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INTRODUCTION

Group Dynamics When Battling a Pandemic

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Background: This special issue of *Group Dynamics* presents six articles that address aspects of how group dynamics and processes have been impacted by, and have the potential to impact, the SARS-CoV-2 or COVID-19 pandemic. ***Method:*** This introduction briefly reviews and comments on each article. ***Results:*** The articles highlight a number of issues and findings: the natural inclination of people to congregate in groups both exacerbate the spread of the virus and can provide solace during these times of stress; the concept of groupthink may explain the seemingly irrational rejection of public health measures among some in society; group psychotherapy is effective, but we need more research to understand how it works when delivered in an online format as necessitated by the current pandemic; an emotional management intervention might help virtual work groups to perform better; how members perceive their virtual environment could affect the quality of their groupwork; and today's virtual work environments requires group members to have a common understanding of the technologies they are using. ***Conclusions:*** The current crisis has highlighted that groups to which we belong are important to our mental health and productivity. The pandemic also has made clear the need for a broader scholarly and professional investment in the understanding and use of groups. Such an investment would not only move the fields of group research forward, but would also inform public health policy, and ease our adjustment to and capacity to flourish in the current and future pandemics.

Highlights and Implications

- The COVID-19 health crisis has shown us how central groups are to daily living. Unfortunately, there are many aspects of group functioning that we do not understand very well, but which the pandemic has shown are critical.
- This special issue of *Group Dynamics* reviews a select few of these aspects.
- In particular, the papers address the virtual group experience and what we know about how it compares to the in-person experience; provision of virtual group psychotherapy; how social distancing is necessary for physical health but problematic for emotional health; and how groupthink can explain some of the surprising behaviors that we have seen during the COVID-19 crisis.

Keywords: virtual groups, group psychotherapy, groupthink, pandemic

This is an ambivalent time for groups researchers. The world has been thrust into a massive experiment on what happens when people are forced to alter their daily involvement with all manner of groups: social, work, and therapy groups. It is an experiment that is proving to be taxing on the participants, so much so that increasing numbers are requesting, or demanding, to be excused from the remainder of the study. Presumably no scientist is happy about having to collect data in this way. But at the same time, the situation presents a tremendous opportunity to demonstrate the importance and applicability of group research and practice. It is inarguable that the general public is gaining a greater appreciation for the role of

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groups in their lives. Many citizens who were previously unfamiliar with the notion of a virtual group have by now learned the basics of Zoom or Skype and have discovered that effective participation in a virtual group requires more than just speaking clearly into a microphone. Those who have moved their work venue from an office suite to their home have learned that a lot of things get accomplished during brief conversations with coworkers in the hallway. Exercising by oneself at home for some reason feels less motivating than when surrounded by others at a fitness center. For many people, a comforting activity in times of stress is to get together with friends for libations and conversation, but for an extended period of time this was not possible.

These experiences have made plain to many people the central role that groups play in our lives. In fact, the disengagement from groups has contributed to a phenomenon, "Blursday," which refers to the inability to determine which day it is as a result of isolation. While research into the experience is only just beginning (the National Science Foundation has already awarded money to study it), it is speculated that regular participation in groups serves as a tool to help regulate one's internal clock—our leadership team meets every Monday morning, I go to CrossFit on Wednesdays and Saturdays because I like the other people who are there on those days—and there is no viable substitute if those activities are removed. Along these lines, since the implementation of quarantine measures there has been an explosion of popular interest in research on loneliness and comparison of the interpersonal dynamics in face-to-face as opposed to virtual groups. In response to these issues, people are finding creative ways to provide group experiences. As I write this, New York has recently announced free online resilience group therapy for all state residents, with other states expected to follow suit. Fitness gyms are setting up Zoom workout rooms through which members can exercise at home while interacting with trainers and other members. Virtual cocktail parties are popular.

This means that the time is right for group researchers and practitioners to step to the forefront and share our knowledge, expertise, and research skills. This special issue of *Group Dynamics* provides a launching point. Here we have articles that tackle six aspects of the groups-under-COVID experience: a broad consideration of how the human inclination to form groups contributes to both the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and the amelioration of its psychological effects; a groupthink analysis of why subgroups have actively opposed science-based governmental policies on congregation and interpersonal interaction, a review of what is known and not known about the provision of virtual group psychotherapy, management of emotion in a virtual team environment that removes many of the typical cues used to detect emotional reactions in others, a consideration of the subjective experience of "virtuality" in groups and an argument that it supersedes the objective online/face-to-face distinction in determining group productivity, and a demonstration of the impact of subjective perceptions of the interaction technologies used within virtual groups.

