and teams are goal-oriented, information-processing entities. However, they are vulnerable to information-processing failures (Schippers et al., 2014). Herbert Simon (1982) found that individual members of groups or teams are restricted by their cognitive abilities to process all of the information and make decisions under the constraints of *bounded rationality*. Bounded rationality refers to the finding that – under conditions of limited processing capabilities, knowledge, and time – individuals are unable to behave and interact according to early models of problem-solving, such as Dewey's reflective thinking. Members' ability to follow models that suggest the idealized rational actor (one who carefully weighs all options, is fully informed and expert, and has unlimited time to make a decision) is, in fact, bounded by the limits of their processing capabilities, knowledge, and time (Simon, 1982). While it seems logical that team or group members should be able to complement each other's information-processing lacunae, group dynamics such as withholding information, proclivity to seek consensus, and selective information-processing biases lead to groupthink and poor decision-making (Janis, 1972, 1982; Schippers et al., 2014).

Key Assumptions

Together, these strands of scholarship helped to establish the functional approach to group decision-making. The core assumptions of a functional perspective are that groups are (a) goal-oriented entities (b) whose performance varies, and (c) this variation is a function of internal and external influences on group interaction. It is still the most common approach taken to the study of groups and centers on discerning which inputs and processes shape team effectiveness in the form of particular outputs (or outcomes).

Key Scholarship

Some examples of this perspective include groupthink theory, the functional theory of group decision-making, and the social combination approach.

GROUPTHINK THEORY

Groupthink is such a popular concept with mainstream purchase that you can find this term in the Oxford English Dictionary (among other dictionary sources). Irving Janis (1972) proposed groupthink theory to explain the faulty and sound decision-making processes during global political and economic crises. Through a qualitative analysis, he compared the faulty decision-making processes that led to disasters such as the invasion of North Korea, the escalation of the Vietnam War, and the attack on Pearl Harbor with the effective decision-making processes that took place during the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Marshall Plan. Based on these comparisons, Janis (1972, p. 9) defined groupthink as “a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members’ strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action.” Janis (1972) further observed that groupthink occurs in a team when the drive toward unanimity leads to suppressing or discounting dissenting voices and perspectives. This loss of information weakens the inputs and processes needed for effective decision-making and results in poor-quality decisions. Groupthink is more likely in groups when three conditions are present: (a) high levels of cohesion; (b) high levels of insulation from outside ideas and information; and (c) high-pressure (competitive or time-constrained) environments.

Janis (1982) developed a unified, five-stage model of groupthink and proposed groupthink as a decision-making process. Although this model included certain organizational and situational conditions as antecedents to groupthink, Janis (1982) maintained that group cohesiveness was the primary predictor of groupthink (Cline, 1990). Per Janis, this concurrence-seeking tendency resulted in eight symptoms of groupthink that lead to faulty decision-making among groups. To loosely categorize these symptoms, the first two are outcomes of overconfidence in group’s abilities, the next two are due to the lack of exploration of alternative views, and the remaining symptoms stem from the pressures of group conformity. Below we list the eight symptoms and related tendencies or outcomes:

- 1 *The illusion of invulnerability*: Members engage in reckless risk-taking due to optimistic biases.
- 2 *Belief in the inherent morality of the group*: Members believe in the rightness of their cause with a lack of regard for the moral consequences.
- 3 *Collective rationalization*: Members operate based on their preconceived assumptions, unwilling to reconsider alternatives.
- 4 *Out-group stereotypes*: Members respond to intergroup conflict ineffectively due to negative stereotypes of out-group members.
- 5 *Self-censorship*: Members avoid raising concerns that deviate from the perceived consensus of the group.
- 6 *Illusion of unanimity*: Members believe that the decisions are agreed upon by all members.
- 7 *Direct pressure on dissenters*: Members are dissuaded from making counterarguments to the group’s view.
- 8 *Self-appointed mindguards*: Members keep the group and leaders in the dark from problematic information.

FUNCTIONAL THEORY OF GROUP DECISION-MAKING

The functional theory developed by Gouran and Hirokawa (1983, 1996, 2003) identifies five requisite communication functions needed for effective decision-making.

First, *problem analysis* includes using available information to understand (a) the nature of the problem, (b) its magnitude or seriousness, (c) its probable cause, and (d) potential consequences of not resolving it. The second requisite function is to *establish evaluation criteria*. What standards does the group need to meet – by its own and others’ judgment? Herbert Simon’s (1982) concept of satisficing is relevant here. Satisficing concerns making a decision that is adequate but not optimal. It typically occurs when resources (material or time-based) are low or when it is difficult to determine an optimal solution because of highly ambiguous or constantly changing events. The third requisite function is to *generate alternative solutions*. Groups should identify a number of potential resolutions, rather than limiting themselves to one idealized “best” choice. The fourth requisite function focuses on *evaluating the positive consequences of solutions*. What is the best-case scenario for each proposed decision? The fifth requisite function focuses on *evaluating the negative consequences of solutions*. What is the worst-case scenario for each proposed choice? The ability of a group to carry out each of these requisite functions predicts their ability to perform well.

