The Pros and Cons of Dyadic Side Conversations in Small Groups

The Impact of Group Norms and Task Type

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This research explores the impact of dyadic side conversations on group norms within three- and four-person groups. The authors propose a link between dyadic communication and group norms such that the absence of dyadic communication enhances a norm of group unity, whereas its presence enhances a norm of faction-forming. In two studies, we demonstrate that the presence of dyadic communication opportunities can both help and hurt group performance and that this depends on a fit between the content of the norm and the wider social context. In negotiation tasks that benefit from group unity, the absence of dyadic communication results in a stronger focus on the group and its future as well as increased group performance. However, in problem-solving tasks that benefit from faction-forming, the mere presence of dyadic communication opportunities leads to increased openness to unique information, disagreement, and group performance.

Keywords: dyadic communication; group norms; problem solving; negotiation

A technologically sophisticated business environment in which the use of smart phones and laptops has become increasingly widespread imposes important communication challenges for managers who try to

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organize effective team meetings. For example, team members can (and do) check e-mail or instigate text chats during their discussions with others in their team meetings. However, how these dyadic conversations influence group meetings remains relatively unknown. An important question for managers is, therefore, how they should deal with the opportunities group members have to communicate with others during group discussion. Should these opportunities be restrained like the Israeli prime minister’s recent decision to have his ministers hand in their mobile phones before weekly cabinet meetings (BBC, 2007) or, alternatively, should team members be encouraged to utilize alternative means of communication?

There is an increasing need to understand how the opportunity to engage in dyadic side conversations influences group meetings, given that popular belief suggests they are more likely to hurt than to help the group’s productivity. In contrast to these widely held beliefs, we propose that dyadic conversations during group meetings can also be beneficial. As new technologies continue to permeate meetings at work, it is both theoretically and practically important to develop a thorough understanding of their impact on group dynamics. Based on previous findings from the literature on communication in groups, we argue that there is an intimate link between the possibility to engage in dyadic conversations and group norms. We test these ideas in two experimental studies.

**Communication and Group Norms**

The basic opportunity to communicate with others has been shown to have a profound impact on the emergence of interpersonal and group norms for communication. Research has demonstrated that being able to communicate with others provides an opportunity to reconcile differences, adopt a more cooperative work style, and display more positive emotions and also gives rise to a concern for others’ actions, feelings, and well-being (Caporeal, Dawes, Orbell, & van de Kragt, 1989; Dawes, McTavish, & Shaklee, 1977; Postmes, Spears, Novak, & Lee, 2005b). For example, Dawes and his colleagues demonstrated that people who were able to talk with fellow group members were more likely to cooperate than those who could not (Dawes et al., 1977). In addition, it has been shown that communication with others increases feelings of commitment to the group’s well-being (Kerr & Kaufman-Gilliland, 1994), a stronger sense of shared identity (Kramer & Brewer, 1984), and an increased shared understanding among group members (Swaab, Postmes, Van Beest, & Spears, 2007). The
underlying reason for all these effects, it is argued, is that the opportunity to communicate with other group members highlights a sense of unity and makes the collective, rather than the individual, the primary source of influence. As a result, a norm of group unity is likely to be enhanced (Asch, 1951; Postmes, Haslam, & Swaab, 2005a; Postmes et al., 2005b).

Although this research shows that the mere opportunity to communicate can increase a norm of group unity and transform group members’ perceptions from me and you into an all inclusive sense of we, it does not provide insight into the impact of dyadic communication opportunities. That is, many studies in the management literature exploring the impact of communication on group decision making used control conditions that minimized any form of uncontrolled communication in their experimental protocols. Typically, these studies compared situations where people were able to communicate with others in a public setting, where everybody could monitor what everyone else was saying, with settings where communication was highly restricted (Kramer & Brewer, 1984) or settings where people could not communicate at all (Dawes et al., 1977). Everything else, such as the gender, age, social relationship, values, and beliefs of the participants or the precise form of interaction, whether face-to-face or via electronic means of communication, is typically abstracted away in these experimental designs. Although eliminating communication as a control condition is useful to assess whether communication may have any impact, it does not inform us about the impact of dyadic communication opportunities on group decision-making processes.

