This pair of studies examines some of the obstacles groups encounter in their attempts to practice small group democracy. Through a critical case study, a number of problems are identified, including excessive meeting length, unequal involvement in the group, unequal commitment to group goals, cliques and "minorities," differences in communication skills and styles, and protracted interpersonal conflicts. The second study tests the external validity of the first study's findings, suggesting that these obstacles may, indeed, be common and formidable barriers to small group democracy.

IDENTIFYING OBSTACLES TO SMALL GROUP DEMOCRACY

JOHN GASTIL
University of Wisconsin-Madison

In recent essays, Gastil (1992a, 1992b, 1993) reviews modern democratic theory and develops a definition of small group democracy. Gastil defines a small democratic group as having some degree of power, a somewhat even power distribution, and an inclusive membership committed to the democratic process. A fully democratic group also affirms the competence of its members, balances member autonomy with a sense of mutuality, and maintains a congenial group atmosphere. Finally, a democratic group makes decisions through a deliberative process, which involves equal and adequate speaking opportunities for each group member, mutual comprehension, and due consideration of one another's views.

Gastil (1992b) investigated the utility and meaningfulness of this definition by studying the weekly meetings of a cooperative work-

AUTHOR'S NOTE: The author would like to acknowledge the assistance of C. David Morris, the staff at Mifflin Co-op, Aaron Brower, and his students. The author can be reached at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Department of Communication Arts, Vilas Communication Hall, 6th Floor, 821 University Avenue, Madison, WI 53706.

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place. The staff members at the workplace were able to understand the different features of the definition, finding it relevant to many of their experiences in staff meetings. Moreover, the definition proved effective as an evaluative tool. It was stringent enough to identify deficiencies in the co-op's decision-making structure, but it was not so demanding that it made the co-op appear altogether undemocratic. In fact, the final evaluation roughly matched the intuitive evaluations made by the staff itself and community members who had previously observed the co-op's meetings.

The following studies attempt to build on these previous pieces of research, moving from explication issues to questions of causation. Among other tasks, researchers interested in small group democracy must identify and examine the obstacles that prevent groups from deliberating democratically. The two studies presented below take the first step, identifying the group and member characteristics that appear to obstruct the democratic process in small face-to-face groups.

The first study is an intensive case study, designed to provide detail and conceptual clarity but limited generality. The second study examines a larger and somewhat diverse sample of small groups, which allows an assessment of the external validity of the initial study's findings. Methodologically, this essay attempts to draw on the strengths of two different modes of inquiry. Hypotheses are developed by taking a grounded approach, then tested through a hypothetico-deductive method, as suggested by Poole and McPhee (1985). Taken together, these complementary approaches should provide a useful starting point for understanding the obstacles in the path of small group democracy.

STUDY 1

METHOD

Case study methodology. This first study asks an exploratory question, “What are the obstacles to small group democracy?” Yin (1989) explains that such a question “is a justifiable rationale for conducting an exploratory study, the goal being to develop pertinent hypotheses and propositions for further inquiry” (p. 17).

For the purposes of this study, it is useful to focus on a “critical case” (Yin, 1989), as opposed to one chosen at random. It is best to study a group that has already made a great deal of progress in its pursuit of the democratic ideal, because any obstacles that this group encounters are likely to be faced by other groups. As Patton (1980) writes, in the context of evaluating educational programs, we might choose a case that causes us to say, “If that program is having problems then we can be sure all the programs are having problems.” In this way, “logical generalizations can often be made from the weight of evidence produced in a single, critical case” (pp. 102-103).

Participants. The group selected for study is the staff at Mifflin Co-op, a 24-year-old grocery cooperative located in Madison, Wisconsin. As discussed in Gastil (1991, in press), the staff meetings at Mifflin Co-op appear exceptionally democratic. The Mifflin staff has a significant amount of power, which is shared equally by the staff. All regular staff members are included in the weekly meetings, and their words and actions suggest a strong commitment to the democratic process. Although the six meetings this author observed involved uncharacteristically intense disagreements, speaking opportunities appeared adequate, and group members generally understood and considered one another’s words. The most serious limitations were occasional hostile interactions among staff members during discussions of Norma’s vacation time, a subject that receives more discussion below.

