

Part I

The Nature of Groups

Most of us are pretty sure we know what a small group is. After all, small groups are all around us, and we are all members of one or more of them. However, coming up with a precise definition of a small group that everyone agrees with has proven to be a challenge for small group scholars. Because serious scholarship demands that we define our key terms and concepts clearly so others know what we are talking about, we begin this book by addressing the most basic of questions: What is a small group?

Defining Elements

A small group has been defined simply as a collection of people, few enough in number to be able to interact and communicate with each other on a regular basis in order to reach a common goal (Homans 1950, 1). There are five basic elements of a group that are embedded in such a basic definition: number, purpose, interdependence, perceptual boundary, and interaction.

First, the *number of people* is significant. To be considered a “small” group, there must be at least three, and no more than 12 to 15, people. Most group scholars would agree that three to seven people would constitute a “small group.”

Second, small groups have a *shared purpose*. The success or effectiveness of a group is partially dependent upon the degree to which members of the group share a desire

to achieve a commonly agreed-upon goal. This does not mean that every member of the group must want the same thing(s)—indeed, individual goals are a prominent feature of most groups. However, unless a gathering of people shares at least one common goal toward which they are all willing to contribute their individual efforts, they cannot function together as a group.

The third element that distinguishes a small group from other aggregates of people is the *interdependence* of group members. In a small group, the actions and behaviors of individual members both affect, and are affected by, the actions and behaviors of others in the collectivity. For example, a group member who fails to carry out his or her assignment could make it difficult for others in the group to carry out their assignments. Also, the absence of a group member at a meeting can hinder the progress of the entire group if that member happens to have important information that the rest of the group needs to move forward with its task. In short, the success of a small group depends on the contributions of each group member; they rely on each other to reach their shared goals.

The fourth defining property of a group is the existence of *perceived boundaries*. A small group exists when its members are able to identify themselves as part of the

group and, more importantly, differentiate themselves from those outside of the group. The ability of group members to distinguish between “insiders” and “outsiders” depends on the presence of shared characteristics that help participants identify themselves as members of a particular group. For example, group members might be identified by the clothes they wear, or by the words they use, or by the geographical location where they meet and spend time together. These shared characteristics serve as perceptual markers that allow group members to separate those who belong in the group from those who do not.

The fifth defining element of a group is the presence of *regular interaction and communication* among participants. With rare exceptions, group members are expected to communicate openly and often with one another. Interaction among group members is the basis for sharing information, providing feedback, coordinating actions, persuading

others, controlling group situations, establishing rules and procedures, and so forth (Poole and Hirokawa 1986).

The advent of new communication technologies and computer-mediated electronic interactions has resulted in the emergence of new forms of small groups that challenge traditional notions of what a group is and suggest the need to expand our definition of small groups. The chapters in Part I present some current thinking about what constitutes a small group and what its defining characteristics are.

References

- Homans, G. C. (1950). *The Human Group*. New York: Harcourt, World, and Brace, Inc.
- Poole, M. S., and Hirokawa, R. Y. (1986). “Communication and group decision-making: A critical assessment.” In R. Y. Hirokawa and M. S. Poole (eds.), *Communication and Group Decision-Making*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage. ♦