GROUP COMMUNICATION AND SECURITY

Small Groups for Good or Ill: Developing a Group Communication Approach to Security

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ABSTRACT: This chapter argues that group communication scholarship has insufficiently addressed security-related concerns. Group communication theory has not kept pace with the proliferation of team-based work, particularly in the context of national security. The deficiency is in part due to the imperative of secrecy, leading security groups to protect their operations from broader scrutiny. This chapter expands conceptions of security for group communication scholars encouraging application of theory on groups that operate more transparently and on larger societal security issues. Two case studies are explored using Embedded Systems Theory (Gastil 2010), a broad theoretical framework, for its relevance and flexibility in explaining different security domains. The cases represent a conventionally prosocial group, an environmental management discussion group, and a conventionally antisocial group, a domestic terrorist group. The environmental discussion case study explores the Our Coastal Future Forum, in which a deliberative framework was applied to help residents consider solutions to problems created by rising sea levels and increased storm severity. The domestic terrorist case study explores the Garden City (Kansas) Plot, in which three men plus an FBI informant attempted to take violent action against local immigrants. We apply the lens of EST to examine how the political climate impacted the formation, organization, and actions of these very different groups. We briefly discuss some of the practical and ethical concerns present when helping organize or evaluate group communication within the security context.

Introduction

Communication research within national security contexts has become increasingly important as globalization has routinized contact and interdependence among nations (LaFree, 2010). Understanding security from a group communication perspective adds an additional layer of difficulty, partly because of the covert activities and opaque goals of related groups, as they engage in pursuing their own security interests and/or threatening the security of other groups. But security, as a concept is broader and more complex, often requiring a focus on contexts beyond conventionally-defined "national security" (Baldwin, 1997). Issues such as limited resources, population growth, and changing climate impact the stability, resilience, and security of varying groups, and these contexts can offer important theoretical understanding about how groups organize and function under varying threats, while often being easier to access than traditional national security groups. The dearth of research on security-focused group communication encourages the application of theory across a variety of contexts.

Our application of communication theory within these contexts of group interaction is two-fold. First, we show some of the unique insights that communication theory can provide in examining various security-related groups. Second, we aim to help practitioners think about how to organize groups within security contexts. These groups could be more efficient and effective, we maintain, with a better understanding of communication theory. However, in describing mechanisms for better group functioning, the inverse can be applied by the state to dismantle or disrupt groups. We therefore structure this chapter by first discussing prosocial group communication and providing a related case study, and we then discuss antisocial group communication and offer a second case study. Our conclusion highlights the duality of explicating theory around groups, especially when trying to categorize groups based on positive

or negative goals for society.

The adaptability of groups has made them a valuable tool in a variety of environments leading to their increasing adoption in places like organizations and citizen-driven government. Groups and organizations are forms of social organizing that use norms and rules to achieve their goals; however, organizations provide layers of bureaucracy and management as means of enforcement whereas groups tend to leverage their interpersonal relationships to monitor and enforce behavior (Aakhus, 2002). Groups are often present in organizational structures but operate with a level of autonomy allowing group enforcement. Scott (2015) outlines hidden organizations in a way that could apply to groups that operate covertly:

> …hidden organizations can indeed be rather difficult to clearly classify as they manage shifting tensions between visibility and invisibility, as they alter strategies to fit various audiences, and as they conceal certain organizational elements within otherwise recognizable organizational entities. (p. 509)

One case study below even highlights how organizations and groups can work in tension as a means of ensuring or exposing hidden group identities. This is just one example of the embedded nature of groups. But as the definition of security expands to include topics beyond "hidden" national security contexts, the constraints and affordances between groups and organizations changes as well.

For our purposes a security group is a small group of goal-focused individuals who seek to collectively alter the stability of the larger society. This definition is intentionally broad to capture the range of topics security groups often engage. Though this broad definition can feel too encompassing, a more focused examination includes the practices, processes, and organizing structure of a security group. The diversity of security-related groups may be depicted as a set of

tensions displayed between the characteristics of two opposed types of groups, pro- and antisocial groups. Considered collectively, these dialectics suggest both the distinctive qualities of groups, as well as the range of their manifestations. While certainly others exist, we offer the following:

Rigid hierarchy vs. flexible networks

Open vs. restrictive membership

Action vs. organizational mission identification

Covert vs. overt actions

Proactive vs. reactive problem-solving

These groups often engage in distinct practices based on the context in which they operate, requiring choices in the tensions above. These tensions serve as points of interest for communication scholars to examine to better understand the constraints provided by the contexts in which the groups form and act.

