

# FAMILIARITY IN GROUPS: EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INTER-MEMBER FAMILIARITY AND GROUP BEHAVIOR

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper reviews the effects of familiarity on the group process. Previously, familiarity has been defined as interpersonal knowledge of another individual. Familiarity is a dyadic construct, based on the relationship between two individuals. We consider familiarity from a phenomenological perspective, exploring how the experience of the individual affects the group and how the group affects the individual's experience. We believe that part of this experience is based on knowledge, but we propose that the experience of familiarity is also made up of affective and behavioral components. In order to gain a better understanding of familiarity, we gathered data from groups that worked on a semester long project. It was found that individuals rely on affect as well as cognition when determining familiarity. Positive, negative, and neutral affect all had interesting implications for the group. Individuals who know and like one another are more likely to engage in positive, team-building behaviors than those who do not know or like one*

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Toward Phenomenology of Groups and Group Membership, Volume 4, pages 173–201.  
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ISBN: 0-7623-0862-1

*another. It was also found that dyadic relationships can directly impact the group. Dyadic relationships that are positive create an open, friendly environment for other group members while dyadic relationships that are negative create tension and conflict in the group.*

## INTRODUCTION

We are interested in familiarity as it is both a consequence and an antecedent of the experience of an individual within the group. Since the familiarity that develops among individuals reflects their experiences, one approach that seems particularly well suited to study it is the phenomenological approach. Stablein (2002) states that "[i]f we are interested in the real experience of group members, then the broad research tradition of phenomenology seems a likely resource." This approach is well suited to the study of familiarity because phenomenology allows us to bridge behavior and cognition, enabling us to focus on the complete individual.

Recent research has started to focus on the importance of pre-established relationships between members of groups and their impact on the activities of these groups (Goodman & Leyden, 1991; Gruenfeld, Mannix, Williams & Neale, 1996; Jehn & Shah, 1997; Shah & Jehn, 1993; Williams, Mannix, Neale & Gruenfeld, 1996). This increased emphasis is due, in part, to the recognition that interactions among strangers can be quite different from interactions among individuals who know one another (Gruenfeld et al., 1996; Williams et al., 1996). A key concept in this research is familiarity, the notion that individuals acquire and use information about others to guide their interactions in group settings.

Familiarity between members of a group is a phenomenological experience because it affects and is affected by the group. Familiarity between people influences who participates in groups and how they participate. In addition, it influences the dynamics of the group, both among individuals who know one another, and even among those individuals who are not familiar with one another. However, the group experience also influences familiarity by providing an arena for experiences to accumulate and for relationships to unfold. We are interested in understanding, from a phenomenological perspective, how the experience of individuals, alone and in the group, is affected by familiarity with other group members.

Prior research on familiarity has generally defined the construct as the degree of interpersonal knowledge that individuals have regarding one another (Okhuysen, 2001). This knowledge-centered definition can help explain, for example, why familiarity helps group members develop tacit coordination of

tasks (e.g. Goodman & Leyden, 1991). Earlier research has also examined the impact of familiarity, as knowledge, on information sharing (Williams et al., 1996), negotiation (Valley, Neale & Mannix, 1995), decision-making and motor tasks (Jehn & Shah, 1997; Shah & Jehn, 1993), and conflict (Rockett, 2000).

Thinking of familiarity as knowledge is useful to discuss particular relationships and outcomes among individuals, but this research still leaves some questions unanswered. One difficulty with the research is that it does not explain how familiarity develops or where it comes from. Also, most research on familiarity has equated familiarity with friendship, focusing on the relationships in which positive affect plays a part (Jehn & Shah, 1997; Shah & Jehn, 1993). One last shortcoming of current research on familiarity is the manner in which it has been operationalized in group research. While researchers have typically measured familiarity as a dyadic construct, that is, a measure of knowledge between two individuals, they have used it to explain group level phenomena without clearly specifying how these are linked (e.g. Shah & Jehn, 1993; Okhuysen, 2001).

While it is true that familiarity is based on the relationship between two members of a dyad, we believe that it is also an integral part of the group experience. In this paper, we set out to begin exploring the role of familiarity in the group experience. In particular, we seek to answer the following questions: What elements influence familiarity? How does the familiarity between two members of the group impact behavior within the group and the desire to interact again? To answer these questions, we begin by considering familiarity as a construct that emerges between two people and which then impacts the group interaction. We also examine the full range of affective components of familiarity, from positive to negative. Lastly, we explain some of the behavioral consequences of familiarity in group situations.

