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Gross, Tobey

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Handbook for Higher Education

Volume 1

# Sociodynamics and the Theory of Mind

Scientific Foundations and Principles in Language  
Proficiency and Communication

Tobey Gross

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# **Sociodynamics and the Theory of Mind**

A handbook on scientific foundations and  
principles in language proficiency and  
communication

Volume 1

**Tobey Gross**

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This handbook serves as a supportive resource for higher education courses in communication sciences and language proficiency. While it is not intended to be exhaustive, it focuses on theories and concepts, that I, through my own experience in higher education, find especially valuable.

The understanding and application of the knowledge in this book have repeatedly shown to contribute to the aforementioned fields.

The domain of communication is fast-paced and ever-evolving, as well as it plays a significant role in a myriad of scientific fields, such as psychology, general language education or management.

Dr. Tobey Gross  
Professor of Educational Science  
[www.tobeygross.de](http://www.tobeygross.de)

*This book series is dedicated to my parents.*

# Foreword

The current era is marked by fast-paced, multi-faceted, global, cross-cultural communication on a daily basis, and communicative studies are rightfully part of many programs in higher education. I have taught a number of differently-focused language education programs and have read countless brilliant works on the matter. However, there are several common denominators, as well as there is probably an essence of what the most influential aspects in communication sciences are, that should be considered and respected in interdisciplinary domains. This book aims to serve as a resource for what I consider the essential theories and concepts, that crucially contribute to the broader domain of language proficiency. These selections are based on my personal experience in educative environments, and there are certainly a whole lot more excellent frameworks and concepts on the topic. The chosen content reflects a blend of theoretical knowledge and equally its practical applicability, hence the term "*handbook*" – attempting to integrate the essential insights from psychology, rhetoric and cultural studies, as well as pragmatics and discourse analysis.

While it is certainly meant to be material especially tailored to educators and students, I deliberately tried to maintain a digestible language throughout this work, so any interested reader would have the opportunity to draw their conclusions and understand the key takeaways.

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# **Introduction to Communication Sciences and Language Proficiency**

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## **The multidimensional nature of language proficiency**

In characterizing, what language proficiency consists of, we must first eliminate the misconception, that it only means the correctness and fluency of a language. There is much more to the topic of language proficiency than only correct grammar and a well-established lexical range.

There are different approaches to the definition, because there has been no general consensus about what characterizes a general language proficiency in a way that would have suited each and every scenario. Therefore, we want to perceive it as multidimensional in nature.

## **Aspects of language proficiency**

The Council of Europe (2001) acknowledges linguistic, cognitive and sociocultural factors for a broader definition. ACTFL for example, define common denominators, that have to be fulfilled, in order to reach different levels of language proficiency. Other than that, they agree with the broader consensus, that language proficiency is mostly defined by the four core competency domains listening, speaking, reading and writing (ACTFL, 2012).



A broader conceptual framework has been defined by Kern in 2000, who integrates further components into the assessment of language proficiency, one which I personally find more suitable, or at least, more global and exhaustive. Kern defines linguistic components, under which I count all of the aforementioned, but further he states, that cultural awareness and nuances, as well as the ability of critical thinking must be acknowledged in the regard of overall language proficiency (Kern, 2000).

### **Capturing in-depth psychological underpinnings**

My framework that I typically use for the introduction of language proficiency – you could see it as my introductory lecture in higher education – is simple and at the same time, it captures the essential aspects, that I like to treat in a course. As I already mentioned earlier, this is my personal experience and I do not claim to reinvent the wheel here, nor do I feel like my personal approach outperforms another; I am sharing experience-based knowledge, hopefully to some peers' inspiration and enrichment. No more, no less.

Students will have to master linguistic concepts, of course, so correctness and fluency form the foundation of any respective course. Stage I is essentially meant for getting rid of grammar mistakes and misconceptions, raising metalinguistic awareness and making them aware of interlingual interference in morphology and

syntax. To me, mastery of those concepts is the basic foundation of anything that is to follow, hence I assess and fly through the commonly troublesome grammar topics while at the same time I do my best to increase the lexical range.

However, this book focuses on the second stage, and in some ways I do consider it the one that makes for a much larger part of actual language proficiency. Stage II is characterized by knowledge about social cognition and psychology: the behavioral side of language, if you will, and this is where lectures get engaging, interesting, and language becomes a real powerful tool. Stage III eventually forms the synthesis of the former two, using the tools from Stage I and the building blocks from Stage II, in order to *actually* build. Now obviously, Stage II has a lot of content to it, and there might never be an exhaustive list of what is to be considered *important*, so in the following chapters, I will delve into those frameworks and concepts in psychology, general rhetoric, pragmatics and social cognition, that I consider especially valuable for students in language proficiency courses.

## **Language as a coherent system of different disciplines**

Language, in communication sciences, is to be perceived as not only forming correct morphology and syntax, but is a much broader field, that only comes to life in social context. Hence, I consider the psychosociological underpinnings of language at least as important as the actual stage of fluency and development of a lexical range and correct inflection. There is a necessary integration of a so-called *observer perspective* in behavior and context to the application of language, which makes for a large part in its proficient use (Pike, 1982). Furthermore, nonverbal communication should not fall into the cracks, either. It is an important aspect when speaking of language proficiency, as we will later see, since it makes for the even largest part of actual communication (Mehrabian, 1972). Apart from that, sociolinguistics teach us, that social conventions, participant status and many different cultural norms and other aspects contribute to language proficiency (Hymes, 1972). Discourse analysis and strategic competencies, which, on the one hand, I'd rather consider part of the synthesis, but on the other, need to be introduced in context, should at least be mentioned in this introduction's regard. Since later, from correctness in grammar, fluency style, over psychological knowledge and awareness of sociological cues, and bridging it all into style, behavior and application, it forms some sort of a flow, they cannot always be explicitly and sharply divided anyhow (Canale & Swain, 1980).