SOCIAL COMBINATION APPROACH

This approach is based on social decision scheme theory and centers on predicting how members of a group will combine their unique contributions for a given task type (Davis, 1973; Lorge & Solomon, 1955). It is only relevant for task settings in which a group must agree on a pre-specified set of possible decision alternatives. Studies also show that the best decision rule depends on the task (Davis, 1973). Thus, the findings are highly specific, making it useful to understand group decision-making in particular contexts, such as with jury decisions (Davis et al., 1989).

The social combination approach, or social decision schemes, has been utilized to study decision-making processes involved in the execution of a range of task types. For example, Laughlin and Ellis (1986) found that groups use a truth-wins decision scheme on tasks that have demonstrably correct responses (e.g., mathematical problems). For decision tasks that do not have explicitly visible correct solutions, a majority-wins decision scheme is used by group members (Davis, 1982). The social combination approach has also been used to explain how groups come to a decision based on the inputs from expert group members. For instance, Bonner (2004) studied the influence of expert members on decision-making and found that experts wield more influence than other group members.

Approaches Taken to Communication

The majority of research in this line of scholarship regards communication as a message and focuses on its role in making meaning, which shapes group process. This is consistent with its narrow focus on task-oriented decision-making. For example, how does a given message fulfill the requisite functions needed for team success? Hirokawa and Poole (1996) explicitly delineate nine functions of communication in groups: information processing, analytical processing, procedural functions, goal-oriented functions, synergistic functions, rhetorical, conflict management, control, and creation and maintenance of group cultures and climates. This focus on messages and meaning is consistent with transmissive models of communication that were prominent at the time this perspective emerged (see Chapter 1). Similarly, much of the work in this tradition ignores the role of culture except as it shapes the ability of the group to fulfill its requisite functions.

Approaches Taken to Organization and Agency in the Communication-Organization Cycle

Three core assumptions of the functional perspective are that groups are goal-oriented; group performance varies and can be evaluated; and internal and external factors influence group performance. Structure (seen as an input) is considered in the ways it informs process and is viewed as a predictor of team performance. Theories that draw on a functional perspective mainly focus on communication and influence. For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted how team members collaborated over dispersed locations. Particularly, in a work-from-home context, Breideband and colleagues (2023) compared how the location of workers, whether in a nonprivate/private room versus working at the office, impacted team conflict. Their findings revealed those who worked in private rooms at home had significantly lower perceptions of team conflict, likely due to the ability to control disruptions.

Other work from this perspective includes a deliberate focus on the role of agency in the communication-organization cycle. Homans' (1950) work on the external systems orientation highlights the dynamic construction of groups and teams. Rather than viewing groups as a static entity, Homan considers continuing cycles of interaction with the environment and ways in which positive or negative feedback loops shape groups through their ability to adapt to external conditions. This focus on interaction with the environment is unique among group theories that draw on a functional perspective, illustrating how a range of approaches can be described as functional.

*The Symbolic-Interpretive Perspective**Origins*

The symbolic-interpretive perspective has its origins in hermeneutics and phenomenology (see Chapter 2). Hermeneutics was founded based on a pre-20th-century concept called *verstehen*, or understanding. Similarly, phenomenology is the study of knowledge that arises from understanding, consciousness, and experience. Ultimately drawn from theoretical and methodological influences across a range of literatures and disciplines – including Schutz's social phenomenology, Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology, Garfinkel's ethnomethodology, as well as seminal work by Mead, Blumer, Langer, and Burke – the symbolic-interpretive approach takes communication to be the key social process that shapes our reality. Within a group perspective, it bears on team members' shared reality.

Key Assumptions

A fundamental assumption of the symbolic-interpretive perspective is that groups are socially constructed and the group as an entity exists only through members' interaction. Following from this basic understanding of groups as communicatively constituted, groups are also readily acknowledged to be fluid in terms of their boundaries and to exhibit interdependence with the external environment. It shares this in common with Homans' (1950) work, which discussed the functional perspective. However, it typically departs from the external systems orientation in terms of its empirical focus. Scholarship conducted from a symbolic-interpretive perspective focuses on group members' symbolic activities, ranging from the stories members tell to the written organizational rules they follow or reject in their daily interactions.

