

## Introduction

So, let's not look at our leaders in anger or desperation, let's look at ourselves and ask: 'How are we to be members of this uncertain society?' (OPUS Listening Post comment, January 10 2012, The US and the world at the dawn of 2012)

### 1.1 Background

As researchers and social scientists, it is essential that we take the dynamics of being a group member seriously. We cannot escape the fact that groups, and our membership of them, permeate our lives (Dalal, 1998). From our first and primary group, the family, and throughout our lives, we stand in continuous relationships with a variety of both formal and informal groups. Not only do we influence the various constellations of the groups to which we belong, but they also influence us – in the present and also well into the future – as we transfer our previous group experiences to the new groups that we join. In fact, the degree to which our individual behaviour is intelligible only in the context of the groups to which we belong (our social context) is such that various scholars believe that it is impossible to examine human behaviour outside of the context of groups (Dalal, 1998; 1991; Stacey, 2003). So, on the one hand we have scholars who give primacy to the individual (or the internal) and on the other hand we have scholars who give primacy to the group (or the external/social) when trying to make sense of behaviour. In concurrence with Stacey (2003) and Dalal (1998) I contend that we should try to find a conceptualisation that does away with the internal-external dichotomy. In lieu of this, it seems as if a shift in focus from a split between the 'individual' on the one side and the 'social' on the other, to an integration of the two as embodied by the group member, can provide important insights with regards to human behaviour.

In addition, it is essential that we admit that being a group member is a complex and powerful process (Aronson, 1995). As group members we are confronted with pressures from within ourselves as well as pressures from the group that are often

difficult to understand, but which can lead to powerful experiences, both constructive and destructive (Nitsun, 1996). It was, in fact, immediately after the atrocities of the Second World War that researchers began to ask questions in earnest about groups and the effects that groups have on individuals (Bion, 1961; Foulkes & Kissen, 1976; Lewin, 1951). However, the complex and powerful dynamic of being group members is not only reflected in the big events of world history, it is also a part of our daily existence. This means that, as part of our process of maturation, we are continuously confronted with the responsibility of reflecting on and taking responsibility for the way in which we conduct ourselves as members of the groups to which we belong. Therefore, since making sense of how we conduct ourselves as members of groups is an extremely complex issue, social research can make a valuable contribution in providing frameworks within which our often conflicting experiences of being group members can be understood.

Even if the issue of group membership is narrowed down to formal groups within an organisational context only, it makes sense that we regard group membership as a serious topic which merits further research (Hirschhorn, 1988; Obholzer & Roberts, 1994). Organisations today are functioning within a context of unprecedented democratisation of authority and information (Ridderstråle & Nordström, 2004). In order to be able to adapt to the rate of change, organisations are becoming smaller, less hierarchical and increasingly structured around teams. Increasingly these developments are placing the group member in a position where he/she is forced to take responsibility for his/her own process of navigating the dynamics of being a group member. A deeper scientific understanding of the dynamics of being a group member would help group members to understand the reciprocal interactions between themselves and the groups or teams to which they belong; it would assist leaders to make sense of the experiences of group members; and it would contribute to overall organisational wellbeing and performance if the members of the various groups on different organisational fronts and levels would take responsibility for the way in which they take up their membership roles in the organisation.

The problem, however, is that, whilst we realise the need for a greater understanding of group membership, there is a lack of in-depth research into the dynamics of being a group member. Ever since the 1930s, researchers and theoreticians in the social sciences have paid more attention to questions pertaining to what it takes to be a group leader (for instance the trait-, behavioural-, contingency- and transformational leadership theories), rather than to what it takes to be a group member. Even where

researchers did deviate from this path by developing theories on followership (Kelley, 1998), these theories still indirectly emphasized the primacy of the group leader over and above that of the group member. Despite the fact that theories of leadership differ in many respects, they do have one thing in common in that they mostly tend to neglect the effect of group dynamics on leadership and performance. Hersey and Blanchard's Situational Leadership Theory (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977) probably comes the closest to taking account of the group, but even they do not really ever work with the group-as-a-whole, its internal dynamics and how these dynamics influence the motivation and competence of interdependent group members. Accordingly, theorists who chose to research and explain leadership, not only, by implication, chose to not examine membership, but they also, to a large extent, neglected the influence of group dynamics on leadership requirements.

