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The Changing Epistemological Assumptions of Group Theory

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ABSTRACT:

In this paper we call for a change in the epistemological assumptions underlying group dynamics theory to better meet the needs of the pluralist world of the 1990s. Current group theory is unable to support the rising heterogeneity of group composition and the growing concern with preservation of this diversity. A model is introduced to demonstrate how the prescriptive nature of most group theory encourages practices promoting assimilation of differences and maintenance of the status quo through normative control. The basic assumptions underlying the field of group dynamics emerging in the United States and Great Britain in the post-WW II years are examined, focusing particularly on their deep organicist origins. Stephen Pepper’s (1942) world hypothesis schemata is used to explicate the tenets of organicism and to explore an alternate worldview, contextualism, which may offer a framework for deriving more appropriate group theory for our contingent and pluralistic contemporary world. The paper concludes with a proposed set of underlying assumptions based in contextualism, offering a foundation for birthing the next generation of group dynamics theory.
CHANGING EPISTEMOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS
OF
GROUP THEORY

A rock has a shape of its own. It is hard, hard-edged, permanent and unchanging. We can see and feel its shape. We can say that a rock “is”. It is not going to let us down and change into something else. There is the sense of an independent absolute. Water is very different from rock, but just as real. It flows. The emphasis is on “to” rather than “is”. Water flows according to the gradient (context). It takes the form of the vessel in which it is placed (circumstance) (deBono, 1990, p. 8).

de Bono suggests two different ways of framing the process of meaning-making. His metaphor facilitates an exploration of the epistemological foundations of group theory. One frame assumes a theoretical lens that is permanent and unchanging, applicable to all situations. The other frame recognizes the need for fluidity and the use of multiple lenses in constant interaction with context and circumstances. Consider the spectrum of challenges currently facing practicing social scientists:

A human rights activist based in Hong Kong in the late 1980s found herself in a bewildering situation. She was responsible for organizing a group of individuals that shared a concern for Vietnamese refugee families incarcerated in detention facilities. The participants were multicultural, multilingual, and interreligious, including Hong Kong Chinese, Vietnamese nationals resettled in Australia, Canada, and the US, expatriate relief workers, and other interested individuals from Australia, Canada, Germany, Great Britain, and the US.

A new manager of a facilities engineering department of a major aerospace company in California wondered how to effectively lead his group. Equipped with an engineering degree and an MBA, he was nevertheless nonplused by the task awaiting him. He has been assigned to manage a group of sixty people representing twenty-two different ethnic groups, all speaking English as a second or third language.

In the early 1990s the negotiating committee for a consortium of construction contractors in Silicon Valley huddled to strategize before meeting with representatives of the plumbers and pipefitters union to haggle over the renewal of their labor agreement. For the first time in history, a woman was among them. Awkwardly, they attempted to perform their task.

We sat together in our first year doctoral seminar called Group and Interpersonal Analysis. The authors we read were exclusively white males, and the subjects of their studies were also predominantly white men. Was this why the theories seemed to miss the mark? “Where are the female and minority theorists?” we indignantly inquired. “There are none,” the professor replied, “if you want group theory from a different perspective, you’ll have to create it yourselves.”

As the scenarios suggest, managers, practitioners, and academics are called upon to act and react in situations arising during a unique period of history. A particularly prominent characteristic of the world today is an increased heterogeneity within populations at every level of organization from small groups to nations. Most of our theories of group dynamics were conceptualized based upon the
experiences of social scientists in less diverse groups than those described in the first three scenarios above. Had the actors in these situations looked to the group process literature, and some of them did, they would not have found answers to many of their questions. They would, however, have encountered assumptions about group composition, leadership, membership, and personal values that were not applicable to the groups in which they now found themselves.

In this article we explore the origins and foundations of group dynamics theory, calling attention to its shortcomings when applied to the world we live in today. Rooted in the conceptual frame of organismism, group dynamics theory is strained by practitioners attempting to apply it to circumstances encountered in environments characterized by greater and greater pluralism. We suggest a shift to the conceptual frame of contextualism which changes the nature and role of theory in important ways, opening the door to the possibility of increased effectiveness when applied to highly heterogeneous groups. We conclude with a discussion of the possible features of contextualistic research and group theory.

The Itinerary

We invite the reader to join us as we recreate the conceptual road we ourselves traveled to arrive at a place of new possibilities for group theory, holding the hope of new options and approaches for facilitating positive social change in the next century. We candidly acknowledge that it has been the very careful consideration of our own experiences which led to this journey. This rootedness in human experience is a strength of this article. Beginning with a step back in time to the post W.W. II era, we revisit the social climate that gave rise to the field of group dynamics. Our journey then takes us quickly through a half-century of turbulence to the world of the late 1990s, a period easily likened to the post W.W. II years by a shared sense of uncertainty and a profound need to rebuild and recreate social systems. We pause to look carefully at some of the unique characteristics of the world today, establishing both the presence of pluralism and the holding of the ideal of continued pluralism in the US.

Our next destination allows us to examine the role of conceptual frames in shaping theory. Prevailing metatheories, historical events, and human needs together contribute to the generation, acceptance, and relevance of theory. This discussion prepares the traveler to meet Stephen Pepper's
(1942) root metaphor theory which provides the metatheoretical framework we use as a tool to understand the origins of current group dynamics theory and to articulate a paradigmatic shift that promises the possibility of creating more useful theory.

In order to establish a common language and understanding with which to communicate about group dynamics theory, our journey must include a visit to the foundational assumptions and components of the field of group dynamics. This allows us to move ahead to an analysis of group dynamics theory through the lens of Pepper’s (1942) root metaphor theory, establishing its basis in organicism. We will make an interlude to consider the shortcomings of group dynamics theory when applied to the world today, offering a model illustrating the self-fulfilling nature of group dynamics theory within the organicistic paradigm.

Having completed several important legs of our journey, we now find ourselves amidst the conceptual museum of modern thought. Observing the embodiment of the essence of the organicistic paradigm, we can’t help but notice a rather large fissure unfolding before our eyes into an actual chasm, violating the wholeness and integrity of the paradigm itself. The first signs of a new contextualistic paradigm become visible as the apparition of the cloven organicistic paradigm fades into the background.

Once we have navigated the historical bridge between the two paradigms, we can view contextualism more closely. Here we have the opportunity to examine the role and shape of research in a contextualistic paradigm, along with the purpose of theory. We will pause to consider the underlying values of contextualistic group theory and surmise what the enactment of such theory might look like. Our journey ends with a look back on our travels, reflecting on the challenges and possibilities inherent in a paradigmatic shift to contextualism.

The Social Climate: Then and Now

The years following W.W. II, and the second half of the final decade of the 1900s, are distinguished by the presence of fundamental changes in the structure of societies throughout the world. Each of these periods is marked by the falling of walls, the breaking of frames, and the struggle of individuals and systems to redefine themselves in response to overwhelming external forces. During these eras, change, often uninvited and unexpected, thrashed relentlessly against the carefully constructed
edifices of social, political, and economic systems, destroying or transfiguring once seemingly immutable structures.

Remaining after such devastation is a world in need of healing; a world eager to embrace the skills of craftspeople capable of weaving together the surviving threads of the past with the newly milled fibers of the present, ultimately creating the warp and woof of a fresh and viable social fabric. As in the post W.W. II era, social scientists must again participate in the reconstruction and renewal of social relationships and systems during a time of loss, change, and unprecedented possibility.

The Post World War II Era

The great depression in the US, followed by W.W.II, together left the country with a sense of loss and a felt need to respond to the overarching experience of personal disjunction. A focus on superordinate goals provided a sense of purpose during the war years, fueling the need for American citizens to embrace a more collectivist perspective. Individuals willingly assumed self-sacrificing behaviors, focusing on the future while regarding the present as a temporary hardship which must be endured.

During the long war years, the social sciences were mobilized to support governmental efforts to meet the needs of the war itself, and also to address the desire to maintain a tenable society. Struggling to get by with resources severely limited by the demands of the troops abroad and the increased need to produce ordnance, agencies and institutions were stressed and weakened.

The social needs created by the war and its aftermath produced a climate in American and European culture conducive to the functional use of groups. In Great Britain, the leaderless group became a useful mechanism for identifying leader-like individuals to fill an unprecedented need for military officers. This work, conducted by War Office Selection Boards, provided the impetus for viewing groups in creative, new ways by the Tavistock Institute who led the development of the field of group dynamics. Groups became an unexpected vehicle for the therapeutic treatment of post-war trauma victims. The issues of repatriation and resocialization became loci for group-based interventions (Miller, 1992).

As in Great Britain, the war itself became the catalyst for foundational research about groups in the US. Lewin, in conjunction with French and Marrow, studied group decision processes as a means of improving industrial production. With Margaret Mead, he investigated the group as a vehicle for
influencing American attitudes in an effort to facilitate the adjustment of the population to shortages of common foods (Cartwright and Zander, 1963). Other social concerns of the post-war era, including race relations, further supported a growing interest in groups as a medium of influence and information. Thus, the ground upon which the field of group dynamics was built unselfconsciously admits to the intention of utilizing groups as a means of social influence and control.