Key Scholarship

Exploring symbolic convergence theory, structuration theory, the dialectic perspective, and adaptive structuration theory helps to further explicate the key assumptions and methods used in symbolic-interpretive research.

SYMBOLIC CONVERGENCE THEORY (SCT)

SCT concerns how group consciousness is created through symbol use. The communication process that leads them to converge as a group around a given fantasy is a central point of investigation for this theory. Scholars drawing on this theoretical perspective study group fantasy chains that derive from members' shared interpretations of events that fulfill particular social or psychological needs (Bormann, 1996). Fantasies reflect the creative and imaginative interpretations of everyday events that converge in a shared group understanding (i.e., chain reaction). Additionally, symbolic convergence theory highlights the ways in which group members' behavior is shaped and guided by this shared understanding (Bormann, 1973, 1996).

For example, Aghazadeh's (2022) study grounded in symbolic convergence theory examines how the National Eating Disorders Association's (NEDA) social media utilizes a symbolic "warrior" fantasy to frame eating disorder recovery as a heroic journey. Besides their ongoing use of social media hashtags, such as #recoverywarriors or #edwarrior, NEDA also engages members through using visual and rhetorical cues of the warrior fantasy that prompts multiple users to engage in chaining behaviors. This is seen in one of their posts of a recovery-themed tattoo with the caption: "Do you have a recovery tattoo? Show us your ink, recovery warriors!" (Aghazadeh, 2022, p. 111). In response, members shared their tattoos, stories, and messages of hope – indicating a shared reality.

Groups may converge around cultural identity, norms, and traditions. For example, Klett and Arnulf (2020) discuss how myths around Chinese and Western management teams lead scholars to overlook the impact of Indigenous Chinese leadership theories and philosophical systems on team processes. For example, traditional Chinese philosophies – such as Confucianism, Legalism, and Daoism – can mediate Chinese business leaders' actions regarding team processes. A Chinese leader may manage their team as a culturally hierarchical, Confucian "imperial court," which may lead their team to become more synergistic and high-performing in "an Indigenous Chinese manner and not in an essentialist Western way" (Klett & Arnulf, 2020, p. 9). This implies that while Chinese and Western teams may experience similar phenomena, contextual variables produce distinct communicative processes. Therefore, understanding these cultural contexts, stories, and histories can enrich team research by offering alternative perspectives on team structure and performance.

STRUCTURATION THEORY

The focus of structuration theory extends well beyond the confines of the group as an entity. A sociological theory, structuration is concerned with the role of larger societal structures in shaping human behavior (see Chapter 3). However, this theory found a home in group communication research as scholars from the functional perspective began to look further outside the boundaries of group process to consider the larger role of structure – the *rules* and *resources* that group members draw on to accomplish everyday activities – as well as the role of human agency in decision-making. In terms of structure, examples of organizational

rules include an employee handbook or stories told to newcomers about what to do or not to do in order to succeed. Resources range from things like the raw materials used in production to the training and certification needed to obtain a job (see [Chapter 3](#)).

Unlike a functional perspective, structures alone are not viewed as determining group outcomes. Group members make decisions – implicitly or explicitly – about whether to draw on these structures in their daily practices. For instance, a meeting agenda is a structure designed to introduce a particular order to group interaction. Members may only loosely follow that agenda, however. This reflects human agency, which is enabled and constrained by structures (such as the agenda) – making some things more likely and others less likely – not solely determined by the structures. Therefore, structures are both the medium and the outcome of human interaction and symbolic activity.

DIALECTIC PERSPECTIVE

Continuing the example about whether group members closely follow a meeting agenda, the dialectic perspective highlights the frustration members may feel about how their agenda item is treated, rushed, or even skipped altogether. The dialectic perspective concerns the tensions that arise in group interaction because of the continual need to choose between two different, and seemingly, contradictory choices. The ways that team members manage these ever-present tensions through their symbolic activity is the focus of this perspective ([Johnson & Long, 2002](#); see also [Chapter 3](#)).

ADAPTIVE STRUCTURATION THEORY (AST)

In the 1990s, [Poole and DeSanctis \(1990\)](#) further refined aspects of structuration theory to bear on the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to facilitate the work of groups and teams. AST theorizes that the influence of ICTs (on teamwork, for example) depends upon the structure built (i.e., designed) into the technology and the structures that emerge when users try to incorporate the ICTs in their work. Structure refers to both the *features* and the *spirit* of the ICTs. The features are made up of the specific rules and resources embedded in the material aspects of the ICT. The spirit is made up of the broader aim concerning the values and goals that underlie a certain feature.