## Chapter 2: Social Identity Theory and Group Dynamics

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The individual identity has been found to be closely tied to the setting of the most relevant peer group to which the individual belongs. The language that is used within the boundaries of the particular peer group is widely adopted and strengthens the sense of community among the peers that consider themselves part of the group on the one hand, and on the other hand, it is a characteristic of acceptance. Thus, the choice of individual language and expression is a strong signal for group affiliation and is used from both sides to reflect and reinforce group belonging.

It can be further asserted, that especially for multilingual individuals, the current group context is especially influential for their language use (Greene, 1999). In social settings, it is commonly observable, that humans adapt their language and communication to the contemporary settings they find themselves in (Tajfel, 1985; Reid & Giles, 2005; Strauss, 1959).

*In daily life, it is easy to confirm those observations, if you carefully listen to someone who has spent, or is still spending time in a region that commonly has a different dialect, or where various dialects come together. With varying speed, they will adapt to the common denominator and adopt local pronunciations and expressions. But you don't even have to go that far as to wait for someone out of your peer group to change places*

*for a while, you will even make these observations with yourself, depending on which of your peers you have around yourself.*

Social Identity Theory itself is the idea, that individuals are likely to categorize themselves (and others) into social group systems and this categorization alters their attitudes and behavior. Group dynamics are vastly shaped by in-groups and out-groups, of which the former are protected and enhanced and the latter alienated. It is an important concept for intergroup relations and translates well into communication sciences (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

In higher education courses on language proficiency, group dynamics and the Social Identity Theory are of utter importance in order to shape the understanding of current social settings and the necessity for a ready adaptation. Students should be made aware of how language choice and application can have a large influence on successful communication outcomes. As an essential marker of group identity, not only the own production of speech content, but the informed analysis of input is crucial in my opinion: ingroup bias and stereotyping are two keywords that may find their way into informed lectures.

While there is the clear tendency to overvalue the own ingroup identity – and with it, the ingroup language – this preference may lead to stereotyping outgroups and thereby becoming severely biased. This can happen due to oversimplification of outgroup

language features and ultimately miscommunication. While the own emotional resonance with own dialects and features is not a negative phenomenon per se, the alienation and simplified stereotyping of outgroups and the potential for miscommunication certainly is (Brown, 2000).

Social categorization and depersonalization are phenomena that underscore these behaviors and patterns, as described by Hogg (2001):

*"This overall process is called depersonalization because people are not viewed as unique and multifaceted individuals but as matches to the relevant ingroup or outgroup prototype; prototypicality, not individuality, is the focus of attention. Depersonalization refers to change in the basis of perception; it does not have the negative connotations of deindividuation or dehumanization. Social categorization of self, self-categorization, has the same effect but more so. It not only depersonalizes self-perception but goes further in actually transforming self-conception and assimilating all aspects of ones attitudes, feelings, and behaviors to the ingroup prototype; it changes what people think, feel, and do. Depersonalization is the basic process underlying group phenomena; it perceptually differentiates groups and renders perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and behaviors stereotypical and group normative."*

The strong influence of group patterns on individual perception, cognition and conduct is an indicator of

how importantly peer group belonging influences language and equally the perception of language of others. This is to be acknowledged when discussing language phenomena and, for example, analyzing exemplary speech or written samples, in a course setting. It is of importance, that the underpinnings, which make for the production of certain cultivations in language, are understood. Since the overall aim of such courses in higher education is to raise awareness for communicative pitfalls, in order to shape and refine strategies in communication, understanding these dynamics helps address various organizational phenomena with more ease, such as cohesion, deviance, leadership. Also, adopting linguistic normative of a dominant group within a multifaceted, inhomogenous setting, increases chances of appeal.

Particularly in organizational communication, adapting language and communicative strategies to distinct group settings can not only help mediate conflicts and lead to resolutions, it is also a powerful tool in persuasive strategies. In order to prepare students for professional environments, where they will inevitably need to be prepared to navigate various communicative situations, the awareness of such complexity, and also the vast influence of sociodynamics, play a crucial role – one that is ever-increasing in a fast-paced, multicultural professional world (Scott, 2007; Reid & Robinson, 2015).

# Chapter 3: Theory of Mind: Perspectives and Knowledge Bases

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## The concept of the Theory of Mind

The Theory of Mind refers to the awareness and the ability to process the fact, that the own mental states like beliefs, virtues, knowledge, experience, emotions, desires and intentions differ from others'. As a key aspect of social cognition, it involves the capability of making inferences about others' mental states and acting accordingly (Freedman & Stuss, 2011; Whiten, 2006). It was first introduced by Premack and Woodruff (1978), who explored interpretations and predictions of actions and conduct of others, based on one's own awareness of their mental states.