The post W.W.II years presented significant challenges to US society best understood by considering this country's history. As a nation founded by Europeans in search of greater political and religious expression who willingly severed ties to their homelands, an image of personal sacrifice for a more noble cause ensconced early settlers. Bound by a common goal and mutual dependence, later immigrants to the US were motivated to overlook what were certainly important differences among groups and individuals. That these differences were typically not visibly distinguishable, since these European transplants were most often white Caucasians with fair complexions, undoubtedly enabled the minimization of differences.

The fairy tale beginning of the formation of the United States of America is generally retold with the intentional exclusion of accounts of the Native American experience or the story of the introduction of African Americans as slaves (Zinn, 1980). This idealistic and popular fictive account of history has given rise to the well-known metaphor of the US as a melting pot, welcoming and nurturing all people seeking freedom and sanctuary from oppression.

For the earliest groups of immigrants, the melting pot implied amalgamation, the combining of ethnicities to form an integrated, unified whole (Davis, 1978). For later groups entering the US, the melting process became assimilation. Margaret Mead (1995) describes this phenomenon:

Immigrants from Europe were subjected to the extreme racial ethnocentrism characteristic of the English-speaking settlers, who held Eastern and Southern European immigrants in low self esteem. . . . To enter the mainstream of American culture it was on the whole necessary to change one’s name, move away from an ethnic neighborhood and slowly adopt “protective coloration” (p. 305).
Assimilation is generally defined as the blending of previously distinguishable sociocultural groups into a common entity (DeVos, 1995; Mead, 1995; Yinger, 1994; Young, 1976). According to Mead, ethnic assimilation is "...the doctrine of the melting pot which states that the kind of product desired from the melting process may change through time, but the goal is always production of a standard product" (p. 309). Harry Triandis (1976) introduces an additional element in his definition of assimilation as "...a policy of making each cultural group adopt the culture of the mainstream" (p. 180). Though by strict definition assimilation allows for reciprocity among all parties, each making a vaguely equal contribution to the resulting culture, Triandis gives voice to an often silenced aspect of assimilation in Western civilization. Generally the dominant, more powerful group exerts pressure on less powerful groups, besieging them to make the necessary accommodations to "fit in" in order to gain the opportunity to achieve equal status.

The post war decade is often described as an era of conformity (Jahoda, 1959). Though in its simplest sense, conformity implies no more than agreement with a majority opinion, Jahoda suggests that "on a higher level of insight, conformity is regarded as the reduction of diversity through social influence processes" (p. 100). Her observation helps us appreciate the myriad of pressures encouraging ethnic assimilation during this period.

In view of our discussion of assimilation, it is interesting to note that in the 1950s, the decade immediately following the end of W.W.II, the top five countries of origin of US immigrants were Germany, Canada, Mexico, Britain, and Italy. During the 1980s, only Mexico still remained in the top five, with the other four all being Asian countries (Yinger, 1994, p.33). Clearly, one of the most salient differences between the post-war years and the 1990s is this dramatic shift in the composition of immigrants, and ultimately the entire population. The Second Half of the 1990s

The world population is increasing at the unprecedented rate of almost one billion per decade. In the past, growth has typically been concentrated in the societies with the greatest wealth. This is no longer the case. Today the largest population increases are occurring in the poorest countries (Yinger,
1994). We are also experiencing increased ethnic interpenetration due to rising social and geographic mobility supported by shifting labor markets (DeVos, 1995).

These realities, in tandem with political turbulence, have rendered the 90s a period characterized by constant change and high levels of uncertainty and ambiguity. The issues at hand are unquestionably complex, and simple solutions clearly do not exist.

Unique to this era is the concept of globalization. Societies have effectively become more public as advanced technologies enable greater communication and a broader and deeper sharing of data and knowledge worldwide. Two important outcomes of this increased access to information are: 1) The magnitude of Western influence is intensified, and 2) The gross inequities in the distribution of wealth and power are painfully visible. This sense of the private made public suggests that the US in particular, and the West in general, must admit ownership of a significant responsibility to the rest of the world. Our resources, our technological capabilities, and our capacity to influence represent the tools that can positively impact the future of humanity. According to Havel (1995), “The main task of the coming era is a radical renewal of our sense of responsibility. Our conscience must catch up with our reason, otherwise we are lost” (p. 34).

Due in part to demographic changes within the US, a compelling shift in the social context has been gaining strength. Unlike the conformity or uni-norm-ity of the post W.W.II period, the rise in social consciousness in the 1960s, with its focus on anti-establishment activities and positions, re-ignited and popularized the American tradition of freedom of expression, giving currency to individual difference and non-conformity. Blacks, women, gays, lesbians, and many ethnic groups responded to this window of opportunity, actively staking their claim to a piece of American culture.

This awakening of ethnic Americans to the devaluation of their own cultures and the lack of inclusion of their histories in the tales spun in classrooms and text books led to a climate in which minorities contested their lack of recognition. In his 1995 commencement address at Harvard, Václav Havel calls our attention to a seemingly paradoxical quality of a world moving toward a global perspective.
Ancient traditions are reviving, different religions and cultures are awakening to new ways of being, seeking new room to exist and struggling with growing fervor to realize what is unique to them and what makes them different than others. ... It is often said that in our time, every valley cries out for its own independence or will even fight for it (pp. 32-33).

This discussion of the predominant qualities of US culture in the late 1990s leads us to two important conclusions. First, concern for the degree of cultural fragmentation in society is widely shared (Glazer, 1997; Hollinger, 1995; Kidder, 1994, Yinger, 1994). Yinger asserts, "One can detect in the United States today a shrinking of the common ground of culture" (p. 75). Dinesh D'Souza (1995) gives words to a haunting fear: "To say that all that unites Americans is their diversity is another way of saying that there is nothing that unites Americans" (p. 546). Opinions vary, but there is generally agreement that US society is becoming continuously more heterogeneous, and that multiculturism is an issue profoundly impacting the future (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swindler, and Tipton, 1991; Glazer, 1997; Hävel, 1995; Taylor, 1994).

Second, the assimilationist approach is no longer acceptable. Yinger notes that in the academic arena, using the word assimilation is akin to swearing. Within the social sciences there is a strong bias toward recognizing multiculturalism, honoring pluralism, and embracing diversity. Practitioners, nonetheless, continue to rely heavily on theories and methodologies that grew out of the assimilationist era.

A Mandate for New Theory

A need exists for new theories of group dynamics to support the practices and institutions people encounter in their daily lives. The context of the world today has changed in critical ways that mandate a reconceptualization of the assumptions underlying the field and practice of group dynamics. We must be prepared to address the rising heterogeneity of group composition characterized by dissimilarities in culture, values, and customs, while honoring the commonly expressed desire to preserve these differences. New theory will enable social scientists to support the growing globalization of groups and organizations, making space for the continuance of this pluralism.
As always, small groups are vehicles of communication and meaning making, presenting a forum for creating understanding, precipitating action, and leveraging change. They are the building blocks of our organizations and institutions; the microcosms of larger social systems (Myers, 1993). Groups are a vital mechanism through which patterns of power relations are reproduced and maintained in organizations (Nkomo and Cox, 1996).

The Role of Conceptual Frames in Shaping Theory

Every theory has a conceptual home, having emerged from a metatheoretical framework that positions the new theory within a paradigm (Slife and Williams, 1995). These metatheories tacitly shape our perceptual lenses by serving as “...a frame of reference which reflects a whole series of assumptions about the nature of the social world and the way it might be investigated” (Burrell and Morgan, 1979, p. x). As such, “they play an important role in shaping the methodological and normative standards of judgment. These social worldviews provide a common background of taken-for-granted understandings about social reality” (Ritzer, 1992, p. 88).

Metatheoretical frames in the form of paradigms or worldviews determine how we experience the world. “We cannot see things unless we are prepared to see them” (deBono, 1990, p. 136). Our conceptual frame is supplied by our experiences. “Experience forms perceptions and perceptions...allow us to see things in a particular way. When you look up at the night sky do you see a spot of light or do you see a ‘star’?” (p. 129).

Kuhn (1962) aptly describes the path of scientific revolution as consisting of building pressure within an existing paradigm, eventually forcing a shift to a new frame more compatible with current experience. Kuhn does not miss the irony of scientific paradigms. While the development of what he calls normal science depends on the existence of a paradigm which in certain ways is “...an attempt to force nature into the preformed and relatively inflexible box” (p. 24), the confidence in the paradigm also enables deep investigation of minute areas that would be impossible without such a firm, unshakable foundation. Regrettfully, this phenomenon results in “...drastically restricted vision” (p. 24).

