

**THE FORCES INVOLVED IN BEING A MEMBER  
OF A SMALL GROUP**

by

**JEAN HENRY COOPER**

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

**PHILOSOPHIAE DOCTOR**

in

**INDUSTRIAL AND ORGANISATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY**

in the

**FACULTY OF ECONOMIC AND MANAGEMENT SCIENCES**

at the

**UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA**

**PRETORIA**

April 2012

**PROMOTOR: PROF J.S. BASSON**

## Letter of Declaration

I, Jean Cooper, hereby certify that this dissertation is a bona fide report of research conducted by myself under the guidance of Prof. Johan Basson.

The content of this dissertation is my own work and has not been submitted to any other institution or university for the award of any other degree or diploma and all the source material that I have used have been duly referenced and acknowledged.

Jean Cooper

April 2012



Vir Fransie

## Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the following people for their contribution to the completion of this study:

- Prof. Johan Basson, for being a ‘voice of reason’ throughout but, especially, for giving me the space I needed to play with ideas and to grow with my research;
- Melissa Brak, for getting to know the data as well as I did and for providing a critical space for reflecting on the data and what it meant;
- Liz Archer, for all her help with AtlasTi;
- Greyling Viljoen, for the many conversations over good cups of coffee on my research ideas, but especially for awakening my initial interest in groups;
- The group members who participated in this research, for allowing me to use their very personal learning experiences for my own learning;
- The group psychology community, for your generosity of spirit in listening to and providing feedback on my ideas. Especially to Drikus Kriek, Assie Gildenhuys, Frans Cilliers, Andy Beck, Leopold Vansina and Barney Straus;
- My Evanston neighbours and friends, for helping out with the children and for providing me with a crucial opportunity to enjoy silence and solitude during the final stretch of writing;
- My family: Fransie, Francois, Rose and Riëtte, who made the journey both possible and worthwhile.

## Abstract

# THE FORCES INVOLVED IN BEING A MEMBER OF A SMALL GROUP

by

JEAN HENRY COOPER

PROMOTOR: PROFESSOR JOHAN BASSON  
FACULTY: ECONOMIC AND MANAGEMENT SCIENCES  
DEPARTMENT: HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT  
DEGREE: PhD (INDUSTRIAL AND ORGANISATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY)

There is a general lack of in-depth research into what it means (and takes) to be a member of a small group. Firstly, research is often focused on leadership rather than on membership and, secondly, empirical research tends to focus on studying group outcomes rather than group process. The purpose of this research was to explore the forces involved in being a member of a small group and to develop a research method for doing so. A postfoundational philosophical stance was adopted in terms of which the need both for discovering universal truths as well as gaining in-depth understanding within context, was pursued. A constructivist grounded theory design was adapted by developing a theoretical lens with which to facilitate the coding and analysis of the data. This theoretical lens was based on an integration of Kurt Lewin's field theory; Wilfred Bion's psychoanalytic group-as-a-whole approach; S.H. Foulkes's group analytic approach and Yvonne Agazarian's theory of living human systems. The data consisted of transcribed video material of ten 90-minute sessions conducted with a training group of 9 members; written reflections by the group members on their group experience as well as field notes taken by the researcher during the training group sessions. Through the application of the theoretical lens to the data, member

behaviour was coded both deductively and inductively, thus allowing the data to speak for itself whilst maintaining a rigorous analytical structure. The result of this exploration was an emerging field theory of group membership which postulates the group member as existing within a field of forces (both pro- and anti-group) operating between the triangular 'polarities' of belonging, individuality and task. The theoretical and practical implications of this field theory are discussed in terms of their relevance to both grounded theory research methodology and group psychology. Finally, it is shown how this research can be used as a foundation from which to conduct a multitude of future studies into group processes from the perspective of the group member.

## Opsomming

# DIE KRAGTE WAT INWERK OP 'N LID VAN 'N KLEIN GROEP

deur

JEAN HENRY COOPER

PROMOTOR: PROFESSOR JOHAN BASSON  
FAKULTEIT: EKONOMIESE EN BESTUURSWETENSKAPPE  
DEPARTEMENT: MENSLIKE HULPBRONBESTUUR  
GRAAD: PhD (BEDRYFS EN ORGANISASIELKUNDE)

