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Using *The Lure of Gang Life* to Teach Interpersonal and Group Attraction

By Gordon Alley-Young

*Objective: Students apply group and interpersonal attraction theories to discover the factors impacting a young man's small group membership choices in *The Lure of Gang Life*; this short story illustrates the forces that attract individuals to different small groups across their lives*

Course: Small Group Communication

Introduction

Beginning when we are born into families the human experience is a group experience. We are born into some groups and we select or reject other group affiliations, leading scholars to consider how we make our choices. One theory holds that it is types of interpersonal attraction we feel towards individual group members that draws us to particular groups (Arrow, McGrath, & Berdahl, 2000; Beebe & Masterson, 2006; Byrne, 1971). Another theory, group attraction, holds that individuals are attracted to the group itself based on the group's activities, goals and/or membership (Beebe & Masterson, 2006; Shaw, 1971). Both theories show how group choices are consciously made because they offer perceived benefits to the individual.

My students frequently assert that groups form by chance. Jeremiah Utley's story can be used to heighten students' awareness of the factors impacting group choices. Utley's story details his transition from a child in a loving family, to a gang member, and finally a member of a religious group engaged in prison outreach. Students can apply the factors of interpersonal and group attraction at the points in Utley's story where he recounts how his life choices determined his group choices. Analyzing the story prompts students to contemplate the thinking underlying their own group affiliations. This activity reflects a greater goal of communication education to focus our students' analytical skills on the greater significance of the seemingly mundane communication and social interaction that they encounter in everyday life.

Activity

This activity is best suited to follow a discussion of group formation. In a weekly schedule with three one-hour periods the instructor would facilitate discussion of the chapter for two periods and use the third hour for this activity. Prior to the unit students are assigned a textbook reading that develops Byrne's and Shaw's thought on interpersonal/group attraction (e.g., Beebe & Masterson, 2006, chapter 3). Students are also given a blank reading guide (see Appendix) and are assigned to write definitions for the factors of interpersonal and group attraction.

During the activity period students keep their guides handy as we read copies of the Utley's article together aloud. The article is available by title in the Ebsco research database Academic Search Premiere. As students read they are told to underline content in the story that seems to be an example of the factors outlined in the reading guide. In 5-7 member groups students share their findings. A group recorder completes one clean copy of the reading guide for each group by listing quoted and/or paraphrased examples of the factors of interpersonal and group attraction. Groups, on average, take 20-30 minutes to complete the reading guide.

Debrief

After the guide is completed the groups come together as a class to report their answers to the instructor who charts abbreviated responses on the board and combines overlapping answers. Debriefing provides the students with factual evidence of attraction and asks them to consider the degree to which Utley's choices were conscious and deliberate. In debriefing students must reflect upon their own life choices and consider how these choices prefigure their own group affiliations. Specifically, students are asked to consider:

1. Utley's joining the gang is partly due to being there (proximity/contact/interaction) when a gang leader is chased through his neighborhood. How responsible is Utley for his group choice and how much of it is due to exposure to groups in his environment?
2. How has proximity/contact/interaction determined the groups to which you belong?
3. Material wealth and power (group goals/group membership) are strong draws to gang life but at the time Utley is arrested he has realized for a while that the benefits are not worth the trouble. Like Jeremiah Utley, why do we remain a part of groups when the benefits are outweighed by costs?
4. Prison places Utley in the same proximity as the Juvenile Justice Ministry and it allows him to change. How could incarceration have taken him in a different direction? What are some other group affiliations that could have resulted from him being incarcerated?
5. How have the life choices that you have made (e.g., social, schooling, career path, starting a family) brought you closer to and taken you away from different small groups?

