This article clarifies the conceptual relationship between democracy and small group processes by providing a definition of small group democracy. A small democratic group is (a) powerful and (b) inclusive, with (c) a membership that is committed to the democratic process. A fully democratic group (d) maintains healthy, democratic relationships and (e) practices a democratic form of deliberation, including equal and adequate speaking opportunities and both comprehension and consideration. The concluding section makes recommendations for future research, including the suggestion that researchers integrate theories of small group behavior with theories of democratic social change.

A DEFINITION OF SMALL GROUP DEMOCRACY

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Why do we study small group interaction? The standard answer is that some group processes and outcomes are better than others and we can achieve better group discussions and decisions if we improve our understanding of them. To this end, researchers have typically studied desirable outcomes, such as productivity, cohesion, and member satisfaction. A casual examination of recent volumes of Small Group Research shows the prominence of these variables (e.g., C. Evans & Dion, 1991). Widely used small group textbooks (e.g., Brilhart & Galanes, 1989; Jensen & Chilberg, 1991) and research monographs (e.g., Hirokawa & Poole, 1986); Phillips & Wood, 1984) also focus on these variables, particularly decision quality or productivity.

Undoubtedly, these are important variables, yet there is another variable of equal or greater importance that has been sorely neglected. Theory and research on small group behavior has rarely examined democracy, yet practitioners often hold this factor in high esteem. People often expect their small decision-making groups to conduct themselves democratically—so often, in fact, that the democratic process is sometimes taken for granted. In fact, democracy has become increasingly applicable to ostensibly apolitical small group settings. One can now speak of democratic workplaces (Benello, 1992; Lappe, 1989), democratic classrooms (Gutman, 1987), democratic clubs and organizations (S. Evans & Boyte, 1986), and even democratic families (Okin, 1989; Pateman, 1983).

Many citizens have high democratic aspirations today, but it was over half a century ago that Kurt Lewin and his colleagues first suggested that social scientists turn their attention to small group democracy (Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939; White & Lippitt, 1960). Sporadic theory and research on the subject followed, including investigations of democratic leadership (e.g., Haiman, 1951; Maier, 1952; for reviews, see Bass, 1990; Gastil, 1992a) and democratic "group work" in social work settings (e.g., Coyle, 1947; Glassman & Kates, 1990).

Unfortunately, these scattered studies and theoretical commentaries have not provided us with an understanding of small democratic groups. In fact, we lack the preliminary groundwork necessary for developing a clear and meaningful definition of small group democracy. There exists an abundance of definitions of democracy (e.g., Barber, 1984; Dahl, 1989), but these do not focus on the small group. There also exist writings on small groups that discuss democratic procedures and norms (e.g., Coover, Deacon, Esser, & Moore, 1978; Glassman & Kates, 1990), but these do not ground their definitions in democratic theory.

Research linking democracy and small group behavior will continue to make limited progress until a clear definition of the key
sion making. In this ideal situation, all group members “have, in principle, at least the chance to participate in . . . deliberation” (Habermas, 1973/1975, p. 108). Decisions reached should “meet the unforced agreement of all those involved,” and all must “participate, as free and equal” in discussion and decision making (Habermas, 1979, p. 186). Essentially, the ideal speech situation consists of persons with equal and adequate communication skills seeking mutual understanding through open, informed, egalitarian, and participatory discussion.

Unlike the previous authors, Mansbridge (1983) does not provide a definition of democracy; instead, she gives us two. She identifies opposing but complementary types of democratic theory and practice, the adversarial and unitary modes of democracy. Adversarial democracy entails conflict, agreement upon procedures but not issues, and majority rule. By contrast, unitary democracy involves cooperation, common ground, friendship, and consensus. When the interests of the members of the demos seriously conflict, as is inevitable in heterogeneous, large-scale democracies, an adversarial mode of democracy is in order. A more unitary mode is appropriate for a demos with relatively harmonious interests; the Quaker meeting may be its archetype. An ideal demos should be capable of practicing either adversarial or unitary democracy, shifting with changes in the relative harmony of members’ interests (Mansbridge, 1990a, 1990b, 1992).