In this chapter, we will examine groups through the lens of Embedded System Theory (EST), a meta-theoretical framework which argues that a small group is a complex system shaped by many internal and external factors that can in turn affect other aspects of the group itself and of external entities like organizations, local contexts, and social systems (Gastil, 2010). Like other system models (Arrow, McGrath, & Berdahl, 2000; Forder, 1976), the EST framework encourages consideration of a wide range of factors from the group's structure and interactions to the policies and actions of the organizations to which the group belongs, and from the characteristics of individual members to the influences of the society in which the group is embedded. EST is influenced by Structuration Theory (Giddens, 1984), in that it recognizes the role of both social structures and individual agency in shaping group life. Much like

Structuration Theory, EST is a meta-level theory more concerned with establishing a framework for understanding broad relationships between categories of variables than with propositions about specific variables. Figure 1, adapted from Gastil's graphical description of the EST framework, illustrates some of the relationships between groups and their organizational and societal contexts.

Starting from the lower left side of the figure, in the EST framework the society to which a small group belongs shapes the group and its members from the start, such as by providing relevant social norms and instituting policies that affect how the group can function. The organizational context in which a group exists can also influence the group, by providing an overarching mission and resources for members to accomplish goals. Next, the structure of the group, such as roles and tasks assigned to specific members, and factors related to the group's individual members, like their goals and beliefs, all have an impact on how the group operates. Next in the figure comes the group's actual interactions, such as the decision-making process, social dynamics, and identity building that happens within the group, which have an effect on the group's decisions and other outcomes like the members' assessments of their group experiences.

It is important to note that the EST framework presents groups as embedded and iterative entities, in that group interactions and outcomes can affect earlier categories of variables in the model through feedback loops. Problems during a decision-making process could lead to a group deciding to change its structure to better facilitate discussion, for instance, whereas members having a low opinion of their group experience could have negative consequences for the organization to which they belong. In addition, the EST framework argues for both direct relationships between the linked categories in Figure 1, as well as more complex paths between multiple categories. This framework helps us understand, for example, how an organization's

practices in recruiting members can influence interactions at the small group level within that organization, and how even a single group with a flawed decision-making process can have profound implications on other members of its organization going forward.

In applying the EST framework, we will explain how research on prosocial and antisocial groups can help us better understand how these groups function and how they are shaped by and in turn shape the social world around them. We describe a pair of case studies on two groups connected to security, one dealing with environmental security and another in the national security context. We apply the lens of EST to examine how the political climate impacted the formation, organization, and actions of these very different groups. In the context of the prosocial group, we note how a group deeply concerned about environmental issues is unfortunately hampered by the economically driven conservative socio-political climate of South Carolina. This context both reduces the group's ability to affect policy and limits members' communicative behavior in discussing environmental problems and potential solutions.

In the case of antisocial groups, our analysis of a violent extremist group reveals the importance of a changing socio-cultural environment where the group formed. The extremist group arose from an anti-government militia movement within the state, and was also driven by anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiment following an influx of Somali Muslim immigrants to the region. Our analysis also notes other ways in which this group works as an embedded system as it develops, from the group's fostering of ingroup and outgroup identities to its attempts to expand and procure resources that ultimately led to its capture.

The case studies provided are examplar prosocial and antisocial groups because both the goals and behaviors are aligned as pro- and antisocial, respectively; the Garden City plot, for example, involved an anti-social behavioral action and an anti-social end goal. Groups like

Anonymous are harder to categorize because their actions might be distasteful generally, but their overarching goals are by some measure an attempt to increase individual protection (Beyer, 2014). Evaluations of good or bad often come from a place of power coupled with culturally constrained acceptable behavior (Lukes, 2004). Ultimately, concrete answers for delineating pro- and antisocial groups would necessitate a certain value system that would not be universal, though we revisit this dilemma below and offer one potential resolution.

Our analysis of these groups through the lens of EST also captures each of these groups' impacts on their broader community for better or worse. Through the use of broad theory we hope to highlight the application of group communication theory on a variety of security contexts and invite closer analysis of particular aspects of communication and security that need examination. We hope to highlight the application of theory vis-à-vis a variety of security contexts and invite closer analysis of particular aspects of communication and security that warrant examination. This chapter is far from exhaustive in terms of application of theory, but instead offers a template for the application of theory in varying contexts.

Prosocial Groups and Security-Related Communication

Applications of groups in security contexts are plentiful, but group communication research has sometimes failed to adequately capture this wide use. A search of Communication Source yields less than 100 results when looking for "Group Security" or "Group Communication Security." However, there is a proliferation of groups in real-world security contexts -- including, for example, law enforcement teams, foreign policy thinktanks, cyber security developers, and environmental activist groups.

