Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a concise overview of the research and to integrate the various outcomes. In order to do this, the main outcomes of the research will be highlighted in such a way that they provide a foundation for indicating the theoretical and practical implications of the research, as well as suggesting possible areas for furthering this work in future research projects.

7.2 The main research outcomes

The purpose of the research was to explore the forces involved in being a member of a small group. This overall research purpose required first the development of an appropriate research method and then the application of this method in order to conduct the actual exploration.

7.2.1 A method for exploring the forces involved in being a member of a small group

In terms of developing a research method that would be appropriate for this research, the main outcomes are as follows:

7.2.1.1 Positioning the research in the postfoundational philosophical tradition

To my knowledge, this is the first study into the psychological processes of small groups that has adopted an overt postfoundational stance. Taking this stance made it possible for the research to embrace both the need to search for that which is common to all groups and the need to take the specific context and nuances of the specific group that we investigated seriously. This resulted in a very valuable intellectual space for the development of the research.
7.2.1.2 Adopting (and adapting) a constructivist grounded theory research design

The fact that a constructivist grounded theory design was followed (as it had been described in the literature) until the point of data analysis where we realised that it would not work, was an important outcome of the research. Through this process of trial and error we not only learnt much about what can and cannot be achieved through an open-ended constructivist grounded theory analysis, but it also caused us to embark on developing the theoretical lens that turned out to be one of the major contributions of the research.

7.2.1.3 The theoretical lens

The theoretical lens (as presented in chapter 4) that was constructed from the existing theory was one of the highlights of the research. This lens postulates the group member within a field of forces operating between the goal region complexes of individuality, belonging and task and helped us to create a coding system for analysing the data. However, as will be discussed later, this theoretical lens has the potential to be applied in various ways.

7.2.2 The forces involved in being a member of a small group

Through this research there was much learnt about the forces involved in being a member of a small group.

7.2.2.1 The forces can be observed on different systemic levels

Agazarian’s (2000) notion that it is possible for the group and its dynamic components to be observed on different systemic levels was also found to be the case in this research. In particular this emerged from Analysis 1 in the previous chapter where all the codes over all ten sessions were clustered together according to the inherent meanings they carried. One of the interesting outcomes emerging from that clustering process was how the behaviour codes could clearly be grouped according to the systemic levels to which they belonged.
7.2.2.2 A force has different meanings on different systemic levels

Not only was it possible to observe a specific behaviour and, by inference, also its underlying forces, as playing out on different systemic levels, but it was also possible to see how that behaviour, and its corresponding set of underlying forces, had different meanings on the different systemic levels. For instance, with regard to the pairing dynamic that was discussed in Analysis 3: on the group-as-a-whole level, the act of pairing up and forming an alliance with a fellow member, amidst a sense of anxiety within the group, may be seen as an act away from belonging as it fragmented the group-as-a-whole into different pairs and subgroups but, on the member-level, it could be seen as an act towards belonging as it signified the need of the individual member to stay connected with someone, albeit with a partner or a subgroup and not with the group-as-a-whole. There were other similar examples and this, of course, also corresponds with Agazarian’s theory of the group as a hierarchy of systems in terms of which she uses the example of three-dimensional chess to describe the way in which a move on one board has different meanings on each board (Agazarian & Gantt, 2000).

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

The emergence of this pattern came as somewhat of a surprise as there is no theoretical formulation that explicitly describes the group as alternating between acting on forces broadly aimed at either the group’s growth or its demise. Of course, there are descriptions in the literature of anti-group forces (Bion, 1961; Nitsun, 1996) and pro-group forces (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000; Bion, 1961; Lewin, 1951) while Bion (1961) also shows a pattern of oscillation between states which may be broadly classified as ‘pro-group’ or ‘anti-group’. Nevertheless, in Analysis 3 of chapter 6 it was surprising that this alternation between anti-group and pro-group forces at work, literally happened in an almost metronomic fashion from one set of speeches to the next. This could, of course, have been a result of the choice of the session, namely, session 7 of 10: had we chosen either session 1 or 2 for the in-depth analysis, we might have found a more one-sided set of forces at work. However, this pattern of alternations did not emerge from Analysis 3 in chapter 6 only. In fact, it first became evident in Analysis 2, where we looked at the group’s progression over the ten sessions and observed the group’s movements towards and away from development and growth between sessions, also in a more or less alternating fashion.
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.