Daar is 'n gebrek aan navorsing oor wat dit beteken (en verg) om 'n lid van 'n klein groep te wees. Eerstens fokus navorsing gewoonlik eerder op leierskap as op lidmaatskap, en tweedens konsentreer empiriese navorsing gewoonlik eerder op uitkomste as op die groepsproses self. Die doel van die navorsing was om die sielkundige kragte wat inwerk op 'n lid van 'n klein groep te ondersoek, asook om 'n navorsingsmetode te ontwikkel om hierdie ondersoek uit te voer. 'n Postfondamentalistiese navorsingsperspektief is ingeneem ten einde die spanning tussen die soeke na universele waarhede aan die een kant, en die behoefte aan 'n konteks-spesifieke verstaan aan die ander kant, te oorbrug. 'n Konstruktivistiese *'grounded theory'* kwalitatiewe navorsingsontwerp is gevolg. Hierdie navorsingsontwerp is aangepas en verryk deur die ontwikkeling van 'n teoretiese lens vir die kodering en interpretasie van die data. Die teoretiese lens is gebaseer op 'n integrasie van Kurt Lewin se veldteorie, Wilfred Bion se groep-as-geheel benadering, S.H. Foulkes se groep-analitiese benadering en Yvonne Agazarian se

stelselsbenadering tot groepsgedrag. Die data het bestaan uit getranskribeerde videomateriaal van tien 90-minute sessies van 'n opleidingsgroep met 9 lede; geskrewe refleksies deur die groeplede oor hulle groepervaring; sowel as veldnotas wat geneem is ten tyde van die groepsessies. Groeplede se gedrag is beide induktief en deduktief gekodeer deur die aanwending van die teoretiese lens. Sodoende kon daar in diepte op die data gefokus word terwyl daar 'n sistematiese en analitiese struktuur gehandhaaf is. Die resultaat van die ondersoek was 'n ontluikende teorie wat stel dat die groeplid homself in 'n kragveld bevind tussen drie 'pole', naamlik, 'individualiteit', 'om te behoort' en 'die groep se taak'. Die teoretiese en praktiese implikasies is bespreek beide met betrekking tot *'grounded theory'* as navorsingsmetodiek en groepsielkunde. Ten slotte word die hoop uitgespreek dat hierdie navorsing die fondasie kan lê vir vele toekomstige studies rakende groepsprosesse vanuit die oogpunt van die groeplid.



## Table of contents

<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Background	1
1.2 Research problem	5
1.3 Research objectives	5
1.4 Research questions	6
1.5 Delineation and limitations	6
1.6 Assumptions	8
1.7 Significance and relevance of the research	8
1.8 Dissertation flow, layout and language	9
<b>Chapter 2: Method</b>	<b>12</b>
2.1 Introduction	12
2.2 Research philosophy and approach	14
2.2.1 Basic scientific beliefs	14
2.2.2 Considering the research topic and objectives	16
2.2.3 Postfoundationalism and the ontology and epistemology of this research	18
2.3 Research design	21
2.3.1 Constructivist grounded theory	21
2.3.1.1 History and development	21
2.3.1.2 Reasons for using constructivist grounded theory	22
2.3.1.3 How does constructivist grounded theory work?	23
2.4 The initial research process	25
2.4.1 Introduction	25
2.4.2 Research setting	25
2.4.2.1 The immediate, physical context of the training group	26
2.4.2.2 The theoretical and professional contexts which informed the roles and approach of the facilitators	27
2.4.2.3 The context of the post-graduate programme and the role(s) of the researcher	28
2.4.2.4 The institutional context	29
2.4.2.5 The broader context of experiential learning within the academic environment, specifically with regards to group dynamics training	30
2.4.2.6 The South African socio-political context as part of a broader, global context	31
2.4.3 Sampling and data collection methodologies	31

2.4.3.1	Training group	31
2.4.3.2	Written reflections	33
2.4.4	Data analysis	34
2.4.4.1	Initial data analysis process followed	34
2.4.4.2	The need for a revised data analysis methodology	36
2.5	Conclusion	38
<b>Chapter 3: Theoretical foundations</b>		<b>39</b>
3.1	Introduction	39
3.2	Field theory	40
3.2.1	Introduction	40
3.2.2	Field theory as meta-theory	41
3.2.3	Lewin's specific field theory	44
3.2.4	Constructs in field theory	50
3.2.4.1	Life space	51
3.2.4.2	Field	51
3.2.4.3	Elements	51
3.2.4.4	Goals	51
3.2.4.5	Goal region	52
3.2.4.6	Position	52
3.2.4.7	Locomotion	52
3.2.4.8	Force	53
3.2.4.9	Tension	53
3.2.5	Conclusion: Why field theory is not enough	53
3.3	Psychoanalytic approaches to groups	55
3.3.1	Introduction	55
3.3.2	The group and the individual	56
3.3.2.1	Foulkes on the individual vs. group dilemma	56
3.3.2.2	Bion and the individual vs. group dilemma	57
3.3.3	The group's task	58
3.3.4	Specific contributions: Bion	58
3.3.4.1	The group-as-a-whole	58
3.3.4.2	Three basic assumption states	61
3.3.4.3	Recent developments: A fourth basic assumption?	66
3.3.4.4	Application of Bion's conceptual structure	67
3.3.4.5	Organisation-in-the-mind	69
3.3.5	Unique contributions by Foulkes	71