Though few studies have explicitly connected group communication and security, there has been a great deal of related scholarship on security-related groups and teams, including work

from related disciplines such as psychology and management. Such research has tested and generated social science theory (Baker, Day, & Salas, 2006; Minei & Bisel, 2013), and has also yielded practical findings that can help other security-related groups be more effective (Burke, Wilson, & Salas, 2003; Hackman, 2011; Ishak & Williams, 2017). Hackman's (2011) detailed study of intelligence analysis teams, for instance, helped explain the many pitfalls such groups face in trying to analyze and counteract security threats, from organizational conflicts between different federal agencies to ignorance of group members' areas of expertise. Other research has examined the online and offline impacts of groups that are somewhat prosocial, like the hacker collective Anonymous and the organizers of The Pirate Bay, both of which raised awareness of issues around privacy and copyright even as they violated laws and social norms (Beyer, 2014).

Research on citizen groups grappling with security-related (and other societal) problems has likewise yielded both theoretical insights on group communication and practical advice for improving such groups. For instance, deliberation scholarship has helped shed light on the ways people express disagreement in group settings (Black & Wiederhold, 2014; Leighter & Black, 2010), the role of expertise in creating inequality in groups (Sprain, Carcasson, & Merolla, 2014), and the importance of narrative in building shared understanding (Ryfe, 2006). In addition, this area of scholarship has provided guidance for future iterations of these citizen discussion groups by evaluating past groups and noting successes and shortcomings of deliberative processes (Carson, Gastil, Hartz-Karp, & Lubensky, 2013; Knobloch, Gastil, Reedy, & Cramer Walsh, 2013; Ratner, 2005) and cataloguing the logistical and processual components of vibrant deliberation in different contexts (Burkhalter, Gastil, & Kelshaw, 2002; O'Doherty & Burgess, 2009).

It is important to note that much of the preceding scholarship is not explicitly tied to

"security," and in fact may only be tangentially related to the term as commonly defined. However, one of our goals with this chapter is to propose a roadmap for further study in this area—in a sense, we hope to broaden the conception of group communication and security research to include pro-social groups that can contribute to societal security. Given the worldwide rise of deliberative civic engagement in recent years (Nabatchi, Gastil, Leighninger, & Weiksner, 2012), citizen discussion groups are becoming an increasingly important context for security-related decision making and warrant further scholarly attention.

The diverse range of groups in the security-related domain offers communication scholars multiple opportunities to begin exploring better and more effective ways to address structure, task, and context in analyzing and improving groups. Not every security domain could benefit equally, however: issues like national security might entail additional constraints (Hackman, 2011). Issues that have broader antecedents and a less adversarial nature, like environmental security, might be more apt for group decision making—though this may change over time as these issues become about competing for resources rather than protecting resources (Baldwin, 1997). There is already a fruitful history of citizen involvement in environmental security issues, but further applications of theory might serve to strengthen those connections and produce better outcomes (Brulle, 2010).

Communication scholars may also want to consider how they can help organize or guide prosocial security groups. As noted above, one increasingly popular approach is deliberative engagement, in which groups of people have respectful, informed discussion and analysis of public issues in ways that help bridge divides (Burkhalter et al., 2002). In contrast to this ideal, deliberations of security (particularly, *national* security) are often organized and conducted so as to discourage broad participation from stakeholders (e.g., non-experts). This condition occurs

due to the allegedly-urgent nature of related threats (which inhibits extended, complex debate), and the relevance to elite decision-makers of secret knowledge that cannot be publicly disclosed or discussed (Baldwin, 1997). However, when *collective* human security is threatened by an amorphous, *non-human* agent such as the environment, the tendency toward hierarchical and inter-group conflict may be reduced. In this latter case, the application of group communication theory enables us to better understand the broad impacts of decision making, and to build important relationships among participating stakeholders. As a result, groups have been studied widely in decision making related to these types of environmental or human security issues (Daniels & Walker, 2001; Renn, 1999; Sprain & Reinig, 2017).

Case Study 1: Our Coastal Future Forum

South Carolina is heavily reliant on its coastline for recreation, tourism, commercial fishing, an environmental barrier, and many other uses. Because of climate change, many of these features of the coastline have reduced use and increased costs associated with maintaining current levels of environmental functioning (Adger, Hughes, Folke, Carpenter, & Rockström, 2005). More frequent and severe storms have wreaked havoc, and compounding these issues is increased coastline development. These fluctuations have led many citizens to consider possible actions to address changes in the environment. In order to facilitate some of the needed conversation, the South Carolina Sea Grant Consortium, in conjunction with the College of Charleston and the University of Oklahoma, hosted the Our Coastal Future Forum (OCFF) in 2017.

This forum involved a deliberative discussion that included approximately 100 individuals from the 13 coastal counties of South Carolina meeting over two days in October to discuss the consequences of climate change and other threats on the environmental security of

the region. Discussion took place first as a large group, and then in assigned groups of 8 to 12 participants and a facilitator (Burkhalter et al., 2002). The goal of this forum was not to enact policy but to provide space for interested participants to understand the issues facing their communities and develop ideas for environmental management in the face of these risks.

