



## Book Review

J. E. McGrath, (1984). *Groups: Interaction and Performance*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., \$25.95.

What would readers of this journal think of an author who, for 17 years, has been sifting (McGrath & Altman, 1966) and re-sifting (Runkel & McGrath, 1972) and rephrasing (McGrath, 1978) what is known about small group research and misspells only the word parchesi (p. 109) in the text under review? Wouldn't you guess that he was compulsive with a low sense of play? This is, in fact, not the case. McGrath has a fine sense of humor, is always helpful to colleagues, wishes at all costs to avoid improper criticism, and his spelling—pachisi—is allowed. At a deeper level, however, I believe McGrath is committed to a particularly pessimistic brand of positivism.

McGrath's iron-clad law of small group research is that "All methods used to gather and analyze evidence offer both opportunities not available with other methods and limitations inherent in the use of these particular methods" (p.29). More specifically, he assumes that field studies (including field experiments) gain realism at the price of low generality and lack of precision. Laboratory experiments (including simulations) maximize precision of measurement and control of variables at the price of realism and general application. High general application of surveys is obtained at the cost of realism and precision and high level theories are, like surveys, somewhat unrealistic and imprecise.

As a result of the fixation on precision and realism, McGrath overlooks entirely the character of strategies related to discovery. As a minor theme of the book, McGrath relates the emphasis on the consequences of group activity to Lewin's followers and the study of interaction process to the Bales group at Harvard. In no sense does he help the reader identify the essential insights. Truly basic insights are not differentiated from diligent but uninspired parametric studies. A strong point of his organization is the identification of the common emphasis on group productivity in the various small group programs at Illinois. Internal evidence tells us that McGrath is informed about interaction process and group dynamic positions on leadership and if he

were disposed to review Fiedler's or Davis's work in terms of these, then students working with the book would be alerted to the need for a better theoretical synthesis. If McGrath's iron-clad law leads one to think that since all general theory is imprecise to some degree, no theory is particularly better than any other, then this is error.

McGrath contrasts groups "composed and in various degrees restricted (by experimenters?) in form of interaction" with "natural" groups. A striking accomplishment of Goffman is that he has used a similar dimension. In *Asylums* (Aldine, 1967), he describes the pressure to "be sick" in mental hospitals where the individual is prevented, as in an experiment, from putting himself at risk. And in "Where the Action Is" (in *Interaction Ritual*, Aldine, 1969), he describes casinos where an individual can "high roll" to the limit of his wealth. McGrath dismisses Goffman with a one-line reference to his earlier (1957) *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (p. 248). By not addressing Goffman's later work and, more generally, by not digging more deeply into the reach of social context in both experimental and natural settings, McGrath acts as if he wished the experimenter-biased insights of the 1970s had not occurred.

The author's classification system and text would permit a reader to believe that jury experiments in court contexts with jurors recruited from regular service cannot be differentiated in value from casual mock jury studies with college sophomores. Sources of funding need to understand that data produced by expensive high reality field experiments have great original value and continue to constitute a scientific resource to be revisited with new hypotheses. The author's closing chapter on research on standing groups (such as families) has no reference to David Reiss's *The Family's Construction of Reality* (Harvard, 1981), a book of great interest in group psychotherapy and a veritable paradigm of the process of discovery through family experimentation.

On the other side, my small group lectures will be improved because McGrath has reminded me of less-than-classic but nonetheless important studies. One example is Dunphy's restatement of a phase hypothesis based on Bion (p. 155). A second is Hare's classification of interpersonal problems in terms of Parson's AGIL paradigm (p. 158). Both will restore threadbare sections of old notes. For instructors whose nondirective classes need a factual spine—this text may well be the best currently available.

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