The democratic character of Mifflin Co-op makes it appropriate for a critical case study methodology. The members of Mifflin Co-op have probably discovered and overcome many of the obstacles that prevent other groups from moving closer to the democratic ideal. The barriers that the Co-op continues to face are probably ones that most groups encounter when they attempt to practice small group democracy.
Procedure. The staff meetings at Mifflin Co-op were studied using a multimethod approach (Brewer & Hunter, 1989), involving historical information, participant observation, videotaping and transcription, questionnaires, interviews, and informal conversations (for a detailed discussion, see Gastil, 1992b). The primary sources of data for the identification of obstacles were the questionnaires and interviews. Preliminary analyses of the questionnaires combined with informal conversations between staff members and the author helped focus the interviews, and final integrative analyses of all of these forms of data led to the identification of the obstacles discussed below.

RESULTS

Five categories of obstacles were identified: excessive meeting length, unequal involvement in the group and unequal commitment to its goals, cliques and "miniconsensuses," differences in communication skills and styles, and interpersonal conflicts. The following discussion clarifies the nature of each obstacle and explains its relationship to small group democracy. Afterward, a table is presented that summarizes some of the ways in which the members of Mifflin Co-op suggested confronting these obstacles.

Long meetings. The staff members of Mifflin Co-op freely admit that their meetings often go on too long. As Ray said, "The democratic process breaks down after two hours, and often our meetings go more than two hours." The meetings begin at 6:30 p.m. on Mondays, and by 8:30 p.m., many staff members are tired. In Ray's view, the exhaustion makes meetings increasingly disjointed and unproductive, and because members do not grow weary at the same rate, their participation levels begin to diverge.

Excessive meeting length places two obstacles in the way of a group that seeks to be democratic. First, relational talk may become, on balance, unaffiliative. The members who grow tired may become angry and bored, as Ray did during the videotaped meetings, and those who are still full of energy may resent the frustrated comments of the more weary staff members. Second, fatigue makes the distribution of opportunities increasingly unequal, and it may even make opportunities entirely inadequate for the most exhausted members.

Although not all staff members recognized the implications of long meetings for the democratic process, they did venture to guess at why the length of meetings sometimes became excessive. Louis explained that some staff members get the group off track by speaking too long: "I feel that some people, at times, will speak more than they really need to, and instead of aiding the discussion, it will be more disruptive." Staff members considered member distraction an even more pervasive and serious problem. Amy linked this to poorly orchestrated meetings. She remembered that meetings from years past were effectively facilitated. Now, she complained, "It's less democratic because different people have different levels of distraction. So, you know, some people might want to just get everything off the track more than other people."

Unequal involvement and commitment. According to some of the staff members, there are important exceptions to the overall equality of involvement and commitment at Mifflin Co-op. As Louis argued, "Some people are developing greater power over others ... at Mifflin, and I feel that it's due to their amount of time in the store, in the Co-op." Louis later explained that "some people" referred to Kate. Kate works more hours at the store than the other staff members, and she has the broadest range of special responsibilities at the Co-op. Having worked at the store longer than the rest, she also has the most experience working at the Co-op, which makes her knowledgeable on almost every subject discussed during staff meetings.

Norma also expressed concern about Kate's exceptionally high level of involvement in the Co-op. She told a story about how one of her friends visited the Co-op and told Norma, "Kate's the boss." Norma agreed with her friend, seeing Kate at the top of an unofficial hierarchy of involvement: "There is ostensibly no power structure and everything's egalitarian ... but it's really not that way." In Norma's view, no matter how committed the membership may be to being egalitarian, if involvement is too unequal some members
will obtain greater power by virtue of their relative amount of information and expertise.

The dangers of such an imbalance are apparent. As a member of the group rises in relative power, it becomes more likely that the powerful individual will limit other members’ ability to obtain and comprehend information relevant to the group. In addition, the same powerful individual is more likely to take away others’ opportunities to talk by dominating the discussions of the various agenda items.

Member commitment and involvement are related but different: A staff member can be involved only marginally in the store’s day-to-day activities, yet remain totally committed to the Co-op’s goals. This is the case with Dan, who works only a few hours at the Co-op every week. As Ray explained, “Dan is as committed to the ideals of the Co-op as anyone else, easily . . . but he’s not as involved with the store . . . He’s the least involved.”

Most of the staff members contrasted Dan with Norma. Norma works the second smallest number of hours per week and probably has the least commitment to the Co-op. She even acknowledged that Miifflin Co-op is a lower priority in her life than it is for other staff members. During one of the staff’s Monday night meetings, Rose explained to Norma the effect of this low commitment:

I think . . . what people talk about is . . . feeling like you don’t have the store prioritized in the same way that other people do . . . It feels like your relationship [with your boyfriend] is prioritized over the store . . . It does conflict in how we see each other’s commitment to the store, because I feel like the store is my first commitment, and . . . so it’s hard to work with people that have a different commitment than me.

