

‘A critical theoretical analysis of my experience of working in a group during the MOB Research Project.’ *Total word count: 1209*

During the course of this essay I will be attempting to critically analyse my experiences of working in a research group for MOB coursework as well as any relevant theories that may be applicable in relation to those experiences. I use the plural ‘experiences’ as any team must operate based on context. For example the day, time and personal circumstances of each individual within my group, as well as the way those individual personalities interacted with the other personalities, could significantly alter my perceptions of my experience within the group. This is due to the resulting different group dynamics. I would then refer to my experience of these varying group dynamics as my various experiences.

We must consider how varying group dynamics and individuals may have affected or influenced various outcomes and situations, whether those were positive or negative. Tuckman (1965, cited in Tuckman and Jensen, 1977) originally specified four stages of a group life cycle: forming, storming, norming and performing. Later Tuckman developed upon this theory by adding a fifth stage to the cycle, adjourning. Thinking back on my experience of group work, our team certainly followed this pattern to a certain extent. However, it was not without leakage and ambiguity. For example, I recall numerous occasions where conflict, or “storming”, arose in numerous stages of the research project.

Sometimes during meetings we would end up stepping on each other’s toes in an emotional sense, which may have been related to individual circumstances and pressures external to the project such as the influence of other academic deadlines on emotional wellbeing. There were some weeks when we were fairly productive and mostly “performing” and other weeks when we were mostly “storming”. While we may not have been outright arguing with each other, subtle unspoken undertones indicated resistance and conflict between group members. In a worst case scenario, the group would not even reach a “forming” stage (within a weekly meeting context) due to absenteeism and lack of a structured project plan with identifiable targets. Workloads were ultimately completed in stressful, last minute bursts due to a lack of formal organisational structure and designated leadership roles. This, however, could not be helped due to the diverse range of individual lifestyles and personal circumstances, for example varying living distances and part-time employment status. The uncertainty and ambiguities in who would be able to come to our weekly meetings led to a power struggle in leadership which I will discuss later.

In any case, Tuckman’s theory is not necessarily 100% prescriptive in that discrepancies in the boundaries and timings of the various stages do exist. I would rather think of Tuckman’s model as a guide to the dominant aspect of working group dynamics. We must remember that there are various different alternatives to the model, all of which have a slightly different layout and segmentation of group working stages such as Dunphy (1968, cited in Tuckman and Jensen, 1977) and Braaten (1975, cited in Tuckman and Jensen, 1977). My personal view is that this theory of a group stage life cycle can only be useful objectively, as an outside viewer. Having subjective knowledge as an internal team member, I can tell you that the stages outlined by these theories are never as clear cut as they project them to be in practice.

Therefore, the strength of Tuckman's theory lies in gaining some form of intuitive understanding of the way in which groups generally work. However, this theory by itself cannot be used to tell the whole story.

I feel that much of the conflict I inferred as undertones may have been in part due to the fact that there were conflicting leadership personalities, particularly between me and the other British male in the group. I felt that his style of leadership embodied more of the elements related to the "great man" hypothesis as suggested by Carlyle (1907, cited in Judge et al, 2002) than perhaps mine does. I feel my style to be more quiet and less forced than his was, although that could just be due to different personality temperaments. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator based on Jung's theory (1921/1926, cited in Carlyn, 1977) splits personalities into two categories in relation to their "preferred orientation to life", extroverts and introverts. Introverts such as me are more likely to detach themselves from the world around them, meaning I became submissive to my teammate's leadership style as he seems to be a typical extroverted personality. Extroverts are typically more physically oriented, including objects and people in a wider and overall sense. They tend to live their lives by interacting with others rather than debating their own thoughts with themselves. So by default I tend to be submissive to extroverted types as they tend to be more talkative and open whereas I am more reflective and pensive.

However, I maintain that leadership power was shared within the group and was not held by one individual at any one time. In terms of the type of power that was shared, French and Raven (1959, as cited in Raven with Schwarzwald and Koslowsky, 1998) suggested the existence of many different forms of power. For example, my expert power as a student studying a course involving both business and computer science allowed me to take the lead in producing digital data diagrams for use in our final presentation. However, I lacked the referent power held by the two other prominent leaders in our group, who were able to utilise their worries over the deadline of another module which all my teammates shared to stall and side-track our research. In this context I wish I had been placed in a group with people who were on my course.

As with Tuckman's theory, these different views on what power is can only be used as an objective tool. Subjectively, on an individual basis, overlaps between the different types of power may be observed. One alternative view from Yukl and Falbe (1991) identified simply two sources of personal power: persuasiveness and charisma. In this context, power may simply be viewed as a perceived entity which we allow what we might refer to colloquially as 'pushy' people, or perhaps manipulative people, to hold. If I think about power in this context, then I can certainly relate that to the British male mentioned before. He was often too talkative during our meetings and I feel that the other group members, including myself, just allowed him to lead to a certain extent. This was probably because we were not prepared to deal with the headaches arising from opposing his suggestions or instructions. I noted that without him however, there was little direction or drive within the group. That was probably because I as well as the other prominent leader within the group had already conceded to him, so we did not feel a duty to become the driving force of the research project in his absence.

Ultimately I would argue in relation to the theories studied that my experience as a whole within the group was experienced on my own subjective level. Therefore the applicability of these theories to that experience is somewhat limited. Each individual has their own perception of culture, power, leadership and interpersonal relations which can never be fully defined academically.

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