Participants came from a wide variety of backgrounds including city planners, a former mayor, science teachers, concerned citizens, relevant state agency workers, and some residents skeptical of climate change. The participants were diverse in their understanding of and connection to climate change in South Carolina, but all had a vested interest in the outcome. Rules for participation were also explained to help keep conversation on topic and away from personal attacks, and to focus people on the need for understanding and perspective taking over argumentation and perceptions of winning. Participants were then briefed by a content expert on two areas of concern (Biodiversity and Living Marine Resources) before meeting in small groups to discuss those topics. This process was repeated for the last two topics (Environment and Health, and Coastal Resources).

The OCFF can be understood through an application of the EST framework by examining a group with prosocial goals, and highlighting how group communication theory can be applied within this environmental security context. We should note before proceeding further that the field of "security" has been expanding in recent years to include individual concerns about quality of life (Ullman, 1983), as well as societal concerns about access to natural resources and threats to the natural world (Allenby, 2000). Environmental security can be generally defined as a combination of individual and governmental concerns about environmental threats and natural resources, particularly when those concerns overlap with national security issues (Allenby, 2000). As such, the OCFF case provides a useful illustration of

a prosocial group oriented toward improving environmental security in coastal South Carolina.

This case study indicates how a shared group identity among participants both helps and hinders their decision making, and also suggests the importance of group organizing and process design in influencing groups' decision making. Communication theory helped organize this group to create productive conversation over a contentious topic among diverse stakeholders. The forum took place nine months after the inauguration of President Donald Trump and in a state that experiences some ideological split between coastal counties generally leaning Democratic compared to the Republican-leaning western and rural side of the state; even with this split, most federal seats are considered safe for Republican candidates (The New York Times, 2018). Though not universal, politics within the state tend to favor reduced regulation of commercial entities, sometimes at the calculated cost of the environment. A prime example is the $30 million beach re-nourishment project (i.e. replenishing eroded beach with new sand) for Folly Beach in 2014 which only restored the beach for about two years (Crowe, Bergquist, Sanger, & Van Dolah, 2016). Republicans who were in part attempting to preserve tourism and recreation revenue blame local government for allowing development in threatened areas, whereas some Democrats felt that this was a waste of resources in the face of near certain beach migration and destruction by ocean currents (Findlay, 2017). Neither party wants to lose the billions of dollars in revenue that results from these coastal areas. Early on in the process, one participant summed up the political gridlock issue well:

> … small towns, counties, states, are picking up the role that the federal government has dropped. I don't think we have much of a chance of changing that until we change administrations at this point in time. So, it's imperative that we take action at the local level.

This polarizing divide is complicated by those who live in coastal areas versus those who simply use them a few times a year and live more inland in the state. Another participant added:

> The folks who lived inland took the beach as a free good. It's only when you — we really went through a campaign that was a year that said — you know, you might live a mile and a half inland.

These development and environmental entanglements are governed at local, state, and federal levels. They are connected with the larger political scene as well as micro politics of particular communities.

As researchers who had helped organize the structure of the event, we had taken advantage of a history of local dialogue as a form of problem solving. By using a deliberative approach that encouraged open dialogue and a focus on sharing personal experience and knowledge, participants were ready to share in an event of this style. Participants shared their experiences with major storms and flooding events caused by major hurricanes such as Hugo and Joaquin and began to develop a shared group identity.

> *Participant 1*: And then, another — and then another you know 10 years you know prior to that was Hugo. So, I mean if you haven't seen that storm in Charleston, it's been like 30 years. But a lot of investment and development has gone on. Like, we got really lucky with Irma.
>
> *Participant 2*: Can you imagine?
>
> *Participant 1*: And Florida. If it came right for us, it would have been — it would be a total disaster.
>
> *Participant 2*: Even worse than Hugo, it was projected to be.
>
> *Participant 3*: I was working Hugo. You know, right over here on Rivers Avenue. It was

thigh-deep.

Participants were from coastal counties and represented a relatively homogeneous group in terms of similar perspectives and experiences around coastal communities. This connection also served as a constraint on the group given that most of the specific strategizing about steps moving forward focused exclusively on the coastal region. Without major voices sharing the experience of inland residents, participants easily skipped over their concerns or felt ill equipped to adequately address the concerns of an absent population.