This inequality of commitment obstructs the democratic process by fostering undemocratic member relationships, as illustrated by the hostile exchanges between Norma and the rest of the Miifflin staff. First, staff members find it somewhat difficult to affirm the legitimacy of Norma’s personal interests. Instead, they view her as somewhat selfish and openly question her individual needs and desires. Second, because Norma does not share the same level of emotional and philosophical commitment to the Co-op as the rest of the staff, it becomes difficult for staff members to affirm her mutuality. At best, they are likely to talk to her as though she is, as Louis put it, “on probation.” Third, friendly relations between the staff and Norma are diminishing. Many staff members have become frustrated with her “lack of commitment” and vent this frustration through angry and resentful language.

Cliquies and miniconfession. All Miifflin staff members recognized the importance of talk outside of meetings, but they also stressed the hazards it presents for the democratic process. Talking outside of meetings allows individuals to work through issues beforehand, exchanging information, developing opinions, and coming to understand the views of others. This, in turn, results in shorter and more friendly meetings. At the same time, however, these seemingly innocuous gatherings can result in serious schisms, as the group divides into separate factions resembling preexisting staff cliques. People may come to meetings with set opinions, and they may become reluctant to reiterate viewpoints that they have already explained to many—but not all—members.

The reason that talk outside meetings creates difficulties is that such talk almost never involves the entire group. It is usually an informal conversation between two or three staff members working in the store, or it is a spontaneous chat among friends at social encounters outside the store. Those not present during these casual exchanges come to meetings lacking the information and ideas that have already been distributed informally. At Miifflin Co-op, Norma and Dan typically lack the information that others have, because they spend the least amount of time at the store, both in terms of work and informal visits. Their lack of information, in turn, makes it difficult for them to comprehend some of the discussions that take place during the meetings. Whereas Dan can sometimes compensate for day-to-day knowledge with his years of experience at the Co-op, Norma, who is relatively new, has more difficulty following others when she lacks pertinent information.

This information inequality leads to the second problem associated with talk outside the meeting. When staff members, particularly Norma, repeatedly request information during a staff meeting,
feelings of anger or frustration often emerge. The person requesting information can become angry at the fact that the group did not provide it beforehand. In her interview, Norma expressed this feeling, complaining that she should not have to wait until meetings to receive information relevant to the meeting’s agenda items. At the same time, other staff members can become frustrated when they have to listen to information they have already received. For instance, when Amy was commenting on the videotape of a staff meeting, she criticized Rose’s behavior, saying that Rose had not taken time before the meeting to obtain relevant information. In addition, Sam pointed out that even when staff members recognize the importance of providing someone with information during the meeting, tension still builds due to the lengthening of the discussions.

But conversations outside the Mifflin staff meetings provide more than mere information: They also create bonds among those who are present. Sam said that conversations outside the meetings can keep staff members up to date on each other’s feelings, concerns, and ambitions. From passing comments to significant shared experiences, these interactions create “a good bond between us and allows us to understand each other more fully... We see each other every day, or at least five of us do,” he explained, “and, you know, with that comes a certain closeness.”

Once again, the problem arises because these information interactions involve “five of us” or some other subgroup of the staff. The rest of the staff can become “outsiders,” lacking the sense of cohesion shared by the staff members who regularly communicate with one another outside of meetings. In the case of Mifflin Co-op, it appears that Norma may have become the outsider. She works as much as Rose and more than Dan, yet Rose and Dan have more friendly interaction with the other staff members. There is, as Amy described it, a certain “resistance” to Norma from the rest of the staff. Even when Norma is in the store, Laura explained, many staff people often try to avoid her.

It is apparent how this interferes with small group democracy: The congenial exchanges among staff members during meetings will tend to exclude the individuals outside of the informal cliques. In fact, the lack of understanding between the individuals and the staff may result in misunderstandings and hostility. The group’s spirit of mutuality may grow stronger for everyone except the individuals outside of the informal network. As the members of the network recognize their mutuality, they may simultaneously disavow their affiliation with the outsiders.