This pattern towards and away from belonging, individuality and task was not merely a theoretical formulation into which the observation of the data was ‘forced’. As soon as we started with the coding process, we realised that it was, in fact, possible to code all the behaviours within the group according to this pattern without having to force anything. This natural fit between the data and the theoretical framework strengthened the belief that the forces involved in being a group member can, indeed, be seen as operating between the three polarities of individuality, belonging and task. Furthermore, in Analysis 3 of the previous chapter, it again emerged as a very natural way in which to conceptualise the interplay of forces. With regard to Analysis 3 we started with the data first and still found it fitting and useful to augment our inferences of the way in which the forces operate by describing them along the lines of the theoretical lens. When seen in conjunction with the pro-group and anti-group qualities of the forces involved in being a group member, we are able to see how all group forces, whether working towards the group’s development or its demise, impact on the group members by driving them either towards or away from belonging, individuality and task.

The quality of the forces in the group change as the group moves from one developmental level to the next.

This outcome seems to be self-evident from the perspective of group development theorists, but it still is interesting to note how a study, that was not focused on studying, proving or disproving theories of group development, came to a conclusion about the forces operating within the group that supports the notion of the group developing from immaturity to maturity, and not simply oscillating between states of work and non-work or, then, basic assumptions. It was also interesting to note how the two patterns of the group forces that had been discussed thus far, firstly, as alternating between pro- and anti-group and, secondly, as towards or away from belonging, individuality and task, did not change in any observable way as the group became more mature in terms of its ability to develop a structure and to carry out meaningful work. While the pattern of the forces did not change, the quality of both the forces and
their associated behaviours, did change in meaningful ways, as can be seen in Analysis 3 in chapter 6.

7.2.2.6 One impact of the forces on group members is that the members assume roles within the group

This realisation is in line with Agazarian’s work on group roles and forces as well as with Bion’s notion of the individual’s valence for taking up specific roles in the group. In this study we were able to see how the taking up of roles within the group, for example, Maggie, as discussed in Analysis 3, is both a function of the forces on the group-as-a-whole level and the forces on the individual member-level. If this realisation is understood in conjunction with what has been learnt in terms of the patterns of the forces within the group, then the forces in the group can be seen as ‘recruiting’ members to act on their behalf, either towards the group’s growth or demise and always along the lines of towards or away from belonging, individuality and task. The member with the greatest valence for responding to a specific force will be selected (or volunteer) for enacting the concomitant behaviour and, if this is repeated over time, an expectation can develop in terms of which certain members will be recruited to enact specific behaviours in accordance with the underlying forces - in other words, establishing a role.

7.3 Implications for existing theory

7.3.1 Group theory

The implications of this research for group theory can be summarised as follows:

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

This research has shown that much can be gained from looking beyond the safe enclaves of our intellectual traditions. It also has shown, in common with others in the past, including Agazarian (2000), that it is, indeed, possible to integrate the approaches to group theory that were set in motion by pioneers such as Bion (1961), Foulkes (1975), Agazarian (2000)and Lewin (1951) – and to do so in a coherent and logical way. This integrative way of looking at groups acknowledges that the group is
infinitely complex and that it can only be helpful to look at the group from various theoretical perspectives in order to further our understanding.

In addition, an integrative perspective ensures checks and balances in the process of observing and making sense of group phenomena. While interpreting the group's behaviour from one perspective, one is immediately reminded to check one's interpretation against the way in which another perspective may have interpreted the same behaviour. This not only acts as a safeguard against 'group think' when thinking about groups, but it also serves as a constant, critical disruption in one's thinking about groups, thus forcing one to remain critically honest and alert.

