V Congress of Russian Psychological Society

Dynamics of Small Group: Microgroup Theory Approach

Andrey V. Sidorenkov*

Faculty of Psychology, Southern Federal University, st. Zorge, 56/1, apt. 141, Rostov-on-Don, 344103. Russia

Abstract

The concept of 'group dynamics' should be concretized by means of certain processes and phenomena. This concretization depends on the framework employed by a researcher. In the context of a microgroup theory group dynamics is conceived as transformation of socio-psychological group structure, i.e., of informal subgroups and non-involved-in-them members, their relations with each other and with a group as a whole. The basis of the group dynamics is composed of contradictions (self-transformation source) and the related processes of integration and disintegration (self-transformation mechanism) in structure and external activity of a group.

1. Introduction

The concept of 'group dynamics' has been widespread in social psychology. At the same time this concept has no univocal interpretation and is used in different connotations. First, the concept of 'group dynamics' is employed to signify a wide totality of processes and phenomena, which take place in the group (social influence, leadership, role performance, communication forms and so on). Second, the problem of group dynamics is touched upon directly and indirectly in theories of a small group, although in some of them the term 'group dynamics' is used seldom. The most significant in this respect are theories united in the psychodynamic perspective [1]. Third, group dynamics is considered in the context of time and change that in the concentrated fashion is presented by the temporal perspective [2].

————

* Corresponding author. Tel:+7-863-218-9561
E-mail address: sav@micro-cosm.ru

Notice that the concept of 'group dynamics' is an abstraction by itself, if it is not concretized through definite processes and events. This concretization may be implemented variously depending on the framework being employed by the researcher. Thus, a certain approach is proposed in the context of a microgroup theory that is a socio-psychological theory of a small group [3]; [4]. This theory embraces two interconnected conceptual spaces – group as a system along with all its phenomena and group dynamics. In compliance with this theory, contradictions and associated-with-them integration and disintegration processes in the socio-psychological group structure make up the basis of group dynamics. (Socio-psychological structure is informal subgroups and members not included in them (outside members) who are in certain relations to each other and to the group as a whole.) Group dynamics is the transformation of the entire group structure or its separate components. That is, this is first of all formation, change, destruction of subgroups and their external ties.

The goal of the article is to designate the basic positions of a microgroup theory with regard to group dynamics.

2. Key elements of group dynamics

There is a mixture of terms as far as the development process is concerned in literature. The question is about 'conditions', 'means', 'source', 'mechanism'. For instance, in dialectical philosophy the notion 'source of self-development' of the system is associated with contradiction [5], but in psychology – with needs [6]; [7], performance [8], conflict [9]; [10]; [11], or contradiction [12]; [13]. In order to eliminate the terminological unconformity, even in the bounds of our research, we will attempt to outline basic concepts.

2.1. Transformation conditions

The concept 'conditions' fixes what mediates transformation processes of a group, informal subgroup, individual. Conditions of group activity are generally divided into external and internal. External conditions of group dynamics as a whole are spatio-temporal, organizational, material-technical, socio-economic, natural variables. Internal conditions may be classified into two types: formal-quantitative and socio-psychological. In their turn, internal group conditions may concurrently occur as external conditions for informal subgroups or individual members. Internal informal subgroup conditions are formal-quantitative and socio-psychological characteristics of these subgroups.

2.2. Transformation means

The concept 'means' reflects thanks to what new characteristics are translated and/or self-constructed. The development means of a group, subgroup, individual are joint / individual performance, interaction / communication, and social perception.

2.3. Transformation source

The concept 'source' fixes what starts, initiates self-development process. We shall consider external and internal contradictions as a universal self-transformation source of a group, subgroup and personality.

It is necessary to distinguish constructs 'contradiction' and 'conflict'. Firstly, contradiction is an internal and essential property of an individual. Divergence of opposites in contradiction is most distinctly expressed at the cognitive level of individuals' activity. A conflict is an external activity form manifesting itself in collision, counter-actions of parties. Secondly, contradiction is at the basis of conflict origin. However, contradiction may evoke various types of disintegrative (possibly, integrative) relationship and interaction of parties. Conflict is one

of the disintegration types along with avoidance, contest, competition, and so on. Thirdly, being a process, a conflict initially carries with itself transformation, but it does not produce by itself any other change. A conflict exerts influence only on contradiction (the one initiated by it, or any other), and contradiction change supports the former or produces a new form of integrative or disintegrative activity of parties.