One aspect of this process that helped in developing a shared group identity for participants was the adoption of a superordinate identity over the course of the event by some members. Many individuals do not realize they have a shared experience until they begin to talk about regionally important events like the hurricane Hugo and realize the parallels of experience (Hartley, 1999). As a result of this sharing, they develop a group identity, which in the case of the OCFF was aided greatly by the application of a deliberative process with focus on perspective taking. A superordinate identity is an overarching social identification that unifies a social group beyond their individual goals and perspectives (Lee, 2005). It often includes consideration of goals for a larger social group rather than the smaller more immediate social groups to which a person belongs, and is evidenced by collective pronouns as an indicator of thinking about a situation more broadly (Lee, 2005). Two different participants indicated this shift over the course of the second day of the forum; on the morning of the second day, participants typically thought of themselves as follows:

> *Participant:* Well, I was invited — I was invited here. I think because of my meteorology background. But my interest lies primarily in climate change because of that. And my understanding of the impacts that are possible and that are probable. And now calling

Charleston my home, obviously this — this region can experience significant impacts. And in the afternoon, participants had started to shift to thinking about the problem from a collective perspective:

> *Participant:* Their way — how do you give the people that — I mean, like us, that don't have time to go, you know, to every court battle or something. Like, how do we get more of a voice just like — just how do you shift that system to where it doesn't really matter how much money you have.

This reference to a collective identity is indicative of thinking about a situation at a group level rather than thinking about the greatest benefit for one's self. Self and group goals are not mutually exclusive, although the more diverse a group is the more likely divergence will be (Carson et al., 2013). The use of deliberation helped form a shared identity, and that shared identity began to reflect problem solving at a larger level through the use of a superordinate identity of all coastal residents.

This process created productive conversation about how to address issues in the larger region. Potential actions across the eight groups at the forum were consistent, and we identified these as being organized into concrete and abstract actions. The divide between these action items reflected the composition and organization of the groups. When talking about specific action items, such as changing local government environmental impact predictions from 5 years to 25 years for all new commercial construction, the focus was on local contexts. Abstract actions usually had a larger focus such as state-wide change, especially in educating people about environmental issues.

This difference in action depth is two-fold; the first is due to the organization of the forum. Participants came from a similar location with similar concerns and this forum often

lacked the perspective of participants from inland communities who used the coast in different ways. The second limit on action impact was a societal one: the geographical and political divides present in South Carolina. Participants often felt that the political and geographical difference would prevent action at levels higher than the local:

> *Participant:* Because it's expensive to be a responsible business. And I fear that that is what's going on down here. Big money pushes back legislation over and over again. The politicians cave. And we are continuing down this dismal road. And I don't know how to solve it unless we can get corporate investment out of the politician's pocket.

This frustration for participants is linked directly to perceptions of political and geographical divides that prevented workable solutions at state and federal levels.

The EST framework highlights how these larger societal and government contexts impacted how groups organized and created decisions about mitigating environmental risk. The use of deliberation as an organizing structure for groups exacerbated existing divides but allowed for a positive experience that many participants hoped to emulate in future experiences:

> *Participant:* But we can also educate others by sharing our own history, our own local knowledge, especially people who have been in Charleston and in South Carolina for a long time. This can happen around a dinner table. It can happen at a local board meeting. There are many ways to have these conversations.

The choices made in organizing the forum both limited and created workable action plans. Shortly after the conclusion of the forum, a group of participants from the same municipality, but who were not in the same group at the forum, asked for some documents used at the forum to present them in a water rights meeting. Several participants used information presented at the forum to take back to local government and enact their created solutions because they were

tangible creations rather than abstract goals.

These discussions about community health and security are ripe for group research and application. The inherent tradeoffs of finding solutions in applied contexts with groups is inspiring. Given the required secrecy of some forms of security research, tackling issues like environmental or community health are places to expand theory and build better communities.

Antisocial Groups as Embedded Systems

Group communication and security scholarship can also help us better understand what we dub antisocial security groups: that is, groups acting in antisocial ways and with nefarious goals related to security and stability, such as terrorist groups. In our conception of antisocial security groups, an important point of distinction from prosocial security groups is based on the group's behavior—whether the group is engaging in actions that are in opposition to the laws and norms of a society, as opposed to actions that are positive and promote understanding. We should note that groups may, sadly, shift over time from a prosocial to an antisocial orientation, such as when political activist groups turn toward violence as a means to achieve their goals (Townshend, 2002).

Extremist and terrorist groups are exceedingly difficult to study, as the groups are often isolated from the outside world and in many cases are engaging in illegal behavior that put members at risk of arrest or even death. However, scholars have been able to draw some conclusions about antisocial groups through studying the individuals, collectives, and social forces involved with them. This research has generally focused on two main areas of inquiry: understanding the psychological and social forces that influence individual and collective behavior in extremism and terrorism (Bruscella, 2015; Sageman, 2008), and analyzing extremist and terrorist entities through primary and secondary sources (Alexander, Swetnam, & Levine,

2001; Horgan, 2009; Koschade, 2006). In addition, there is a great deal of scholarship on basic processes of group formation, interaction, and decision making unrelated to extremism or terrorism that can be useful for analyzing such groups (Reedy, Gastil, & Gabbay, 2013).

One of the most important categories of influences on extremism at the small group level are related to the group's larger organization or social collective, which can affect the group's formation, characteristics, membership, and resources (Asal & Rethemeyer, 2008; Jackson, 2009; Sageman, 2008). In the terrorism context, two important factors of organizational influence are the training and resources provided to individual members, as well as the grand narrative and shared identity that help individuals believe in and identify with the organization's overall mission.