Finally, talk outside the meetings can lead to the closing of opportunities for other staff members to participate in deliberation. If a subgroup of staff members has already tried to specify the parameters of an issue before the meeting, these members may try to prevent another member from reformulating an agenda item during a meeting. Louis expressed a concern about this in the case of Kate and Ray. With reference to the tenure incentives issue, he feared that their preemption of the group discussions may have led to limiting the scope of meeting agendas. More generally, by the time a meeting begins, a subgroup may already have reached a miniconsensus—an agreement among themselves. As a consequence, the subgroup might try to close debate prematurely, cutting off opportunities for reformulation, articulation, and persuasion. As Dan saw it, “If small groups of people achieve consensus on an issue outside of a meeting, they may assume it is dealt with, while others have not had a say in the decision.” At best, “People at different levels of understanding are forced to try to come to some agreement or common view.”

Different communication skills and styles. Mifflin staff members were confident that they had overcome many of the obstacles presented by individual differences in background, skills, and styles. For instance, Rose and Louis, the two group members belonging to ethnic minorities, insisted that the group never discriminated against them on the basis of ethnicity—neither during staff meetings nor in any other capacity. Similarly, the women in the group believed that there was not a gender hierarchy at the Co-op.

The important differences that remain at Mifflin concern speaking skills and styles. As for speaking ability, one might expect that members of an egalitarian, democratic cooperative would all possess highly developed communication skills. The reality, however, is that there are openly acknowledged skill differences among the
staff at Mifflin Co-op. Sam explained that some members, usually newer ones, have not yet overcome cultural norms that stunt the development of the skills necessary for democratic decision making: "A lot of people are very used to being led... It's easier to be led than... to be in the forefront." Sam argued that the United States has hierarchical, patriarchal traditions, and on her questionnaire, Amy concurred:

We come from cultures that are not democratic—we've been raised in families with strict hierarchies, not only between parents and children, but sometimes between siblings too. Our educators have often been regimented and we have not been taught that our individual opinions are important to the larger group. Participating in a democratic experience is rare... We all bring the dynamics of our past into the process at Mifflin.

Different ability levels often obstruct the democratic process by creating an inequality of speaking opportunities, with the more skilled perceiving and receiving a larger number of chances to talk. The more agile speakers have more success interrupting, holding the floor, and redefining the discussion.

Differences in communication styles present another set of problems for small group democracy. An important difference between skills and styles is that one style is not necessarily "better" or "more developed" than another. As Norma and Sam argued, to some extent people are just the way they are, and they should not have to change for their groups to be democratic. The members of a democratic group should accommodate, if not appreciate, each other's different styles of communicating.

Amy hastened to add that she does not believe one of these styles is better. In her opinion, both are compatible with the democratic process.

Louis described a similar style difference between himself, Amy, Norma, and Sam, on one hand, and the rest of the staff, on the other hand. "I would just... tend to believe that... the one thing we do have in common is that we're perhaps more introverted than... other people. More quiet, more self-analyzing." Louis did not view this difference, in and of itself, as a problem. Instead, he argued that the problem derives from a cultural bias in favor of the extroverted style of communicating:

I think it's more general than Mifflin. I think it's a cultural bias that we have in our nation [favoring extroverts]... Those are the people we see as leaders and will promote as such over the people that are more introverted and just do their work and are not outspoken in a positive way.

Differences in communication styles could present at least two problems. First, if one of the styles dominates and becomes the group norm, those speaking in the unconventional style may have more difficulty receiving and recognizing opportunities to speak. Second, regardless of whether or not one style predominates, group members who speak in different styles may have difficulty comprehending and considering one another's views.

Interpersonal conflicts. Expressing a typical view, Ray wrote on his questionnaire, "I think that animosity between some staff people and the lack of respect between them hinders our democratic process... Greater group democracy would come from... [the] resolution of interpersonal conflicts." The members of Mifflin Co-op recognize that there are serious personal conflicts between some staff members. The staff believes that the problem is both the bitterness of some interpersonal conflicts and the failure to face them.

These conflicts can obstruct small group democracy by closing opportunities to speak, causing members to ignore each other's views, and undermining mutuality. First, staff members who have an unresolved conflict with another staff member may have more difficulty speaking. In effect, their tension could make their ap-
parent opportunities to talk meaningless. As Norma explained, “There... are times when because of... whatever emotional or interpersonal dynamic was going on at the moment, it felt like a reduced opportunity... I feel like there are overriding interpersonal barriers.”