3.3.5.1	The group as an abstraction	71
3.3.5.2	The group matrix	73
3.3.5.3	Levels of exchange	76
3.3.5.4	Mirroring	77
3.3.5.5	Free-floating discussion	78
3.3.5.6	Resonance	78
3.3.5.7	Translation	79
3.3.5.8	Nitsun: The anti-group	79
3.3.6	Bion and Foulkes: Other areas of diversion and conversion	80
3.3.7	Conclusion: Why the psychoanalytic approaches are not enough	81
3.4	Systems theory	82
3.4.1	Introduction	82
3.4.2	The visible and invisible group	82
3.4.3	Hierarchy and isomorphism	83
3.4.4	Groups as systems	84
3.4.5	Boundaries	85
3.4.6	Application of the systems-centred approach	90
3.4.6.1	Contextualizing	91
3.4.6.2	Boundarying	91
3.4.6.3	Subgrouping	92
3.4.6.4	Vectoring	93
3.4.7	Conclusion: Why systems-centred theory is not enough	93
3.5	Conclusion	93
<b>Chapter 4: Constructing a theoretical lens</b>		<b>95</b>
4.1	Introduction	95
4.2	Being a group member: Towards a definition	96
4.3	The emergence of an idea: A narrative account of how the theoretical lens came into being	98
4.4	Formal discussion of the theoretical lens	102
4.4.1	Level of focus	102
4.4.2	The member as a system in a field of forces	102
4.4.3	The goal region complexes: Belonging, individuality and task	104
4.4.3.1	Belonging	104
4.4.3.2	Individuality	107
4.4.3.3	Task	109
4.4.3.4	Positions in the field	113

4.5	Comparing the schema with existing theory	120
4.5.1	Introduction	120
4.5.2	Field theory	120
4.5.2.1	Constructs from Lewin's specific field theory	120
4.5.2.2	Field theory as meta-theory	123
4.5.3	The Tavistock tradition	126
4.5.3.1	The group-as-a-whole	126
4.5.3.2	The work group vs. the basic assumption group	127
4.5.3.3	Defences: Pathology or normal human behaviour?	128
4.5.3.4	The impact of the group's basic assumption behaviour on its members	130
4.5.3.5	Authority	131
4.5.3.6	Role	132
4.5.3.7	The organisation-in-the-mind	132
4.5.4	The group analytic tradition	133
4.5.4.1	The group as an abstraction	133
4.5.4.2	The group matrix	134
4.5.4.3	Levels of exchange	134
4.5.4.4	Mirroring and resonance	135
4.5.4.5	Free-floating discussion	135
4.5.4.6	The anti-group	135
4.5.5	Systems-centred theory	136
4.5.5.1	The visible and invisible group	136
4.5.5.2	Hierarchy and isomorphism	136
4.5.5.3	Subgrouping	137
4.5.6	Other group dynamic concepts	137
4.5.6.1	Group development	137
4.5.6.2	Group norms	138
4.6	Conclusion	139
	<b>Chapter 5: Revised method</b>	<b>139</b>
5.1	Introduction	139
5.2	Revised data analysis: An abductive approach to coding the data	141
5.2.1	Coding examples	146
5.2.1.1	Example 1: the pair with the secret	146
5.2.1.2	Example 2: an apology not reciprocated	148
5.2.2	A summary of the coding principles as illustrated above	153