Grouping During a Pandemic: Pros and Cons

Marmarosh, Forsyth, Strauss, and Burlingame (2020) begin this special issue with an intriguing thesis: that groups are both facilitators of the pandemic and tools for mitigating the impact of the pandemic. As we now all know, physical closeness is a primary cause, perhaps *the* primary cause, of SARS-CoV-2 transmission. Transmission is amplified in any gathering of people in which unusual amounts of air are expelled from the lungs. A cheering audience, a choir, and a high-impact aerobics class are all examples of such groups. Public health officials thus quickly encouraged people to not congregate, and in many places gatherings of people who do not share the same household were severely limited or banned altogether. As Marmarosh and colleagues point out, this strategy is a double-edged sword, as in times of stress, people especially seek to affiliate in order to help them cope. Thus, an intervention intended to reduce the likelihood of physiological illness likely contributed to a rise in likelihood of psychological illness.

This raises the provocative question of why public health officials were so quick to advocate for the elimination of grouping as opposed to a

mere reduction in allowable group size, or permission to move group events outdoors. I recognize that questions can be asked about how effective these alternate approaches would have been given what is known about the virus. My point is that little attention seems to have been given to the psychological impact of not allowing people to congregate, despite there being ample research into this issue. Marmarosh Marmarosh and colleagues (2020) discuss this research in detail. I would argue that this indicates a clear need for group researchers to be regular members of public health intervention teams. While early on people were quite diligent at adhering to stay-at-home orders, images of beaches and parks and athletic fields showed us that people began to deviate from these orders rather quickly. Experts on groups would have predicted that and would have had ideas on how to address the problem.

The other side of Marmarosh et al.'s (2020) argument is that groups hold considerable potential for helping people recover from the mental and emotional shock of the pandemic. This is a perspective shared by some of the other contributors to this issue. Marmarosh and colleagues provide an impressively broad review of the ways in which groups can be employed to help people begin to recover. Group psychotherapists and researchers alike should find much to take away from this review.

Groupthink

Groupthink is a model that tries to identify the causes of bad group decisions. A puzzling decision emerges from a capable group, results of the decision prove to be disastrous, and a subsequent inspection of the group identifies at least some of the factors that Janis (1972) suggested can induce groupthink: a charismatic leader whose preferred course of action is known, failure to solicit input from outside of the group, an interpretation of silence as tacit agreement with the suggested course of action, cohesiveness among group members, and the issue being one that is high stakes or stressful. The model has historically been used to explain legendarily bad decisions: for example, NASA's decision to launch the Challenger space shuttle in cold temperatures or Enron leadership's singular focus on continually increasing its stock price.

Common to these groups is that they are standing groups with a history of good decisions and are comprised of talented members. The issue is that they have fallen into complacency and developed bad habits. Forsyth (2020) suggests that groupthink can also occur among loosely defined ad hoc groups whose members are mostly not acquainted with each other and have no performance history. Held up as an example of this are the groups who have protested stay-at-home orders resulting from the pandemic. This is an intriguing idea. The protestors generally identify themselves as supporters of President Trump, who has argued for states to have less regulation of pandemic-related behavior and is certainly charismatic. While we've no way of knowing from where the protestors have been getting information about the pandemic, it seems safe to assume that, consistent with at least American trends, they favor news sources that are compatible with their personal view of the world (Purcell, Rainie, Mitchell, & Rosenstiel, 2010). That this is a stressful situation probably goes without saying. It is even plausible to speculate on some sense of cohesion among the protestors. The argument gets even stronger if we add to the mix the desire to maintain a positive social identity, which Turner and Pratkanis (1998) hypothesized to be an influence on groupthink. The protestors often articulate a sense that their views on constitutional freedoms, governmental regulation, and interpersonal relations are being ignored or trivialized. Rising up would be a way to reassure that these views have value. Bénabou (2013) has proposed "willful ignorance" as yet another contributor to groupthink, with group members either pretending that dire forecasts do not exist or overemphasizing mildly positive information. Arguments that the predicted SARS-CoV-2 mortality rate is overblown, or that the virus is really no different from the flu, are good examples of this.