Kuhn traces the process of paradigm shifts to the encountering of anomalies--experiences that do not conform to expectations consistent with our theories. As we witness increasing anomalous situations
or outcomes, we are forced to reexamine our previously unassailable view of the world. Reluctantly, we
consider the possibility that our theories-in-use are no longer adequate.

We have reached such a juncture with group dynamics theory. Its applicability and usefulness in
many situations faced today is questionable. Later we will look closely at the organismic origins of this
theory, identifying the implicit underlying assumptions of its metatheoretical roots. This will lead us to
consider the possibility of a significant paradigmatic shift, creating new opportunities for the emergence
of more appropriate and relevant theory.

Root Metaphor Theory: An Introduction

It is at this point in our journey that we introduce a metatheoretical framework we found helpful
in understanding and communicating why the usefulness of group dynamics theories appears to be
diminishing. Stephen Pepper's (1942) root metaphor theory has been applied to counseling style
preference (Lyddon and Adamson, 1992), developmental psychology (Reese and Overton, 1970), models
of identity development (Myers, Speight, Highlen, Cox, Reynolds, Adams, and Hanley, 1991), industrial
psychology (Payne, 1976), psychoanalysis (McGuire, 1979), and qualitative research methods (Pettigrew,
1985). Pepper proposes four world hypotheses, or worldviews, essentially in competition with each other
(Kuhn, 1962) for top status as a basis for meaning-making. The four worldviews, formism, mechanism,
organicism, and contextualism, each provide a bounded interpretive field of unlimited scope. This is to
say that each worldview, differentiated by its own root metaphor, purports to enable understanding of all
facts and phenomena. The following brief introduction to each of the worldviews and its respective root
metaphor will provide sufficient knowledge of Pepper's schema to light the path to the next phase of our
exploration.

Formism is characterized by the root metaphor of similarity. The approach is analytic, enabling
classification of objects or phenomena according to their common qualities. Essences are static, providing
no provision for change and no consideration of context. The correspondence theory of truth is associated
with this worldview, asserting that a statement is true if what it refers to actually exists. The purest
representative of formistic theory is Plato's Theory of Ideal Forms.
The worldview of mechanism is most easily understood by reflecting on its root metaphor, the machine. Reductionistic and functionalist, the view through the lens of mechanism explains the world in terms of cause-effect relationships. Truth is established by what Pepper (1942) calls causal-adjustment theory. Verification and predictability of linear, causal relationships through observation and measurement of the machine in operation provides the data for determining truth. Frederick Taylor's scientific management, with its emphasis on time and motion studies, and breaking work processes into the smallest possible parts, is a notable example of theory rooted in mechanism.

Unity, alignment, integration, and holism are appropriate descriptors of the organismic worldview. The organic process, the root metaphor of organicism, alleges that everything we observe or experience is in actuality a part of a harmonious and fully understandable whole. Implicit is the idea of ascensionism, assuming continuous movement toward a perfect state; a constant drive toward higher orders of complexity yielding a more evolved state of equilibrium. Should we encounter something puzzling and unexplainable, organicists would submit that we must not be considering a large enough whole. The coherence theory of truth is most appropriate to organicism, asserting that truth is determined by the ability to integrate an idea or proposition into a larger, coherent, interrelated body of knowledge. Systems theory, which attempts to align propositions with an objective state of affairs, is clearly a product of the organicist worldview (Wilber, 1995). Systems theorists imply that there "are no accidents" and that every system is essentially perfect and complete the way it is (Berman, 1996).

Contextualism focuses on actions and events occurring interactively in a specific context. Within this worldview, nothing is static, universal, or unchanging, making it virtually impossible to categorize entities or phenomena. The root metaphor of contextualism is the historic event which is embedded in an identifiable environment and is revealed over a period of time. The historic event is known, however, in the active present where meaning is made retrospectively. The relevant theory of truth is qualitative confirmation, since knowledge will change as context changes (Pettigrew, 1985). The fluidity inherent in contextualism, and the local character of knowledge, challenge our expectations for theoretical neatness processed and packaged in rational, critical thinking. Social constructionism (Berger and Luckman, 1966) is an example of theory with strong ties to the contextualist worldview, maintaining that individuals
are largely responsible for creating their own experience and reality through mutual negotiation and agreement within a particular social aggregate.

It is within these four frames that we seek to find the theoretical spawning ground of the field of group dynamics. To reach the next stop on our itinerary, we now focus on a definition of group dynamics.

A Definition of Group Dynamics

In the years following the second world war, a distinct field of inquiry and practice appeared which became known as group dynamics. Early sociologists, including Durkheim (1858-1913) and Cooley (1864-1929), developed foundational theories of social organizing. The growing field of psychology moved toward greater acknowledgment of a dynamic unconscious, suggesting the possibility of non-rational human behavior (Hunt, 1993). The study of groups as a genre in its own right, bearing a unique flavor distinguishing it from its sociological and psychological roots, is thus relatively recent (Cartwright and Zander, 1968).

Considering the work of respected researchers describing their conceptions of the field of group dynamics (Cartwright and Zander, 1953; Gillette and McCollom, 1990), we offer the following four tenets that together define the important elements common to the theories shaping the field of group dynamics:

1. A reliance on empirical data. There is an emphasis on understanding groups by conducting research that is empirically significant (Cartwright and Zander, 1963; Farrell, 1976; Frey, 1994). The social sciences can be explored and explained using the techniques of the hard sciences.

2. Group theory is universal and generalizable. The experimental focus of group dynamics seeks to discover general principles concerning which conditions produce particular effects in groups (Cartwright and Zander, 1963; Lewin, 1947). In these groups, “context is relatively de-emphasized” (Gillette and McCollom, 1990, p. 6).

3. The intention to improve social relations and institutions. The purpose of understanding group process is to apply theoretical findings to social practice, promoting systemic change toward a greater good (Cartwright and Zander, 1963; Myers, 1993). Lewin (1947) clearly states, “group experimentation is a form of social management” (p. 193).
4. Groups are entities that can be seen as dynamic wholes. Groups are like organisms, (Bennis and Shepard, 1956; Bion, 1959; Gibb, 1978; Wells, 1990), possessing qualities that are uniquely different from the characteristics of the individual members in the same way that "...molecules have properties which are different from the properties of the atoms or ions of which they are composed (Lewin, 1951, pp. 191-192). Gibb (1978) illustrates the common tendency to combine individual group members in a conceptual whole.

Each group emerges as a special kind of organism. ...Each group is unique, as different from other groups as a person is from other persons. A group is more than a collection of persons, more than the sum of its parts. It has being and essence (p. 150).

The metaphor of the group as an entity or organism is frequently regarded as a higher developmental state. Turquet (1974) purports that a state of oneness between the individual and the group is achieved "when members seek to join in a powerful union with an omnipotent force, unobtainably high, to surrender self for passive participation, and thereby to feel existence, well-being, and wholeness" (p. 357).

Conceiving of groups as discrete units helps social scientists manage their potentially overwhelming complexity and feel a greater sense of mastery and control. It also allows intervention on a group level, leveraging efforts to shape or influence social behavior. Additionally, practitioners may call upon familiar theories of individual human growth and development to inform observations of groups.

Group dynamics theory leads to an increased sense of control, understanding, and expert status by the social scientist as a facilitator of movement toward a destiny of ever-increasing holism. Taken together, the four shared principles of group dynamics theory reflect a central theme, a theme that we will show is a product of Pepper's organismic worldview.

The Organismic Worldview

We contend that group dynamics theory is embedded in the organismic worldview, along with most organization theory since the 1950s. This is a strong and perhaps provocative position which we hope will stimulate productive dialogue. The convergence of humanistic psychology (Maslow, 1943), with von Bertalanffy's (1951) general systems theory, led to a new approach to people in organizations,
most acutely represented by the work of McGregor (1957). The possibility of a paradigmatic shift from mechanism to organicism was set forth by Burns and Stalker (1961) who contrasted mechanistic and organic forms of organizing. Subsequent organization theory emphasizing workplace democracy, empowerment, and open systems thinking (Block, 1990; Katz and Kahn, 1978; Lawler, 1986; Mohrman, Mohrman, Ledford, Cummings, Lawler, and Assoc., 1989; Peters and Waterman, 1982) unassailably embodies the principles of organicism.

Pepper (1942) traces the philosophical roots of organicism to Schelling, Hegel, Green, Bradley, Bosanquet, and Royce. Most important to the organismic paradigm is the idea of the unity of all things. Truth is thus found in the complete system, the place where differences are reconciled as the role and function of each part ultimately finds its proper place in harmony with the whole. Hegel professes a basic unity between God and man, embracing the notion of absolute knowing and a certainty that all things will ultimately converge in a synthetic whole (Hegel, 1974). History is thus linear rather than circular in the Greek tradition, chronicling progress toward human perfectibility. Pepper’s conceptualization of organicism stresses the organic process as movement toward an ideal; the additive evolution of knowing, always intentional about uncovering the pieces leading to discovery of the perfection which already exists. “The resolution is always an integration of conflicting fragments. Progress moves from level to level of integration” (p. 298), leading to theory that is aspirational and appealing due to its reassuring hopefulness.