The closer the alignment between the way a given technology is appropriated by its users and the spirit of the technology, the more likely it is that the technology may provide benefits. If the meeting agenda described above is delivered via any number of the popular digital meeting applications, its success will depend upon a combination of the structural features, the spirit of the app, and how members use it. For instance, in a healthy team, if members use it to keep the meeting moving and productive without privileging the voices of particular people, then it will be more likely to be adopted and used by members. If, however, it is appropriated to suppress dissent, then it may become a contested ICT that some members refuse to use altogether (see [Chapters 3 and 19](#)).

Additionally, ICT adoption is impacted by macro-level events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, where team members had to quickly learn to exclusively collaborate via technology (see [Chapter 19](#)). This pivot exemplifies how teams adjusted their activity coordination around ICTs in order to effectively complete both individual and team-level work ([Whillans et al., 2021](#)). For example, some organizational members quickly learned to work on shared digital documents versus locally saved ones to improve communication speed and team performance ([Klonek et al., 2022](#)). Macro-level events can also impact how technology is

adopted to enhance belongingness and community across temporal and geographic distances (Abelsen et al., 2023).

Approaches Taken to Communication

The symbolic-interpretive perspective pays special attention to meaning creation, given its focus on symbol use. It also views the group as communicatively constituted through members' symbolic activities. Group fantasy chains are key to the symbolic-interpretive perspective. They begin with dramatizing messages, which contain at least one of the following: analogy, anecdote, parable, allegory, fable, narrative, wordplay, double entendre, or a figure of speech. If these messages elicit an affirmative response among members, a chain reaction (i.e., a fantasy chain) is created in which others join in and participate, shaping the group culture (Bormann, 1973, 1996; Bormann et al., 2001).

Approaches Taken to Organization and Agency in the Communication-Organization Cycle

The interplay between entity and process is vital to the symbolic-interpretive perspective. The focus is on how the entity arises and is (re)shaped through symbolic processes. These symbolic representations then structure future interactions. However, while symbolic representations enable and constrain group members' interactions, this perspective centers on the ways in which group members continually (re)create these representations through exercising their own agency. This reflects the concept of *duality of structure* in structuration.

The agentic nature of fantasy chains offers an illustrative example: fantasy themes are never faithful representations of some past experience – they always project a particular experience that has a unique spin, thus recreating the group to suit their purposes. Also, multiple fantasy themes are often shared among group members as a way to account for different versions of the same experience and can develop into stock scenarios that are repeated over and over again. Sometimes these themes get integrated by characters into a larger rhetorical vision that captures the group's imagination. Thus, the group (and larger organization of which it is a part) is literally created through their members' everyday symbolic communication practices. Culture plays an important role in this perspective because organizational groups and teams are sites of organizational subcultures. These fantasy themes and rhetorical visions mark divisions across these subcultures and serve to bind members within a subculture even more tightly.

The Network Perspective

Origins

The network tradition of group scholarship dates back to at least the 1930s and was developed across multiple disciplines, including anthropology, social psychology, communication, sociology, mathematics, epidemiology, political science, and economics. It derives from theories of mutual or collective interest, theories of self-interest, theories of homophily, social exchange or dependency theories, and cognitive theories – all of which have contributed to the diverse schools of thought within the network approach. Two distinct lines of work emerged across time. The first line of work was conducted between 1930 and 1960, and a new line of research emerged in the 1990s that reflects strides made in network software as well as a burgeoning interest in social capital. Consistent with the

timing and tradition of the functional perspective, in the 1950s, one of the earliest and most famous experiments that leveraged a network approach to small groups examined the ideal network structure to support group performance (Bavelas, 1950; Bavelas & Barrett, 1951). More centralized groups, those focused around a few primary group members, performed better than others on complex tasks. More decentralized groups performed better on simple tasks.

Key Assumptions

Unity across the varied perspectives is found in five underlying principles identified by Wellman (1988). First, individuals' social networks – e.g., reflected in their group membership – are a better predictor of individual behavior than their drives, attitudes, or demographic characteristics. Second, the relationship among units – such as among members of a group or among groups in an organization – should be the analytical focus of network research rather than characteristics of the units themselves, e.g., individual or group characteristics. Third, the methods used to study networks should not rely upon the assumption of independence among units or groups. Fourth, we cannot understand a social system, such as a group or a network of groups, through the dyadic ties within that system. All units within a system are interdependent; therefore, the whole system must be studied. Finally, organizations are not made up of clearly demarcated groups, but of overlapping networks. This is due to the fuzzy, permeable, and shifting boundaries of groups which is owed, in part, to the fact that individuals maintain multiple group memberships.