Forsyth (2020) provides us with an excellent model for understanding why citizens would oppose seemingly sound scientific advice. The challenge is intervening to prevent future occurrences. Strategies for discouraging groupthink are few and have received minimal research attention (Pratkanis & Turner, 2013). Despite this, Forsyth speculates on some possible techniques. His suggestions have much appeal and

hopefully will spur researchers to more rigorously tackle this thorny issue.

Group Teletherapy

The potential for virtual delivery of group therapeutic sessions is exciting and extends beyond the coronavirus crisis. It opens up the possibility of reaching communities that are some distance from the nearest care provider, allows people to participate from a location that is comfortable and familiar, and makes it possible for a person who is traveling to continue treatment uninterrupted.[1] The emergence of virtual yoga groups and fitness groups during the pandemic demonstrates the possibility for physically engaged therapeutic groups. Health and mental health present a bigger challenge because of the need for confidential interaction, but doctors and therapists now have a range of secure portals at their disposal (e.g., Doxy.me, AMC Health, Teladoc). The bigger issue is that implementation is running ahead of research. We just do not know very much about the extent to which the online group psychotherapy experience mimics the in-person setting and whether the interpersonal dynamics, so crucial for successful group psychotherapy, are impacted by the virtual setting. Widespread use of poorly understood techniques has hampered group psychotherapy before and led to the abandonment of promising tools (see Parks & Tasca, 2021), and we need to make sure that virtual group psychotherapy does not suffer the same fate.

Weinberg (2020) does us the service of reviewing what is known, and not known, about online group psychotherapy. Further, he discusses practical challenges for therapists who wish to move online: managing the setting; dealing with the reduction of physical cues and the loss of information that such cues convey; establishing therapeutic presence; and accommodating the environmental intrusions that regularly occur in virtual interaction: pets on laps, housemates behaving in the background, outside noises through open windows, and so on. Weinberg thus identifies for us two research agendas: Determining the efficacy of virtual group psychotherapy for a variety of problems and developing strategies for overcoming procedural challenges that do not arise in in-person sessions.

Implicit in Weinberg's (2020) analysis is another topic, namely, the therapist's self-efficacy for delivering treatment online. This has proven to be a fundamental issue for schoolteachers, particularly veteran teachers who have well-established instructional methods that do not translate well to the virtual environment, and ideas are already emerging on how to help them make the transition (e.g., Haverback, 2020). Collaboration between education researchers who are tackling this problem and group psychotherapy researchers could be productive and lead to rapid development of methods to help group psychotherapists move seamlessly into the virtual environment.

Virtual Groups

The harmful versus beneficial effects of electronic social interaction have long been debated (see Shaw & Gant, 2002) and while there has been a growth of research on virtual work teams (Gilson, Maynard, Jones Young, Vartiainen, & Hakonen, 2015), that work has been criticized on the grounds that it is heavily laboratory-based and lacks ecological validity (Purvanova, 2014). The pandemic has thus induced us to embrace a mode of communication and collaboration that is not nearly as well-understood as we need it to be. Complicating matters are broad individual differences in ability to use virtual interaction interfaces, general computer skill, and openness to technology. Further, the impact of these individual differences is magnified by the perceived compulsion to interact electronically in virtual groups, which can elevate anxiety and diminish self-efficacy (Park, Rhoads, Hou, & Lee, 2014). Paradoxically, geographic dispersion of virtual group members can work against group performance and interaction quality. Eliminating the need for everyone to be in the same physical space is presumably one of the great benefits of virtual meetings, but dispersion often introduces norm- and cue-detection problems, uncoordinated communication, and opportunities for distracted attention among other challenges (e.g., Eisenberg, Post, & DiTomaso, 2019; McLeod, 2013; Perry, Lorinkova, Hunter, Hubbard, & McMa-

[1] This potential presumes nationwide broadband coverage, currently a problem in rural communities in many countries.

hon, 2016). These experiences can, in turn, increase both skepticism about the quality of virtual groupwork and general dislike of the virtual group format (e.g., Lowry, Zhang, Zhou, & Fu, 2010).

A major challenge lies in interpreting the reactions of group members. A group that communicates only through written messages lacks any context information that can help clarify the intent of a comment. A videoconference group is better, but even here, a camera head shot removes body language that helps us assess others' emotions. Here, people tend to focus on communication content and tone to infer how others are feeling and reacting. Regardless of format, loss of noncontent information makes verbal statements ripe for misinterpretation, which can produce a conflict spiral and general negative reactions to the virtual group experience (Cheshin, Rafaeli, & Bos, 2011). Holtz, Orengo Castella, Zornoza Abad, and Gonzalez-Anta (2020) suggest that this difficulty can be lessened by applying an emotional management intervention to the group. This intervention teaches group members about the impact of emotion on group functioning, the challenges of accurately detecting emotions in virtual groups, and strategies for regulating the emotional climate of the group. Holtz and colleagues (2020) show that this intervention can have meaningful and positive impact on group performance by enhancing motivation and synergy.