Influential in shaping this worldview, general systems theory (von Bertalanffy, 1951) provided a universal explanation of the unity of the sciences. In The Nature of Living Systems (1971), Miller describes the universe as a “...hierarchy of systems, each higher level of system being composed of systems of lower levels” (p. 39).

In her article, “Organismic Process: A Paradigm for Freeing Human Creativity”, (1980), Crampton describes the paradigm as “...an evolutionary process or organicist whole aiming toward higher orders of creative synthesis. ...a combinatorial process which increases unity-in-multiplicity” (p. 133). The process of creative synthesis occurs through differentiation and integration. “Differentiation produces multiplicity. Integration combines differentiation into more complex wholes” (p. 133). This process occurs in dynamic equilibrium, suggesting a Lewinian quasi-stationary state.
The organismic worldview invites an image of perpetual change, but according to Pepper (1942), such an assumption would be unsound. In actuality, the apparent change within this paradigm is incremental or evolutionary, and the only direction of movement is up. Inherent is the idea of ascendance toward an absolute ideal.

Change is simply the reconfiguration of elements within a bounded frame. This effect is reminiscent of the traditional wintry snow scene suspended in water inside a glass globe. When shaken vigorously, the snow flies, transforming the scene dramatically, creating the visual illusion of a fierce blizzard. When the artificial snowflakes settle, they are surely repositioned, yet the micro world entombed within the glass ball has not really changed.

**Group Dynamics Theory: The Operationalization of Organicism**

Four characteristics of organismism can be seen as most relevant to group dynamics theory: 1) The universe is knowable and truth is systemic; 2) There is an ultimate unity of all things, an ideal; 3) As the universe moves toward greater harmony, progress is measured by the degree of integration and “fit.” The conceptual ideal is the complete assimilation of all parts in a unified, coherent whole and, 4) An implicit hierarchy of systems exists within the universe. As illustrated in Table 1, these organismic principles can be aligned to the four tenets of group dynamics theory presented earlier.

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Insert Table 1 About Here

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Group dynamics theories can be viewed as the operationalization of organismism. By focusing on a number of the widely shared elements featured in the literature, we will show how their enactment supports an organismist worldview. The following list of characteristics associated with positive group functioning reflects the consistent message indigenous to the field of group dynamics: 1) Cohesiveness and positive identification with group membership; 2) Shared goals and vision; 3) Development of agreed-upon norms to assist in fulfillment of task and maintenance requirements, effective decision making, conflict resolution, and individual satisfaction; 4) Capacity to reach consensus on relevant issues, and 5) Evidence of development toward increased maturity and sophistication over time (Bennis and
Shepard, 1956; Brower, 1989; Burnand, 1990; Cartwright and Zander, 1968; McGrath, 1984; Moreland and Levine, 1988; Schein, 1988; Shaw, 1981; Tuckman, 1963; Tuckman and Jensen, 1977; Wheelan and McKeage, 1993; Yalom, 1985; Zander, 1987). The model which is introduced in the next section will more clearly demonstrate how the organicist paradigm, operationalized through group dynamics theory, continues to prevail because of its tendency to reproduce itself with only minimal, incremental changes. Transformational change becomes possible only through intentional, purposive behaviors consciously chosen to dislodge and reframe theory in a new paradigm.

**The Self-Fulfilling Nature of Group Dynamics Theory**  
**Within the Organismic Paradigm: A System of Social Control?**

Beginning with the idea of the group as a unit of analysis, we have created a model describing the way group dynamics theory perpetuates itself within the organismic worldview. The cycle we see is iterative and self-sustaining, continuously reinforcing principles and practices that support the social systems and power structure of the post W.W. II era. There is a rather popular notion that one very natural way in which people make sense of the world is through their experiences which are often self-fulfilling prophecies. Weick asserts that "people create and find what they expect to find" (p. 35), a comment reminiscent of our earlier discussion of the role of conceptual frames\(^1\). Argyris and Schön (1974) assert that to some degree, every theory-in-use is a self-fulfilling prophecy. In order to create new theory more closely attuned to the needs of the contemporary world, the cycle must be recognized and broken.

Table 2 represents the process by which a human system continues to reproduce itself by repeating a series of steps that support the self-sustaining way our perceptual lenses direct our attention and program us to see exactly what we have come to expect to see. The model presented is devoid of context, making it flexible and transportable.

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Insert Table 2 About Here

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\(^1\) Refer to the deBono quotations in the earlier section "The Role of Conceptual Frames in Shaping Theory" which foreshadows the notion of interpreting our experiences in ways that fulfill our expectations.
As text, the model reads like this: The group as a unit of analysis requires cohesiveness, enabling the group to act as a single entity to reach consensus, enabling perpetuation of the majority or dominant viewpoint, leading to absorbing differences through assimilation, enabling the generalizability of group theory, ensuring the perpetuation of our perceptual frame-in-use and the status quo. We are describing a cyclic, largely unconscious process in which change does occur incrementally, but is often indiscernible. A tour of the six positions in the cycle will illustrate the way the process unfolds, leading to normative control.

**Cohesiveness**

Zander (1982) defines cohesiveness, a consistent concern in the study of groups, as “the strength of members’ desire to remain members” (p. 4). Downing (1958) regards cohesiveness as “an attempt to define the very stuff of social interaction” (p. 157). The functional importance of cohesiveness for effective group operations has been argued in the group dynamics literature (Cartwright and Zander, 1968; Levine and Moreland, 1990; Stogdill, 1959; Zander, 1982). The degree of cohesiveness in a group can be measured by the level of comfort and safety, commitment to group goals, strength of norms, degree of adherence to norms, and the attractiveness of group membership. In highly cohesive groups, members influence each other to a greater extent than in less cohesive groups (Downing, 1958; Zander, 1982).

Though cohesiveness and a shared identity is generally considered to be beneficial to group operations, there are a few exceptions in the area of decision making (Harvey, 1988; Janis, 1971).² Cohesiveness generates sufficient commonality to enable a group to act, and to be acted upon, as a single entity. “The units rules, policies, norms, or required practices, designated as group standards represent proper behavior so the body can be viable and effective” (Zander, 1982, p. 46).

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² The notion of group think presented by these authors raises issues suggesting flawed decision making in some groups. Cohesiveness could be regarded as a deterrent to critical thinking in homogeneous groups, or in groups with conflict averse cultures.
Cohesiveness tends to build congruence and homogeneity. "The structural integrity of a group is dependent to a large degree upon the commonality of expectations and values among its members, particularly as these relate to the group purpose and operations" (Stogdill, 1959, p. 79). Schein (1988) describes the process of a group becoming a cohesive unit as the emergence of a distinct identity with a culture of its own. "If the culture that develops works it will ultimately be taken for granted as the only correct way for group members to see the world" (p. 206). Like a well-trained team of synchronous swimmers, the cohesive group faces the important task of decision making with a spirit of mutuality, ready to reach agreements through consensus.

**Consensus**

Cohesiveness readies a group to move forward in unison, making choices that can be supported by all members. "Any group's goal should be to reach decisions that best reflect the thinking of all group members. We call this 'reaching consensus'" (Scholtes, 1988, p. 2-40). A common measure of group effectiveness is the ability to work together collaboratively, making quality decisions consensually. "Ordinarily, if all goes well, members have enough commonality of opinions to finally agree about which alternatives are better" (Zander, 1982, p. 18).

Once again, the homogeneous group, the basis of group dynamics theory, in which members share a common heritage and similar goals and values, is most apt to find consensus an acceptable form of making decisions. The intent of consensus is to give all voices the opportunity to be heard, and through rational discussion, to reach agreement about outcomes deemed satisfactory by all participants. In some groups, the ideal of consensus is undoubtedly a reality, but consensus can also become a sanctioned form of tyranny.

**Perpetuation of the Majority View**

Many of the theories in the group dynamics genre omit power, both internal and external, on group processes, presuming a society of equals (Berman, 1996). In a group with implicit or explicit power differences, consensus can be an oppressive technique, frequently silencing minority voices, all the while wearing the benign mask of egalitarianism. Guinier (1994), in her work, *The Tyranny of the Majority*, contrasts homogeneous and heterogeneous societies.
The majority may not represent the whole. In a homogeneous society, the interest of the majority would likely be that of the minority also. But in a heterogeneous community, the majority may not represent all competing interests. The majority is likely to be self-interested and ignorant or indifferent to the concerns of the minority. In such cases...the assumption that the majority represents the minority is “altogether fictitious”. (p. 3).

Zaleznik and Moment (1964) assert that “the more nearly an individual conforms to group norms, the higher his rank or social position in the group” (p. 117). This posit suggests that the greatest amount of power will be held by those who are most compliant, least deviant, and are enthusiastically supportive of the majority values and perspective. Thus, the group will tend to reinforce dominant norms and viewpoints.