The Impact of Dyadic Communication

We do not argue that the mere presence of communication automatically enhances a norm of group unity or increases group performance. Instead, we propose that communication can lead to the development of different types of group norms. The content of these group norms can vary as a function of the opportunities group members have to communicate with others in their group. More specifically, we propose that if group members know they will engage in a discussion that is monitored by all other members at all times, a sense of group unity will increase. This, in turn, will encourage the group as a whole to act in an intragroup fashion, where different group members interact to jointly solve a problem. This suggestion is consistent with the aforementioned research showing that a group discussion can lead group members to act in a united fashion.
However, if all group members know they can also engage in dyadic conversations throughout the whole group discussion (e.g., through text messaging or electronic chats), the mere availability of these communication opportunities might already increase the expectation that various factions will form between different group members. This, in turn, may encourage all group members to perceive and act in an *interpersonal* fashion in which it is normative for group members to engage in one-on-one conversations. These hypotheses correspond with recent findings showing that peoples’ language reflects an increased concern for the group’s welfare when they have more—rather than fewer—opportunities to communicate with others (Swaab, Kern, Diermeier, & Medvec, in press). Although the primary focus of this research was on social exclusion, it nevertheless shows how individuals’ perceptions of the interaction process (i.e., as intra-group or interpersonal) can be influenced by the opportunities they have to communicate with others.

Thus, we propose an intimate link between the opportunities people have to communicate with others in their group and the content of group norms. A norm of group unity is likely to emerge when group members know they can only have a discussion that will be monitored by all other group members at all times, and a norm of faction-forming is more likely to emerge when group members know they can utilize dyadic communication opportunities. But whether these different norms help or hurt the group may also depend on a fit between the content of the norm and the team’s task (see Figure 1).

The Moderating Impact of Task Type

One factor that influences whether the group norm fits the group’s task is the extent to which the nature of the team task benefits from group unity or faction-forming. For example, group negotiations may benefit from a norm of group unity because individual members run the risk of focusing too much on mutual differences, which can obstruct them from reaching a decision (Ury, Brett, & Goldberg, 1988). A key strategy to downplay these differences is, therefore, to create a climate in which group members focus more on the group as a whole and their common future (De Dreu, Weingart, & Kwon, 2000; Kramer & Brewer, 1984; Kramer, Pommerenke, & Newton, 1993). Inducing a norm of group unity may thus encourage group members to find agreements that leave no resources unused.

Because a norm of group unity will be enhanced when individual group members know that their discussion will be monitored by others at all
times, we propose that the absence of dyadic conversations should lead to discussions with a stronger emphasis on the group as a whole, its future, and an increased likelihood of agreement among all group members involved. Because faction-forming undermines a sense of group unity, we expect that groups who can engage in dyadic conversations will communicate less about the group as a whole and its future and will be less likely to reach agreement. In Study 1, we will focus on how the use of dyadic conversations affects these variables in negotiation tasks. Study 2 will turn to a more hidden-profile task.

**Hypothesis 1:** On negotiation tasks, groups that cannot utilize dyadic conversations will communicate more about (a) the group as a whole, (b) the future of the group, and (c) will perform better than groups that can utilize dyadic conversations.

**Study 1**

**Method**

*Participants and procedure.* Sixty-six students at a Midwestern university in the United States participated and were randomly assigned to 22 three-person groups. Groups were then assigned randomly to two experimental conditions (dyadic communication: not possible vs. possible). All participants were allowed 15 to 20 minutes to read the exercise and 45 minutes to interact. All communication was computer mediated so that transcripts of discussions could be easily obtained. Participants were assigned to individual
computers in small breakout rooms where they logged on to Ayeware, a software package developed to facilitate various forms of computer-mediated communication. They were not allowed to verbally communicate with anyone while engaged in the online discussion. After completing the discussion, participants were debriefed.