Second, if these interpersonal conflicts are not addressed, members lose the respect that is necessary for seriously considering the views of others. Even if members consciously know that they should respect the person with whom they are having a conflict, they may not be able to do so. For example, Ray said that he generally listens,

but if it’s someone I respect less than I should, their comments tend to... fly by... I don’t listen to them carefully, or I look for what’s behind their comments... It’s not an honest exchange going on, back and forth. It’s been subverted by things becoming twisted... The truth is very key to the democratic process, and the more truthful we can be... that’s how an honest dialogue will occur... If there’s not an honest dialogue, then I don’t think the democratic process is functional.

Third, if the conflict is not addressed and respect erodes, interpersonal conflicts can begin to divide a group and undermine its spirit of mutuality. A major contributor to this divisiveness is the gossip that unresolved conflict tends to create over time. Norma explained, “There’s some kind of taboo that interferes with the democratic process or there’s some sort of pattern of behavior where people aren’t good at confronting each other, and they talk... behind each other’s backs.”

Laura admitted that she resorted to gossiping about Norma with other staff members. Gossip was not uncommon at Mifflin in the past, she said, but because Norma’s vacation issues came up, it has become “10 times worse.” It is now more frequent and often more malicious. Laura added, “I am just so angry with her, I have lost all respect.” The conflict between Laura and Norma had lessened their sense of mutuality, but the gossip does more, replacing weakening bonds with emotional barriers.

The costs of unresolved conflict, in terms of opportunities to speak, listening, and mutuality, are clearly high, but staff members are sometimes willing to pay this price rather than confront their interpersonal conflicts. The clearest case of this at the Co-op is the conflict between Norma and the rest of the staff. In the interview, Norma began to cry as she described how the conflict worsened over time: “Things got worse and worse, in a spiral. People didn’t think I was doing a good job, but they didn’t confront me about it. I was scared I’d lose my job.”

Confronting the obstacles to small group democracy. Once again, the experience of Mifflin Co-op suggests five formidable obstacles to small group democracy: long meetings, unequal levels of commitment and involvement, cliques and miniconsumus, differences in communication skills and styles, and intense interpersonal conflicts.

The Co-op hoped to address these problems in a number of ways. Although this study is primarily concerned with identifying obstacles, researchers and practitioners might wish to know how the Co-op planned to confront its problems. Table 1 provides a brief summary of these possible strategies (for a longer discussion and an epilogue, see Gastil, 1993).

DISCUSSION

These obstacles to deliberation can serve as preliminary hypotheses regarding the pursuit of deliberative democracy. If Mifflin Co-op is, in fact, relatively democratic, the obstacles it still faces are probably important for almost any group that seeks to become more democratic. Its status as a critical case makes such an inference plausible, but it is still necessary to examine other small groups. This is the purpose of the second study.

STUDY 2

The first study generated the hypotheses this study tests, and it may be helpful to restate them before proceeding. First, it is hypothesized that all of the aforementioned obstacles generally
### TABLE 1: Strategies for Confronting Obstacles to Small Group Democracy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Obstacles</th>
<th>Strategies/Solutions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Long meetings                   | Self-facilitate  
Meet when everyone is wide awake  
Come to meetings prepared  
Be attentive during meetings, take notes |
| Unequal involvement and commitment | Make levels of involvement and commitment more equal  
Reduce some members' levels and/or increase those of other members  
Change the group membership |
| Cliques and miniconsorts         | Establish a means for communicating important ideas and information outside of meetings (e.g., logbook)  
Make individuals responsible for communicating with others outside of meetings |
| Communication differences        | Encourage and assist the least skilled members in improving their skills  
Establish procedures that make it easier for more hesitant members to speak (e.g., round-robin)  
Create a self-sufficiency ethic that spurs members to take responsibility for augmenting their communication skills |
| Unequal communication skills     | Try to understand and accept differences in communication styles  
If possible, integrate different styles into a unique, group style that favors no particular individual style |
| Different communication styles    | Try to maintain mutual respect  
Resist the temptation to gossip about group members with others in the group  
Prevent bitter conflicts through building positive emotional bonds among members  
Whenever possible, express feelings to other group members; be open and honest  
Help other members work through their conflicts  
If the conflict becomes extreme during a meeting, consider leaving the room and addressing it at a later time |

Excessive meeting length lessens congeniality and makes speaking opportunities more unequal during meetings. Unequal involvement leads to unequal speaking opportunities and poor listening, and unequal commitment leads to reduced affirmation of competence, recognition of mutuality, and congeniality. Cliques formed outside of meetings lead to reduced mutuality and congeniality. Unequal communication skills create inequalities in speaking opportunities, and different communication styles create speaking inequalities and lower the quality of listening. Finally, higher levels of interpersonal conflict reduce mutuality, congeniality, and consideration and make speaking opportunities more unequal.