Within a network perspective, a group is considered either (a) an emergent characteristic of a network that reflects a particular structural “grouping” or (b) a formally imposed category or designation about a set of actors. Also frequently referred to as a clique, within the emergent view, a group reflects the connection among various nodes in a population. In this view, network analyses often focus on various types of connections among nodes within a system, based on any number of characteristics, including culture, expertise, trust, and collaboration. In contrast, when a group is considered as an imposed designation or boundary, such as a political party, network analysis often focuses on comparing communication patterns within and outside of that network (see Chapter 9).

Key Scholarship

Some examples of this perspective include theories of self-interest, social exchange and dependency, and theories of mutual or collective interest.

THEORIES OF SELF-INTEREST

This school of thought assumes that individuals are driven by a rational self-interest and form dyadic or group ties in order to pursue these interests (an assumption critiqued below). A central influence in this research tradition was the work of sociologist James Coleman (1988) who illustrated how dyadic interactions – where each actor tries to maximize their self-interest – form the basis of a social system (like a small group). Against this backdrop of self-interest, Coleman's work showed that the interdependence shared by the individuals acts as a limit or constraint on the extent to which each person will pursue their self-interests. Ultimately, each person receives access to more rewards by working together than could be obtained by unchecked self-seeking.

From a self-interest theoretical perspective, individuals also earn social capital from their investments in particular relationships that can be leveraged for a variety of rewards. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu defines social capital as the “sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 119). One of the ways that people may gain further social capital is through filling structural holes, or places in a network where connections are missing. Making those connections for others can be a “profitable” way to invest one’s social capital and earn returns on one’s investment.

The theory of self-interest warrants critiques for its Western bias that asserts people are primarily self-motivated and seek to maximize their personal value through relationships and resources. Beyond the Western context, social groups often work together toward mutual benefits. In theorizing various environmental justice models that are specific to Africa, Ssebunya and colleagues (2019) focus on communitarian societies that emphasize mutual dependence and relationality. For instance, the Buganda region of Uganda practices *bulungibwansi*, meaning “for the good of the country,” and in Kenya, the concept of *harambee*, or “pooling efforts together,” reflects a similar ethos. This does not suggest all non-Western cultures are focused on interdependence and collectivism, but it does render Western logics visible within the groups and teams literature.

SOCIAL EXCHANGE AND DEPENDENCY

Homans’ (1950) work was central to the social exchange school, as he argued that people proactively seek to build ties to others with whom they can reap benefits through the exchange of valuable resources. Relationships are continued to the extent that they continue to yield such resources and ended when they no longer do so. Because of the explicit focus on external resources (and resource dependency) within the study of groups, Homans (1950) helped to link micro (i.e., individual) and macro (i.e., organizational) levels of analysis and show how structure arises from interaction (as we discussed with regard to structuration theory). Emerson (1972a, 1972b) also studied the social exchange of resources and observed that it was enabled by a large-scale network of relationships in which individuals, dyads, and groups are embedded. Thus, he also considered the role of intergroup communication and relationships. In contrast to theories of self-interest, the social exchange and dependency perspective highlights how individuals are motivated to create ties in order to minimize their dependence on others and to maximize the dependence of others on them.

THEORIES OF MUTUAL OR COLLECTIVE INTEREST

Public goods theory (Samuelson, 1954) is a well-developed theory of collective action that focuses on how the potential benefits that accrue from coordinated action typically outweigh individual self-interests. Its original focus centered on the economics of public versus private ownership of public goods, like material resources, but it has been applied to a range of public goods, including intellectual property (Fulk et al., 1996). Research in this tradition identifies the conditions under which group members are more likely to aid collective action aimed at creating and maintaining public goods that benefit everyone. It addresses the *free-rider* problem, wherein all members of the group will benefit from this public good whether or not they help to create or maintain it. Findings suggest that individuals are motivated to

act in ways that maximize their shared ability to use these resources, despite the free-rider problem. This runs counter to both the self-interest and social exchange theories.

Approaches Taken to Communication

Major network theories are concerned with how communication ties and networks are created rather than a particular message or meaning. For instance, *public goods theory* highlights the conditions under which group members are motivated to form ties and build networks. Communication networks are also based on *homophily*, the finding that ties are more likely to form among group members who share things in common. Individuals strategically form ties with others who are similar in order to reduce conflict, foster trust, and offer predictability. *Transactive memory system* is another theoretical perspective that concerns how group members develop communication networks to benefit from the expertise and skills of others in the group. For each of the varied network perspectives, while the focus is on the constitutive features of the ties within a network, scholars also consider the nature of the ties, which inheres in the messages or meaning associated with the tie. This includes

communication ties (such as who talks to whom, or who gives information or advice to whom), formal ties (such as who reports to whom), affective ties (such as who likes whom, or who trusts whom), proximity ties (who is spatially or electronically close to whom), and cognitive ties (such as who knows who knows whom).