Nevertheless, groups have not been totally forgotten, albeit not in the domain of leadership-centred research. In the period towards the end of, and directly after, the Second World War, social scientists in the fields of psychology and psychotherapy started with an in-depth focus on researching group phenomena and developing theories in order to explain group behaviour (Johnson & Johnson, 1987; Ringer, 2002). The most notable of these early pioneers included Wilfred Bion (1897–1979), S.H. Foulkes (1898–1976) and Kurt Lewin (1890–1947). Although these early theorists and their followers in the Tavistock, Group Analytic and Organisational Development (OD) traditions made significant contributions to our understanding of groups, not one of them specifically attempted to formulate a theory of membership that takes the group member as the point of departure. This was also the case with later, prominent theoretical schools such as the Interpersonal School of Irvin Yalom (1931– ) and the Systems Centred approach of Yvonne Agazarian (1930– ). Although most scholars in these theoretical traditions often refer both to membership and to issues regarding membership when describing and explaining various group phenomena, not one of them (with a few exceptions) placed the group member at the centre of their investigative focus and theoretical formulations. Therefore, even although it is possible to draw valuable inferences from these works on the dynamics of group membership, not one of them has focused specifically on in-depth, empirical research on the forces involved in being a group member.

Nevertheless, there are some exceptions where group membership has, indeed, constituted the investigative focus. These include the following:

- a) *'What's in it for me?' The development from immature to mature dependence in groups* in which Von Fraunhofer (2008) uses concepts from Fairbairn (object relations) and Foulkes (group analysis) to discuss the defensive regression and eventual resolution connected with the anxiety of joining a group;
- b) *'Ambiguity, Complexity and Dynamics in the Membership of Collaboration'* in which Huxham and Vangen (2000) focus on the membership structures of inter-organisational collaboration;
- c) *'Rituals and resistance: Membership dynamics in professional fields'* in which Lawrence (2004) examines the concept of membership from an institutional perspective, focusing on the dynamics of membership in professional fields;
- d) *'Group membership and individual security'* in which Zander (1958) discusses a trend that prevailed at the time in wanting to find out about the causes of emotionally toned behaviour in groups;
- e) *'Group membership and self-evaluation'* in which Rasmussen and Zander (1954) investigate the relationship between experiences in groups and self-esteem.

It is, thus, clear that, as compared to leadership, there has been relatively scant research attention paid to group membership. In addition, there has been no research focused specifically on understanding the forces involved in being a group member. Of course there is the extensive body of knowledge which has evolved from the various group-theoretical traditions mentioned earlier but, as mentioned, these do not take group membership as the point of departure, but rather as a structural and dynamic component in the description of various group phenomena.

The dilemma is, therefore, that, despite the fact that we recognise the need for in-depth research which focuses on the dynamics of group membership, such research barely exists. This situation is compounded by the fact that any empirical research that tries to move beyond 'black box', input-output studies towards studies on the full complexity of group processes or dynamics as they unfold is highly complex, difficult and time consuming (Beck & Lewis, 2000). In fact, a general trend in group research is the remarkable lack of rigorous empirical studies into the group process (Beck & Lewis, 2000). Research into groups will, typically, take one of the following routes:

- a) Theoretical and philosophical studies that take an in-depth look at the complexity of groups by building on and integrating existing theoretical formulations in order to create new ways of understanding old formulations.

These studies often focus on the complex dynamics of the group process, but are non-empirical in nature.

- b) Rigorous empirical studies that avoid the group process data but, instead, focus on data from before and/or after the group, collected through questionnaires, surveys and interviews.
- c) Case descriptions, for example, vignettes, in terms of which the researcher's recollection or description of a group situation will be analysed from a specific theoretical perspective such as the group analytic, systems psychodynamic or systems-centred perspective. Although these studies often attempt to make sense of the complex dynamics of the group process itself, they do not work with the data as they emerge from the group, but rather with recollections of the group situation via interviews or essays.
- d) Group process studies that observe, analyse and interpret the data produced by the group situation itself and which are captured by means of video and/or audio equipment are, without any doubt, in the minority and, with regards to group membership, per se, such studies are even less evident.

## **1.2 Research problem**

Against the backdrop of an increased need to understand the dynamics of group membership, we are, thus, faced with the dilemma that empirical research on this topic is almost non-existent. This is compounded by the fact that research of the type that focuses on group processes is highly complex and very few examples exist that could act as methodological blueprints for such a study. The problem facing this research study is, therefore, twofold:

- a) There is currently no methodological blueprint for the study of the forces involved in being a group member.
- b) There is a lack of empirical research focusing specifically on the forces involved in being a group member.

## **1.3 Research objectives**

In order to address the research problems, this research study will aim to achieve the following objectives:

- a) To develop a method for an in-depth empirical study of the forces involved in being a group member.

- b) To make use of this method to explore the forces involved in being a member of a small group.

#### 1.4 Research questions

In order to achieve the above objectives of the research, the following questions will have to be answered:

- a) Which research philosophy will be able to guide the process of designing and conducting such research?
- b) What is meant by 'group membership'?
- c) What is meant by 'the forces involved in being a group member'?
- d) How can the forces involved in being a group member be studied?
- e) What are the forces involved in being a group member and how do they operate?