Contradiction is a source of group self-transformation because it intensifies interaction / exchange / communication, social perception and experience. Contradictions (as and integration-disintegration processes) in the group may be regarded in accordance with two types of relations: subject–subject (e.g., individual–individual, individual–group), and subject–conditions/performance. Contradictions may arise: (a) between a group (subgroup, individual) and its external conditions / performance, (b) between the subgroups, between subgroups and outside members,, including the conditions / activities, and (c) in subgroups, comprising those with respect to the condition/activities**.**

2.4. Transformation mechanism

The term 'mechanism' fixes by what means self-transformation takes place. The universal mechanism of development and functioning of a group, subgroup, individual is external and internal integration and disintegration processes.

Transformation mechanism is latently reflected in the dialectical law "the unity of mutually excluding and simultaneously mutually supposing opposites". If this law is to stratify into two constituents, then integration process are referent to "the unity of mutually supposing opposites", but disintegration process – to "the unity of mutually excluding opposites". Both processes are interconnected and linked to contradictions.

Integration and disintegration in contrast to stability and instability, order and chaos, and so forth, are the primary processes which do not have in their basis any other processes. Integration and disintegration are in the basis of phenomena such as stability–instability, organization–disorganization, order–chaos. Integration and disintegration are not only transformation processes, but are a substance as well that is incorporated in the concrete phenomena of self-manifestation and individuals' (subgroups', groups').

3. Socio-psychological contradictions in group dynamics

3.1. Types of small group contradictions

On the basis of accumulated knowledge in the area of contradictions of small group and stated above relation types, we can identify the following types of socio-psychological contradictions of small group: (1) interpersonal contradictions (within subgroups, between members of various subgroups, between outside members, and between subgroup representatives and members not included in subgroups), (2) inter-microgroup (between subgroups in the group) и intergroup contradictions, (3) individually-microgroup and individually-group contradictions, (4) status contradictions, (5) motivational-performance contradictions, (6) performance-organizational contradictions.

Listed above contradictions are most common for a majority of small group types. However, in each concrete group they are filled with their specific content. Emergence and development of the same contradiction may occur on different grounds. Types of contradictions are interconnected (with regard to direct and reverse ties), and therefore change of some contradictions entails that of others.

3.2. Contradictions and group structure

Viewing group contradictions from the position of socio-psychological structure reveals a new research perspective. First, one should take into account that in different structural categories of a small group, contradictions will be represented variously. Thus, in a subgroup contradiction in accordance with meaningful-for-its-members signs are less expressed, but in case of their sharpening they are more effectively resolved than

contradictions across the group as a whole. Second, one should ascertain the fact that subgroups, not only single members or a group as a whole, are subjects and objects of different contradiction types. Subgroups to a different extent and with regard to different contradiction types are held to be a source of contradictory group tendencies as a whole. Third, taking into consideration all group contradiction types in their composition, on the one hand, and socio-psychological group structure, on the other hand, will permit to approach a systematic analysis of a phenomenon of group contradictions.

4. Integration–disintegration processes

4.1. The essence of integration-disintegration processes

The basic meaning of integration lies in ensuring co-existence of parties as a total sum, but that of disintegration in supporting the very possibility of existence of each of the parties. This fundamental statement has a number of clarifications that are applicable for a group, subgroup and personality. The first clarification is that integration is a process of convergence of parties for a unilateral or mutual assimilation of one side of the sign (one or more) of the other side, and disintegration - the process of divergence and separation of the parties, manifested in the strengthening of the evidence available (one or more) from related parties (or one side). In this or other case, the question is about transformation, but it has a different content. Integration involves the conversion of the parties up to the disappearance of one or both sides, and disintegration is an increased severity of the parties up to the collapse of a constituent. For instance, integration dominance between two subgroups in the group will result in seizing their existence as autonomous communities on the ground of their merging with each other.

The second aspect assumes that integration–disintegration are not only two independent processes, but two sides of the total self-development process where each of them dominates; a rate and direction of a domineering process are often set by a rate and direction proceeding of the other process. That is, disintegration increase results in weakening or relation disruption of the parties at all, and also in over-emphasizing these parties. In this case we observe integrity damage, but we do not have transformation of each of the parties separately yet and emergence from them a new sum total. This will never occur if there is no integration. But integration does not follow disintegration, but acts simultaneously with it. Disintegration weakens relations, counter-opposes and hyperbolizes the parties, and at some moment of this gaining-strength process, integration is launched that is seized by a disintegration rate and starts proceeding in an intensive regime. If integration does not join disintegration in due time, then the system simply breaks down.

The third one is expressed in the fact that integration and disintegration correlation of the parties is dynamic on the self-regulation foundation both in a mutual and one-sided order. That is, self-regulation supports an optimal balance of integration and disintegration.

