The Concept of Boundaries in Group Dynamics

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This paper will take a focused look into a segment of a class meeting from the course “Dynamics of Organizational and Instructional Groups” of which I am a student in the course. First a brief description of the class, or group, segment will be provided to gain familiarity with the group members and our interactions during a short time in one of our early group meetings. Then a brief description of one theory about the study of groups will be described. Finally the group theory described will be used to interpret the group segment.

Description of Group Segment

The group segment described here took place during the second week of a fifteen week course that meets once per week for three hours on Wednesdays. This particular segment occurred about one hour into the class meeting. The class group consists of ten students and the course instructor. On this particular day all of the students were physically present except for one, Terrence, who was participating via Skype.

The segment begins with the instructor of the course, Dr. John Dirkx, asking the class to discuss our “experience of talking about” (Dirkx, 2012) a story we read and discussed the previous week. After Dr. Dirkx poses his question to the class there is about a ten second pause before any of the group members speak to answer his question. Jess, a fourth year doctoral student, is the first of the group members to respond. I, a doctoral student hopeful, am next to respond in agreement with Jess and what follows is a brief but energized conversation between Jess and me about our common views of the leaders of the group being in the wrong and that the kids were “innocent” in the cause of the group problems. Dr. Dirkx clarifies our discussion by stating that we use our own perspectives and experiences to find understanding. Brendan, a fifth
year doctoral student, adds that we also bring our values into our understandings of the situation. Mary, a first semester master’s student, then points out that even though we as a group felt the leaders in the story were the reason for the poor group dynamics, we at the very same time did not believe that the kids saw a wombat as they claimed. Mehmet, a first year doctoral student, claims that the way the story was presented to us also had a part in guiding our judgment of the story. Brendan agrees with Mehmet and Dr. Dirkx redirects the conversation back to how we experienced the story and not how we interpret the story. Mike, a master’s student hopeful, points out that as a group we decided that there was more to the story that we did not know, yet we were quick to fill in the gaps of the story with our own “narratives”. Mike also is the only member of the group that outwardly disagrees with the viewpoint that the leaders of the group were in the wrong, and admits he thought it was the kids that were the cause of the group issues. The group responds by reassuring him that his view is “ok” and valid. Jess then points out that she was wrong in judging the leaders of the story because she had no “context” in which to judge them by since she has never been in that situation before. Dr. Dirkx then poses a question about the leaders’ authority. Jess is again the first to respond to his question. Mike and Mary discuss the authority of the leaders and group members in the story. Rita, a last year master’s student, injects a few brief words about the anxiety in the group because of the lack of leadership. Dr. Dirkx then summarizes what that lack of authority might symbolize. (Dirkx, 2012)

Throughout the ten minute segment of the group interaction all but three students contribute to the conversation. Gina and Tika, both second year doctoral students, and Terrance, a fifth year doctoral student participating via Skype, all remain silent throughout the class discussion. This segment of group interaction demonstrates the concept of boundaries.
The concept of boundaries is a means that we use to fulfill our need to make sense of our experiences in the world. We need to create boundaries in order to differentiate one category of things from another. (Stapley, 2006) Without boundaries our meaning-making process would not occur because we would not be able to distinguish similarities or differences in the world. Boundaries are extremely important in our concept of ‘self’. Stapley (2006) says that when we answer the question ‘who am I?’ we are essentially “drawing a mental line or boundary across the whole field of our experience, and everything on the inside of that boundary we are feeling or calling our ‘self’ while everything outside that boundary we feel to be ‘not-self’.” (p. 18) The boundary is actually the connection between our external and internal experiences. However, if our internal knowledge and the external experience do not match then anxiety may occur. (Stapley, 2006)