Organizations that have been more successful in their efforts, such as the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) in Ireland or the international network of al Qaeda, have prospective operatives undergo training in areas such as small-arms use or bomb creation and deployment (Gunaratna, 2002; Horgan, 2014). Training as individuals may be useful for aspiring terrorists, but what may be even more important is training as a team (Sims, Salas, & Burke, 2005). Many examples can be found in terrorism, such as Palestinian suicide bombers undergoing training within a "martyrdom cell" (Moghadam, 2003), or the members of the Hamburg cell having trained and fought together in Afghanistan (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 2004). Material resources can also be vital for a group in carrying out its mission. Coherent orders and useful feedback from people higher up in an organization can help a group act more effectively (Hirokawa, DeGooyer, & Valde, 2003), and sufficient equipment, fiscal resources, and logistical support help to ensure that the group can succeed in its tasks (Bushe & Johnson, 1989). Radical groups need fiscal and logistic resources

to actually execute a terrorist operation (Horgan, 2014).

Organizations and social collectives shape small groups through shared identity and narratives that lead individuals to see their group membership as defining their place in society. The Social Identity perspective holds that affiliations with both small groups and societal-level groups, such as an ethnic or religious group, shape an individual's sense of belonging and understanding of the world, particularly in relation to relevant groups different from one's own (Abrams, Hogg, Hinkle, & Otten, 2005; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Terrorist and extremist groups seem to draw considerable strength from shared social identity, as members are devoted enough to an ingroup that they kill or die for the sake of their group (Horgan, 2014; Sageman, 2008). Groups often also cultivate an identity as members of a resistance against an oppressor (Horgan, 2014).

Another key element of antisocial groups is the structure of the group itself, including characteristics such as leadership styles, role specialization, and the communication network within the group. Leadership styles in terrorist organizations may vary across different levels of the organization. At the highest levels, hierarchical systems with strong individual leaders and leadership councils are tasked with strategic decision making, with little input from rank-and-file members (Alexander et al., 2001; Gunaratna, 2002). Operational-level cells, on the other hand, may be less hierarchical: Fewer divisions between members can help build cohesion in a group isolated from the outside world (Crenshaw, 1985; Wheatley, 2007). Extremist groups from the Provisional IRA to al Qaeda have been found to engage in role specialization at the operational level (Gunaratna, 2002; Horgan, 2014). However, teams working on complex tasks often use cross-training, in which members learn about others' roles and tasks to promote cooperation and redundancy (Sims et al., 2005). Similar efforts have been noted in terrorist cells, where it may be

especially important for individual members to take over for others should they be captured or killed (Alexander et al., 2001; Koschade, 2006).

Another key set of factors in the analysis of extreme antisocial groups are those based in group interaction, such as social bonding, substantive discussion, and decision making. Groups that spend time bonding together can develop greater cohesion as a group, and in turn may be more effective working together as a team (Sims et al., 2005). Terrorist groups often spend considerable time together not working on training or attack planning but instead simply bonding as a group, as seen with the Hamburg cell's time together in Germany (Reedy et al., 2013). This time spent on activities other than those related to their overarching purpose helped them bond before embarking on a mission that required intense dedication to the group's goals and total trust in one another.

Despite many popular conceptions of extremist groups showing them on a pre-determined path to cause violence and destruction, those groups often spend substantial time on discussion and decision making. Groups are often weighing their political, strategic, and tactical options; predicting the consequences and benefits of taking action; or planning the specifics of an operation (Horgan, 2014; Jackson, 2009; Post, Sprinzak, & Denny, 2003). This can occur at many different levels within a collective, from the operational cell up to leadership teams (Hamzeh, 2004; Horgan, 2014; Richani, 2002). Two areas of group scholarship—polarization and groupthink—may be especially relevant in this area. Group polarization occurs when a group decides on a more extreme decision than would be expected based on the individual members' pre-discussion positions (Myers & Lamm, 1976; Zuber, Crott, & Werner, 1992). Terrorists may be prone to a norm that biases them towards taking action, which could in turn trigger the norm-induced mechanism of group polarization (McCormick, 2003). Groupthink is a similar

phenomenon, but involves a group reaching a poor decision because of specific structural and procedural defects (Gastil, 2010; Janis, 1972). Extremist groups may fall prey to groupthink due to their very high cohesion and severe isolation from the outside world, and such situations could lead to actions that are disastrous for members or their larger movement (Crelinsten, 2001).

To further apply some of the above theories and concepts from group scholarship to the context of extreme antisocial groups, we turn now to a case study of one such group, an extremist militia group in the United States.