Dyadic communication manipulation. In the condition where groups could not engage in dyadic conversations throughout the group discussion, participants were told they could not leave their (chat) room and were thus aware of who said what to whom throughout the duration of their interaction. Participants in the dyadic communication condition were told they could use the public (chat) room but, in addition, were also told that they could utilize the opportunity to communicate with one another in private chat rooms whenever they wanted (i.e., there was also a chat room for participants 1 and 2, 1 and 3, and 2 and 3). Specifically, participants were told,

You have two opportunities to communicate with the other people in your group—you can chat in the common public chat room or you can chat in a private chat room with either one of the two other agencies. To access the private chat room (if two people wish to speak privately), go back to your “My Ayeware” page by hitting either the “Back” button or the “My Ayeware” button. Click on the specific subgroup to talk to either of the other two representatives. The other people in the group will not have access to the information exchanged in this private chat room.

If any party left the public chat room to go to a private chat room, the message “[Screen Name] has left the chat” appeared on each party’s computer screen. So, if any two parties left the public meeting space to talk in private, the content of their communication remained in their dyadic conversational space and was private, but the fact that they have left was common knowledge. Participants could only be active in one chat room at a time.

Task. Students participated in a three-party negotiation case titled “Social Services,” a task where individual group members had incentives to look out for themselves but, at the same time, where the group as a whole would benefit from unified action because this decreases the likelihood that resources are left unused. In this task, participants were randomly assigned to the role of a representative for one of three different social services agencies (Allied, Benevolent, and Caring). The agency representatives were offered the opportunity to receive funds from a government agency, provided at least two of the three firms formed a consortium. Each representative
was given the goal of obtaining as much funding as possible for their organization. The students were told that they needed to agree on the parties to the consortium and the distribution of the resulting funds. The amount of resources available for any grant varied based on the agencies involved (See Table 1). All the participants received the same case materials and saw the same pay-off matrix. No further information was provided about how money had to be allocated within a certain faction. So participants had the freedom to decide themselves how the money was split.

**Use of dyadic chat rooms.** We measured how many groups in the dyadic communication condition used the dyadic chat rooms to communicate with others.

**Outcome variable.** The group’s outcome was measured dichotomously. We operationalized group performance as whether or not the group left money on the negotiation table. If all parties were included in the final deal, we coded the outcome as successful, “1,” because this left no resources unused. However, a deal between any subset of parties would leave some resources unused and was therefore coded as unsuccessful, “0.”

**Process variables.** We obtained the process variables by examining group members’ language because recent work in computational linguistics has demonstrated the usefulness of automated text analysis to recognize linguistic patterns in data sets that would usually take years to code manually (Jackson & Smith, 1999; Jurafsky & Martin, 2000). For example, automated text analysis has been used to identify aspects of personality and psychological states (Pennebaker, Francis, & Booth, 2001). To analyze language within