5.3	Data analysis: Interpretation of the codes	153
5.3.1	Analysis 1: Overall code themes after ten sessions	154
5.3.2	Analysis 2: The group's movement over ten sessions	156
5.3.2.1	Purposive sampling: Choosing a specific session on which to focus	157
5.3.3	Analysis 3: The group's movement in session 7	157
5.4	Ensuring the quality of the research	159
5.5	Ethical considerations	162
5.6	Conclusion	164
<b>Chapter 6: Discussion of results</b>		<b>165</b>
6.1	Introduction	165
6.2	Analysis 1: Interpretation of the overall code themes after ten sessions	168
6.2.1	Introduction: Analysis 1	168
6.2.2	Results	168
6.2.3	Discussion	169
6.2.4	Conclusion: Analysis 1	174
6.3	Analysis 2: Interpretation of the group's movement over ten sessions	174
6.3.1	Introduction: Analysis 2	174
6.3.2	Results: Tabular and graphic description of the group's movement through time	176
6.3.2.1	The group's behaviour over the ten sessions (in table format)	176
6.3.2.2	The group's behaviour over the ten sessions (in graph format)	177
6.3.3	Results: Report of the group's movement through time	177
6.3.4	Analysis and interpretation: The group over ten sessions	186
6.3.5	Conclusion: Analysis 2	195
6.4	Analysis 3: Interpretation of the interplay of forces in session 7	196
6.4.1	Introduction: Analysis 3	196
6.4.2	Section 1	199
6.4.2.1	Transcript	199
6.4.2.2	Codes allocated to section 1	200
6.4.2.3	Discussion of transcript and coding	200
6.4.2.4	The interplay of forces	202
6.4.3	Summary of the forces in section 1	203
6.4.4	Section 2	204
6.4.4.1	Transcript	204
6.4.4.2	Codes allocated to section 2	206
6.4.4.3	Discussion	206

6.4.4.4	The interplay of forces	210
6.4.4.5	Summary of the forces in section 2	213
6.4.5	Section 3	214
6.4.5.1	Transcript	214
6.4.5.2	Codes allocated to section 3	216
6.4.5.3	Discussion	216
6.4.5.4	The interplay of forces	220
6.4.5.5	Summary of forces	224
6.4.6	Section 4	226
6.4.6.1	Transcript	226
6.4.6.2	Codes allocated to section 4	232
6.4.6.3	Discussion	233
6.4.6.4	The interplay of forces	237
6.4.6.5	Summary of forces in section 4	240
6.4.7	Section 5	242
6.4.7.1	Transcript	242
6.4.7.2	Codes allocated to section 5	243
6.4.7.3	Discussion	244
6.4.7.4	The interplay of forces	246
6.4.7.5	Summary of forces in section 5	247
6.4.8	Section 6	248
6.4.8.1	Transcript	248
6.4.8.2	Codes allocated to section 6	251
6.4.8.3	Discussion	252
6.4.8.4	The interplay of forces	256
6.4.8.5	Summary of the forces in section 6	258
6.4.9	Section 7	259
6.4.9.1	Transcript	259
6.4.9.2	Codes allocated to section 7	263
6.4.9.3	Discussion	264
6.4.9.4	The interplay of forces	267
6.4.9.5	Summary of forces in section 7	272
6.4.10	Conclusion: Analysis 3	274
6.5	Conclusion	276
<b>Chapter 7: Conclusion</b>		<b>277</b>
7.1	Introduction	277

7.2	The main research outcomes	277
7.2.1	A method for exploring the forces involved in being a member of a small group	277
7.2.1.1	Positioning the research in the postfoundational philosophical tradition	277
7.2.1.2	Adopting (and adapting) a constructivist grounded theory research design	278
7.2.1.3	The theoretical lens	278
7.2.2	The forces involved in being a member of a small group	278
7.2.2.1	The forces can be observed on different systemic levels	278
7.2.2.2	A force has different meanings on different systemic levels	279
7.2.2.3	The forces can be broadly classified as having either pro-group or anti-group qualities that, in turn, follow an alternating pattern within the group	279
7.2.2.4	Apart from having ‘pro-group’ or anti-group’ qualities, the forces within the group impact on the group members in ways that drive their behaviour towards or away from individuality, belonging and task	280
7.2.2.5	The quality of the forces in the group change as the group moves from one developmental level to the next	280
7.2.2.6	One impact of the forces on group members is that the members assume roles within the group	281
7.3	Implications for existing theory	281
7.3.1	Group theory	281
7.3.1.1	An integrative approach – drawing on different theoretical traditions – is demonstrated as opposed to a loyalist approach – adhering to and being loyal to one theoretical tradition only	281
7.3.1.2	A coherent framework for understanding the forces involved in being a group member is proposed	282
7.3.1.3	The theoretical framework mentioned above is, in essence, a ‘field theory’, which has important implications	282
7.3.1.4	Our understanding of forces within the group is furthered	282
7.3.2	Qualitative research methodology	283
7.3.2.1	Implications for research philosophy	283
7.3.2.2	Implications for research design	283
7.4	Suggestions for the application of the research outcomes	284
7.5	Suggestions for future research	285