Since “members who have more power usually have more say in the final decision” (Zander, 1982, p. 18), we begin to see the possibility of oppression through consensus. With so many forces working to achieve compliance and homogeneity, coupled with the rewarding of conformity with power and influence, our experience suggests the conclusion that minority opinions will seldom prevail, and will only occasionally be permitted to enlarge the scope and depth of discussion. As Guinier (1994) aptly suggests, “The tyranny of the majority is just as much a problem of silencing minority viewpoints as it is of excluding minority representatives or preferences” (p. 20).

The groundwork for perpetuating the majority viewpoint in a group has been expertly laid by encouraging cohesiveness and decision making by consensus, rendering the continuation of the majority viewpoint the path of least resistance. The result of these covert processes is assimilation of differences, and an ever-increasing uniformity among individual group members.

Assimilation

Assimilation of differences results when group norms are clear, are reinforced and rewarded by the power bearing majority, and are encouraged by influential group members capable of retaliating against dissenters by excluding them from membership. According to Katz and Kahn (1976), “the recourse and sanctions that the group can use for conformity to its values and for deviance from its norms constitute a major source of compliance” (p. 389). Levine and Moreland (1990) further stress the role
played by members in urging group mates to blend and conform: "attempts are made by newcomers and oldtimers to alter one another in ways that make them more compatible. Successful socialization often increases homogeneity within the group even further" (p. 597). Normative control is achieved as the self-fulfilling nature of group dynamics theory continues to repeat the pattern.

Generalizability of Group Theory

Successful assimilation of differences enables generalization of group dynamics theory. The universalizing spirit of group dynamics is epitomized by the words of Tuckman (1965) as he introduces his well known "forming, storming, norming, performing" schema of developmental stages in groups:

"The following model is offered as a conceptualization of changes in group behavior, in both social and task realms, across all group settings, over time" (p. 384). The fact that most theory disregards the impact of internal and external contextual factors completes the self-fulfilling cycle of how group dynamics theory perpetuates itself.

Universalized theories shape our perceptual frame. "Theories-in-use are theories of the artificial; they help to create as well as describe the behavioral worlds to which they apply" (Argyris and Schön, 1974, p. 30). These theories thus encourage and maintain the status quo. "The constancy of theories-in-use is considered as valuable as the constancy of the behavioral worlds created by those theories" (p. 30). Without an intentional effort to revisit and challenge existing theories, we are unaware of gradual erosion in the appropriateness and usefulness of our theories-in-use.

As we have seen, the way we look at and make sense of groups through an organismic frame tends to reproduce itself in a cyclic fashion with only minor incremental change. de Bono (1990) contends that circularity is the basis of all systems of perceptual truth. "Beliefs are self-fulfilling systems" (p. 129). He also suggests that perceptions are circumstance-dependent, and furthermore:

When we think we are analyzing data we are actually only looking at it through our existing paradigms and with a limited range of available concepts. In the future we may come back to the same data and see them very differently. There is therefore a practical reason for re-examining old data through new perceptions (p. 278).
Why Group Dynamics Theories Lack Utility

As we begin to explore alternatives to traditional group dynamics theory, we will first pose and consider some questions. Why isn't group dynamics theory working well? Where is it falling short, and what are the likely consequences of its diminishing effectiveness? A theme of our journey has been the changing composition of groups amidst a turbulent global environment. We have shown that as societies become more pluralistic, existing group dynamics theories have proven to be less helpful, leaving social scientists bereft of useful methods and tools to assist them in their efforts to contribute to social reform.

The fatal flaw of group dynamics theory, when laid as a template upon many of the groups we encounter today, is the assumption of a reasonably homogeneous constituency, similarly endowed with power, and possessing the capacity and desire to share values and goals. Less and less often is this assumption of sameness valid. Despite inconsistent and varied use of the term diversity, with definitions ranging from narrow (e.g., considering a single dimension such as race or gender) to very broad conceptualizations, inclusive of a myriad of possible differences, the popular press has made diversity a buzz-word of pro-active, forward-thinking organizations (Nkomo and Cox, 1995). Given the rising frequency of significant heterogeneity in groups, the mandate to value diversity, and the accepted prescription for success provided by the organismic paradigm ensuring that the norms and values of the dominant group will generally prevail, we can expect some or all of the following outcomes:

1. The process of finding a way to work together and reach agreement about norms will be arduous. The group may never reach the level of groupness required to accomplish even very basic tasks, resulting in dissolution of the group or a loss of members. The group dynamics literature has addressed this kind of situation by essentially recommending more of the same--repeat the process of group formation, try harder to arrive at acceptable norms, dig deeper to unearth common values, and attempt to make group membership more attractive. None of these approaches is likely to overcome an impasse resulting from a lack of fundamental ideological agreement, particularly in a culture in which non-dominant groups have been socialized to believe that there is an alternative to assimilation (e.g., the U.S).

2. Because the process of selecting norms and reaching decisions by consensus favors the attitudes, values, and desires of the dominant group as the locus of the greatest concentration of power, it is
expected that their viewpoint will prevail. Arney and Bergen (1984) call attention to a potential “tyranny of harmony” which they warn does not necessarily reflect a free or humane social system. The frequency with which there is overt or covert dissatisfaction with consensual agreements is certain to be higher in heterogeneous groups.

When individuals overtly express their dissatisfaction with group decisions, values, or norms, there may be conflict. Resistant members may rebel, actively seeking to defeat or sabotage group goals. In extreme cases, a counter-movement might be mobilized by minority interest groups. Unable to comprehend and act on the underlying culture and values conflicts provoking resistance, group dynamics favors repositioning resistance as primarily an individual problem, or in some cases of resistance, as a stage of group development in which the group expresses anger toward the leader as an authority figure (Bion, 1959; Slater, 1966, Tuckman, 1964). In either case, the preferred outcome is to turn resistant members into team players, or to help the group understand their dependency issues causing them to misdirect their anger toward the leader. The manifestation of resistance is consistently regarded to be the “acting out” of an essentially pathological response. The possibility of resistance as a healthy response to pressure or coercion threatening individual or group identity is generally lacking.

Another response to disagreement or discomfort with group norms and culture is covert, assuming the appearance of conforming. Though some members will actually attempt to bend to the dominant culture, others will simply feign acceptance. This approach avoids public resistance or confrontation, behaviors unnatural to some individuals and ethnic groups. Pretending is also a form of protection from possible retaliation by dominant group members. Gulach (1996) suggests that management “no longer simply wants employees compliance; they want an end to alienation and internal politics through the complete internalization of corporate values” (p. 431). A number of studies have called attention to the negative effects of the cognitive dissonance which may result when individuals attempt to adjust to living in a culture with values incompatible with their own (Hayes, 1990, Kunda, 1992).

Group dynamics theories offer no remedies to the tension created by pressures to conform, no method of diagnosing a gross mismatch between group norms and individual values, and no alternative
techniques or processes aimed at minimizing the necessity for such complete internalization of organizational culture.

3. With the frequency of downsizing, reducing levels of management, a competitive global market, and a resulting tendency to outsource functions previously handled within the organization, there has been a gradual but abiding change in the employee-employer contract. Organizations are becoming less paternalistic, and in response, employees are less loyal. The net outcome is that employees are growing less likely to view the internalization of an organization’s values, culture, and goals as being in their own best interest.

4. The rising use of project teams to achieve organizational results assumes improvement in task performance. If the team is engaged in activities requiring innovation or creative thinking, a heterogeneous group is often deemed more desirable. Some research has explored the performance differences in homogeneous and heterogeneous groups, but little has been offered to assist social scientists in working with highly diverse groups (Watson, Kumar, and Michaelsen, 1993).

Lawrence, Bain, and Gould (1996) explain that as a result of the turbulence in industrial societies, “the individual loses faith and trust in any structure, whether good or bad, that is greater than the individual” (p. 35). In an environment the authors characterize as “persecuting,” individuals are prone to withdraw into themselves, employing social alienation as a coping mechanism. Observations of such a phenomenon in groups has led them to expand Bion’s schema to include a fifth basic assumption which they call “Me-Ness” (baM). Attributable to selfishness and protection of individual interests in response to perceived threats at the societal level, baM is apparent when members “act as if the group had no existence because if it did exist it would be the source of persecuting experiences” (p. 36).

Lawrence et al. suggest that the presence of baM may be transitional as opposed to permanent, surfacing during a time in which the world is moving toward a new, emerging post-colonial global organizational configuration reflecting republicanism and democracy. The authors’ observations of the current social environment are congruent with our analysis of the social climate of the 1990s. The “Me-Ness” they report could be regarded as support for one manifestation of resistance we allege is likely to occur in response to the pressure to conform and ultimately be assimilated by the majority position. The
Lawrence et al. study also implies a need to re-examine the pervasive assumption of a nearly universal motivation for membership in groups.