Case Study 2: The Garden City Plot

In the fall of 2016, the United States was going through a tumultuous presidential campaign cycle that saw Republican nominee Donald Trump using strong anti-immigrant and pro-nationalist rhetoric. As election day drew near, the federal government announced the arrest of three men in southwestern Kansas allegedly at the center of a shocking domestic terrorism plot. According to authorities, the men had been planning a high-profile event to "wake up" their fellow citizens to the "threat" of immigrants and refugees from predominantly Muslim countries (USA v Allen, Stein, and Wright, 2016, Doc. 1). They had been acquiring guns and ingredients for improvised explosives, the government alleged, and were planning to bomb a local mosque in the town of Garden City, which had become home to many Somali immigrants drawn to the region and its steady meatpacking jobs. A few weeks before Patrick Stein, Curtis Allen, and Gavin Wright could follow through on their alleged plan, federal authorities arrested them, charging them with several offenses, including violations of federal laws related to explosives and the use of a weapon of mass destruction.

The Garden City plot offers a useful case for studying an extreme antisocial group in the security context, and it provides important examples of how communication theory can be useful

for understanding the functioning of such groups. In addition to further applying the EST framework in this case study, we will describe several examples of how small group research could be beneficial in better understanding why such groups succeed or fail and how they might be disrupted and degraded in an effort to preserve security. We also discuss how efforts to disrupt such small groups may also lead to unintended consequences for societal security.

The group behind the Garden City plot—Allen, Wright, Stein, and a fourth man who wound up becoming an informant for the FBI—formed out of the context of an anti-government militia group and a changing social environment in rural southwestern Kansas. The predominantly white region wound up being home to many meatpacking jobs, leading to southeast Asian immigrants moving to the area for work in the 1980s, and Somali Muslim refugees and immigrants followed suit in the 2010s (Pressler, 2017). Though most people in the area welcomed these new residents, some responded to the changes with fear and suspicion. Militia groups like the Kansas Security Force (KSF), which were primarily motivated by concerns about federal government overreach and abuse of power, had some members who were also fearful of Muslims living in the United States (Pressler, 2017). Wright and the other men took this fear even further, forming a splinter faction of the KSF militia called the "Crusaders," in which they discussed taking violent action to push back against the influx of Muslim immigrants in Kansas (USA v Allen, Stein, and Wright, 2016, Doc. 218). Similar processes of fracturing have been noted in other extremist groups, and these cleavages have in some cases also led to new factions being more violent than the predecessor group (Crelinsten, 2001). Though authorities may wish to try to spread dissent and disagreement within extremist groups to hamper their efforts, it is important to note that such a strategy could have the unintended consequence of creating a violent subgroup or faction (Reedy et al., 2013).

The social and organizational context in which this group formed also seems to have helped the "Crusaders" foster a salient ingroup identity as militia members, in keeping with both the social identity perspective and the EST framework's feedback loops between small groups and the society and organization to which they are connected (Abrams et al., 2005; Gastil, 2010). These kinds of identity- and narrative-building practices are often seen with terrorist groups in particular (Horgan, 2014; Reedy et al., 2013). The group's ingroup identity as an anti-immigrant militia helped members engage in depersonalization of relevant outgroups like Somali Muslims, a process that started well before the more extreme "Crusaders" group broke away from the KSF (USA v Allen, Stein, and Wright, 2016). The three men allegedly used Facebook and other online media to share extreme anti-government and anti-Muslim views, and reinforced their ingroup identity as militia members through criticizing government overreach in handling other militia groups (USA v Stein, 2016).

In the system view within the EST Framework, a group's resources, tasks, structure all play an important role in how the group functions and evolves, and extremist groups in particular are reliant on these components to be effective (Reedy et al., 2013). The group at the center of the Garden City plot needed to develop all three to carry out its audacious plan. The men initially discussed a fairly straightforward attack with firearms to intimidate the Somali community (Pressler, 2017), but their desire for a high-profile incident led them to consider a bombing attack (USA v Allen, Stein, and Wright, 2016, Doc. 1). That sort of strategy required more specialized training, and group members turned to online resources to learn more about bomb making, much like how other extremists have turned to online or in-person resources to develop their attack capabilities (Reedy et al., 2013).

The group also developed some basic structure and specialized roles as its plans

coalesced. Wright began letting the group use his family's business as a regular meeting location, for example, and seems to have become the de facto leader of the group (USA v Allen, Stein, and Wright, 2016, Doc. 1). Allen was primarily responsible for making the ingredients for explosives and assembling the bombs when the materials were ready, though Wright and Stein allegedly helped with procuring some ingredients and materials. Prior research has noted that terrorist groups often engage in role specialization and sometimes develop complex communication network structures (Koschade, 2006). Scholars and practitioners have speculated that such structures could be leveraged by targeting particular members or sub-groups for disruption, but this may be a risky strategy, given the possibility of parallel structures that could be activated by a group following actions by authorities (Koschade, 2006).