It is a fundamental aspect in communication sciences and the broader context of human social interaction, particularly in the domains of cognitive development, social cognition and aspects like empathy (*empathy will play a crucial role in another volume of this series, in the context of emotional appeal and rhetoric*). Because of the essential insight, that others have their own perceptions and accordingly their own inner individual set of mental states, acting upon that knowledge is a key component of communication and language sciences (Stone et al., 1998; Azabdaftari, 2012). While the introduction of the idea of the Theory of Mind was researched on primates (Premack & Woodruff, 1978), there have been more recent studies that include



functional neuroimaging and suggest, that there are specific neural substrates linked to the cognitive processes underlying social cognition and interpersonal comprehension. Gallagher and Frith (2003) state:

*"Interest in this very human ability has engendered a growing body of evidence concerning its evolution and development and the biological basis of the mechanisms underpinning it. Functional imaging has played a key role in seeking to isolate brain regions specific to this ability. Three areas are consistently activated in association with theory of mind. These are the anterior paracingulate cortex, the superior temporal sulci and the temporal poles bilaterally."*

Another neuroscientific perspective is offered by the imaging of subjects that were exposed to scenarios that required them to distinguish true from false beliefs. Cognitive and neural processes in this brain activity allow for a deeper understanding of the Theory of Mind from a perspective that is explainable through evolutionary origins (Geangu et al., 2013).

## **Theory of Mind and its implications for nuanced language skills**

In overall language proficiency, the acquisition of necessary and foundational skills starts as early as in the childhood years, when the first concepts of language are built in a child's mind. The foundational idea of language as a tool to share knowledge and information is adopted alongside the concept of each individual having their own perception and mental state (Ketrez et al., 2017). On the other hand, we could say that it also works vice versa, as though language acquisition leverages the development of Theory of Mind as well: the acquisition of language promotes a structural alignment of mentalistic concepts about others' beliefs, knowledge base and so on (Astington & Baird, 2005; Kim, 2020). In relation to a development of an understanding of pragmatics, which is an own linguistic discipline nowadays, it has been found that the Theory of Mind applies to how children and adults likewise are able to infer meaning beyond a literal meaning of an utterance. A speaker's intention and mental state is derived not only from literal content – which is a finding that is absolutely seminal in the respective context of communication sciences (Bozin, 2021; Papafragou, 2018).

Where there is a deep understanding of how language is capable of conveying figurative meanings, emotional states, implicature etc., there is a strong foundation for communicative competence way beyond a correct and fluent expression of own information. The ability to proficiently processing inherent

information from context is dissimilarly sophisticated in individuals, which is also a commonly known fact in regard of some disabilities and mental illnesses. As far as linguistic pragmatics go, mental illnesses and disabilities are not relevant here, but it is important to know, that in the realm of communicative competence, there are also distinctly pronounced abilities in the understanding and processing of implicit meanings and propositions (Piparo et al., 2013; Wilson & Sperber, 2012).

During courses in higher education, I usually get the expected reactions upon introduction of the Theory of Mind, which are acknowledgement blended with a subtly perceptible assumption, that it is a matter of self-evidence. This happens in the way, that students are certain of their own awareness of the matter in communicative circumstances, as well as one mistake they regularly tend to make: the Theory of Mind also includes – *per definitionem* – the awareness, that there might *not* be an equal awareness in the communicative counterpart. The mistake derives from the very preassumption *This must be evident to anyone*. If we acknowledge the fact, that we must be aware of others' possibly substantially different state of mind, then this also includes, as a necessity, that there might not be a *vice versa*: as a matter of fact, even if Person A is fully aware of the Theory of Mind and its implications on the current communicative setting, it is possible, that Person B has a whole different perception or idea of the circumstantial settings and acts accordingly – in turn, it demands sort of a double-acknowledgement from Person A, in regard of their own awareness of the

situation and even in regard of Person B's total lack of awareness. Only then, misconceptions can be properly addressed.

Furthermore, it sometimes cultivates interesting discussions and insights within lectures, when I make students aware of situations, where they did indeed make false preassumptions in the respective communicative settings, such where they had indeed preassumed a particular information or opinion to pre-exist in their audience. This reflective exercise sharpens the inheritance and retention of the knowledge, as well as further practice on the matter enhances its application.

## **Sociolinguistic Variance and Theory of Mind**

Sociolinguistic variance describes the systemic relationship between sociocultural structures and language expression within linguistic concepts, structures and frameworks (Wright, 1975; Sole, 1978; Campbell-Kibler, 2010; Auwarter & Seiler, 1989).

The intersections of Theory of Mind and sociolinguistic variance are manifold. Since Theory of Mind is already a highly influential factor of language acquisition in the first place, it is only logical, that at a later stage, the comprehension and production of sociocultural contexts is also influenced by its individual sophistication.

I especially want to address two of them in this work, the first of which is Elfenbeins (2013) work, that investigates emotions as one "*universal language*": The variability nonverbal communication highlights the role of cultural context in the interpretation of others' emotions and intentions. Reading them accurately is equally a matter of empathy and factual learning. This interplay between sociolinguistics and Theory of Mind is a crucial factor in the investigation of emotional intelligence, cross-cultural interactions and after all, language proficiency. *[annotation: emotional intelligence, hierarchies (within power dynamics) and nonverbal communication are standalone topics in subsequent volumes of this series.]*

Another intersection of sociolinguistic variance and Theory of Mind, that I consider important here, is how

in a sociolinguistic setting, a seamless code-switching does not only require linguistic skills [*cf. my Stage I vs. Stage II explanation*], but also an understanding of others' perspectives and backgrounds, as well as their expectations – a key component of Theory of Mind. The crucial aspect in this regard is *cognitive flexibility*, which enables individuals to shift their perspective effectively and thus understand others' mental states in particular multilingual contexts (Im-Bolter et al., 2016).