#### 1.5 Delineation and limitations

This study is situated within the theoretical and practical context of group dynamics in small groups. Although certain parallels do exist between small and large groups, this project does not aim to make any claims regarding the dynamics of group membership of large groups and other more complex social formations, such as organisations or societies (Anzieu, 1984; Hopper, 2003a). Nevertheless, in view of the fact that organisations are, in essence, groups within groups within groups, I am of the belief that it will be possible to make useful inferences, based on this study, with regard to the level of the organisation as a whole (Ringer, 2002).

A further delineation is the fact that this study is situated within the intellectual traditions of the psychoanalytic, systems and field-theory approaches to groups although this is not to say that various other valuable psychological or sociological approaches do not exist. The reason for this particular theoretical demarcation is the fact that the second main objective of this research study involves exploring the forces involved in, or, the *dynamics* of being, a member of a small group. Psychoanalytic thinking provides access to an understanding of both conscious and unconscious dynamics whilst systems theory and field theory provide a language in terms of which it is possible to operationalise dynamic concepts for both research and application purposes (Agazarian & Gantt, 2000). Whilst field theory provides the language and methods for conceptualising "dynamics" in the group specifically as psychological

forces, systems theory, in turn, and especially as applied by Yvonne Agazarian, provides the space for creating a bridge between psychoanalytic and group dynamics thinking. A systems-centred approach also helps us to adjust our observational perspective to focus on the individual, the member and the group respectively. The main psychoanalytic approaches to groups that are used in this research are those of the Tavistock and Group Analytic traditions as pioneered by Bion (Bion, 1961) and Foulkes (Foulkes & Foulkes, 1990b).

In terms of the first research objective, namely, to develop a methodology for the study of the forces involved in being a member of a small group, the research is delineated by a focus on qualitative research approaches. This appears to be a logical choice as a result of the fact that the focus of this study is neither to prove a hypothesis, nor to measure a construct, but rather to explore the dynamic forces as they unfold within the group context (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). This will be further discussed in the sections on method in chapters 2 and 5.

It has to be acknowledged from the outset that it is not possible to objectively discover “The Theory” that would fully explain the forces involved in being a group member. As will be discussed in the sections on the research method, it is quite possible that different researchers may observe different dynamics in the same set of data. Accordingly, it is essential that the inevitable subjectivity of a research project such as this be acknowledged and worked with if the research is to be of value (Charmaz, 2007). Several strategies have been employed in order to ensure that this is, indeed, the case, including providing a detailed trail of the considerations, decisions and thinking of the research team in terms of which all subjectivities were made as transparent as possible so as to render this research study intelligible for future researchers and practitioners (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). As will be discussed in chapter 2, this research is philosophically positioned in the postfoundational tradition. The epistemological and ontological implications of this will be dealt with extensively in the following chapter.

A potential limitation of the study is the fact that the empirical component is based on a semi-structured training group within an educational setting. Despite the fact that an argument will be offered in the sections on the research method (chapters 2 and 5) in favour of the appropriateness of using such a group, it is worth noting that further empirical research using groups within different contexts would strengthen the theoretical description of the forces involved in being a group member. However, the

possible limitation in terms of the number of groups studied may also constitute a possible strength in terms of the depth of the analysis that can be made of this one group (Smith, 2008).

## 1.6 Assumptions

This research is based on the following assumptions:

- a) Groups and group research are complex and there are no quick and easy answers to questions regarding the dynamics of groups (Beck *et al.*, 2000).
- b) There are both conscious and unconscious dynamics at play in groups (Agazarian & Peters, 1981; Bion, 1961; Foulkes & Kissen, 1976; Hirschhorn, 1988; Hopper, 2003a; Miller, Gould, Stapley, & Stein, 2001; Nitsun, 1996; Obholzer & Roberts, 1994; Pines, 1985; Prins, 2006; Ringer, 2002).
- c) The Tavistock, Group Analytic, Systems-Centred and Field Theory approaches to group dynamics will provide a sufficient intellectual space in which this study can achieve its aims. (This is discussed in more detail in the chapters on theory – chapters 3 and 4.)
- d) Experiential training groups provide a sufficient laboratory context for the study of groups that can, in turn, be transferred to other group settings (Miller, Gould, Stapley, & Stein, 2004). (This is discussed in more detail in chapters 2 and 5.)
- e) It is possible to carry out research that simultaneously strives both to understand and to explain phenomena. Understanding (hermeneutics) and explanation (episteme), therefore, need not be mutually exclusive (Van Huyssteen, 1990).

## 1.7 Significance and relevance of the research

This research project is significant, firstly, because it addresses a group process that, despite its importance and complexity, has not, until now, been the primary focus of the research community.

Secondly, this research comes at a time when, as a result of a rapidly changing social landscape, the issue of group membership is becoming critical with regard to the development, success and general mental health of individuals, groups and organisations.