The inability of organicism-based group theory to meet the needs of practitioners becomes exceedingly apparent if we consider the impact of increasingly heterogeneous group composition in tandem with the likeliness and frequency of being called upon to facilitate group process in unfamiliar contexts. As we become conscious of what Kidder (1994) refers to as "worldshrink," and how the pressures of population, communication, and economics will require unimaginable levels of global interdependence, we are compelled to acknowledge and address the shortcomings of the current theoretical frame.

**The Contextualistic Worldview: A Crack in the Paradigm**

Metatheories are the ontological tectonic plates of paradigm shifts. The rumblings and crevices in underlying assumptions yield altered perceptual lenses through which the data of experience is gathered in new and different ways. The final phase of this journey begins with a description of Pepper’s (1942) worldview, contextualism. We then investigate the potential for crafting relevant new group theory for a multicultural environment from within the contextualistic worldview, exploring the shape and attributes of contextualistic research. We end with a discussion of what lies ahead; the questions we must answer, and the direction of future exploration.

The roots of contextualism lie in the pragmatic philosophy of truth, whose purpose is to serve practical human needs. Attempting to reconcile theory and practice, pragmatism makes practice the testing of ideas. Developed by C.S. Peirce (1839-1914), William James (1842-1910), and John Dewey (1859-1952), pragmatism is often described as the unique American philosophy.

Facing the pluralism of the modernist world, the pragmatic philosophers broke epistemologically with the positivists' correspondence theory of truth. The pragmatists contended that universal correspondence with reality was impossible. Epistemologically, truth for the pragmatists is not actual, but potential—never total, but partial and tentative. Abandoning traditional conceptions of validity, a future-oriented, constructivist approach emerged, with a focus on the clarification of ideas. This is the orientation of Berger and Luckman’s (1966) sociological theories of the social construction of reality.

The supposition that truth is not lying dormant, waiting to be discovered, gives way to a contextual view of truth, being created or produced in action. The focus is on the practical consequences of alternative answers, and an attitude toward scientific theories as instruments to guide future action, rather than as final answers to questions about nature. The pragmatists’ concern with utility and preoccupation with action is reflected in the thinking of Dewey, whose conception of a true idea emphasized the applicability of a concept to equip individuals to exert control over their environments, the true idea being verifiable only to the extent that it provides an “assertability” evoking the confidence required to act upon an hypothesis in order to solve problems (Diggins, 1994).

The neopragmatists, the most notable of whom is Richard Rorty, reinterpreted the work of the earlier pragmatists. Rorty (1989) poses the imaginative creation and building of a human solidarity based upon a common perception of strangers as fellow sufferers. Foregoing the traditional philosophic notion of the discovery of a deeper common essence resonating among beings, Rorty underscores the role of contingency in the establishment of human values. “What counts as being a decent human being is relative to historical circumstances, a matter of transient consensus about what attitudes are normal, and what practices are just or unjust” (p. 189). Clearly, the neopragmatists strengthened the notion of the social construction of culture, norms, and beliefs.

Pepper's (1942) contextualist worldview, like the pragmatists and the neopragmatists, is steeped in utility. Its root metaphor is the historic event experienced in the dynamic present, structuring meaning in the present event, and working synthetically from the present outward. This dynamic, non-linear approach to time enables contextualism to take into account preceding events, future events, and the impact of these events on each other. Sensemaking unfolds within the experiencing, living, and acting in the widened scope of the moment.

Due to the gestalt of interconnection and mutual interpenetration among events, contextualists assert that clear distinctions and categorizations are ambiguous and arbitrary, cloaking life in an aura of relativity. Contextualism thus seeks only fair approximation, acknowledging that the historic event is
typically marked by an inexhaustible number of relations whose individual strands can be followed for multiple meaning-making possibilities. Dispersive and disorderly, the core assumption of contextualism is change, ever aware of the lack of permanence in the world. The table below contrasts the organicist and contextualist worldviews.

Insert Table 3 About Here

Contextualist Group Theory

We have reached a pivotal point in our journey, having finally arrived at a place of readiness to reflect and speculate about the future of group theory. We believe that research can be conducted using a contextualistic process, and we feel certain that valuable learning will result which will influence our thinking and our methods of practice. Given the complexity and diversity of possible contexts, ever-present change, and the acknowledgment of multiple strands of meaning, we would expect a variety of theories to appear, none of which is universally applicable. Critical to our understanding of the shape theory might take from the contextualist perspective, we must consider the implications of the historic event as the root metaphor of this worldview. Pepper (1942) contends that what is meant by “historic event” is an attempt to “re-present” experiences, making them once again alive. The contextualist paradigm invites us to consider specific life events as inextricably situated amidst a series of associated and interconnected, overlapping activities. The historic event is thus actually quite alive, always being re-experienced and re-interpreted in view of more recent actions. This understanding speaks directly to the infeasibility of universal grand theories within the social sciences.

Two specific assumptions are likely to undergird the new group theory: 1) plurality and heterogeneity are a part of the world we serve, and 2) there is no one right answer or best way. We have come upon a number of techniques that are reflective of the above assumptions and might suggest an emerging theory. Though many of the issues faced by groups may be essentially the same as in the past, we have established that in less homogeneous groups, these issues will appear with greater frequency, clothed in more diverse and complex costumes. Following is a case introduced to illustrate how the
rudiments of alternate group theories may be constructed based on our experiences. The first scenario presented at the beginning of this article is based on the actual experience of one of the authors. From her first person recounting of how she handled this situation, we can extract some important learning suggesting that the future of group theory will perhaps arise from reflective practice (Schön, 1983).

Cultural Multiplicities: Refugee Concerns in Hong Kong

As the designated facilitator of a meeting in Hong Kong called to discuss alternatives and reach a decision regarding an advocacy position on behalf of Vietnamese refugees currently incarcerated in detention facilities, I was feeling the weight of the responsibility entrusted to me. I was an experienced facilitator, and was well versed in the situation at hand. Still, I was overwhelmed by the challenge of how best to assist this incredibly diverse group of people in their task. At least ten distinct ethnic groups were represented, and nearly as many languages. The depth of the differences among participants went beyond language and ethnicity, including religion, the nature of their interest in the situation, and the level of their prior knowledge and experience with the Vietnamese refugee situation.

I focused on my overarching goal: to create a forum in which everyone could be heard and understood, leaving attendees with a richer, more accurate understanding of a very complex situation which would enable them to agree on a well-supported course of action. People were coming to this meeting with very different perspectives and experiences. It was important for everyone to speak, and preferably in their own language. I wanted to enable the honoring of differing viewpoints and to understand how the situation looked from these multiple points of view. Some people had more power to influence ultimate decisions than others, so I was interested in doing something to equalize power as well. I realized that language would also contribute to the power dynamics, knowing that whatever language we chose to work in, native speakers would have the advantage.

I began to think about how I might create the right environment to allow group members to expand their awareness of the cultural assumptions, value differences, and unique perspectives represented at this meeting. I drafted a design to get us started, knowing that in such a diverse
group, I would need to be flexible. Though I had worked with many groups throughout Asia, I
had learned that with a group as heterogeneous as this one, there was little about the behaviors
and expectations of the participants that was predictable.

At the start of the meeting I introduced myself and then proceeded to acknowledge and
name the multiple differences in context, culture, ethnicity, and language among the group
members. I was intentional in making these differences explicit for two reasons. First, I wanted
to make everyone feel valued and noticed, laying the groundwork for building a safe environment
for each attendee. Second, I hoped that by modeling open communication about differences, and
an acceptance of those differences, I would influence the kind of norms that would emerge in the
group. I then described a way that we might proceed to hear from each person, asking for their
responses to my design and encouraging them to make suggestions. After a short discussion, the
group expressed a willingness to move forward with the process I had presented. I knew it was
important to give everyone an opportunity to contribute ideas and voice acceptance of the final
design.

I asked the group to assemble in a circle for the purpose of raising consciousness and
sharing ideas and perspectives, instructing each person to present one possible way of working
with the issues at hand. This statement was to be followed by the sharing of the person’s
individual experience, including the context and considerations from within which ultimate
meaning of the situation was made. I stressed that individuals should relate both their thoughts
and feelings.

Together, the group decided to conduct the meeting in English, while providing
simultaneous translation where necessary. I also instituted a guideline to assure as equal a voice
as possible for all participants; all questions and comments would be held until each person had
the opportunity to express themselves as completely as they desired. I also requested that
judgment be suspended until all group members had spoken. By gaining the agreement of
everyone participating to honor this turn-taking process, I intended to send the implicit message
that alternative viewpoints were valued and deserved air-time.
I had no idea whether or not this approach would work, but my experience throughout Asia, along with my personal commitment to giving voice to all points of view, no matter how different or unpopular, helped me design a process that was ultimately successful. Taking the time to listen to each member’s story exposed everyone to an interactive mix of “facts”, all embedded in a context and infused with a unique set of values, quickly made it clear that no single solution was immediately apparent as the “right” answer. As the facilitator, I remained focused on the necessity to hear all viewpoints and the importance of equalizing power differences.