The concept of boundaries not only plays an important role in the development of self identity, but it also plays an important role in our interpersonal relationships and within groups. The point where an individual’s boundary meets another’s is called the contact. “The contact point, at the boundary, is where awareness arises.” (Stapley, 2006, p. 92) The boundary of a relationship is a dynamic state that separates and connects through the process. Roles may be claimed as a result of the boundary of a relationship. Roles are another means to determining what is ‘me’ and ‘not-me’ in a relationship. Just as we may draw a boundary as a role to define ‘me’, we may also draw one around the other individual in the relationship as a means to determine what is ‘not-me’. (Stapley, 2006)
Boundaries also play an important part in groups. “There are boundaries in groups that explicitly indicate who belongs and who does not. There are boundaries drawn around subgroups that together form the group as a whole. There are boundaries that link the parts.” (Smith & Berg, 1987, p. 102) Additionally there are the boundaries of each person within the group. Boundaries play a critical role in the individual for self identity, in interpersonal relationships and in group dynamics.

Evidence for Interpretation

The segment of group interaction described earlier demonstrates the concept of boundaries. Based on the understanding of boundaries playing a significant role in the formation of self identity, interpersonal relationships and group dynamics it is clear that the group segment described is fraught with examples of boundaries affecting the group interactions. The affect of personal boundaries is demonstrated and verbalized from the beginning of the conversation when Jess begins by saying “we definitely viewed it from our own perspectives”. (Dirkx, 2012) Jess may not have realized it at the time but she was referring to our own boundaries and how we used those boundaries to make meaning of the story. She then proceeds to discuss how her initial perceptions of the story, her boundaries of the story, changed as she learned more details about it. She even exclaims “…so, ya, I kind of feel like a jerk now,” (Dirkx, 2012) for her feelings towards the leaders in the story. Stapley (2006) says”…personality is characterized and evidenced by sameness and continuity but is at the same time a dynamic process. Consequently, this boundary line can and frequently does shift. Personalities are dynamic continuums: they can be re-drawn.” (p. 91) In this example with Jess her boundary regarding the leaders and kids in the story changed based on new information.
Many members of the group reveal boundaries that affected their meaning-making of the story. I express how I viewed the students as “innocent”, as if they had no role in creating the group problems. (Dirkx, 2012) Mike admits that he thought that “the students were evil”, placing the blame on the kids, not the leaders of the group. (Dirkx, 2012) Our past experiences formed our boundaries regarding the leaders and the kids and therefore helped us to make meaning of the story.

Boundaries also play an important role in interpersonal relationships. As discussed earlier the contact point is where one person’s boundary meets another person’s. “The boundary that is a location of a relationship where the relationship both separates and connects may result in the notion of taking up a role.” (Stapley, 2006, p. 93) According to Tyson (1989) roles are patterns in behavior, such as thinking, feeling and doing. Roles are important too because it is a way people choose to represent themselves towards others. The only time in the group segment that there is conversation between group members, other than talking to the instructor, is in the beginning between Jess and me. Jess and I find a common value based on our line of work in student affairs. This interaction begins to reveal roles and boundaries forming in the group. Jess clearly takes on the roles of ‘starter’ and ‘court jester’. (Tyson, 1989) She is the first one to initiate conversation and she makes her points using humor that relieves anxiety in the group. In the brief conversation between Jess and me, I am testing different roles within the group in an attempt to find where I belong. In this instance I may be trying on the role of ‘trust builder’ by valuing Jess’ opinion. Or I may be acting as the ‘encourager’ by acknowledging her contribution. (Tyson, 1989) Honestly, I am not sure of my role yet within the group and if I have one it is a part of my unconscious working-model but I know as the group continues to build
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Trust our roles will be shaped by our boundaries and may even change with the group task at hand.

Boundaries, of course, also play a significant role to the group as a whole. The boundaries of a group determines who belongs and who does not belong to the group. “We distinguish external boundaries separating members from non-members, and internal boundaries, in the context of the influence of the group on the individual.” (Stapley, 2006, p. 217)

Boundaries in groups consist at many levels. It begins as boundaries of the individuals that make up the group. Boundaries then might be seen as subgroups form and then there is the boundary of the group as a whole. (Stapley, 2006) In the segment of group interaction in this paper we start to see how our individual boundaries affect the group dynamics. As the group continues to build trust we will see how these boundaries change with time.
References