Thirdly, because of the fact that it is not possible to conceptualise the individual apart from the group/groups to which he/she belongs, this research may provide significant insights into the impact of group membership on the individual. These insights can be especially helpful to group leaders and also to individual counsellors and coaches/mentors in assisting them in understanding the individual's experience in relation to the groups to which he/she belongs.

Finally, this research is significant in that it strives not only to contribute to the fraternity of group theorists and the leaders of the various kinds of groups that constitute our daily social reality, but especially to group members as they strive to reflect on and take responsibility for their own membership behaviour.

### **1.8 Dissertation flow, layout and language**

This dissertation is structured in such a way that it presents itself as a process, or a work in progress, rather than as a final, perfect product. The dissertation is, therefore, not merely the final story of the research as it was conducted. It is more than that. It tells the story but the act of telling also changes the story. By not removing the traces of trial and error in this final telling, it becomes possible to see the way in which the research, the researched as well as the researcher, changed and developed as the story unfolded. This layout decision was inspired by Henri Matisse's methods of modern construction, as depicted in his 1913 *Flowers and Ceramic Plate* (Matisse, 1913), in which he deliberately leaves the traces of development of the artwork in the final product in order to depict art as a work in progress (The Art Institute of Chicago, 2010). Accordingly, it is hoped that this way of presenting the research will allow the reader to follow the logic within its context as it developed and, thus, enable the reader to perceive the research as an honest effort that is never fully completed.

The first chapter discusses both the research problem and the research objectives. The research is delineated, possible weaknesses are pointed out and the assumptions underlying the research are briefly discussed.

Chapter 2 is the first of two chapters (chapters 2 and 5) in which the research method is discussed. Firstly, an argument in favour of a postfoundational philosophical stance with regard to the research is developed. In addition, postfoundationalism and its implications for conducting research are discussed. Following this, constructivist grounded theory is considered as a research design that is both compatible with a

postfoundational philosophy and also suitable in terms of realising the goals of this research project. With the philosophy of science and the research design pinned down, chapter 2 continues to describe the initial research process that was conducted. It is important to note that this initial process represents the first attempt at conducting the research, and that the subsequent attempt is discussed in chapter 5. As part of the description of the first research attempt, attention is also given to the research setting; training groups as a medium for research; the data collection and the data analysis. It is specifically with regards to the data analysis that this first attempt at conducting the research is regarded as the *initial* research process. The outcome of the first attempt at data analysis is described as well as the need that emerged for a theoretical lens through which to analyse the data in a more structured deductive-inductive (abductive)<sup>1</sup> manner.

Chapter 3 proceeds to lay the foundation for the development of the theoretical lens. Firstly, the notion of group membership and the way in which group membership is currently defined and understood is problematised and explicated. This is followed by an integrative discussion of four major group-theoretical schools of thought, namely, Kurt Lewin's Field Theory, Wilfred Bion's psychoanalytic approach (also referred to as the group-as-a-whole or the Tavistock approach), S.H. Foulkes's psychoanalytical approach (also known as group analysis) as well as Yvonne Agazarian's systems-centred approach.

In chapter 4, drawing upon the theoretical foundation laid in chapter 3, an argument is developed for understanding group membership as a dynamic interaction of forces between the member as an individual (individuality), the member as belonging to a larger body of people (belonging), and the group's task (task) as the primary reason for the existence of the group. The logical consequences of this formulation in terms of understanding group membership are considered while the theoretical lens itself is viewed critically against various group-theoretical concepts in order to check and improve the ability of the lens to act as a robust framework in terms of which to make sense of the forces involved in being a group member.

Chapter 5 proceeds to operationalise the theoretical framework for research purposes, specifically with regards to the data analysis while an in-depth exposition of the way in which the data were analysed and interpreted is also presented. This exposition shows

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<sup>1</sup> Abductive logic is discussed in detail in chapter 2.

how this approach to data analysis is congruent with the principles of postfoundationalism, constructivist grounded theory as well as the second objective of the research, namely, to explore the forces involved in being a member of a small group. The chapter then proceeds to discuss measures that were taken to ensure the research quality as well as the ethical considerations that were involved in the research.

Chapter 6 describes and interprets the results pertaining to the second research objective. This is done by first focusing on the behaviour that emerged throughout the life of the group under investigation, then on the way in which shifts in overall group behaviour took place between sessions and, finally, on how the forces involved in being a group member played out in one of the sessions of the group.

Chapter 7 provides an overall conclusion to the research and also summarises the research. The essence of the research outcomes, as weighed against the stated research objectives, is considered while practical, theoretical and methodological implications of the research study are discussed. Possible future research, aimed at both strengthening and building upon the current research, is discussed.

Chapter 8 provides a personal reflection in terms of which I, as the researcher, take a step back in order to reflect on the research process, my own patterns of membership behaviour, the value of the research and the field of group research in general.