The outcome, or course of action, became a negotiated solution based on the expanse of information shared at the meeting. The awareness of those present was raised considerably, and a number of participants changed their positions as a result of what they had learned from their fellow group members. This was a very satisfying experience for me, and I was frankly surprised that a group with this level of diversity was able to reach a mutual agreement so that they could move forward.

From this personal account of facilitating a highly heterogeneous group we can extract some useful information about effective methods for assisting heterogeneous groups, which might well become important components of a theory of practice. One of the first elements of learning from this case is that the facilitator was well informed about the variety of cultures she was dealing with, having lived in Asia for a number of years after growing up and being educated in the US. This background was probably a critical factor in her ability to understand the situation on multiple levels and avoid behavioral blunders that might have alienated her irrevocably from certain individuals.

A second consideration is the importance of the role and attitude of the facilitator. The facilitator was very clear about her goal in the group. She knew that achieving a positive outcome meant arriving at a decision that everyone could support. Unfacilitated, the possibility of doing this seemed low. She took an active and instrumental role in truly facilitating the group’s work, enabling the kind of environment that would provide enough safety to make open sharing of differences possible. It was important to make differences among the participants visible and explicit initially, and to intentionally act in ways to
adequately equalize power. Her attentiveness to the issue of unequal power prevented a dominant individual or coalition from steamrolling their way to a solution that would never be actively supported or implemented by all interest groups and would not produce a decision with consideration of the level of complexity necessary. The potential of conflict being exceptionally high, the public recognition of differences, as well as a structured process, worked to defuse conflict without silencing opinions.

An important distinction is that the goal of the facilitator was not to change the members’ viewpoints or positions. Rather, her intent was to increase their awareness of the complexity and multiplicity inherent in the issue to allow a more informed decision that would satisfy all interest groups to as great a degree as possible. Her behavior and the process she offered helped participants reframe their differences as various perspectives due to their individual experiences in dissimilar cultural environments. de Bono (1985) delineates this more encompassing perspective of viewing ideological or value-laden differences:

Although differing belief systems are at the basis of most conflicts, there is no reason why belief systems as such need ever clash. Conflict arises when one belief system believes that its derived values should be applied everywhere and adopts a mission to make this happen. Conflict arises when a belief system has a spread-and-convert mission as part of its belief structure. Conflict arises when one belief system is set up precisely to attack another belief system. None of these "expansionist" tendencies of belief systems are intrinsic to the nature of beliefs (P. 67)

An integral element of contextualist group dynamics theory might be to not impose personal beliefs on others, agreeing instead to honor all systems of belief. Neither agreement nor approval would be required or expected. This is a distinct move from dualistic thinking, favoring instead an and/also perspective, allowing space for ambiguity and paradox. The approach and the process of the facilitator in our case helped the group embrace differing viewpoints in this non-threatening way.

Another stimulus for future theory that was demonstrated in the case is the role of the group facilitator. The actions of the facilitator were very intentional. We are not suggesting that this is always an appropriate role, but it brings up the possibility of a correlation of the degree of heterogeneity within a group and the level of instrumentality that may be required of the facilitator. The creation of a safe
container for open expression of viewpoints and the putting in place of a process enabling hearing and honoring all members was crucial for the group operating functionally.

The facilitator relied on a familiar technique described by Lani Guinier (1994) in her book *The Tyranny of the Majority*. She proposes the same simple method of equalizing power differences between majority and minority constituencies used by the facilitator in our case. She suggests, quite simply, the practice of the childhood favorite, taking turns. She believes that public dialogue should “represent all perspectives; no one viewpoint should be permitted to monopolize, distort, caricature, or shape public debate...we cannot all talk at once, but that does not mean only one group should get to speak. We can take turns” (p. 20).

The facilitator also focused clearly upon creating a forum for sharing experiences and learning from each other; her goal was never to encourage complete acceptance of different perspectives or to achieve ultimate agreement among the entire group. This approach is attuned with Weick’s encouragement of shared experience. “Shared meaning is difficult to attain...Although people may not share meaning, they do share experience” (p. 188). Weick proposes the possibility that if people want to reach a place of shared meaning, they should institute ways in which they can discuss their shared experience to “hammer out a way to encode it and talk about it” (p. 188). He also addresses the possibility that groups may have shared experience and unshared meanings. Discussing common experiences, without summarizing or labeling, may create a bond and establish a common referent. This achieves, according to Weick, a culture-like effect, and may evoke sufficient commonality to enable a group to take collective action despite differences, or to eventually gain an understanding of unshared meanings of shared experiences.

The facilitator accomplished her goal by orchestrating a shared experience. She could not know what the outcome might be, but she did not push for shared meaning or collective adoption of a single interpretation. The shared experience alone built sufficient common ground to make mutual action possible.

**The Case From the Organismic Viewpoint**
We have discussed the implications of this case from the contextualist frame. To more clearly illustrate the differences in the process of meaning-making from the contextualist versus the organicist epistemological stance, we offer a brief description of an organicist interpretation of the case. Were the facilitator to approach the situation from the standpoint of organicist group theory, her underlying assumption would likely be that there was one, best, higher order outcome to be achieved. The task, therefore, would be to move the group to that predetermined, singular destination. Despite apparent diversity among those comprising the group, an overriding belief in the shared humanness which naturally unifies individuals and mitigates differences may well have blinded the facilitator and those group members from dominant, more powerful cultures, to the deeper, ideological heterogeneity which existed among participants. In working to achieve the "right" outcome, attempts to develop group cohesiveness by attenuating similarities and areas of congruence would be likely. Efforts to assimilate the experiences, values, and cultures of group members would lead to building the requisite consensus.

Achieving the desired outcome, the creation of an identifiable group with a single, unified, perception of the situation makes decision-making and collective action possible. This, in turn, becomes evidence of the apparent success of the group to work together effectively, reinforcing the tendency to generalize the approach to all groups and contexts. Only inquiry into the reported experiences of minority group members would reveal their actual agreement or disagreement with the perceived acceptability of group decisions. Investigation over time into the actual implementation of group decisions would further inform the effectiveness of the organicist approach to group dynamics. In speculating about the possible findings of such a research undertaking, we are reminded that inquiries into organizational and social change consistently implicate the lack of ownership and commitment to proposed change by those responsible for implementation as a key contributor to failed change efforts (Beckhard and Harris, 1987, Walton, 1980)

We are convinced that by revisiting and sharing both successful and unsuccessful experiences in heterogeneous groups reported by both professionals and group members, we can begin to extract important elements that will contribute to a new strain of group theory. Each context will be unique, and any theory cannot be universalized to include all groups. Future theory may well include an expanse of
practices and methodologies, connected by a set of underlying principles or values that guide and inform effective processes.

**Contextualist Values**

Though contextualism has characteristics in common with a postmodernist perspective, contextualist theory does not live in a space that is valueless and cannot abide the postmodern notion that all values and voices are equal. Within the contextualist worldview, there are a set of values we have noticed and find helpful in our thinking, our writing, and our practice.

1. Everything must be regarded with consideration of context. Contexts are overlapping, interacting, and at times, paradoxical.

2. Heterogeneity is a part of our lives. We can no longer divorce ourselves from situations in which we are experiencing “irreconcilable differences.” Every viewpoint has value and deserves to be spoken and heard. Plurality is positive and should be protected and encouraged.

3. The same values are not shared by all.

4. Change is a constant and must be embraced and acknowledged.

5. Power must be understood, owned, and acknowledged. Social systems are political and this feature must be a primary consideration in our actions and theories.

Are these values fixed forever, a set of principles that light our path, providing the steadfast and providential guidance many crave? Certainly not. This is contextualism. Perhaps the greatest difficulty we are facing as proponents of a contextualistic worldview is that we can never provide the very thing that researchers, practitioners, and group members most want: Certainty, predictability, and control. The process of contextualist theory-building is susceptible to the same conceptual trap Berman (1996) foresees for Prigogine and Stenger’s (1984) assertions in *Order Out of Chaos*. Berman voices the possibility that “the whole program, the whole vocabulary of nonequilibrium, order through fluctuation, dissipative structures, and bifurcation--that all of this will get assembled into a new canon” which will “likely resist change or conflict because it claims to stand for these things already” (p. 48). Certainly our discomfort with ambiguity, particularly in areas in which we expect to find indisputable facts and scientific truth, does drive us to repeat a process of embracing, questioning, rejecting, and finally replacing our
worldviews. Contextualism suggests a different role for theory, a different methodology for deriving or creating it, and an as yet untested ability to live with multiplicity.

Conducting Contextualist Process Research

Our travels to this point have provided considerable food for thought, leaving us ready to consider the attributes of contextualistic research, paying particular attention to the role of the social scientist as she actually engages in the research process. Below are seven components we have identified as being critical to conducting research within the contextualist paradigm. The list is not intended to be exhaustive, but rather representative of the kinds of actions and issues likely to be associated with the research process.