7.3.1.2 A coherent framework for understanding the forces involved in being a group member is proposed

Following on the point made above, another important theoretical contribution is the fact that a theoretical framework was proposed to fill an important gap in the literature. Until now, no theoretical framework has existed which focused specifically on what it means, and takes, to be a member of a group. Accordingly, this research has shifted the focus to the group member and away from the group leader, who is so often favoured when it comes to research attention. Also, as mentioned above, this framework is founded upon a coherent integration of several prominent theoretical traditions in conjunction with a rigorous, empirical study.

7.3.1.3 The theoretical framework mentioned above is, in essence, a ‘field theory’, which has important implications

The fact that the theoretical framework describes the relationships and tensions between various elements means that it can be applied to, and tested in, a variety of settings. It also means that it can be used to generate innumerable hypotheses regarding group behaviour that can then be empirically tested.

7.3.1.4 Our understanding of forces within the group is furthered

The previous section highlighted the main outcomes of the research with regards to what we have learnt about the forces involved in being a group member and the way in which these forces operate. While some of these outcomes confirmed the work of other scholars, others comprise unique contributions.
7.3.2 Qualitative research methodology

This research also made important contributions to qualitative research methodology, especially in the field of group process research.

7.3.2.1 Implications for research philosophy

The fact that this research demonstrated the way in which a postfoundational research philosophy can be applied to the research of group process can, potentially, have great value in the field of group research. The main reason for this is the space that a postfoundational stance opens up between wanting to acquire precise and exact knowledge about group process on the one hand, and wanting to be interpretative and contextual on the other. Much of the research that attempts to study group process gravitates to one of the two extremes, with the result that potential knowledge and meaning may be lost.

7.3.2.2 Implications for research design

There are two major implications of this research study in terms of research design. Firstly, with regard to constructivist grounded theory research, important lessons were learnt about applying it to group process research. A group is a moving target and it is essential that the research design, especially with regard to data analysis, take this into account. In addition, it is not possible to blindly apply the traditional grounded theory way of gathering data about a specific, static issue or problem and then analysing that data by means of a clustering process to studying group process, as a group changes over time. The way in which this was dealt within this research study was to break up the data into small segments and then analyse the data segment by segment in order to allow for the movements over time to become visible. Also, as a result of the fact that data emanating from the group process, for example, video and transcripts, carry so much meaning on so many different levels, it is impossible, at least, not feasible, to maintain a fully open-ended grounded theory approach to data analysis. In other words, a theoretical framework is needed to focus the observation and analysis.

The second major implication for research design with regard to group process is, of course, the theoretical framework itself, which can be applied as an instrument for data
analysis in various group process research studies. The fact that, as discussed above, the theoretical framework is a ‘field theory’ means that it can be applied to a variety of research questions. These research questions will be pointed out below where the possibilities for future research are discussed.

7.4 Suggestions for the application of the research outcomes

The way in which the forces involved in being a group member have come to be understood in this research study can be applied in a variety of ways.

Firstly, as mentioned above, researchers can use this framework as a tool to explore various aspects of group life.

Secondly, consultants and team leaders can use this framework as a diagnostic or intervention tool in order to gain insights into the underlying processes in their groups. All team members can be asked to list those aspects of being a member of their team that draw or push them either towards or away from a sense of belonging to the group, a sense of being unique and separate individuals, and the group’s task. The group can then reflect on this information in order to come to an understanding of its own process and to devise ways in which to improve its functioning. Of course, there can be many variations of this, for example, asking the group members to draw pictures depicting how they perceive their relation to belonging, individuality or task or carrying out a sculpting exercise in terms of which the group members position themselves in the space between the three polarities and discuss the reasons, implications and possible solutions with regards to where they find themselves in the group.

Thirdly, team leaders can use the theoretical framework as a tool for reflection on the behaviours that they observe within the group. By observing group behaviour through this framework, hypotheses can be generated regarding what might be happening in the group and these hypotheses can then be tested, talked through and adapted.