In translation to language proficiency and communication courses in higher education, a useful practice is to create immersive settings, where students try to navigate sociolinguistic nuances and attempt to anticipate their conversational counterpart's reactions and responses in order to improve dialogue and negotiation skills over time. Empathy is a crucial factor in effective communication and the awareness of affective and emotional states in conversation helps facilitate more nuanced responses with better outcomes. When it comes to idiomatic expressions, sociolinguistic contexts can help make sense and understand cultural references. From lecturers' perspective, there is of course another implication when it comes to providing nuanced feedback to students. In consideration of each other's affective and cognitive states, assessment and enhancement can vastly benefit just as well. A guided tool I like to apply are feedback loops.

# **Chapter 4: Cultural Considerations, Cultural Intelligence and Adaptations**

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## **The meaning of cultural awareness in effective communication**

Not only does effective communication require cultural awareness for the sake of communicative competence, but also for a development of critical thinking in the domain of language proficiency across culturally varied settings. In cases, where there is the majority of learners non-native English speaking, it has been found, that using cultural proverbs in English could effectively improve critical thinking in speakers. For the effective understanding of communication ethics, non-native speakers would benefit from their use in language proficiency classes (Sarsenbaeva & Utebaev, 2020).

In conflict resolution and mediation techniques, understanding psychological and socio-cultural cues is of importance for the effectiveness of these endeavors. In conflict situations and according stress reactions with accompanying communication, individual coping strategies, cognitive styles and functional states are formed and rooted in cultural and sub-cultural levels, and influence behavioral patterns (Pchelintseva, 2014).

## **Defining Cultural Intelligence (CQ)**

When we speak of Cultural Intelligence, further referenced as CQ, we mean a broad and multifaceted concept of an individual's capability to adapt to various socio-cultural contexts, in regard of social behavioral competence and language proficiency likewise (Al-Momani & Atoum, 2016). The cognitive domain of CQ links knowledge about psychological and socio-cultural cues together with skilled behavior in action and production of linguistic output. Thomas (2006) found:

*"Similar to earlier definitions, I conceive of CQ having three components. [...] CQ consists of knowledge, mindfulness, and behavioral ability [...]. These three components combine to produce the ability to interact effectively across cultures."*

The below figure, taken from this work, shows Thomas's Venn Diagram depicting the interrelation of those three subsets of CQ.



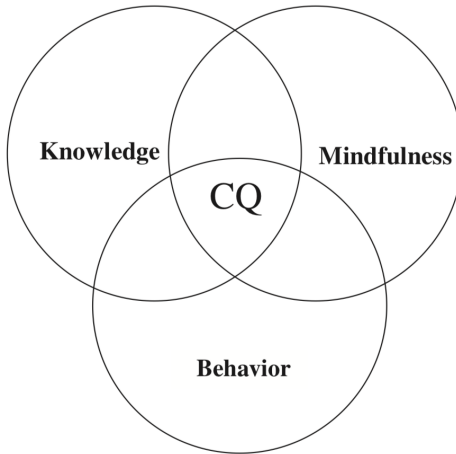


Figure 1: Components of CQ  
NOTE: CQ = cultural intelligence.

### Thomas, D. C. : **The components of Cultural Intelligence**

These interdisciplinary skills are vital for encompassing cognitive, emotional and behavioral adaptation in multicultural settings. They are to be perceived as complementary rather than standalone features, especially when found in individuals who interact extensively in cultures other than the one of their upbringing, and account for quick and precise application of previously learned information (Brislin et al., 2006).

## **Concept and components of CQ**

Another interesting perspective on CQ is breaking it down into four components. Ang et al. perceive CQ into the dimensions metacognitive, cognitive, motivational and behavioral. According to their study, individuals, that show a high CQ do not only benefit from a positive influence on their cultural judgment abilities, but they also make more informed decisions in multicultural contexts, that are perceived to be more appropriate. In two studies, they were able to conclude, that metacognitive and behavioral CQ were important for effective task performance (Ang et al., 2007).

While structural dimensions are arguable, depending on the perspective we want to take in order to investigate CQ, it can be asserted, that in an increasingly diverse global working environment, complex cultural situations will not become less, but much more frequent. Higher education has to adapt to these modalities and incorporate suitable language proficiency courses, that do not only address linguistic concepts, but go a lot further than that.

As has been shown, there are entire industries, that require careful consideration in communication settings, which are much more sophisticated than just reaching a certain level of fluency in a language. As an example, in the tourism industry, CQ not only enhances individual adaptability to multicultural scenarios, but accounts for a substantial boost in customer satisfaction levels, together with a higher revisit intention. Thus, CQ can certainly be stated to have a vast impact on the

industry, since it has also been found that it has profound implications on the sector's economic competitiveness (Frías-Jamilena et al., 2017).

In globalized economy, even at the own workplace, there is definitely a necessity for the development of a certain level of CQ, which makes the incorporation of cultural contexts into language proficiency courses mandatory in my opinion. Culturally diverse workplaces are becoming standard situations in every industrialized nation, and with them, multicultural contexts extend to everyday life just as well.

Furthermore, it has been found, that the development of CQ not only enables individuals to navigate complex cultural contexts, but also to improve productivity and has a positive impact on job performance. Through aiding employees' ability to cope with multicultural situations, CQ enables them to effectively perform within those environments (Haghighatian et al., 2014).

## **Cultural variations and communication styles**

Throughout different cultures, the understanding of communication and language can vary significantly – not only across languages and dialects, but also within the overall perceptions of language.