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<tr>
<th>Possible Agreements</th>
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<td>A alone</td>
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the dialogues occurring in each conversation, we used the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) approach (Pennebaker et al., 2001). LIWC calculates word frequencies from a given text and classifies them into several features, including rudimentary linguistic features. LIWC controls for the volume of communication because the variables reflect percentages of the total amount of words within a text (Pennebaker et al., 2001). LIWC has demonstrated strong validity and reliability among a number of contexts and cultures in its ability to capture the connection between speech and psychological dimensions (Brett et al., 2007). Because we expected that the absence of dyadic communication would increase communication about the group as a whole as well as their future focus in competitive tasks, we used LIWC to measure group members’ speech. First, we measured communication about the group as a whole by examining the number of references made to other group members. Previous research has examined the number of collective pronouns such as *we*, *us*, and *ours* as a proxy for cooperation (Liang, Moreland, & Argote, 1995). Because it is unclear in a multiparty negotiation context whether collective pronouns refer to the group as a whole (*we* as all three of us) or a smaller coalition (*we* as the two of us), we measured the extent to which negotiators made references to others. The inverse of this measure is a more accurate reflection of a collective frame of reference such that increased cooperation among all three negotiators would be evidenced by a decreased number of specific references to others. LIWC was composed of 22 third-person pronouns that made references to others such as *he*, *she*, *his*, *hers*, etc. Sentences like “If we cannot reach an agreement, he will demand at least . . .” or “If A is planning to do that, he will certainly . . .” would be indicative of the use of references to others. A smaller proportion of these “us versus he/her” references would therefore provide linguistic evidence of a more cooperative and inclusive mind-set among negotiators. Second, we measured the extent to which discussions were focused on the group’s future. Previous research has shown that a stronger focus on the future goes hand in hand with increased cooperation (Mannix, 1994; Mannix, Tinsley, & Bazerman, 1995). Therefore, we examined the extent to which group members used verbs in the future tense. LIWC was composed of 14 verbs in the future tense, such as *will*, *might*, *shall*, etc. Sentences like “Please note that we will be working together and as such, should combine in such a way as to maximize the pie” or “I look forward to all the work we will do together for the hospital to help the children” would be indicative of a stronger future focus.
Results

Because the word frequencies ratios represent unequal and (sometimes) small numbers, we ran a $z$ transformation on all process variables to conduct more meaningful analyses of the differences between the groups. All analyses were conducted at the group level.

All groups in the dyadic communication condition used the opportunity to communicate in the different chat rooms. Marginal support was found for Hypothesis 1a such that references to others were less likely in the absence of dyadic communication (mean $[M] = -.35$, standard deviation $[SD] = .94$) than in the presence of dyadic communication opportunities ($M = -.42$, $SD = .95$), $t(20) = 1.90$, $p = .07$, $\eta^2 = .15$. We found strong support for Hypothesis 1b such that there was an increased use of future tense verbs in the absence of dyadic communication ($M = .45$, $SD = .96$) than in the presence of dyadic communication opportunities ($M = -.53$, $SD = .79$), $t(20) = 2.58$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2 = .25$. Hypothesis 1c was also supported. Analyses of the group outcomes revealed that success was more likely in the absence of dyadic communication (60%) than in the presence of dyadic communication opportunities (10%); $\chi^2(1) = -2.29$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2 = .28$. The content of the group discussion did not statistically mediate the effect of dyadic communication on group performance.

Discussion

We found support for our hypothesis that communication opportunities are linked with group norms. Informing groups that communication could only be conducted in a forum where everybody could monitor everybody else at all times induced a norm of group unity, and this was evidenced by the content of the group’s discussion as well as their outcome. That is, group members made fewer references to others, emphasized the future more strongly, and were more likely to find agreement when they could not engage in dyadic communication. In contrast, an opportunity to engage in dyadic side conversations led to a norm of faction-forming, and this was witnessed by more references to others, a weaker emphasis on the future, and fewer agreements between the three group members involved.

Thus far, we argued that the absence of dyadic communication increases a norm of group unity and that this positively influences group performance in activities where group unity is desirable. However, not all group activities benefit from group unity. The goal of the follow-up study was therefore to replicate the finding that the absence of dyadic communication opportunities
increased a norm of group unity but extend this to a task where faction-formation could help the group’s performance. One example of such a task that might benefit from a strong focus on different factions is a hidden-profile task.

In hidden-profile tasks, group members run the risk of focusing too much on what they have in common, which may deteriorate the quality of their decision (Gigone & Hastie, 1993). Moreover, this is particularly the case when a sense of group unity is strong (Janis, 1972; Postmes, Spears, & Cihangir, 2001). A key strategy to overcome this tendency to focus on common information is to create a climate in which individual group members who hold unique information will be heard by all others (Phillips, Mannix, Neale, & Gruenfeld, 2004). Although the expression of unique information is likely to go hand in hand with increased disagreement, both are critically important to achieve high performance in hidden-profile tasks (Brodbeck, Kerschreiter, Mojcisch, Frey, & Schulz-Hardt, 2002; Stasser, Stewart, & Wittenbaum, 1995).