Finally, this theoretical framework can also be applied very effectively as a self-reflection tool with regard to the individual’s own membership within a group. This may prove to be a very helpful way for group members to make decisions about their membership and to consider ways in which they can be more effective as members of the groups to which they belong.
7.5 Suggestions for future research

There is almost no end to the research possibilities that can flow from this research. These include the following:

a) The same research process can be repeated for studying other groups in order to ascertain whether the same patterns of forces emerge. This can be done in a number of ways. Firstly, a second group of researchers can analyse the same group and be asked to code one session purely inductively, without having seen the theoretical framework, and then compare the code categories that emerge with the categories created by the theoretical framework. Secondly, the framework can be applied to other training groups and also to other types of groups in order to ascertain which patterns of forces emerge and, in this way, improve our understanding of the forces involved in being group member.

b) The theoretical framework could also be applied to study specific questions with regard to the forces that impact on group members. For example: What are the forces involved in taking risks in small groups? In order to answer this research question, the same data which was used for this study can be used, and specific instances in which members had to take action in the face of risk can be identified. These instances can then be analysed in terms of the forces involved, as per the theoretical framework, in order to find out whether there are distinguishable patterns that emerge in terms of pro- and anti-group forces towards and/or away from belonging, individuality and task on different systemic levels. Another research example may involve exploring the impact of facilitator interventions on the underlying forces in the group. Again the same, or different, data can be used and each instance of facilitator intervention analysed in terms of the theoretical framework in order to discover which patterns, with regard to the interplay of forces, emerge.

c) Specific hypotheses regarding the theoretical framework can also be formulated and tested. For example, according to the framework a member should move ‘towards task’ if the forces away from task are weakened and all other forces stay the same. In an experimental design this situation could be established and the hypothesis tested. Despite the fact that it would not be easy to set up experiments such as these, it is theoretically possible to set and test hypotheses for every possible movement in the field of forces.

d) Case study research can be conducted within an organisational setting where specific interventions aimed at strengthening specific forces, for example,
forces towards belonging, can be launched in order to study the impact of such interventions in a real-life case scenario.

e) A narrative study in which group members reflect on their own membership – using the framework to highlight specific aspects of their membership on which to reflect – can provide valuable insights with regard to the way in which the forces within the group are experienced and narrated by its members.

f) Similarly, an action research study can be conducted with a group using this framework to reflect on their own process, devise action steps to take and then to reflect on the impact of the actions taken. Such a study would help us both to understand the way in which a group and its members attempt to take ownership of their dynamic processes, and also to understand the difficulties involved in applying the framework within an organisational setting.

7.6 Conclusion

This research study set out to explore the forces involved in being a member of a small group. In order to do this, a research method had to be developed. By creating a theoretical lens through which to conduct the data analysis, a constructivist grounded theory design was adapted for the purposes of the research and was effectively applied to explore the forces involved in being a member of a small group. This research not only provided greater insights into the dynamic forces within the group, but it also helped us to think through important aspects regarding research into group processes. In addition, the theoretical framework that emerged from the research has definite possibilities for further application, both in terms of practice and future research.
Reflection

It feels surreal, to say the least: typing up this final reflection, watching the snow covering Chicago in her silence. Yet this feeling is also one of completeness – the moment of closing a circle. A circle that started five years ago and which, like all good hand-drawn circles, is not perfect. Still, in these final few pages, I would like to invite you to accompany me on one last task: to take a few steps back in order to reflect on this research.

I must admit that there have been times when I not only doubted my ability to complete this dissertation, but also doubted my topic itself. “So what?”, I would ask. This question circled me like a hungry vulture. So what if we understood the forces involved in being a group member? What is the use, in the bigger scheme of things, of all the time and energy that I am putting into this? This worry was definitely worse than worrying about whether I was up to it, or worrying whether or not my method would actually deliver meaningful results. It was a worry that tore away at the very reason for my doing the research. I would listen to the news and to stories about mining rights for new mines in the most pristine parts of South Africa, and wonder: shouldn’t I rather try to be involved in things like environmental affairs? Or I would walk down an icy Chicago street and see a homeless man begging for food and wonder: how will all my time and energy help this man? Is it worth it to do all of this?