As for a first important distinction, we may consider high-context and low-context cultures. Low-context may be the style, that we are more accustomed to in European and general western civilization. It describes a conversation style, where meaning and distinction in utterances is mainly made through explicit language and verbal messages. Here, linear logic and traditional verbal reasoning is explicit, individualistic values are prioritized (Kim et al., 1998). A message in low-context is conveyed through the meaning of each distinct word, as well as through the explicit and distinct meaning of phrasings and syntactic combinations (Chung, 2013). In contrast, high-context cultures convey meaning through implicit cues to a much higher extent. While rather found in Eastern Asia, high-context cultures use nonverbal cues, implicit communication and cultural references. Rather than being explicitly spelled out verbally, meaning is often derived from the distinct context of an utterance. Explorations have suggested, that these very different perceptions of communication originate from the deep-rooted cultural backgrounds of the areas, where they are primarily found: while high-context originates from Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, low-context has its main origins in ancient Greek logic, rhetoric and verbal reasoning structures (C hao, 2009).

It is an important part of cultural consideration, that these traditionally rooted and deep-seated perceptions of conversations are still timely actual and despite engaging in globalized communication, often in English as a *lingua franca*, they still vastly shape each culture's mental state. In marketing and advertising, this phenomenon has been proven to have noticeable impact, as well as in communication preferences within global virtual teams (Bae, 2017; Yang, 2008).

In my opinion, these timely actual findings show, how today's increasingly globalized communicative settings require us more than ever to respect and take into consideration those phenomena in the realm of language proficiency. Their ancient cultural rootings do not at all suggest a "*contemporary state of communicative equilibrium*" among cultures; on the contrary, they do rather even solidify the advocacy for cultural awareness in globalized communication. Hence, it appears logical, how much communication and language proficiency classes should be a mandatory component of each and every higher education program that is meant to prepare students for a multicultural working environment and they particularly strengthen my point as to how the socio-psychological aspects of language proficiency must not be undervalued and stand back behind the primary goal to achieve fluency and correctness in a foreign language.

Strongly related to high-context and low-context dissimilarities, there are direct and indirect

communication styles. As the names already suggest, direct communication involves the use of straightforward expression of feelings and thoughts, whereas indirect communication relies more on subtle and implicit cues, such as nonverbal communication and the relation to individual context. Again, in daily communication, Asian countries tend to use indirectness, especially motivated by politeness, mostly in order to maintain harmonious relationships (Zhang & You, 2009).

Within the theory of Cultural Dimensions, originally introduced by Geert Hofstede, there can be made the distinction into collectivistic and individualistic cultures. Hofstede introduced the "*Individualism Index (IDV)*", that is meant to measure an individual's extent of independence from collectivity (Hofstede, 1980). Hofstede, while working for IBM, has refined his numerous indices since, and the differentiations he has found among cultures, have been much discussed within the discourse, while his methodology of contrasting collectivistic versus individualistic cultural orientation have found acclaim (Singh, 1990; Arieli & Sagiv, 2018). While in an individualistic culture, there can be found a societal preference for personal achievements and autonomy, also reflected by an emphasis on individual initiative and a high value of personal rights and self-reliance, a collectivistic cultural mindset rather reflects a tightly-knit social network that is characterized by a high reliance on loyalty and community. This orientation is underscored by a collective high value of group goals and desires over personal and individual ones (Hofstede, 1980).

These findings have been assessed in various environments and with numerous specifications, and have been found to have impacts reaching as deep as influencing neural activity in the brains of subjects (Sul et al., 2012). In further explorations, they do as well affect problem-solving skills in rule-based versus context-based tasks, further solidifying the relevance of cultural states of mind for collaborative work and thus, language- and communicative proficiency (Arieli & Sagiv, 2018).

In that regard, language proficiency in higher education should include basic knowledge about those theories and coping techniques, alongside practical implications, among which:

- developing empathy to enhance cross-cultural understanding
- techniques for the cultivation of cultural awareness
- navigating ethical dilemmas
- balancing respect for cultural norms with professional virtues
- a future outlook on cultural intelligence and its increasing impact on dynamics in global communication.

# Chapter 5: Group Dynamics and Interpersonal Relationships in Communication

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## Roles and status within groups

One seminal work on group dynamics and the functionality of group elements in the realm of leadership and management, Chester I. Barnard's *"The Functions of the Executive"* (1938), suggests that the establishment and maintenance of a functioning dynamic within an organization, and the implementation of a structure, that serves a common purpose, are crucial for its success. This highlights the importance of effective communication and cooperation within organizational structures, that facilitate shared goals and beliefs (Barnard, 1938).

The work on group dynamics and status in individual elements has us divide roles into two distinct categories, which are *assigned* and *emergent* roles. While assigned roles are structural roles, because they convey a formal status, emergent roles are informal. The French term *éminence grise* draws some parallels here, describing a powerful advisor that acts in the background. Distinct from that *"grey eminence"*, emergent leaders are recognized by their peers and visible in the foreground, however, they do not possess formal status.



Formal and assigned leaders in a dynamic group setting would ideally fill their preassigned role to the utmost extent, while in reality, formal and informal – or assigned and emergent – roles frequently tend to drift apart. While emergent leadership is based on individual task abilities and commitment to the group and its goals, it shows, that within groups, leadership develops organically (de Souza & Klein, 1995). While I do not want to interfere or overlap with the [*standalone topic of power dynamics*], it is to be acknowledged, that in the domain of group dynamics, leadership does not always follow the preassigned roles. While group elements tend to acknowledge leadership roles differently than through mere formal assignment, but rather based on individual competencies and dedication to collective aims, it sheds a light on the importance of the inclusion of those two contrastive role perceptions within the broader domain of communication and language proficiency.