Appraisal

I outline challenges of this activity not to dissuade instructors from attempting it but to prepare them for various outcomes. As I discuss subsequently, the advantages of this activity outweigh any challenges. First, as I teach in a religiously diverse, urban college environment I am careful to disclaim that this story is not an attempt to proselytize anyone to Christianity. During the debriefing I note that it is Utley's group membership, not his faith, which is our focus as our subject could have converted to Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, or secular spirituality for the purposes of our analysis. Secondly, I have students read the story collectively in class as opposed to reading independently at home as this helps to address the barriers faced by many of my students' who come from English as a second language (ESL) backgrounds. Additionally

reading aloud ensures that all students, ESL or not, have read the material. Working collectively in groups ensures that even if not all group members have completed the reading guide that there are peers who will share. A final concern is keeping students focused on the task. I work with classes of 25-28 students that I split into four 5-7 member groups. I am effectively able to keep groups on tasks by circulating frequently among groups. With larger classroom populations keeping groups on task could prove more of an effort.

Students respond enthusiastically to this activity and their comments inform this outline of advantages. Firstly, using real life examples like *The Lure of Gang Life* that reflect urban life appeals to my urban students who have faced some of these same challenges and their small group communication textbooks can tend to emphasize workplace and business examples. Secondly, this activity allows students to learn course content collectively. Not all students have an analytical eye and having students who have this ability share their work can help guide students challenged by interpretation and analysis. Finally this activity can be a scaffolding exercise that establishes a baseline of knowledge and skill for a future assignment. In my class students take the theories and analytical skills that they learn while doing this activity and use it later when they must analyze a small group for their end of semester project.

References and Suggested Readings

- Arrow, H., McGrath, J.E., & Berdahl, J.L. (2000). *Small groups as complex systems: Formation, coordination, development, and adaptation*. New York: Sage.
- Beebe, S.A. & Masterson, J.T. (2006). *Communicating in small groups: Principles and practices* 8th ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Byrne, D. (1971). *The attraction paradigm*. New York: Academic Press.
- Shaw, M.E. (1971). *Group dynamics: The psychology of small group behavior*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Utley, J & Lutes, C. (2004, June/July). The lure of gang life. *Campus Life*, 62 (9), 36-39.

Appendix: Reading Guide

Interpersonal Attraction and Group Attraction in *The Lure of Gang Life*¹

Interpersonal Attraction	Examples
<i>Similarity:</i> Having similar beliefs, attitudes, values, and backgrounds can make it easier to understand and connect to someone.	Coming from “good, churchgoing parents” (p. 38) made Utley receptive to the Juvenile Justice Ministry (JJM). The biblical story of Saul, a redeemed killer, is a model for Utley’s own conversion and connects him to faith.
<i>Complementarity:</i> We are drawn to relationships based on qualities that others possess that we admire but that we lack.	The Unknown Vice Lords (UVL) leader convinces Utley that he has the smarts the gang needs while he admires the leader for being “cool and scary all at the same time” (p. 38). JJM members have control and purpose in their lives when Utley feels out of control and without purpose.
<i>Proximity/Contact/Interaction:</i> Being physically close to someone makes them more familiar to us, allows us to communicate with them more, and can lead us to see them more favorably.	Seeing a gang member run across a neighbor’s yard initiates Utley’s involvement in the UVL. Being jail with other JJM members placed Utley in close contact with the JJM and its members.
<i>Physical attraction:</i> We are initially drawn to people we perceive to be beautiful.	Not applicable.
Group Attraction	Examples
<i>Group activities:</i> Sharing an interest in an activity can lead us to form groups with others.	Gang activities are not as attractive as other factors. He is willing when his involvement is low (e.g., a lookout) and becomes resistant with riskier activities (e.g., killing a rival). Utley has a desire to tell his story to others and being in the JJM allows him to do this.
<i>Group goals:</i> Members are attracted to a group because of the goal the group seeks to accomplish.	The UVL work to profit from drug sales. The material wealth that this affords Utley is very attractive. The leader convinces him to join by buying him an expensive bike. The JJM allows Utley to bring others closer to God.
<i>Group membership:</i> If there are benefits, power, and or privilege associated with group membership this can lure members.	Being a member of the UVL allows Utley the power and prestige of being in a dangerous and feared gang. Utley’s affiliation with the JJM earns him the respect of his gang peers; they allow him to leave the gang.

¹ Definition of interpersonal and group attraction factors adapted from Beebe & Masterson (2006).