Finally, Barber (1984) discusses the nature of democratic talk more explicitly than any other modern theorist. For Barber, talk is the heart of any strong democracy, serving nine functions: (a) articulation, (b) persuasion, (c) agenda setting, (d) exploring mutuality, (e) affiliation and affection, (f) maintaining autonomy, (g) witness and self-expression, (h) reformulation and reconceptualization, and (i) community building. In more general terms, Barber argues that traditional, liberal theories of democracy have focused only on speaking, thinking, and reflecting. Fully democratic discourse has these features, but it complements them with listening, feeling, and acting.

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**A DEFINITION OF SMALL GROUP DEMOCRACY**

By reframing and integrating these modern theories of democracy, we can create a coherent definition of small group democracy. Table 1 presents this definition in outline form, and the remainder of this article brings meaning to this outline, discussing group power, inclusiveness, commitment, member relationships, and democratic deliberation. Each of these features is briefly defined, discussed, and related to observational methods (on establishing a qualitative observational method, see Gastil, 1991).

**GROUP POWER**

Democratic groups must have power: Their influence or jurisdiction must encompass the items appearing on their agendas. Democracy, after all, is self-government, and meaningful gover-
always vulnerable to manipulation and abuse if its members do not value democracy.

Besides internalizing democratic values, this criterion requires respect for decisions that the group arrives at democratically. Although the two share much in common, democracy is not anarchy; in a democracy, if group members accept group procedures, they must respect group decisions that faithfully follow those procedures. If a group member does not like a group decision, the member must go along with the decision, challenge the procedures used to arrive at the decision, accept some form of penalty for refusing to follow the decision (this is similar to civil disobedience), or volunteer to withdraw from the group. This requirement effectively guards against those group members who claim democratic convictions only because they expect to agree with all of the group’s decisions.

Measuring commitment will require self-reports, probing group members’ attitudes toward and understanding of the democratic process (see Binford, 1983; Gastil, 1992b; Rosenberg, Ward, & Chilton, 1988). If actions speak louder than words, researchers should also take note of members’ behaviors in critical situations, such as those that pit democracy against a member’s other values or desires. In the absence of such situations, group members can be asked to describe how they would respond to hypothetical dilemmas.

MEMBER RELATIONSHIPS

The members of a small democratic group should also enjoy a special kind of relationship with each other, a way of relating that is consistent with and conducive to the democratic process. These relationships will form over time, through actions and words carrying relational implications (see Ruesch & Bateson, 1951; Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967).

We should establish two criteria for determining the degree to which a small group’s relationships are democratic. First, following Dewey (1888), we might use an absolute standard: A group’s rela-

tionships should sufficiently acknowledge the individuality and affirm the competence of each member of the demos. The words and deeds of group members should also, on balance, recognize the existence of mutuality among group members and foster a congenial atmosphere. Second, Mansbridge’s (1983) work suggests that when there is a relative conflict of interests among the members of the demos, mutuality and congeniality should play a more minor role. Groups with contradictory interests might place less emphasis upon these forms of relationship, because in these groups, there is a greater potential for using mutuality and friendliness to manipulate members with different interests.

Employing these criteria in research requires careful attention to the verbal and nonverbal behavior of group members, both inside and outside group meetings. The greatest difficulty is specifying the boundaries that identify and distinguish the different forms of relational communication. Research on politeness may be helpful in this regard; the various forms of politeness parallel the types of relationship discussed below (see fellowship, competence, and autonomy face, as defined by Lim & Bowers, 1991; friendliness, as defined by Lakoff, 1973).

We can now consider the four facets of democratic relationships in more detail, describing them and explaining their roles in small group democracy. For the most part, each manifests itself in the form of verbal and nonverbal communication, so we will consider each as a form of talk. To make them more concrete, each form of relational communication will have an example, most of which are taken from the verbatim transcript of a series of meetings at a small cooperative workplace (Gastil, 1991).

Acknowledgment of individuality. Recognizing a person’s individuality, in its most basic form, amounts to differentiating a member from the group as a whole. When we acknowledge group members’ individuality, we both address them as individuals and explicitly affirm their individual identities or interests in relation to those of the group. One can even acknowledge one’s own individuality: “That’s all I can give right now while I’m a student, and that’s the choice I’ve made, and that’s okay with me.”
remarked, "I'm just ever so grateful that [they] put in the time that they did to get us to this point."