The specific aspect of group *dynamics* is of equal importance, as research has shown, that in collaborative environments, the constantly shifting and evolving roles of individuals are strongly interdependent, shaping and reshaping each other repeatedly over time. This phenomenon emerged while the role system of Wikipedia was being assessed (Arazy et al., 2018). Interestingly, emergent leaders in dynamic group systems do not only convey status through the display of knowledge and expertise, but they also take up the role of emotion managers, especially when it comes to bringing forth certainty and increasing collective confidence – a role aspect outsiders would

probably attribute to *formally assigned* roles, rather than to emergent ones (Pescosolido, 2002). This might be due to their perception by other group members, that base their acknowledgement upon perceived intelligence, experienced communicational skills and behavior; specifically so with authoritarian versus encouraging (Wickham & Walther, 2007).

In communicative scenarios, group dynamics play an important role for conveying one's meaning appropriately, and knowledge about intrinsic dynamics and emergent roles may be of utter importance as to not fail the communicative approach. Therefore, another reminder, that according to the Theory of Mind, we must acknowledge the possibility of ourselves failing to notice emergent roles and interpersonal dynamics *a priori*, in order to make up our minds for the most conclusive communicative approach, and to create the best possible environment for ourselves to adapt. This, according to my experience, is not something students will inherit and apply quickly, hence the advocacy for implementation in according programs. After all, linguistic proficiency will not balance out a vast lack in sociocultural communicative competence, given such dynamic group scenarios being on the rise, especially since virtual teams are ever more becoming the norm and no more an exception.

## **Role complementarity, -adaptation, -flexibility and -compatibility**

The complementarity of individual members of a group has been found to strengthen the group as a construction and entity, which suggests that within a dynamic group system, particularly when role assignments are rigid within the organizational structure. This is, for example, the case in musical formations (Connor & Dyce, 1997). The effectiveness and cohesion of the group also benefits from complementarity among the members, when less structured environments are the setting. Those less structured environments do even appear to amplify the impact of complementarity among the members (Moskowitz et al., 2007). While it has shown to be influenced by differences in the individual members of the dynamic group (Bluhm et al., 1990), complementarity in interpersonal behavior appears to lead to a greater extent of individual satisfaction, even more than a shared goal seems to do (Dryer & Horowitz, 1997). This is especially interesting, because individual goals within a dynamic group can also be complementary, instead of only one commonly shared goal.

The flexible adaptation to, or shift of roles within a group setting is a challenge, especially in an environment, where strategic goals have to be achieved, for example in virtual teams. While students in higher education learn to focus on a goal and develop methodology and strategic approaches to reach it, the real world often has to adjust and adapt

within a very brief timeframe. The unpredictability of economic circumstances makes it especially difficult, to assign roles and targets that are set in stone. In the realm of communication science, adaptation and flexibility are topics that require special attention in a group setting.

Management and organizational psychology suggests, that adaptive coordination of teams leads to a greater balance among stability and flexibility (Grote et al., 2018). Of course, it requires the ability of strategic decision-making in leaders, in particular when there is a situation that causes uncertainty among group members or the group as a whole (Sharfman & Dean, 1997). On the other hand, *vice versa*, if you will, a more recent study has found, that the dynamic model of organizational flexibility can enhance decision-making. As Sopelana et al. (2014) propose:

*"Organisational flexibility, as the ability to adapt quickly to new or changing environments, has received growing attention from both researchers and managers as a key driver for companies to survive and prosper in turbulent and unpredictable environments. Although many scholars have studied the complex nature and multidimensional structure of this construct, research on a comprehensive model, which explains the relationships between its key variables and consequent side effects of such iterations, remains a challenge. [...] results suggest that decision concerning flexible capabilities management and organizational responsiveness can be improved if*

*organizational flexibility is analysed and evaluated incorporating the time-varying dimension."*

As for the individual ability to flexibly adapt to group dynamics, research has highlighted, that a well-working ability to adjust roles in response to dynamic environments, by incorporation of an interpersonal flexibility in roles, can mediate and mitigate interpersonal distress and enhance group dynamics through a decrease in behavioral rigidity (Tracey, 2005).

Overall, the compatibility of role assignments in groups appears to be a (or: *the*) crucial factor, when it comes to the desired effective collaboration through communication. In that regard, it seems to be less crucial, whether the group is intentionally structured homogenous or complementary, as both attributes appear to equally contribute to compatibility (Haythorn, 1968). However, in understanding key components of dynamic settings and interpersonal relationships, social interaction lives through communication. All the more, since multicultural workplaces try to elevate collective expertise and experience, which is a key factor for organizational and individual success. Weick's (1979) idea of how individuals make sense of their complex environments through communication further solidifies this, as he found individuals to make sense of contexts and environments iteratively, through articulation and interaction (Weick, 1979).

## **Cohesion and conflict resolution in group dynamics**

Group cohesion can be measured with different parameters, given that it has been found to have impacts on group-intern values like shared beliefs and understanding, as well as emotional factors like emotional bonds and stress. It can also extend to other factors like the overall performance of a group, which shows that within group dynamics, group cohesion is an important variable to consider (Griffith & Vaitkus, 1999). On the other hand, cohesion is a process, that does not only influence the group, but it is originally influenced by the very members to be formed and strengthened. It involves commitment from each element, which eventually enhances mutual understanding and strengthens bonds. Also, shared beliefs are a product of commitment, that is strengthened through communication (Piper et al., 1983). Within the realms of family bonds, cohesion as a psychological element in family therapy settings, is characterized by core factors like imitation, empathy and sympathy, which in turn enhance mutual acceptance within the boundaries of the group (Behr, 1979).