Whenever I had doubts like these, I reminded myself of the fact that we are all members of groups all of the time. To me this knowledge served as the core of my motivation as I progressed with my research. It helped me keep in mind that if we were better able to reflect on how we are being members of the groups we belong to, then maybe we would also be better able to take responsibility for how we take up our roles as members. I was recently reminded of this at a Listening Post event that was held in Evanston, just North of Chicago. The event was convened by myself and another board member of the Chicago Centre for the Study of Groups and Organisations (CCSGO), an affiliate of the A.K. Rice Institute, as part of a global initiative of OPUS
(Organisation for the Promotion and Understanding of Society) in terms of which groups of ten to fifteen people gathered around the world to reflect on the topic: “The world at the dawn of 2012”. The purpose of each group was to come up with hypotheses regarding the dynamics underlying society at this point in time. Some of the hypotheses from our group were as follows:

- Due to the rapidity of change, communities cannot hold boundaries or roles and so we are struggling to become a “we”, resulting in society becoming increasingly fragmented in spite of our deep need for community and connection;

- Because of the increased occurrences of huge natural disasters, coupled with our knowledge that we have not been able to solve the big problems of our times (for instance, overpopulation), we feel impotent and powerless and we project these feelings onto the leaders and blame them for not being able to rescue us from this situation;

- The overwhelming availability of information and the rapid rate of change contribute to an increasingly complex world where members of society experience a lack of clarity. This leads to a general feeling of being overwhelmed and in turn resorting to strategies of polarization in order to retain some sense of coherence and control.

These threads of thinking about society today underlined the fact that we are usually much quicker to blame the leaders when things go wrong than we are willing to take a critical stance towards ourselves and the way in which we are being members. I also came under the acute impression of the importance for us, today, to each ask ourselves: How am I being a member of this group? Whether ‘this group’ refers to my local school board, my workplace or my community at large doesn’t matter. What does matter is the fact that, until we are able to each take responsibility for our own actions as members, we cannot continue shifting the blame onto the leaders. Of course this line of thinking is not new: it seems to be exactly what Bion (1961) referred to when he distinguished between the basic assumption state of dependency and the work group. What this research emphasized, however, is the importance of asking ourselves: How are we being members? To have this question highlighted at a time like this is, to me, enough confirmation that this research was worth all the time and effort.

Of course the research tried to move beyond this central question by developing a framework according to which we can structure the way in which we reflect upon our membership. It is my firm belief that - given the limitations inherent to any research project that tries to develop theory about something as complex as groups of human
beings – this research managed to put a simple framework on the table that has the ability to facilitate such reflection. What I like about the triangular nature of the framework is that it moves us out of the linear thinking that so often characterises our conceptualisations of belonging vs. individuality, social vs. personal or work vs. non-work. This enables us to look at infinitely complex processes through a lens that intuitively makes sense whilst being grounded both in empirical data and in established group literature. In workshops and lectures to date I have become increasingly convinced of the potential of this framework to be used for purposes of self-reflection regarding one’s own membership, as well for groups to assess themselves in terms of the forces experienced by their members either towards or away from belonging, individuality or task. This realisation motivates me to continue this research in order to test, refine and further develop this framework and its application possibilities.

Finally, much credit has to go to Professor Johan Basson, my research supervisor. He encouraged me to make the research my own while others advised me to get it over and done with as soon as possible. I think he understood that at a deeper level this was much more to me than the letters "PhD" behind my name. The containing space that he created for me to present and play with my ideas allowed both the research and myself to grow. I understand now that for me he became a ‘container’ that could hold my ideas even though he didn’t always agree with them. It is my desire to keep the educational torch that he lit in me burning as I continue to fulfil various teaching and research roles into the future. There is something about higher education that gets lost if we only focus on efficiency, research publications, profits and student satisfaction. Sometimes the greatest learning happens when students are pushed to confront the uncomfortable questions that they would rather avoid. Professor Basson showed me the value of taking education and research seriously, even when it doesn’t seem to make sense through the lenses of profit or ambitious publication outputs.

In closing, this is my wish: that I can use what I have learned here to continuously reflect on how I am being a member of the various groups within which I stand, and that others can be inspired to do the same.

Thank you for accompanying me on this journey,

Jean Cooper