**METHOD**

**Participants.** The study involved 66 undergraduates enrolled in a communication arts course at a large Midwestern university. Roughly half the participants were female, and participants were predominantly European-American. Through course activities, the students had become familiar with the concept of small group democracy, and they all received nominal extra credit for their participation.

**Procedure.** Students were asked to complete a questionnaire that asked them to describe a group that met the following criteria:

1. The group had between 4 and 20 members.
2. Members attended meetings somewhat regularly.
3. The group made some form of decisions (e.g., about group activities, budgets).
4. The group used some form of quasi-democratic means for arriving at decisions (e.g., majority rule, consensus, etc.).
5. The members of the group generally expected and wanted the group to make its decisions democratically (define “democratic” in whatever terms you wish to use).
6. The student had participated in the group for more than 3 months.

Each participant described a different group, resulting in a wide range of small decision-making groups. In all, the study involved
20 extracurricular groups (e.g., women's soccer team, advertising club, sororities), 9 community groups (e.g., 4-H Club, religious associations), 9 business groups (e.g., design and development groups at Motorola and 3M), 7 groups assigned in classes (e.g., a group doing a collective project in a marketing class), 5 residence hall committees, 4 study groups, 2 faculty committees at grade schools, 2 government advisory boards and commissions, 2 groups of roommates, 1 army reserve unit, 1 family, and 4 groups with unspecified identities.

The participants were asked a series of open-ended questions regarding the character of group deliberation (i.e., relational communication, speaking opportunities, listening) and the presence of the hypothesized obstacles to small group democracy. After writing their answers to these questions, participants then answered similar questions, using 5-point Likert-type scales. A score of 5 meant that the group "definitely" had a particular feature (e.g., "Members had unequal levels of involvement in the group"), and a 1 meant the opposite. (For an abridged version of the questionnaire, see appendix.)

The open-ended questions were designed to enhance the accuracy of participants' memories, forcing them to give thoughtful, written answers before circling numbers on the scale items. Only the quantitative data were analyzed for this study. Correlations were obtained for all pairs of the features of deliberation with the hypothesized obstacles. Scatterplots were used to detect any outliers or curvilinear relationships.

For correlational analysis, an N of 66 (with a one-tailed alpha = .05) produced a power of .80 at r = .30. In other words, nonsignificant correlations could be interpreted as indicating only the absence of a true effect size equal to or greater than .30 (Cohen, 1988). This suited the purpose of this study, because the hypothesized obstacles were claimed to be formidable, that is, capable of producing effect sizes larger than .30.

RESULTS

The scores of the obstacles to democracy were treated as independent variables, and the other features of the group were treated as dependent variables. Higher scores on the independent variables meant a greater amount of a given obstacle (e.g., a higher degree of disparity in communication skills), and higher scores on the dependent variables meant more democratic small-group behavior (e.g., more positive relational communication or relatively equal opportunities to speak).

To aid the analysis, four indexes were created through combinations of individual scores on the dependent variables. Relation is the average of the reported scores for the four forms of relational communication, including acknowledgment of individuality, affirmation of competence, recognition of mutuality, and congeniality. Talk is the average of the reported opportunities for five different forms of speech, including agenda setting, reformulation, articulation, persuasion, and voting. Listening simply averaged the two forms of listening, including comprehension and consideration. The Overall index is simply a combination of all dependent variables. Reliabilities for these indexes are as follows: Relation, alpha = .70; Talk, alpha = .78; Listening, alpha = .68; Overall, alpha = .87.

Analysis of scatterplots identified no clear outliers or curvilinear bivariate relationships, so rectilinear correlations were obtained. Table 2 provides descriptive statistics and Table 3 presents the correlations among the variables. The correlations in bold type relate to the predictions outlined above. As the table shows, all but one of the hypothesized associations are supported by the correlational data—the exception being the relationship between excessive meeting length and group congeniality. The table also makes it apparent that there are far more statistically significant correlations than the original hypotheses predicted.