In the remainder of this paper we consider each of these issues individually. We begin by exploring the antecedents and sources of familiarity between people, and by considering the role of affect in familiarity. We then examine the behavioral implications of familiarity, both in terms of intended behavior, such as a desire to interact in the future, and actual behaviors, such as cooperating with each other or using humor in the group context. Through this examination, we present propositions about the role of familiarity in groups. As an early test of these propositions, we examine data gathered from thirty Masters of Business Administration student project groups and use this data to explain the behavioral responses to familiarity among members of a group. In this manner we follow Stablein's (2002) suggestion that researchers should engage in "rigorous, empirical, qualitative methods" in order to understand the

phenomenological experience of the individual within the group. Our findings suggest that familiarity among members may help explain a considerable range of behaviors in groups.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### *Sources/Antecedents to Familiarity*

We believe that individuals build the knowledge base of familiarity through their exposure to others. This cognitive component of familiarity represents the interpersonal knowledge that one has regarding another (Okhuysen, 2001). Individuals might come into groups as strangers having no knowledge of one another, or they might have some knowledge of one another based on previous experience. Once in the group, knowledge can be acquired directly from the target person's appearance, body language, explicit statements, and behaviors, or indirectly, by gathering information about the target person through conversations with others.

Familiarity, then, is inextricably tied to the experience of individuals in groups and organizations. Familiarity encompasses both the accumulation of experiences from interactions with others as well as the possibility of future interactions with them. To the extent that these experiences deepen the knowledge of others, they increase familiarity. Conversely, to the extent that individuals choose to avoid or prevent future interactions, they can also limit the development of familiarity.

Knowledge of another is also important because individuals can use it as a basis to judge similarity with others. For example, an admirer of a celebrity might judge that they are familiar with the celebrity. This could be because the admirer identifies with the actor's role, or his or her personal struggles, and perceives a similarity between them. Interpersonal knowledge, gathered either directly or indirectly, thus plays a key role when an individual tries to determine how familiar they are with another.

In some instances, a person may perceive an affinity with the target individual, and they may be willing to engage in more interactions, resulting in increased opportunities to deepen their knowledge about them. The knowledge gathered about others can include information on preferences, habits, and values (Okhuysen, 2001). One can rate a friend as very familiar because one has gathered a great deal of information about them through direct interactions. The increase in interpersonal interactions then increases familiarity between the two individuals, leading to a greater desire to interact in the future. This leads to proposition one:

*Proposition 1:* Individuals are likely to choose to work with individuals that they have some knowledge of based on previous experience.

As we mentioned, an individual can also develop knowledge regarding a target person indirectly by gathering information from third parties or by evaluating the reputation of the target. Individuals often rely on people around them for information about the world (Shah, 1998). For example, Krackhardt and Kilduff (1990) found that individuals who were friends tended to make similar judgments about other individuals within their organization. We believe that individuals might choose to participate in groups with a certain person based upon information gathered about that person from a trusted source. We suggest that:

*Proposition 2:* Individuals are likely to choose to work in a group with a person if they have information about that person from a friend or colleague.

In addition, an individual considers the knowledge they have about the duration of the relationship in the evaluation of familiarity with another. Many times we evaluate friendships based on the length of time they have lasted. That is, we are more likely to rate individuals as familiar if we have known them for a longer time period. This leads to our third proposition:

*Proposition 3:* Individuals who knew one another before participating in a group together are more likely to rate one another as familiar than those who were strangers before participating in the group.

### *Affect*

The definition of familiarity that most previous researchers have relied upon does not consider an affective component in relationships among individuals (Gruenfeld et al., 1996; Jehn & Shah, 1997; Okhuysen, 2001; Shah & Jehn, 1993; Williams et al., 1996). We consider the affective element explicitly in this section. The affective component of familiarity captures the positive or negative evaluation that an individual makes about the target. One of the affective evaluations that people can make is whether they like or dislike others. This evaluation can be based on an immediate or instinctive "reaction" to the target person, or it can be a reasoned evaluation based on the knowledge gained through the cognitive element of familiarity.

Physical attraction or repulsion is one type of affective response that is often triggered little or no cognitive evaluation. One who is attracted to another is

more likely to rate that person as liked, more likely to interact positively, and more likely to want to get to know them better (Snyder, Tanke & Berscheid, 1977). One who is repulsed is more likely to rate that person as disliked, more likely to be cold in their interactions, and more likely to avoid future interactions with that person. This leads to the fourth proposition:

*Proposition 4:* Individuals will choose to work in a group with people that they like.

