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SMALL TASK-ORIENTED GROUPS

A systems analysis

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of  
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## INTRODUCTION

"Where two or more people are gathered together in order to engage in social interaction - there is a social system".  
(Anon.)

The question of why it is that people come together in systems of interaction and how these systems persist as viable social arrangements is one which has been taken up by social philosophers and sociological theorists as far back as Hobbes. Subsequently Spencer, Durkheim, and such contemporary figures as Homans, Merton and Parsons have also taken issue with this problem. The present thesis shares a similar concern with the problem and derives its stimulus from the way in which sociologists have attempted to formulate adequate explanatory theories.

The thesis exhibits a convergence in the interests of the two authors - on the one hand, an interest in the application of Parsonian theory to small group phenomena, and on the other, the use of 'systems theory' in the explanation of social interaction in educational settings. The specific focus of attention is on those groups which have the properties of being small and task-oriented. Such groups are ubiquitous in educational contexts. At the most general level the thesis uses Parsons' voluntaristic theory of social action as the frame of reference from which a theory of small task-oriented groups can be derived. The thesis is therefore an expedition into the realms of sociological theory and an exploration of the way in which Parsons' theory in particular can be applied to an empirical situation. Elements of a general systems theory have been employed to further limit the scope of the investigation by focussing only on the internal dynamic of small task-oriented groups, rather than the way in which they adapt to their surrounding environments, thus enabling such groups to be conceptualised as discrete social systems in their own right.

The investigation reported in this thesis consists of a series of related steps which systematically link the abstract theory to a concrete empirical situation.

Chapter 1 is a brief exposition of Parsons' frame of reference and the elements of his theory of social action that are used in this study--namely the four functional problem and the pattern variable schemes. These two schemes are discussed in turn as they provide the theoretical basis of a research model which is capable of describing

and explaining the processes and conditions under which small task-oriented groups come into existence and persist over time. In Chapter 2 the research model is constructed by harnessing these two conceptual schemes in a manner that allows specification of a limited set of relationships between the behaviour of individual actors and the state of the social system of which they are members. Chapter 2 also provides a detailed statement of the scope of the research problem and definitions of the operational categories that are used in the analysis of on-going interaction in task-oriented groups. Chapter 3 provides the operational links between the research model and 'the real world' by specifying the empirical conditions under which the relationships hypothesised in the model are to be tested. The results of the investigation are presented in Chapter 4. The final chapter of the thesis presents a discussion of the conclusions to be drawn from the findings: an evaluation of the theoretical strategy and the methodology employed, and a commentary on the theoretical importance of the study.