Wherever there is a dynamic group, there are conflicts, they are a necessary part and can function as a communicative process. Misinterpretations and differing perspectives are among the main factors, that are responsible for an arising conflict (Deutsch, 1974). In the group, and depending on the circumstances and management processes, conflicts can be both positive and negative for the outcome, mainly determined by

constructivity or destructivity (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003). As previously stated, cohesion in a group is a process that draws elements together, it can also have its implications on conflict potential, as changes in group membership may deteriorate the construction. Type of task and the medium of communication are other important influential factors in the examination of conflict as a necessary communication process (O'Connor et al., 1993). The reciprocity between cohesion and its influential factors is obvious. Since contributing factors, as stated above, may have vast impacts on the overall cohesion of a group and its elements, there are similar observations, that cohesion reshapes those factors. Internal cohesion has found to be influential for styles of communication, openness of dialogues among elements and the overall extent of supportiveness of group environments (Qi & Wu, 2021). As has been confirmed, group cohesion – though hardly quantifiable – has a substantial impact on performance (Casey-Campbell & Martens, 2009).

Aligning with former findings and insights, the extent of identification with the group contributes positively to accountability, a decreased potential for conflict and positive group productivity (Lea & Rogers, 2004). In this regard, it is logical, that the previously examined attributes for conflicts in dynamic groups often show lacks in those particular attributions, and their resolution requires adjustment in those respective areas: the overall training of communicative skills in essential areas like presentation, negotiation and assertiveness [*each distinct standalone works of this book series*] can substantially contribute to conflict resolution

ability (Orey & Prisk, 2006). Neither is it any surprising, that applied research has shown the high potential of interpersonal dialogue through effective communicative strategies (Vakkayil & Kumar, 2011) and the strategic use of interests, rights and power in negotiation (Lytle et al., 1999). In group dynamics, conflict and its resolution go hand in hand with group cohesion and it is undeniable that communication is the absolute main component in achieving both a group setting with cohesion among the members, in order to increase well-being and productivity, and the resolution of conflicts. In the age of remote working and virtual teams, it is interesting to acknowledge, that group cohesion does even have a greater influence on the degree of consensus among members, than actual social presence (Yoo & Alavi, 2001).

While conflicts are still to be perceived as a necessary part of a dynamic setting, there is a potential for them to create a better outcome, if treated in the right manner. This again requires communicative proficiency that goes way beyond achieving a certain level of correctness and fluency in a language, but there must be an amount of digestible and comprehensible knowledge for all, leaders, managers and group members. Since we already know, how communication is the main component of working our steps from the one to the next, it is mere logic, that without the mandatory knowledge about the dynamics in communication and their psychological underpinnings, there can hardly be any desirable outcome.



## **Influence mechanisms in groups**

There are a number of different techniques and mechanisms of influence in group dynamics, that often form an interplay in order to achieve specific targets. Among those, inspirational appeals, rational persuasion and consultation are believed to be the most effective and frequent. It has also been found, that especially in constructive change processes within the settings, those three were displayed in a field study (Gravenhorst & Boonstra, 1998). More recently, inspirational appeals and rational persuasion have been found to be popularly used techniques in attempts to influence policy-making in group decision settings, wherethrough influence was idealized (Jensen, 2007). While not delving deep into the *[standalone topic of persuasion]*, rational persuasion is the technique to present compelling and convincing facts, that can produce logical and rational, evidence-based arguments. As to appeal to an individual's sense to logic and reason, concrete facts, statistics or data are presented to underscore the superiority of once argument, and thus achieving to influence others (Dillard & Shen, 2012). Not only are decisions in certain contexts expected to be made based on logic and reason, rational persuasion does also have the compelling psychological factor of an individual's common habit not to argue against something that is widely regarded as true. The underlying power of presenting a point of view as based upon common sense logic adds tremendously to the compelling nature of the argument itself. It can create a welcome subconscious sort of pressure to *"not fighting an uphill battle"*.

Inspirational appeal on the other hand, works with emotional cues. Through attempting to appeal to one's values, beliefs and ideals, or by tactically increasing their confidence and optimism, it is possible to generate motivation to support one's own perspectives. In group dynamics, this emotional component can have a compelling power, based on what we already know about the dynamic nature of those settings. Using enthusiasm within a charismatic narrative creates opportunities to connect on an emotional level. Creating a vision further increases the chances to draw the image of a shared goal and infuse peers with motivation for support. The dynamic works like an ocean wave that becomes increasingly more powerful through an energizing level of enthusiasm and likewise the individual desire to belong (Gravenhorst & Boonstra, 1998).

Apart from those three basic concepts of influence techniques within group dynamics, there have been several others assessed in various well-researched works, for example: personal appeal, coalition, legitimation, pressure (Blickle, 1998), social roles and obedience with conformity (Bleske-Recheck, 2001), conformity through reinforcement learning (Klucharev et al., 2009) and individual disclosure and dissent, as means to prevent social error through group polarization (Sunstein, 2005).

## **Resistance and compliance**

Foundational insights into the topic of resistance in group dynamics can be derived from Sigmund Freud's seminal works into psychoanalysis. According to later research, Freud's concept of resistance arose from a treatment situation, where one of his patients significantly rejected all efforts made towards the progress of a better understanding of her symptoms. In other words, the patient resisted cure (Leal, 1982). Those discoveries were made as early as the 1920s and found their way into seminal works of Freud himself (Freud, 1926; Freud 1937).