(Katz et al., 2004, p. 308)

Scholars are also considering how network analysis can benefit research on human-autonomy teams (HATs), or teams involving humans and one or more autonomous computerized agents (Baker et al., 2021). Over time, this emerging form of teaming will impact how teams construct trust, develop shared mental models, and coordinate tasks. Because this work is in its earliest stages, further research is needed to clarify relevant constructs for theory development (O'Neill et al., 2023).

Approaches Taken to Organization and Agency in the Communication-Organization Cycle

While structure and entity are considered simultaneously, process is typically not the focus of the network perspective. Therefore, in most network studies, network content is rarely a variable under investigation. Podolny and Baron (1997) are among the few who emphasize and explore the effects of network content and its interaction with network structure. Instead, a prominent – although contested – view is that formal organizational structure influences the communication interactions and the content of those interactions. These formal roles should determine the individuals with whom the member communicates, what they should communicate, and the operating procedure for communication. This view is debated because it fails to take into account the active part that individuals play in creating and shaping organizational structure. Following the weaknesses and inconclusive findings relating formal networks to organizational behaviors (Johnson, 1992), there is growing interest in the role of informal networks. For example, Kalra and Szymanski (2023) show how an “us versus them” dynamic can exist not only in globally distributed teams but also within linguistically homogenous teams, such as in India, where dialect differences can impact team cohesion. This research also

highlights the need to acknowledge diversity as more than race and gender, as Minbaeva and colleagues (2021) argue, and to shift focus away from US and Western European research contexts. Indeed, Miike (2007) brings an Asiacentric perspective to bear on the Eurocentric bias in communication theory, while work by Meyer and colleagues (2014) and Emich and colleagues (2020) points to the growing literature on groups and teams globally.

Moreover, there is a need to develop more complex, multi-level theoretical models of diversity within groups and teams in order to better understand the interdependence of interactions and processes across different levels of analyses (McLeod & Yuan, 2021). An example can be seen in Tasheva and Hillman's (2019) multi-level analysis which distinguishes between team-level and individual diversity to predict how various sources of diversity (including surface- and deep-level) can influence team effectiveness.

All of this work illustrates that informal networks are driven and shaped by factors not captured by formal organizational structure analysis. Informal networks involve more discretionary patterns of interaction, where the content of relationships may be work-related, social, or both. Early network research (e.g., Brass, 1984) also takes a relational approach to organizations, rooted in modern systems theory (see Chapter 2), and considers the emergence of structure as bottom-up, individually motivated, and dynamic. The impact of informal networks on various organizational outcomes, such as job effectiveness, commitment, turnover rate, career mobility, and satisfaction, has been examined in this tradition.

Some scholars recommend studying formal and informal networks together in the context of each other as way of understanding the interdependencies between formal and informal networks. Not surprisingly, formal workplace interactions often develop into informal, friendship networks due to similarity, proximity, and constant interaction among organizational members (see Chapter 10). When these formal and informal networks overlap, they create multiplex ties, which means they interact in multiple contexts. In addition to the idea that formal ties naturally lead to informal ones, the reverse is also true. For instance, we may recommend our friends for jobs within our organization, or we may befriend a colleague from another department and this informal tie may influence the way we vote on interdepartmental matters. The key issue with formal and informal ties is to explore each within the context of the other (see Chapter 9).

Conclusion

Across the varied research traditions focused on groups, teams, and decision-making, the concept of organization is viewed and studied in diverse ways – including as process (O_1), as structure (O_2), and as entity (O_3). Beginning with the functional perspective, organization is largely treated as structure (O_2 , seen as an input) and is investigated in terms of the ways it informs process (rather than organization being investigated *as* a process). While Homans' (1950) approach sheds light on the ways in which communication and organization are mutually constituted, most theories that draw on a functional perspective mainly focus on the relationship between communication and influence. In contrast, the symbolic-interpretive perspective highlights the communication-organization spiral through considering the interplay between entity and process. Research from this perspective considers how the entity (i.e., the group and/or organization) arises and is (re)shaped through symbolic processes as well as the ways in which group members continually (re) create symbolic representations through exercising their own agency. Finally, for research

within the network perspective, structure and entity are considered simultaneously, but process is typically not studied.

The study of groups, teams, and decision-making in organizations is fundamental to the study of organizational communication processes. It is a multidisciplinary area of study, yet the varied fields coalesce around communication and interaction as the key driver of group formation and process, exhibiting the conceptual pattern of the C-O dynamic that is so prevalent in organizational communication theory.