Because we argue that dyadic communication opportunities increase a norm of faction-forming, it can be expected that groups will be more open to unique information and more likely to express disagreement when they can utilize dyadic conversations. In tasks that benefit from an expression of unique perspectives and disagreement, this should also be witnessed by increases in the group’s performance. Because we proposed that the mere availability of dyadic communication opportunities is sufficient to establish such a norm, we expect these effects to occur regardless of the frequency with which people actually use the private chat rooms. And because a norm of group unity suppresses disagreement, the presence of dyadic communication opportunities might paradoxically be more beneficial for group performance than its absence.

Hypothesis 2: On hidden-profile tasks, groups that can utilize dyadic conversations will (a) be more open to group members holding unique information, (b) express more disagreement, and (c) achieve higher group performance than groups that cannot.

Study 2

Method

Participants and procedure. Eighty-four students at a Midwestern university in the United States participated and were assigned to 21 four-person groups. Groups were assigned randomly to experimental conditions.
in a two-factorial (communication condition: public vs. private) design. As in Study 1, all participants were allowed 15 to 20 minutes to read the exercise and 45 minutes to interact. Similarly, communication was computer mediated and participants were assigned to individual computers in small breakout rooms where they logged on to Ayeware. Again, they were not allowed to verbally communicate with anyone while engaged in the online discussion. After completing the discussion, participants were debriefed.

**Dyadic communication manipulation.** As in Study 1, the absence of dyadic conversations was manipulated by informing participants they could not leave their (chat) room. Participants in the dyadic communication condition also had access to a public (chat) room but, in addition, were provided the opportunity to communicate with one another in private chat rooms whenever they wanted (i.e., there was also a chat room for participants 1 and 2, 1 and 3, 1 and 4, 2 and 3, 2 and 4, and 3 and 4).

**Task.** Participants participated in a hidden-profile task. Because we wanted to keep the business aspect of the task similar (i.e., a financial decision to be made between different parties), we adapted a hidden-profile task developed by McLeod and colleagues (McLeod, Baron, Marti, & Yoon, 1997). In this task, four group members take the role of the board of directors of the ACME (Acquiring Companies Means Employment!) Investments Company and evaluate three companies available for acquisition using a specified set of investment criteria. The group’s task is to provide a rank ordering of the companies’ acquisition desirability. The task was designed so that the full information showed Company A to be the best investment, followed by Company C and Company B. A hidden profile was created among the information that was shared and unique between group members such that before group discussion, three of the four group members would rank order the companies B > C > A and the 4th group member would favor the correct rank order, A > C > B. So all the unique information necessary to make the best investment (Company A) was held by one group member. We did not inform the groups that their information sets were different.

**Use of dyadic chat rooms.** As in Study 1, we measured how many groups in the dyadic communication condition actually used the dyadic chat rooms to communicate.

**Outcome variable.** The group’s outcome was measured dichotomously. Success was operationalized as whether or not groups chose the right company
to acquire. If they chose to acquire Company A, this would count as a success, “1,” whereas any other choices were counted as unsuccessful, “0.”

**Process variables.** Process variables were obtained by using LIWC (Pennebaker et al., 2001). Because we expected that dyadic communication opportunities would increase disagreement between group members, we measured language reflecting disagreement among group members by including 31 word and word stems indicating negation, dissent, or disagreement, such as *cannot, doesn’t, isn’t, no, not, wasn’t,* and *without* (Pennebaker et al., 2001). Example sentences with negations were “B’s growth figures are steadily declining they’re not hot anymore” and “It seems B does not seem to be a good choice to me as they’ve decreasing profits annually.” To assess how open group members were to the expression of diverse opinions in their group, we measured how long the member holding all unique information (about company A) was allowed to speak.