More recent research investigated the phenomenon of resistance in group dynamics in the context of social movements and organizational misbehavior. The fundamental difference between the concepts, though almost a decade apart, is rather slim: while the idea of psychological resistance had not changed in its original form, the concept was rather extended beyond individual psychology to broader contexts. In terms of management, the four major resistance movements were found to be unions, organizational misbehavior, civic movements and civic movement organizations. The authors claim that these are forms of resistance movements, that seek to disrupt the hegemonic discourse of management (Spicer & Böhm, 2007).

Communicative settings in groups identify three major psychological factors that lead to resistance in individuals, which are avoidance schemes due to a fear of external control, fear of disapproval, reproach or

even ridicule and classical psychoanalytic resistance (Henderson, 1965). While these findings also stem from therapeutical settings, it is important to note, that the group therapy took place after the resistance mechanisms had been identified. Further research found resistance in group communicative settings being linked to tension, anxiety, passive submissive attitudes and indifference mutism, as well as resistance mutism (Darrow & Solomon, 1940). Apart from that, cultural influences are another part that can cause disruptions in group communication, which aligns with the previously presented cultural considerations. While also a therapy setting, another investigation found cultural values, fear of strangers and regression as major influences for resistance (Fenchel & Flapan, 1985).

While the absolute majority of findings on resistance in group dynamics is taken from case studies and reports of therapy environments, it remains subject of research, if there is a clear congruency between those and organizational settings, so that the findings of group therapy dynamics apply to organizational dynamics in the same manner. However, knowing about resistance issues can likely contribute to enhance thinking about certain possible influences.

Strategies of resistance include avoidance patterns, up to contesting, biased processing and empowerment. Especially when there are concerns of deception, threats to freedom or a general reluctance to change, those patterns were observed (Fransen et al., 2015). In a hospital setting, there were multiple forms of resistance found in group dynamics, such as patients' resistance, staff resistance and own counterresistance of the author (Sigman, 1996).

Overall, the relationship of resistance patterns and language- and communication proficiency seems to be somewhat reciprocal, because oral communication (and the resistance to engage in it) is tightly linked to language proficiency. Learners with lower language proficiency have been found to have tendencies to avoidance patterns or reduction strategies, while learners with higher language proficiency showed to rather maintain conversation (Hsieh, 2014). In that regard, resistance in group dynamics, the knowledge about it, and strategies to counteract may not only be essential tools for preparing students in higher education for their future communicative settings. It

seems, that already within the very stage of achieving proficiency, the mechanisms of resistance must be addressed, since teaching and implementing communicative strategies can significantly enhance students' willingness to communicate. This again leads to a higher language proficiency and more effective group interaction. The encouragement for open dialogue, simulating real-life communication scenarios (*e.g. through immersion simulation*) and cultivating a supportive communication environment are then found to mitigate resistance in group dynamics (Mirsane & Khabiri, 2016).

Compliance in group dynamics is conforming behavior, that influences, and is influenced by, communication. Especially through argumentativeness and verbal aggression, compliance-gaining messages in group settings have shown to be context-based (Boster & Levine, 1988).

Two early seminal works in the domain provide important insights into concepts of compliance, especially through their explorations of leadership styles and accordingly the group climate. These two influential works are "*Group Dynamics*" by Cartwright and Zander (1960) and "*Leadership Climate*" by White and Lippitt (1960).

Important findings from the former include:

- Groups are defined by their interactions, their identity and interdependence of individual elements (Baker, 1981).
- Social pressure scenarios in informal groups lead to more rigid dynamics compared to formal groups (*where there is found organizational pressure*) (Beattie, 1963).
- Initially, there were rather the static relationships between groups examined, while in modern research, there is an emphasis on the dynamic components of group interactions (Fisher et al., 2014).

Important findings from the latter include:

- Group climates and leadership styles were simulated in small groups of children, creating "political" atmospheres, including authoritarian, laissez-faire and attempts to democracy. Those experiments, conducted at Iowa Child Welfare Research Station in the 1930s, contributed greatly to the evolution of social-scientific experimentation in controlled settings (Lezaun & Calvillo, 2014).
- Cohesion is one of the critical factors in group dynamics, influencing pivotal points like conformity, productivity, change in individual and group behavior and maintaining membership (Evans & Jarvis, 1980).

After all, Cartwright & Zander and White & Lippitt have constituted a fulminant contribution to today's

understanding and ongoing research about group dynamics in general, and in particular to the topics of compliance within groups (Cartwright & Zander, 1960; White & Lippitt, 1960).

The importance of resistance and compliance in group settings for language- and communication proficiency in modern higher education should now be more than clear to the reader, as dynamics in groups shape and are shaped through communication. While communication itself shapes and is shaped by compliance and resistance, and their according patterns in individuals, as well as the group as a dynamic system, it is obvious that working with the underlyings and the psychological foundations can greatly contribute to communicative success.



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## About the Author



Prof. Dr. Tobey Gross is the head of the International Council of Academics for Progressive Education, which is represented in more than 20 countries on five continents. Based in Germany, he lectures university students in academic research and English language proficiency and cultural sensitivity with an emphasis on communication psychology. While his main research focuses on psycholinguistics and communication, he has also been an international conference speaker on Machine Learning in educational science and is a critical observer of ethics in social media.