Congeniality aids small group democracy as a lubricant serves gears, soothing irreconcilable conflicts of interest and moving individual group members toward a common vision. In fact, Mansbridge (1983) considers unitary democracy akin to the political extension of friendship.

**DEMOCRATIC DELIBERATION**

Healthy relationships provide the earth out of which good decisions might grow. The procedural roots that flourish in this soil are open and constructive deliberation. *Webster's Dictionary* defines deliberation as "a discussion and consideration by a number of persons of the reasons for and against a measure." Simply put, deliberation is careful, intelligent decision making. Deliberation becomes democratic when group members speak and listen to one another in a particular way. In this section, we define this distinctively democratic style of deliberation.

When we think about democratic groups, we may imagine that the members of such groups speak in roughly equal amounts. But is it important that all 10 members of a writer's collective speak the same amount, or is it essential that they have equal opportunities to speak? It is probably true that if one person speaks far more than any other, there is a problem. The problem, however, is that this speaker is taking away others' opportunities—not simply that the speaker is talking the most. Similarly, if a group member rarely speaks, we do not know whether this silence derives from having nothing to say or having no chance to say it. It is the presence or absence of opportunities—not the volubility or silence—that is at issue.

Opportunities should be readily apparent to each member of the demos. They should be "manifest" or "displayed," so that all members of the demos recognize the existence of their opportunities (J. Cohen, 1989). For opportunities to be meaningful, members must also have at least minimal levels of communication skills. If some members cannot speak in the group's language, dialect, or jargon, their opportunities to speak are meaningless.

Like anything, this notion of equal opportunities can be taken too far. We would not want every group member to be able to speak at every point in time. We all learned in kindergarten that we take turns to speak, and democratic groups remember this admonition. In addition, we must all be able to speak, but we must be cogent. In the words of George Fox, the founder of Quakerism, we should let our words be "few and savory."

Finally, what if no member has the opportunity to say even just a few savory sentences? In this scenario, opportunities may be equal, but they are inadequate. In a true demos, the chances to speak must be both equal and adequate: If there are insufficient opportunities to communicate with one another, deliberation—careful and thorough discussion—is impossible. Under such conditions, a small group might choose to vote in a democratic manner, but the constraints on deliberation would move it far from the democratic ideal.

Measuring opportunities ultimately requires reliance upon some form of self-report, using questionnaires or interviews to assess members' perceptions of speaking opportunities. Nevertheless, there comes a point at which a member's claim of inadequate opportunities becomes suspect. For instance, if analyses of transcribed meetings show that a person is regularly speaking at great length, we might question this member's claim that she or he lacks speaking opportunities. In sum, analyses of speaking opportunities should rely both upon self-reports and actual verbal data.

The equality and adequacy of opportunities applies to at least six distinct forms of speech, including agenda setting, reformulation, articulation, persuasion, voting, and dissent. Below, each of these is defined and related to other aspects of the democratic process.

**Agenda setting.** Broadly defined, the agenda is the set of issues that a group discusses during a meeting. Members can set the agenda by attempting to place items on it, remove items from it, or alter the priority of its items. For instance, a group member might
senting an argument designed to persuade other members to change their preferences.

The development of mutuality and congeniality facilitates the presentation and consideration of persuasive messages. If members of the demos are comfortable with one another and perceive a spirit of common interests or mutual respect, it is more likely that they will carefully consider the persuasive messages of the speaker. Persuasion is vital for democracy, because it is often the means whereby minds are changed. If group members remain closed to others' persuasive messages, deliberation becomes a charade—a meaningless prelude to voting.

In an ideal democratic group, we should ask for more than mere persuasion. After all, persuasion can be manipulative, deceptive, or otherwise destructive. Democracy needs persuasion that is honest and forthright, appealing to rather than bypassing critical thinking. Following the work of J. Cohen (1989), we might require that "deliberation is reasoned in that the parties to it are required to state their reasons for advancing proposals, supporting them or critiquing them" (p. 22). Without denying the importance of feelings, we might ask that speakers try to acknowledge the degree to which their arguments draw upon intuition and emotion. Persuasive speakers in small democratic groups should refrain from polishing their words so well that they might persuade regardless of the quality of their arguments (see Gastil, in press).