7.6 Conclusion	286
<b>Chapter 8: Reflection</b>	<b>287</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>290</b>
<b>Appendix A: Study guide and letters to students</b>	<b>297</b>
<b>Appendix B: Preliminary attempt at data analysis</b>	<b>307</b>
<b>Appendix C: Letters of consent</b>	<b>332</b>
<b>Appendix D: Full co-occurrence table</b>	<b>336</b>



## List of figures

Figure 2.1: Outline of discussion on research methodology	13
Figure 3.1: The donkey towards the carrot	45
Figure 3.2: The donkey is satisfied	46
Figure 3.3: The donkey moves away from the stick and towards the carrot	47
Figure 3.4: The donkey does not see the carrot	47
Figure 3.5: The donkey is caught between his hunger for the carrot and his fear of the stick	49
Figure 3.6: The donkey moved past the stick	49
Figure 3.7: The donkey is between two carrots	50
Figure 3.8: Ba dependency	63
Figure 3.9: Ba fight-flight	64
Figure 3.10: Ba pairing	66
Figure 3.11: Demarcating the group with which we want to work - A	72
Figure 3.12: Demarcating the group with which we want to work - B	73
Figure 3.13: Levels of exchange	76
Figure 3.14: The group as a hierarchy of systems	84
Figure 3.15: An independent communication relationship	86
Figure 3.16: A dependent communication relationship	86
Figure 3.17: An interdependent communication relationship	87
Figure 3.18: A mutually exclusive communication relationship	87
Figure 4.1: The initial idea scribble	101
Figure 4.2: The member as a system in a hierarchy of systems (Agazarian, 2000)	102
Figure 4.3: The member as a system in a field of forces	103
Figure 3.4: The forces between the member system and belonging	106
Figure 4.5: The member in a dynamic tension between belonging and individuality	108
Figure 4.6: Adding task to the dynamic force field	111
Figure 4.7: Task as an intervention strategy in the struggle between individuality and belonging	112
Figure 4.8: Positions in the field	114
Figure 4.9: The member as the point of application of the forces - A	122
Figure 4.10: The member as the point of application for the forces - B	122
Figure 5.1: Overview of the revised data analysis process	141
Figure 5.2: Overview of the data analysis process	154

Figure 6.1: The group's behaviour over ten sessions (1)	177
Figure 6.2: The group's behaviour over ten sessions (2)	188
Figure 6.3: Movement away from task	189
Figure 6.4: Slight movement towards task	189
Figure 6.5: Movement away from task, again	189
Figure 6.6: Movement back towards task	190
Figure 6.7: Once more away from task	190
Figure 6.8: Back towards task and individuality	190
Figure 6.9: Away from task, again	190
Figure 6.10: Final movement towards belonging	191
Figure 6.11: Picture from field notes depicting Debbie's position	254

## List of tables

Table 3.1: The work group and the basic assumption group	61
Table 6.1: Overall behaviour themes after ten sessions	168
Table 6.2: Number of codes and quotations per code family	170
Table 6.3: Number of code occurrences per session	176
Table 6.4: Code occurrences per session as a percentage of the total	176
Table 6.5: A breakdown of 'towards belonging' behaviours in sessions 1, 2, 6, 7 and 8	192
Table 6.6: Codes allocated per section in session 7	196
Table 6.7: Codes allocated to section 1	200
Table 6.8: Summary of the forces in section 1	203
Table 6.9: Codes allocated to section 2	206
Table 6.10: Total number of self-reflective and opening-up behaviours per group member over ten sessions	207
Table 6.11: Selected 'towards task' and 'towards individuality' behaviours for the group members over all ten sessions	207
Table 6.12: Summary of the forces in section 2	213
Table 6.13: Codes allocated to section 3	216
Table 6.14: Summary of the forces in section 3	224
Table 6.15: Codes allocated to section 4	232
Table 6.16: Pattern of the group's conversation around Pam's and Maggie's contributions	233
Table 6.17: Summary of the forces in section 4	240
Table 6.18: Codes allocated to section 5	243
Table 6.19: Summary of the forces in section 5	247
Table 6.20: Codes allocated to section 6	251
Table 6.21: Summary of the forces in section 6	258
Table 6.22: Codes allocated to section 7	263
Table 6.23: Summary of the forces in section 7	272