

## **Group Working Relationships Coding System**

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## GROUP WORKING RELATIONSHIPS CODING SYSTEM

This coding system is designed to identify the general working atmosphere in a group. It is a global coding system, in that codes are not assigned to individual acts, but to short periods of interaction, generally 30 seconds. The basic distinctions in the system are based on an empirical analysis of decision-making groups by Poole (1980; see also Poole, 1983). This coding system has been employed in multiple track analyses of decision making reported in Poole and Roth (1989). An example of coding with the Group Working Relationships Coding System is presented in Appendix A, which can be obtained from the first author.

### General Rules

1. The unit of coding is a 30-second segment of group discussion. The coder listens to the entire period and makes a judgment as to the prevailing tenor of working relationships within the segment. A segment may be subdivided if shifts in climate occur within it. However, with the exception of categories 3b, 3c, and 4, no subdivisions should be made which are less than 10 seconds long. Often categories 3b (win-lose) and 3c (tabling) occur quite quickly, and they may be less than 10 seconds in duration. The same is true of short periods of laughter by more than one member, which is coded as 4 (integration).

2. All categories are independent, with one exception: At least one period of 3a (Opposition) must precede periods of 3b, 3c, or 3d. By definition, without opposition, none of the three conflict "resolution" periods can occur.

### Categories

Categorizations are based on the impression the coder forms of the general atmosphere during the period, not on individual acts (although individual acts may be instrumental in contributing to impressions of atmosphere).

1. Focused Work: Periods in which members are working with a concentrated focus on the task at hand. Members do not disagree or qualify each other's contributions during focused work. There is a high degree of idea development and the socioemotional tenor of the interaction is positive, sometimes low-key and sometimes with a good deal of excitement. Common interactions during these periods include adding to and clarification of ideas, building on member contributions, dividing up labor on the task, and sharing thoughts and opinions on issues.

2. Critical Work: During these periods the group concentrates on the task at hand and there is a high degree of idea development. However, unlike focused work, in critical work, members critically examine each others' contributions. There are disagreements and



qualifications of members' ideas and positions. The important aspect of these disagreements and qualifications is that they are still focused on the ideas being discussed. No sides form up; there is no sense of opposition, but rather of actively working with ideas. Members correct and compensate for one another, working toward the same goal. Criticism is incorporated into the stream of ideas, and is directed toward the proposal on the floor. Sometimes interaction in critical work is somewhat "jerky", as members disagree with and qualify ideas. Sometimes the socioemotional tenor may become tense; not all disagreements in these period are amiable. The disagreements in critical work can be distinguished from those in opposition in that members do not seem wedded to positions and they are not personally involved with the disagreement.

3. Conflict: There are four category types within the conflict code. Opposition must be coded first, and once an opposition has been identified, it can only be terminated by win-lose (3b), tabling (3c), or negotiation (3d) periods (of course, the opposition may continue for a number of 30-second segments). Even if opposition seems to be ended by a joke or tangent, which are coded integration (4), it has really been tabled, and these periods should be coded as 3c.

3a. Opposition: During opposition members form up into sides and take opposing positions. There is a clear sense of opposing positions in the discussion; the group is faced with a choice among sides. Members generally are defensive of their positions during opposition periods. They are unwilling to change or compromise. They state positions in black-and-white and oppositional terms. There is often a good deal of tension, though some oppositions are good natured and some even have a good deal of laughter, with integration periods scattered among the opposition.

3b. Win-lose: This is one of three conflict "resolution" methods. In win-lose resolutions, one side gives in to the other. This is one of two codes in this system that can be assigned to only a single, short statement: if an opposition is ended by one member saying the equivalent of "OK, I agree with you, I give in", that statement is coded as 3b. Votes which decide an issue also count as win-lose periods.

3c. Tabling: This conflict "resolution" method involves dropping the subject or postponing consideration until later. Sudden topic changes also function as tabling. Like win-lose resolutions, tabling may be accomplished with a single statement or it may be extended over a short period. Even single statement tablings are classified as such.

3d. Open Discussion: This conflict resolution method corresponds to what are often termed integrative approaches. Here, parties try to discuss the conflict in a way that can lead to a mutually-acceptable resolution. The opposition gives way to more cooperative discussion. There still may be a sense of opposing



sides, although this is not always the case. Open discussion may involve bargaining, negotiation, problem-solving, or compromise. Parties work on the problem together, exchanging information and continuing to try to create a new solution or to find an approach acceptable to all. Open discussion may be similar to focused work or it may resemble critical work, with some disagreement and sharp exchanges. However, it is unlike these periods in that it follows opposition codes and it responds directly to the topic of the conflict. A period of open discussion continues as long as the group continues on the topic that precipitated the conflict. It ends when the group reaches a "meeting of the minds" about the issue. This does not always require the group to reach a final decision. Members may reach a temporary agreement and turn to another subject or issue, with the intention of reopening the issue later. When the issue is reopened, it is coded as whatever type of relationship holds at that time, 1,2, or 3a. Open discussion can only occur again if there is another opposition, which turns into open discussion at some point.

4. Integration: This code applies to periods when the group is not "on topic". These periods may include joking, discussions not related to the task at hand, and personal discussions. There is little or no idea development during these periods. Code laughter as an integration period if more than one person laughs at the same time. These integration periods may be considerably shorter than a 30-second segment, but they should be indicated. Do not code a single members' laughter by itself as an integration period.

#### Notes

1. What at first appears to be critical work may in fact be an opposition in the making. If critical work turns into an opposition at some point, it is a good idea to trace back through earlier critical work codes to determine if the opposition developed earlier, but was just hard to detect. Sometimes it is necessary to change critical work codes into opposition codes.

2. Sometimes you will encounter isolated disagreements in focused work periods. If there is only a single statement, do not code the period as critical work. Only assign critical work codes if there is considerable critical interchange among members.

3. If one individual talks for an entire 30 second segment, it will be difficult to judge the tenor of the group's interaction (since there is none). Use the coding of the previous segment as a standard and code the segment the same, unless something in the individual's turn suggests a shift.

## References

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