1. **Usefulness.** Of foremost importance to contextualist research is a commitment to learning which will prove useful to practitioners. Practitioners, in this case, refer to social scientists intervening in field situations, leaders and other organizational or group members part of the system being investigated, and academics engaged in the preparation of future social scientists. There must be a link between theory, practice, and the multiple, overlapping worlds in which practitioners find themselves.

2. **Active Exploration.** The researcher must enter the system or situation under investigation, recognizing and identifying herself as a participant. An important aspect of contextualism is a focus on doing-on action and becoming, as opposed to being. Because change is expected and accepted, processes embodying continuity through time are frequently the subjects of research. The researcher must take an active role in observing, analyzing, and experiencing a process in action.

3. **Extended Time Frame.** A contextualistic approach requires the researcher to allot an extended amount of time for data collection and meaning making. The need to follow multiple strands of meaning, considering all perspectives, is time consuming. The process of making sense of the data is iterative, constantly being widened by new information in an ever-changing environment.

4. **Processes Viewed in Context.** The contextualist worldview is built around the idea of an event occurring in the active present, meaning that an isolated event or entity can never be understood outside its context which exists in both the past and the future, as well as the present. Pettigrew (1985) describes
contextualistic research as “the holistic study of emergent processes in particular and changing contexts” (p. 236).

5. **Reciprocal Relationship Between Group or Organization and its Context.** Unlike the systems perspective of context as a largely objective environment surrounding a group or organization (Smircich and Stubbart, 1985), within the contextualistic worldview context is actually enacted by group or organization members. In the recently published *Handbook of Organization Studies* (1996), Shulman notes that the performance of work groups is dependent upon social and organizational contexts, a factor overlooked in many studies. Thus, the environment or context is a source of social influence on the group or organization, just as the group or organization influences the context through the enactment process (Barge and Keyton, 1994; Gladstein, 1984; Shulman, 1996).

6. **Researcher’s Explicit Statement of Personal Filters.** Mitroff (1985) suggests that people have a particular filter through which they view and interpret the world. He also notes that these filters have been through a truth test imposed by the individual holder of the filter. The perspectives and biases of the researcher must be made explicit, thus affording those reviewing or assessing the outcomes of the research a basis for considering findings or interpretations in light of the researcher’s filter. Clearly, this suggests that a researcher’s self-understanding and self-knowledge are important.

6. **Balance of Description and Analysis.** The process of contextualistic research should contain a balance between description and analysis. Description is needed to convey a clear sense of the context, an understanding of the structure, and an explanation of the process under investigation. “A contextualist analysis of a process...draws on phenomena at vertical and horizontal levels of analysis and the interconnections between those levels through time” (Pettigrew, 1985, p. 238). Vertical analysis allows for incorporating viewpoints at various levels of the group or organization. “The horizontal level refers to the sequential interconnectedness of phenomena in past, present, and future time” (Pettigrew, 1985, p. 238). The need for description is increased in order to honor the many strands of experience and perception that contribute to meaning-making and communication within the contextualist frame. This requirement suggests a need to redefine what is meant by elegance as applied to concepts and theories. A move from the focus on scientific precision and restraint toward a less controlled kind of elegance,
characterized by grace, fullness of expression, care and mindfulness in choices of expression, and a style of presentation reflective of the content.

The Purpose of Theory in the Contextualist Paradigm

As we near the end of our journey, we want to focus on the value and purpose of contextualist theory. Since we have largely foregone the notion of theory as predictability, we want to suggest the role of theory within this paradigm. The following list highlights the purpose and benefits of contextualist group or organization theory:

1. To improve practice. A good theory may simply be “a tool that may be useful in certain situations” (Berman, 1996, p. 46).

2. To increase the sophistication of researchers, practitioners, and members in recognizing the complexity of group and organization processes by a focus on context, interpenetration of ideas, and time.

3. To change the definition of theory from a fixed sense of a truth frozen in time to a work in process (Calas and Smircich, 1996).

4. To assist social scientists, practitioners, and members in becoming comfortable with ambiguity, mutability, and change, leading to greater openness to new ideas and alternate interpretations.

5. Strengthening the potentiality of non-cyclic perspectives will change the expectations of social scientists. No longer will they be paying attention primarily to patterns which repeat themselves. Rather, they will also pay attention to what is dissimilar and different, or to what has changed.

6. Theory is sensemaking. Weick (1995) describes the process of sensemaking which is a critical outcome of contextualist research. He notes that sensemaking is about an activity, and stimulates a mental position focusing on process. “Sensmaking... is less about discovery than it is about invention” (p. 13). Discovery, as we pointed out earlier, is associated with organicist epistemology, while invention captures the contextualist concept of knowledge as socially constructed.

Conclusion

We have come to the end of this journey—past the organismic origins of group theory into the possibilities of contextualistic group theory. You are the toll taker, checking off the milestones of our itinerary. The trip began by tracing the contours and landscape of the world in the post World War II era and the waves of change which brought us into the late 1990s and the dawning of the new millennium. Together we examined the role of conceptual frames in shaping theory. Pepper’s root metaphor theory was visited as a metatheoretical framework to both explain the origins of traditional group theory and to illuminate potentially more useful theoretical frameworks for the world of today and tomorrow.

To give the sojourner an opportunity to frolic with questions, critiques, and quandaries, a lengthy tour into the valley of the foundational assumptions of group dynamics was provided. It was closely tied to Pepper’s conception of organicism, which we believe is the heartland of group dynamics theory. It is here that our road trip faltered, the tires of organicism surprisingly worn from relentless contact with roads rutted from repeated use. The continuous impact made it impossible for organicism to maintain its course, given the treacherous road conditions we faced. Laboriously, we sought to make the case that new vehicles and new routes were in order. Contextualism was then proffered as a more useful theoretical path. Here again, our toll ticket revealed that we lingered to contemplate the role and shape of theory in a contextualist paradigm and ponder the nature of contextualistic group theory. We admit that there may be further breakdowns along the way. After all, the road is not yet forged, and only over time will we know if the vehicle is equal to the journey.
REFERENCES


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Four Tenets Of Group Dynamics Theory</th>
<th>Elements of Organicism as the Basis for the Underlying Assumptions of Group Dynamics Theory</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A reliance on empirical data.</td>
<td>The universe is knowable and truth is systemic. Social processes and human behavior are predictable and understandable. Legitimizes the social sciences through use of traditional scientific method.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group theory is universal and generalizable.</td>
<td>There is an ultimate unity of all things. Within any whole, the individual components fulfill a role and make a contribution, resulting in synergy. Anomalies can be reconciled by looking to the next higher level of integration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groups are entities that can be seen as dynamic wholes.</td>
<td>An implicit hierarchy of systems exists within the universe. Change initiatives can be applied to the group level, affording greater efficiency in effecting change. Regarding a group as an organism allows the application of knowledge about individual development through the life cycle to groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The intention to improve social relations and institutions.</td>
<td>As the universe moves toward greater harmony and wholeness, progress = integration, and, integration = assimilation. The role of the social scientist is to facilitate progress toward an unfolding perfection.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. The Self-Fulfilling Nature of Group Dynamics Theory Within The Organismic Paradigm

Enabling The Group to act as a Single Entity to Reach

Cohesiveness

Requires

Group as a Unit of Analysis

Ensuring the Perpetuation of our perceptual frame in use and of the status quo.

Existing Within A Void With A Disregard For Context

Generalizability of Group Theory

Enabling the

Majority Viewpoint

Leading to Absorbing Differences Through

Consensus

Enabling Perpetuation of the

Assimilation

Leading to Normative Control
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Worldview</th>
<th>Organicism</th>
<th>Contextualism</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Philosophical Influence</td>
<td>Idealism</td>
<td>Pragmatism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Root Metaphor</td>
<td>The organic process moving toward wholeness.</td>
<td>The historic event alive in the changing present.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of Theory</td>
<td>Synthetic</td>
<td>Synthetic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method of Analysis</td>
<td>Integrative</td>
<td>Dispersive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of Change</td>
<td>Incremental, progressive, integrative movement toward absolute truth.</td>
<td>Radical and unpredictable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of Truth</td>
<td>Coherence theory of truth; knowable and available, waiting to be discovered.</td>
<td>Qualitative confirmation theory of truth, dynamic, contingent, and utilitarian.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude Toward Time</td>
<td>Not important since when the ultimate integration is achieved, the temporal factor will disappear.</td>
<td>Extremely important. Acknowledges schematic time for ordering events and actual time which is the forward and backward spread of the quality of an event.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual Roots</td>
<td>Schelling, Hegel, Green, Bradley, Bosanquet, and Royce.</td>
<td>Peirce, James, Bergson, Dewey, and Mead.</td>
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</tbody>
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