Voting. Although rarely described as a form of communication, voting is simply a formal means of expressing preferences with regard to a set of alternative positions on an issue. This includes preliminary tallies and final, decisive votes, as well as both anonymous and public forms of expression (e.g., secret ballot vs. roll call votes). This definition is rather broad, permitting a variety of methods, such as consensus, majority rule, and proportional outcome schemes (Mansbridge, 1983).

Decisive voting is all but the final act of democratic deliberation, often signaling the end of discussion for the near future. Voting is the only form of democratic talk that democratic theorists universally recognize as essential, because without the vote, all other forms of deliberation become virtually meaningless.

Dissent. Although usually defined in a broader sense, for the purposes of this discussion, dissent is simply articulating one's preference for a position that lost in a decisive vote. It is an opportunity for a group member to express a dissenting point of view after the fact. We might choose, for example, to remind group members that we voted against a proposal after it has passed.

The final form of democratic talk allows unsuccessful minorities to put their formal dissent on record, for future reference. It has been underappreciated by those who hold that articulation is significant only prior to the decisive stage of voting. This is unfortunate, for as Barber (1984) explains, "It is in the aftermath of a vote that dissenters may feel the greatest need to speak their pain." The dissenter says, "I am part of the community, I participated in the talk and deliberation leading to the decision, and so I regard myself as bound; but let it be known that I do not think we have made the right decision." This does not change the decision, but it does "bear witness to another point of view" and thereby keeps the issue, at least informally, on the agenda (pp. 192, 193).

LISTENING

Clearly, all six forms of talk are essential, but without listening, they amount to little more than self-absorbed chatter. Democratic group members must be able to comprehend one another, and they must all be willing to consider what others have to say (Osborn & Osborn, 1991). Imagine a planning group in which the treasurer talks over everyone's head. The other members are missing out on information that they may need to make a fully informed decision. Alternately, if one group member refuses to listen to the treasurer's arguments, the group will have undue difficulty arriving at anything close to a consensus.

As with speaking, researchers might combine self-reports with analyses of transcribed speech to measure the degree to which
Siebold, McPhee, 1986), researchers could use structuration theory as a framework for analysis (I. Cohen, 1989; Giddens, 1979, 1984). Framing small group democracy in structurational terms, one views it as a threefold structure of meanings, power, and norms that exists within finite boundaries of time and space. Structuration theory emphasizes the fact that small democratic groups share their social space with preexisting and evolving social, economic, and political structures that both enable and constrain agents' attempts to make decisions democratically. Researchers can identify which of the many existing structures facilitate and obstruct the pursuit of small group democracy, and they can specify which forms of social and system integration effectively transform these structures. We must ask, What obstacles stand in the way of groups that wish to move closer to the democratic ideal? How might groups confront or overcome these obstacles?

Finally, those who seek to understand the dynamics of largescale democratic social change might explore the relationship between small group democracies and larger social movements. In structurational terms, small democratic groups could establish microstructures within themselves via social integration, and through system integration, they might develop increasingly expansive systems of democratic norms and behaviors.

S. Evans and Boyte (1986) have argued that given the right historical conditions, relatively small groups can, in fact, fuel democratic social change. In their view, democratic voluntary associations—what they call "free spaces"—have been instrumental in every movement for democratic change in American history. The authors substantiate this claim by demonstrating the role of free spaces in the African-American resistance to slavery, the civil rights struggle, American working-class protest, the suffragist and Equal Rights Amendment movements, and the populist movement of the 1880s. In small-scale democracies, people develop self-esteem, learn democratic and cooperative norms, and become skilled at organizing, speaking, and listening. These people then apply their skills and visions outside the free spaces; when organized into an expanding network, their efforts amount to social movements pursuing democratic change (e.g., Benello, 1992; Sapiro, 1990).

If one adopts this view, one strategy for democratic social change is strengthening and developing small group democracies. Theorists and researchers could aid in the development of such a strategy, seeking to understand the mechanisms whereby a relatively small group transforms itself into a free space, making itself increasingly democratic. In this way, we might reach a better understanding of the inner workings of small group democracy and the role of the small group in democratic social change.

REFERENCES