The fourth clarification means: (a) convergence and transformation (or disappearance at all) of one or both parties is determined not only by domineering external integration over disintegration, but by its dominance over internal integration as well, and (b) divergence and strengthening (or complete disappearance at all) of the parties as a sum total is determined not only by dominating external disintegration over integration, but by its dominance over internal disintegration. That is, it is necessary to take into account simultaneously correlation of integration and disintegration both in external and internal manifestation of the parties.

The fifth specification assumes that regular absence of a positive result for one of the parties of disintegrative interaction leads to its internal disintegration which, in its turn, determines isolation and strengthening of this party component.

4.2. Connection of integration and disintegration processes

Integration and disintegration processes are manifested: (a) consistently that is determined by stages of developing and resolving contradiction, and (b) simultaneously and in interrelationship that is determined by availability of various contradiction grounds, by different interaction levels (personality–subgroup–group–external social context) and diverse spheres (external and internal, task and social) of group activity.

We identify several manifestation regulations of integration and disintegration processes:

1- Intensification of one process in some activity group (subgroup) sphere produces manifestation and intensification of the opposite process in the other activity sphere. For instance, contest between groups is accompanied by intensifying their intragroup cohesiveness.

2 - Integrative or disintegrative change of one group (subgroup) phenomenon fixing some activity aspect may evoke corresponding change of the other phenomenon reflecting the other group (subgroup) activity aspect. For example, disappearance of mutually shared goals, norms and values in the subgroup leads to relations destruction between its members and, probably, to subgroup break-up.

3 - Prevalence of integration / disintegration process at absence of unfavourable / favourable internal and external conditions results in intensifying the corresponding process. For instance, availability of conflicts in the unformed group and absence of attempts of their resolution from inside or outside leads to conflict intensification.

4.3. External interaction and integration–disintegration processes

The analysis of influence of external group (subgroup) interaction on internal processes should assume two circumstances. The first of them concerns basic characteristics of external interaction: (a) integration content (integration / disintegration / relative social isolation) and (b) usefulness measure of the interaction result (effectiveness–ineffectiveness). The second circumstance lies in the fact that there is a close connection between the relation of different levels (environment–group–subgroup–individual) and the relation within each level of group activity.

A small group integration with environment (e.g., with the other group) results in washing away group boundaries, decrease of its internal integrity and damage of its socio-psychological structure. Enduring and increasing external group integration will produce in one subgroups without pronounced "integrative" phenomena, washing away boundaries and disintegration increase, and in other subgroups, conversely, increase of their internal integrity and impenetrability of boundaries.

Intensification of disintegrative group interaction with environment produces integration enhancement of the whole group and integration weakening within subgroups. Regular ineffectiveness or in some cases high intensity of disintegrative group interaction with environment leads to disintegration enhancement between subgroups and integrity increase within subgroups or to the change of structural components (break-up, regrouping, rise of new subgroups). Group restructuring may cause its qualitatively new external activity and counter-action increase to environment.

Limitation of social group contacts with environment determines pronounced group disintegration as a whole and integration increase within subgroups.

5. Contradictions and integration–disintegration processes

The problem of relations between contradiction and integration–disintegration processes is extremely complicated. Now we are confined only with setting a problem drawing attention to some important circumstances.

The first aspect of the problem in question presupposes studying contradiction in relation to forming and further transformation of the socio-psychological group structure. Indeed, emergence of informal subgroups and their further dynamics, break-up of one subgroups and merging of the others, relations change between subgroups and within them and so forth are determined by varied contradictions. Thus, unification of group members into

subgroups is connected with sharpening contradictions, when a group as a whole is incapable of realizing those or other functions with respect to individual goals and needs of members proper. This contradiction produces integration with some members and disintegration with the others. That is why, at the very first stage of group existence integration processes start to proceed intensively that finds its expression in uniting human beings into subgroups (i.e. integration within subgroups). At the same time disintegration begins to enhance itself across the group as a whole.

The second aspect of this problem requires a search of answers to a number of urgent issues: What is the critical meaning of sharpening contradiction by which processes start developing intensively? Why can both integration and disintegration develop at the same level of sharpening the similar contradiction? Why can a disintegrative process acquire diverse forms by the same sharpening meaning of the similar contradiction (e.g., a conflict or disruption of all relations)?, etc.

The third aspect is directed at regarding the relation of contradictions and integration–disintegration in a two-sided manner. That is, contradictions themselves are subjected to dynamics depending on how integration–disintegration processes will be carried on and correlated with each other.

The study of this general problem is complicated both on the theoretical and on the experimental field. Now we can formulate proposition: a high level of external group (subgroup) contradictions defines a higher level of external disintegration and internal integrity; conversely, a low level of external group (subgroup) contradictions determines a lower external disintegrity and internal integrity.