Holtz and colleagues' (2020) study meshes nicely with that of Brown, Prewett, and Grossenbacher (2020). Brown and colleagues investigate the concept of virtuality, basically the extent to which a virtual group mimics a face-to-face group, and distinguish between perceived and objective virtuality. They argue, and show, that is possible for virtual group members to perceive their environment as being little different from a face-to-face group, and that such a perception can foster high-quality virtual groupwork. For example, whereas some people might see disjointed communication—extended pauses, overtalking, inability to get the attention of the moderator—as a procedural flaw, others may see it as opportunities to collect thoughts, carefully evaluate information, and plan. Some may find the need to continually scan a checkerboard of faces annoying, but others may like that they can see each person's face and appreciate the ability to have productive one-on-one side chats while the main discussion is occurring. Brown et al.'s (2020) work shows us that members of virtual groups do not necessarily view the setting as all that different from the in-person environment and are able to find parallels between the two forms of meeting. The ability to do this contributes importantly to good collective performance. Two clear follow-up research topics are determining how people come to see the two formats as similar and learning how to foster this perception in those who are skeptical of virtual groups.

Müller and Antoni (2020) also take a perceptual approach to virtual groupwork, specifically to the technology used to interact with other members. In the early days of virtual grouping, communication options were often limited to a conference call, e-mail, or a chat room. Today there are many different ways to connect. Participants in a video conference may join via computer, smartphone, or telephone and may or may not be visually present. The conference may operate through any one of a number of VoIP providers (e.g., Zoom, Teams, Houseparty, Lifesize). Some members may prefer to share documents through DropBox, others SharePoint, and still others Google Docs. There are a large number of chatting tools that can be used for one-on-one interactions. This proliferation of technologies means it is quite likely that group members will have differing preferences for which ones to use and differing levels of familiarity with a particular tool. The person who has only ever used Zoom for video meetings is going to be at a disadvantage if the inaugural meeting of their new group takes place through Teams. A person who does not like SharePoint will likely be frustrated if that is the document sharing portal that the group decides to use. Asynchronies in favored technologies cannot help but disrupt group functioning.[2]

[2] A useful analogue of this problem in face-to-face groups is the need for a common language in which to speak. Group members from countries with different native languages need to settle upon a single language to be used by all when talking to the group at large. If the chosen language is one with which some participants are not very skilled, miscommunications can occur, or translators need to be employed.

Müller and Antoni (2020) thus argue that today's virtual group environment requires group members to have a common understanding of the technologies to be used and congruence in their beliefs that these technologies are at least appropriate for the task at hand. Their argument is an extension of the concept of shared mental models, which arise when group members have a common understanding of the task and similar expectations for how the task should be approached (Mohammed, Ferzandi, & Hamilton, 2010). One of Müller and Antoni's (2020) key findings is that there is a distinction between objective and subjective evaluations of the technological environment, and it is the latter alone that impacts group functioning. For example, group members may each individually feel that DropBox is the best tool for document sharing, but if they have the sense that not everyone likes DropBox, group performance will suffer. This is particularly the case within groups that are limited as to the range of interactive tools they can use. One would think there is an easy fix to this problem—have group members discuss and agree upon which tools to use in a preparatory meeting—but the authors explain why this can introduce other problems.

Concluding Thoughts

This special issue of *Group Dynamics* gives all experts on groups much to think about. There are implications for practice, research, and engagement in policy. Further, we now have everyone's attention. The pandemic has shown the world that groups are a part of the bedrock of human existence, and when that bedrock is broken, structures crumble. People are searching for ways to simulate the grouping experience: some ways work, some do not work, and it is unclear what needs to be done to improve these experiences. The light is shining more brightly than ever on the power of group psychotherapy to help people quickly make meaningful improvements in their quality of life. Hopefully, all of this will spur interest in groups, interest in funding scholars of groups, and willingness to more fully underwrite group-based treatments for mental and life issues. The articles in this issue provide an excellent guide for where these efforts should begin.

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