DISCUSSION

Despite the small sample size and relatively brief questionnaire instrument, all but one of the hypothesized associations were found, suggesting that the obstacles identified in Study 1 may, indeed, be both ubiquitous and substantively significant. Of course, these data do not provide information regarding the causal direction of these
Two other findings should be highlighted before concluding this paper. First, there may be a generally strong relationship between listening quality and the obstacles to small group democracy. All obstacles had significant negative correlations to small group democracy. Some theorists have stressed the centrality of listening in the democratic process (Barter, 1964; Mansbridge, 1990), and it may be that the model of small group democracy used here underappreciates the centrality of this component of the democratic process. Second, opportunities for use were not reported as being highly dependent on the presence of obstacles. It is surprising to this author that participants reported no large associations between the problems of small group democracy and obstacles to democracy.

TABLE 3: Correlations Between Democratic Group Behavior and Obstacles to Democracy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Involv</th>
<th>Commit</th>
<th>Outsid</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>Styles</th>
<th>Conflct</th>
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<td>Mutuality</td>
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<td>-.52**</td>
<td>-.46*</td>
<td>-.42*</td>
<td>-.36*</td>
<td>-.41*</td>
<td>-.62*</td>
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<td>-.32*</td>
<td>-.22*</td>
<td>-.29*</td>
<td>-.29*</td>
<td>-.36*</td>
<td>-.25*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Competence</td>
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<td>-.55*</td>
<td>-.05*</td>
<td>-.35*</td>
<td>-.40*</td>
<td>-.36*</td>
<td>-.36*</td>
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<td>Congeniality</td>
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<td>-.33*</td>
<td>-.34*</td>
<td>-.19*</td>
<td>-.32*</td>
<td>-.41*</td>
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<td>-.52*</td>
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<td>-.37*</td>
<td>-.27*</td>
<td>-.35*</td>
<td>-.38*</td>
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<td>-.23*</td>
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<td>-.26*</td>
<td>-.32*</td>
<td>-.16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Voting</td>
<td>-.19</td>
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<td>-.12</td>
<td>-.20</td>
<td>-.18</td>
<td>-.33*</td>
<td>-.05</td>
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<td>Comprehension</td>
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<td>-.36*</td>
<td>-.19</td>
<td>-.32*</td>
<td>-.51*</td>
<td>-.35*</td>
<td>-.39*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consideration</td>
<td>-.45*</td>
<td>-.51*</td>
<td>-.46*</td>
<td>-.33*</td>
<td>-.27*</td>
<td>-.36*</td>
<td>-.60*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relation index</td>
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<td>-.58*</td>
<td>-.37*</td>
<td>-.46*</td>
<td>-.47*</td>
<td>-.48*</td>
<td>-.63*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk index</td>
<td>-.49*</td>
<td>-.59*</td>
<td>-.40*</td>
<td>-.28*</td>
<td>-.40*</td>
<td>-.45*</td>
<td>-.23*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening index</td>
<td>-.49*</td>
<td>-.50*</td>
<td>-.38*</td>
<td>-.38*</td>
<td>-.44*</td>
<td>-.41*</td>
<td>-.57*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall index</td>
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<td>-.69*</td>
<td>-.42*</td>
<td>-.42*</td>
<td>-.50*</td>
<td>-.54*</td>
<td>-.58*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Involv = inequality of member involvement in group, Commit = inequality of member commitment to group, Outsid = amount of talk occurring in cliques outside of group meetings, Length = frequency of long meetings, Skills = amount of disparity among members’ communication skills, Styles = degree of difference among members’ communication styles, Conflct = amount of conflict among members. Bold type signifies the prediction of a significant negative correlation. Missing data were deleted pairwise.

*p < .05
these variables. One possible explanation is that voting is the most common and widely practiced form of political communication in Western cultures. The relative prominence and taken-for-granted character of voting might make it less susceptible to the influence of the various obstacles.

CONCLUSION

The studies reported herein are certainly suggestive, identifying a number of obstacles that stood in the way of a single, exceptionally democratic group, as well as numerous other groups. Future research might continue to test the prominence of these obstacles, looking at groups with different memberships, histories, environments, and purposes. In addition, the theoretical relationships among the obstacles and the processes whereby they obstruct democracy require further investigation. The high correlations among them may indicate a complex interconnection.

In conclusion, each of the obstacles discussed above appears to be a common group experience. If we come to recognize them as serious obstacles to small group democracy, we will have a greater incentive to find ways of dealing with them like those presented in Table 1. At the very least, we may take these problems more seriously. For example, we have all complained, at one time or another, about meeting length. We may joke about the group member who never seems to tire, and we may sympathize with someone else, who almost always gets groggy as the hours crawl by. We may ask each other to keep meetings brief, but we usually do so as a matter of personal preference or in the interests of our physical and mental well-being. These are legitimate concerns, but we may make a more concerted effort to avoid long meetings if we see them as a potentially undemocratic practice. We may still laugh about lengthy meetings, but we may also do something about them.