**Results**

In contrast to the first study, we only found one group in the dyadic communication condition to use the different chat rooms. As in Study 1, we ran a z transformation on all process variables, and all analyses were conducted at the group level. We found support for Hypothesis 2a, such that members holding all unique information were able to speak more in the presence of dyadic communication ($M = .49, SD = 1.07$) than in the absence of dyadic communication opportunities ($M = −.44, SD = .74$), $t(17) = 2.23, p < .04, \eta^2 = .23$.

Support was found for Hypothesis 2b, such that disagreement occurred more frequently in the presence of dyadic communication ($M = .64, SD = .82$) than in the absence of dyadic communication opportunities ($M = −.58, SD = .79$), $t(18) = −3.23, p < .01, \eta^2 = .39$. Furthermore, the expression of disagreement and the amount of time members holding all unique information spoke were strongly correlated ($r = .77, p < .001$), suggesting that disagreement either occurred because unique information entered the discussion or that people shared more unique information to explain why they disagreed.

Consistent with Hypothesis 2c, we found that success was more likely in the presence of dyadic communication (50%) than in the absence of dyadic communication opportunities (9%), $z = −2.02, p = .04, \eta^2 = .21$. The content of the group discussion did not statistically mediate the effect of dyadic communication on group performance.
Discussion

The results of Study 2 replicate those of Study 1 in that they show that a lack of dyadic communication opportunities increases a norm of group unity and that the presence of dyadic communication enhances a norm of faction-forming. Moreover, we found that the mere presence of these communication opportunities was already sufficient to foster this norm. Although groups did not actually use these chat rooms, they were more open to unique perspectives, expressed more disagreement, and performed better. So the ability to form factions with other group members (through the mere presence of dyadic communication opportunities) led group members to express and integrate their differences in a constructive manner. Furthermore, the results extend those of Study 1 by showing that the absence of dyadic communication opportunities increased a sense of group unity. However, this norm of group unity hurts the group in hidden-profile tasks, where high performance depends on the expression of different perspectives (see also Janis, 1972; see also Postmes et al., 2001).

General Discussion

Implications

Taken together, our results support the idea that there is a causal link between the opportunities people have to communicate with others and group norms for communication. But whether these opportunities influence group process and outcome positively depends on a fit between the wider social context and the content of the group norm. If the group task is likely to benefit from group unity (e.g., because this may lead group members to leave no resources unused), a lack of dyadic communication induces unified action, and this can be beneficial. However, in situations where a strong sense of group unity can be responsible for erroneous decisions, it is the presence of dyadic conversations that can be more beneficial. Interestingly, we found that the mere availability of multiple communication opportunities was already sufficient in developing these norms. That is, a norm of faction-forming emerged irrespective of whether group members actually used them. So if the task requires agreement, group members should focus on the unity within the group, and informing them to stay in the same discussion room provides just this. However, if high performance depends on democratic participation and expression of unique perspectives (e.g., in cross-functional teams), the mere availability may already be beneficial because it increases their focus on unique insights.
An important contribution of our research is that it shows how communication opportunities are linked to group norms. This is a critical finding because the norms being triggered can be beneficial as well as harmful. Our confidence in this idea is strengthened by analyses of the content of group discussions. Consistent with previous research, we find that norms of group unity increase communication about the group as well as promote a stronger emphasis on the future (Dawes et al., 1977; Dawes, Van de Kragt, & Orbell, 1988; Kerr & Kaufman-Gilliland, 1994; Swaab et al., 2007). In addition, we find that norms of faction-forming increase openness toward unique information—a finding consistent with previous findings in the small group literature (Stasser, 1999; Stasser et al., 1995; Wittenbaum & Stasser, 1996). So in addition to our findings being consistent with previous insights, they add to these that the opportunities people have to communicate can be responsible for why these norms develop.