Recommended Supplementary Readings

Functional Perspective

Hirokawa, R. Y. (1985). Discussion procedures and decision-making performance: A test of a functional perspective. *Human Communication Research*, 12, 203–224.

Orlitzky, M., & Hirokawa, R. Y. (2001). To err is human, to correct for it divine: A meta-analysis of research testing the functional theory of group decision-making effectiveness. *Small Group Research*, 32(3), 313–341.

Wittenbaum, G. M., Hollingshead, A. B., Paulus, P. B., Hirokawa, R. Y., Ancona, D. G., Peterson, R. S., Jehn, K. A. & Yoon, K. (2004). The functional perspective as a lens for understanding groups. *Small Group Research*, 35(1), 17–43.

These readings provide a good overview of the functional perspective, specifically as it relates to groups performing tasks. They include the early work in the area (Hirokawa, 1985), reviews of the work (Cummings & Ancona, 2005; Wittenbaum et al., 2004), as well as a meta-analysis of empirical research on functional groups (Orlitzky & Hirokawa, 2001).

Symbolic-Interpretive Perspective

Bormann, E. G. (1996). Symbolic convergence theory and communication in group decision making. In R. Y. Hirokawa & M. S. Poole (Eds.), *Communication and group decision making* (2nd ed., pp. 81–113). Sage.

DeSanctis, G., & Poole, M. S. (1994). Capturing the complexity in advanced technology use: Adaptive structuration theory. *Organization Science*, 5, 121–147.

Frey, L. R., & Sunwolf. (2004). The symbolic-interpretive perspective on group dynamics. *Small Group Research*, 35, 277–306.

Seibold, D. R., & Meyers, R. A. (2007). Group argument: A structuration perspective and research program. *Small Group Research*, 38, 312–336.

These readings focus on the symbolic-interpretive perspective and how it applies to the study of groups. Bormann (1996) uses symbolic convergence theory to explain how individuals create a common ground through a chain of fantasies. DeSanctis and Poole (1994) explain the tenets of adaptive structuration theory and how it explains the relationship between the structures of advanced technologies and the emergent structures of social action that emerge using these technologies. Seibold and Meyers (2007) provide a review of research on group argument from a structuration perspective. Finally, Frey and Sunwolf (2004) review the foundations of the symbolic-interpretive perspective and propose a composite model of group processes, practices, products, and predispositions.

Network Perspective

- Cummings, J. N., & Cross, R. (2003). Structural properties of work groups and their consequences for performance. *Social Networks*, 25(3), 197–210.
- Balkundi, P., & Harrison, D. A. (2006). Ties, leaders, and time in teams: Strong inference about network structure's effects on team viability and performance. *Academy of Management Journal*, 49, 49–68.
- Contractor, N., & Su, C. (2011). Understanding groups from a network perspective. In A. Hollingshead & M.S. Poole (Eds.), *Research methods for studying groups and teams: A Guide to approaches, tools, and technologies* (pp. 284–310). Routledge.
- Katz, N., Lazer, D., Arrow, H., & Contractor, N. (2004). Network theory and small groups. *Small Group Research*, 35, 307–332.

These readings focus on the study of small groups from a network perspective. They include pragmatic approaches to studying small groups from a network perspective (Contractor & Su, 2011), a detailed review of network research on small groups (Katz et al., 2004), a meta-analysis of research on the effects of network structures on team effectiveness (Balkundi & Harrison, 2006), and an empirical study on the effects of group network structure on team performance (Cummings & Cross, 2003).

Important Concepts: Define and Discuss

Bounded rationality
Cohesion
Duality of structure
Feedback loops
Free-rider problem
Group fantasy chains
Homophily
Phenomenology
Problem analysis
Satisficing
Social capital

Practitioners' Corner and Discussion Questions

Contributions to Multidisciplinary Teams (MDTs) at the Children's Advocacy Centers

In any given organizational context, each of the three major research traditions we describe here may be leveraged to yield insights on teamwork and decision-making. Below, we describe a recent multi-year large-scale research project undertaken by a research team (which include the present authors) and ask you to consider how each of the scholarly traditions could assist in the study.

Background: The Children's Advocacy Center (CAC) Movement

The Children's Advocacy Center (CAC) movement changed the individual and institutional landscape for child abuse investigations around the globe through leveraging the power of multidisciplinary teams (MDTs) in the service of children and their families.

The CAC MDT refers to the various individuals from a myriad of core child abuse disciplines who provide the front-line and immediate supervisory services involved in child abuse investigations, assessment, intervention, and prosecution. Those core disciplines include law enforcement, child protective services, prosecution, medical, mental health, and the CAC itself (forensic interviewers, family advocates, mental health clinicians, and MDT coordination staff).