APPENDIX

The following is an abbreviated version of the questionnaire administered to study participants. Spaces provided for free responses have been deleted.

***

The next few questions ask about the atmosphere or “climate” of your group meetings. Answer them as best you can.

Did the members of the group believe that each other was a fully competent member of the group—at the very least capable of speaking for themselves? Did members say anything which questioned or affirmed members' competence?

Did members view one another as a unified whole—a collective entity? Did members openly communicate these views to one another (e.g., affirm/deny the unity of the group)?

Did members feel like autonomous individuals? Did members openly question or affirm one another's autonomy from the group?

Was the talk among group members generally friendly or neighborly?

Did all group members have adequate, or at least equal, opportunities to talk before, during, or after group meetings? “Talk” includes members setting the group's agenda, reformulating or redefining proposals, articulating their own views, attempting to persuade other members, and presenting opposing views even after a decision has been reached.

Did all members have an equal opportunity to vote? Were all votes counted equally?

Were all group members able to understand what each other said? Did any group members “talk over the heads” of others?

Did group members try to take into consideration what other members said?

Did they listen attentively and respectfully?

The following questions essentially restate the previous questions, asking you this time to write your answers in the form of numbers. A 5 means “definitely,” a 3 means “somewhat” or “50/50,” and a 1 means “definitely not.” Please answer these questions to the best of your ability: it is recognized it is difficult to answer these questions in “numbers.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Circle the number which best fits your group</th>
<th>Definitely</th>
<th>50/50</th>
<th>Def Not</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group members recognized their unity as a group</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group members acknowledged one another’s autonomy</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group members affirmed each other’s competence</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group members were friendly to one another</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All group members had adequate opportunities to:</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set the group's meeting agendas</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
APPENDIX Continued

Redefine proposals the group discussed 5 4 3 2 1
Articulate their own views, needs, opinions 5 4 3 2 1
Attempt to persuade other members of the group 5 4 3 2 1
All group members have equal opportunities to cast 5 4 3 2 1
votes that were weighed equally
Group members were able to understand one another 5 4 3 2 1
Group members listened carefully to one another, 5 4 3 2 1
considering what each member had to say

***

Please describe your group in terms of the following features.

Did members of the group have unequal levels of involvement in the group's activities?

Did members have unequal levels of commitment to the group's goals?

Did members talk in cliques outside of the meetings and then come to meetings having already made up their minds?

Were group meetings too long, with some members getting too tired or frustrated to participate?

Did members have unequal levels of communication skills?

Did members respect one another's different styles of communicating?

Did interpersonal conflicts between particular group members make democratic meetings difficult, creating tension and a lack of mutual respect?

Please reanswer these seven questions in terms of a five point scale. Once again, a 5 means "definitely," a 3 means "somewhat" or "50/50," and a 1 means "definitely not." Please answer these questions to the best of your ability; it is recognized it is difficult to answer these questions in "numbers."

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Circle the number which best fits your group</th>
<th>Definitely 50/50</th>
<th>NOT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Members had unequal levels of involvement in the group</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members had unequal levels of commitment to group goals</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members often talked in cliques outside meetings</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meetings were often too long</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members had unequal levels of communication skills</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members did not respect one another's differences in communication styles</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal conflicts between members made democratic meetings difficult</td>
<td>5 4 3 2 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTES

1. The staff had previously requested that a false name be used for the Co-op (e.g., Gastil, 1992b), but staff members have decided to use the real name of the cooperative for this essay and future publications (e.g., Gastil, 1993). Nevertheless, the staff has chosen to use pseudonyms for the individual staff members. Readers are asked to respect staff anonymity.

2. One form of speech, called "witness" (Gastil, 1992b) or "dissent" (Gastil, 1992a, 1993), was not included in the questionnaire. The term refers to dissenting after a decision has been reached, something that is uncommon in some of the democratic groups that use consensus (e.g., Gastil, 1992b). Because some of the groups in this study used consensus, results pertaining to dissent would have been difficult to interpret.

REFERENCES


John Gastil is a doctoral candidate in communication arts at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He received his B.A. in political science from St. John's College in 1989 and his M.A. in communication arts from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1991. He is currently finishing a book on small group democracy, due to appear in the spring of 1993.