Our research also has implications for theory development. First of all, it sheds light on how communication settings enhance or reduce group norms and highlight that the consequences of these norms are context dependent. In addition, our results suggest that individuals’ behaviors are strongly influenced by how group members frame their language. That is, we found support for the idea that communication settings can lead group members to frame their language more as an intragroup setting or interpersonal setting. This also suggests that the nature of the relationship among group members may further moderate these effects. For example, if relationships between group members are extremely competitive (e.g., when strong in-group vs. out-group differences exist), the negative effects of dyadic conversations on establishing agreement may become less pronounced. Nevertheless, future research should focus on these issues in more detail.

Our findings have implications for minority influence strategies. The finding that cooperative hidden-profile tasks were more successful when groups had dyadic opportunities to communicate suggests that numerical minorities are able to directly influence the group process when they interact with just one other group member instead of all other group members at the same time. That is, when they could instigate a dyadic side conversation, their information was considered more thoroughly, which led half of the groups in the dyadic communication condition to come to a correct conclusion about the company to acquire. This finding is consistent with a social validation explanation, which suggests that unshared information is more likely to be discussed when group members interact in a comfortable setting (Wittenbaum & Bowman, 2004; Wittenbaum, Hollingshead, & Botero, 2004). From this perspective, a dyadic conversation can provide the
right level of comfort necessary for minority information holders to share, or for majority members to consider, the unshared information. Although future research is necessary to find out whether this effect is a result of majority members becoming more likely to pull information from the minority member, or minorities being more likely to push certain information, this finding can be considered important given the limited direct influence minority opinion holders normally have (McLeod et al., 1997; Nemeth, 1986; Phillips et al., 2004).

Limitations and Future Research

The research has some limitations as well. First of all, it is not clear whether our findings also apply to larger groups in which people leaving the group meeting may have less visible impact. Although we explored the impact of communication settings on small groups, we can only speculate about the impact on larger groups. One can imagine that as groups get larger, the effects of communication settings become more pronounced. That is, it may be more critical to restrain group members from dyadic communication when agreement between all parties in larger groups is desirable or encourage them to use private side conversations when unique information has to be considered. Future research is needed to provide an answer to these explanations.

An additional limitation of the study is that we did not find the content of the group discussion to statistically mediate the effect of communication setting on the group’s performance. One explanation for the lack of mediation is that we used a software analysis tool that did not allow us to examine the context in which words were expressed. Instead, we were only able to examine the expression of the relative number of words within a text. Although the use of multiple process variables in both studies addresses this shortcoming to some extent, the absence of mediation in both studies suggests that language (measured via a word-count procedure) is an important indicator of, but not a sole responsible factor for, the processes with which communication settings influence group performance.

Both studies were conducted in a computer mediated communication setting. This, however, does not imply that dyadic communication opportunities have different effects in face-to-face settings. In fact, computer mediated communication research has found that online interactions can be just as social as face-to-face interactions when certain preconditions that increase cooperation are present (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998; Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995; Walther, 1992). Although one could argue that
effects would be more pronounced in face-to-face settings because of increased pressures to include others (Baron, 1995; Swaab et al., in press), future research is necessary to investigate this in more detail.

Conclusions

Our focus on dyadic communication has important implications for practice because it sheds light on a critical challenge faced by organizations to find constructive ways of dealing with communication opportunities in group meetings. First of all, the results have implications for individual group members such that they should use language that reflects a collective frame of reference and emphasizes a future focus, at least when they want to ensure inclusion in an agreement. Second, our results have implications for managers. Taken together, the two experimental studies suggest that managers should thoughtfully consider whether to allow (or encourage) dyadic communication possibilities. Whereas our intuition often informs us that engagement in dyadic side conversations is inappropriate and deteriorates the meeting’s productivity, our results suggest that this is not necessarily true. Although we do find that it is important to restrain people from side conversations when the purpose is to find agreement, our results also indicate that when the meeting requires creative input and benefits from diverse perspectives, managers could promote the use of dyadic communication. That said, we do recommend that managers be transparent and precise about how this is done such that dyadic side conversations are only used for conversations that can benefit the task and not when agreement among all parties is needed. Failures to match dyadic communication with the group’s task might not only cause irritation among other group members, but it may equally so lead to critical outcome losses.

References


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