Joint investigation of child abuse cases by MDTs is foundational to the mission of children's advocacy centers. The success of this approach is shaped by the quality and timeliness of communication among team members from different agencies and professions. A number of intra- and interorganizational factors come together to enable and constrain effective coordination in this setting. Our team – comprising experts in communication, time-based coordination, team interaction, and organizational science – conducted a comprehensive analysis of the MDT model. Our objective was to determine what factors influence MDT performance in the complex environment they face.

Discussion Questions

PRACTITIONER LENS – *In an effort to better understand the teams you will study, what kinds of questions would you ask during initial meetings with the organizational leadership?*

RESEARCHER LENS – *Can each of the three research traditions described in this chapter be of assistance in a project of this nature? Describe specific contributions that each of the varied traditions can make to address this research objective.*

Fieldwork at the CAC

To understand the multiple factors that shape best practices for joint investigations, we took a multi-tiered approach to studying MDT communication dynamics. To offer a complete and exhaustive account of the life of MDTs, we systematically analyzed and compared three different – yet complementary – types of observations:

- MDT members' language and communication patterns as exhibited in focus group conversations (in both 10 intra-disciplinary settings and 17 multi-disciplinary settings);
- MDT members' shared views and considerations about the issues of greatest import to high-quality work (discussed in concert with other members of their MDT during 17 multidisciplinary focus groups); and
- MDT members' personal reports about a range of individual, team, and agency-related factors that shape their ability to be effective as an MDT member (as reflected in a state-wide survey of 1424 members).

Our primary objective was to identify systemic barriers to effective collaboration and information sharing. Through reviewing emergent themes from the participant observation, archival data, focus groups, and interviews, we developed a survey to assess MDT members' experiences around issues that included factors such as the role of task design and feedback, training, supervisory support, team psychological safety, task cohesion, social cohesion, individual attraction to the group, and work method autonomy in team performance.

Discussion Questions

Practitioner lens – *As a practitioner, how would you approach the fundamental question of what constitutes MDT performance? On what particular outcomes would you focus as you spoke with MDT members and as you reviewed relevant organizational documents?*

Researcher lens – *Taking the perspective of a researcher trained in each of the three traditions, which of the previous types of data would be of most interest to you? How would you design a study that collects the types of information needed to understand MDT performance?*

Culture at the Children's Advocacy Centers

Because the MDTs were made up of occupational groups with unique cultures – most notably law enforcement, doctors and nurses, therapists, child protective services, and prosecutors – we studied how members of each occupational group perceived the other occupational groups through both focus groups and survey data. In the occupational focus groups, each focus group was constituted entirely of members belonging to a given profession or from a given agency – i.e., where the members were largely homogenous in terms of their work focus. This allowed us to view differences in interagency perceptions of the MDT model.

Discussion Questions

Practitioner lens – *What questions would you ask participants in the occupational focus groups?*

Researcher lens – *What insights, if any, could each research tradition offer to help you better understand the impact of occupational culture on MDT performance?*

Research Findings about MDT Effectiveness

Based upon our triangulation of the multiple data sources, several prominent themes emerged about what shapes MDT effectiveness (both in terms of existing practices associated with strong case development and outcomes as well as existing barriers to effective collaboration and information sharing):

- *Social support predicts resilience and positive case outcomes.* We found positive case outcomes for child abuse investigations are associated with strong MDTs. At the same time, this social support not only leads to improved case outcomes but expressly allows MDT members to carry out their work more effectively and to have more longevity in their careers within an agency.
- *Institutional barriers weaken MDTs. Institutional support strengthens MDTs.* A number of structural and professional barriers exist inside the various partner agencies. These institutional barriers may serve to systematically weaken team processes and create impediments for team members' full participation on the MDT. When partner agencies support the model, MDTs are more effective.
- *Proximity facilitates information sharing and collaboration.* Proximity served as a powerful predictor of information sharing, collaboration, and identity, and diminished barriers associated with professional identity. Physical distance increased these barriers and reduced the ease of information sharing and collaboration.

Discussion Questions

Practitioner lens – (a) Based on these findings, what advice would you offer to children's advocacy centers about how to foster social support among MDT members? (b) How can children's advocacy centers communicate and leverage these findings to cultivate greater institutional support among partner agencies? (c) In settings without physical proximity, how can children's advocacy centers address the barriers we found associated with physical distance?

Researcher lens – (a) Which of these findings would you predict based on extant research in any of the three traditions? Are any of the findings unexpected? (b) Based on these findings, can you design a follow-up study to collect more data to shed even greater insight into team dynamics at children's advocacy centers? What research tradition(s) would offer the most utility given these findings?

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