6. Socio-psychological impact

Any socio-psychological impact on the group as a whole (or a single subgroup and individual in the group) may be reduced, in our view, to handling contradictions (smoothing over / resolution and initiation / sharpening), and by means of them – to integration and disintegration processes in external activity and group structure. Specifically, we have elaborated and tested in the natural experiment concrete directions and methods of smoothing over and sharpening contradictions in the academic groups [14], [15].

7. Summary

In case of considering a group as a system possessing a certain construct one should identify not only elements (individuals), but subsystems as well (subgroups) that are related in a certain way to each other. Therefore dynamics of group may be cognized first of all as an alteration of its socio-psychological structure – informal subgroups and non-involved-in-them members, their relations with each other and with a group as a whole. Group dynamics basis is made up of contradictions that involve in its orbit external/internal conditions, joint/individual performance, communication, and also tied-to-contradictions processes of integration–disintegration in the socio-psychological group structure and external activity.

Considering contradictions and integration–disintegration processes in the inseparable unity and conceiving them as a backbone of group, subgroup and individual self-transformation, we obtain a number of advantages: (a) an opportunity of conceiving such aspects of system manifestation as stability and instability, order and chaos arises; in particular, one can analyze in a new context linear and nonlinear models of group dynamics, (b) one succeeds in compressing information and operating with a limited number of parameters, but parameters of a basic order, (c) there is an opportunity to penetrate into the essence of 'genesis', 'explosion', 'extinguishment' of any process, and to realize multi-versions of group development, and (d) a basic and unified scheme of socio-psychological impact becomes visible to us.

The approach to group dynamics study stated in the article provides a broad research perspective We have conducted empirical research on the following issues: the manifestation of contradictions (in their formulation) in the group as a whole and within the informal subgroups, subgroups change (their formal and quantitative characteristics and socio-psychological phenomena), connection of contradictions with processes of external and internal integration–disintegration of informal subgroups, etc. [14], [16], [17]. However, a great number of efforts

are to be applied for experimental verification and ascertaining a set of designated positions and, probably, for formulating new positions.

References

[1] Mcleod PL, Kettner-Polley RB. Contributions of psychodynamic theories to understanding small groups. *Small group research* 2004; 35: 333-361.

[2] Arrow H, Poole MS, Henry KB, Wheelan S, Moreland RL. Time, change, and development: The temporal perspective on groups. *Small group research* 2004; 35: 73-105.

[3] Sidorenkov AV. *Small group and informal subgroups: The microgroup theory*. Rostov-on-Don: Southern Federal University; 2010.

[4] Sidorenkov AV Microgroup theory. *Russian Psychological J* 2006; 3: 18-36.

[5] Vyakkerev FF. Contradiction as a Source of Development. In *Konstantinov FV, Marakhov BG, editors. Materialist Dialectics*. V.1. Moscow: Misl; 1981, p. 299-306.

[6] Rubin M, Hewstone M. Social identity theory's self-esteem hypothesis: A review and some suggestions for clarification. *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 1998; 2: 40-62.

[7] Schutz WC. *FIRO-B a three-dimensional theory of interpersonal behavior*. NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston; 1958.

[8] *Collective's Psychological Theory*. Petrovsky AV, editor. Moscow: Pedagogy; 1979.

[9] Coser L. *Fundamentals of Conflict Science*. Saint-Petersburg: Svetlyachok; 1999.

[10] Rubin JZ, Pruitt DG, Kim SH. *Social conflict: Escalation, stalemate, and settlement*. Saint-Petersburg: Praim; 2002.

[11] Smith KK, Berg DN. *Paradoxes of group life: Understanding conflict, paralysis, and movement in group dynamics*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; 1987.

[12] Erbert LA. Conflict and dialectics: Perceptions of dialectical contradictions in marital conflict. *J of Social and Personal Relationships* 2000; 17: 638–659.

[13] Johnson SD, Long LM. "Being a part and being apart": Dialectics and group communication. In *Frey LR, editor. New directions in group communication*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; 2002, p. 25-41.

[14] Sidorenkov AV. *Dynamics of informal subgroups in group: The socially-psychological analysis*. Rostov-on-Don: Rostov State University; 2004.

[15] Sidorenkov AV. Trends of psycho-pedagogical effect on academic groups. *Voprosy Psychologii* 1998; 4: 21-29.

[16] Sidorenkov AV. Psychological contradictions in a small group. *Voprosy Psikhologii* 2003; 1: 41-50.

[17] Sidorenkov AV. Psychological mechanisms of small group dynamics: Integration and disintegration. *Voprosy Psikhologii* 2004; 5: 63-72.