The interaction and communication within a group is obviously integral to group decisions and outcomes. The people at the center of the Garden City plot relied on regular face-to-face and electronic interaction to develop as a group and make decisions on their course of action (USA v Allen, Stein, and Wright, 2016, Doc. 1). They needed time spent together to decide to take violent action and then discuss their approach, acquire materials, and plan their attack. Their regular communication, in fact, seems to be integral to their undoing, since one of the group members became an FBI informant and recorded many of their voice chats and in-person meetings to help build a criminal case against the group (USA v Allen, Stein, and Wright, 2016). This need for members to communicate has been a key weakness for other extremist groups and figures, including Osama bin Laden, who was likely found by U.S. intelligence by using an in-person courier to remain in touch with al Qaeda while in hiding (Marcus, 2011).

In conceptualizing groups as systems within a societal and local context, the EST framework highlights the role of group members interacting with each other and the outside

world through cyclical processes, evolving and changing through the life cycle of the group (Gastil, 2010). The "Crusaders" group went through such changes over time, including attempts to expand the group and presumably improve its capabilities and reach (Asal & Rethemeyer, 2008), and a tightening of the bonds between the members of the group as it drew closer to violent action. Wright told the group he would lie to authorities about the plan if he was ever questioned; in addition, the government argues that other conversations (recorded by the informant) included "statements to maintain trust and cohesiveness among the conspirators," (USA v Allen, Stein, and Wright, 2016, Doc. 224). Similar processes of escalating commitment are often found in extremist and terrorist groups and are key to the involvement portion of Horgan's (2014) Involvement-Engagement-Disengagement model of terrorist activity.

As groups interact and evolve over time, a very different outcome is also possible: growing member dissatisfaction, which can eventually lead to people leaving the group. The group behind the Garden City plot saw this happen. A new member of the KSF began to grow alarmed at how some of his fellow militia members—particularly the three men who would become the "Crusaders" group—were advocating open violence against immigrants (USA v Allen, Stein, and Wright, 2016, Doc. 218). The man contacted the FBI and later became the confidential informant who helped bring down the group. Scholars and practitioners in terrorism and extremism have noted the possibility of co-opting group members or recruiting defectors as methods for stopping such nefarious groups (Horgan, 2014; Reedy et al., 2013). However, as noted above with splinter factions, this strategy can have the unintended consequence of removing moderate members and leaving the group with more extreme and violent members.

Conclusion

The two groups described in the above case studies represent fairly straightforward

examples of prosocial and antisocial groups, respectively. However, not all groups can be so neatly categorized, and differing conceptions of societal good can further complicate this issue. As noted above, online communities like Anonymous have had both pro- and antisocial goals. Additionally they have spurred subgroups that work toward exclusively antisocial goals as well as subgroups that have tried to effect positive change in society, such as exposing people collaborating with illegal drug cartels, educating people on privacy and public domain copyright, and helping restore internet access for pro-democracy protesters during the Arab Spring (Howard et al., 2011).

Applied and basic scholarship that connects to security goals may also have unintended consequences that undermine security. Groups in law enforcement and intelligence primarily work to keep the public safe and secure, but in many countries and societies they have also used their authority against protest and dissident groups. Research that is aimed at helping intelligence analysis teams work more smoothly and effectively in identifying security threats (e.g. Hackman, 2011) could also lead to authorities being better able to identify and interfere with groups that are trying to help society change. In much the same way, research that helps us understand how to disrupt or break apart terrorist groups could be adopted by nefarious actors to attack some prosocial groups.

In the case of prosocial groups like the deliberative forum described above, cynical political actors could co-opt this structure and terminology to give a false veneer of democratic engagement to an anti-democratic process or a forum with a predetermined outcome. In addition, scholarship that helps build our understanding of why deliberation is so effective could inadvertently give people ideas for how to sabotage and manipulate deliberative processes. In addition to contributing knowledge that could help break or disrupt groups, scholars should also

consider ways to undo such actions and protect against them.

Social scientists and humanities scholars may also struggle with ethical concerns raised by applying their scholarship to the domain of security. Even researchers who are concerned about extremism and terrorism may have concerns about their work possibly leading to violent action against terrorist groups. Those concerns would surely be magnified if one's scholarship could also be used to target more sympathetic groups like dissidents and protest movements, or deployed in other unintended ways. These are important ethical considerations that deserve attention before research begins, rather than after.

Ultimately, group scholarship and practice have much to offer in the context of security, whether studying groups operating in pro- or antisocial ways, or groups existing at the boundary between those two areas. Researchers would be well served to look for opportunities to contribute to both applied and scholarly domains of knowledge around groups and teams in security, though we should also be aware of and cautious about the implications of such work.

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Figure 1. Embedded Systems Theory framework for studying small groups (adapted from Gastil, 2010)