An affective evaluation of others can also be based on the cognitive elements of familiarity. It often takes a little knowledge to develop affect, especially in the absence of attraction (Zajonc, 1968). Information such as how the person behaves, how similar the person seems, or how others evaluate the person may impact whether one likes or dislikes the individual. For example, one might decide that they like another person because of the knowledge they possess regarding the background of the person and because of a positive comparison with one's own background. Consider a case in which an individual meets another person who attended the same university. While they don't know one another well, they may feel more similar to one another, and therefore like one another, based on this single piece of information.

It is also important to recognize that affect has an impact on cognition. For example, affect may impact cognition by affecting the acquisition of knowledge regarding an individual (Snyder et al., 1977). Dislike may prevent the acquisition of knowledge, and thus familiarity, by limiting the interaction with the target person. For example, one may avoid interactions with an individual due to an intense feeling of dislike, which may be based on third party information or information regarding the target's reputation. If the individual avoids the target person, then they cannot gain much direct knowledge of the individual. On the other hand, to the extent that one has an affinity with another individual, one may seek out opportunities to deepen the knowledge between them. It is also likely that people will judge their depth of knowledge as greater in instances when they like the target, and conversely, they may also judge their depth of knowledge as lower in instances when they dislike the target. Thus, we suggest:

*Proposition 5:* Affect will be positively correlated with cognition.

The cognitive and affective components of familiarity are especially important because they operate at the dyadic level. These components form the basis of the positive and negative evaluations of a target that exist in attitudes (Petty et al., 1997). In simple terms, the affective component helps decide whether

you like or dislike another person. The cognitive component involves the reasons for why you feel the way that you do, as well as provides information on the strength of that evaluation, that is, how certain we are that a particular evaluation is correct. In the next section, we begin to explore how the cognitive and affective elements of familiarity affect behavior. We first consider the impact of familiarity on dyadic behavior, since this is the source of familiarity. However, we are ultimately interested in explaining how the dyadic nature of familiarity impacts behavior at the group level.

### *Behavior*

We propose that individuals can use a cognitive evaluation to determine how familiar another individual is and to determine appropriate behavior towards the target person based on that sense of familiarity. The behavioral component of familiarity is concerned with how cognitive and affective elements combine to predict and explain the behavior of an individual towards the target. In this section we consider the impact of familiarity on the behavior of members in a group.

The behavioral component may be the most interesting part of familiarity, since it provides the link between familiarity and group level activities. As indicated before, previous research has shown that familiarity can affect the process and performance of groups. This research has found that groups with high levels of familiarity share more information (Gruenfeld et al., 1996; Williams et al., 1996) and perform better on decision-making and motor tasks (Jehn & Shah, 1997; Shah & Jehn, 1993; Okhuysen, 1998). For example, Goodman and Leyden (1991) found that groups of coal mining crews with familiar members had higher levels of productivity.

The experience of behavior, both in building familiarity and expressing it, is one of the phenomenological dimensions of familiarity. When a group forms, members of the group begin the process of developing familiarity. The way that an individual goes about developing familiarity with another is at the same time unique to that individual and part of the group process. That is, the development of familiarity is an individual cognitive and affective experience, but it may also influence the group. An individual's experience of events within the group is unique. The same is true of behaviors that are generated out of a sense of familiarity with others. For example, if a member engages in a pro-social behavior such as helping it becomes a part of that member's experience, but it also becomes part of the group experience, influencing the group interaction.

At the simplest level, behavior is influenced by familiarity when a person decides to either seek out or avoid another. If an individual knows something

about the target person and likes them, then that individual may choose to spend more time with the target, and in the process gain more information about them. However, if an individual dislikes another, they may choose to avoid future interactions. In this situation the information gathering process will cease. Seeking out or avoiding another can be a direct behavioral consequence of the affective aspect of familiarity. In other words:

*Proposition 6:* Group members that report positive affect towards an individual will report a desire to interact again in the future, while those who report negative affect will not report a desire to interact again in the future.

Familiarity also influences behavior in and toward a group, not just between the two people that the familiarity may be based on. Consider a group of four people in which two members know and like one another. While the other members may be strangers, the familiarity between the dyad may serve to make the strangers feel more comfortable and included (Williams et al., 1996). This, in turn, might affect whether members are open to new information and ideas. Members of groups composed of people with varying levels of familiarity become aware of the differing levels of familiarity, and this evaluation can affect their behavior towards one another (Rockett, 2000). For example, in a mixed group composed of two familiar members and one stranger, the familiar group members shared more information when assigned to the same subgroup than if one was assigned to a subgroup with a stranger.

Consider a different case in which a four-person group includes two members who know and dislike each other. This negative relationship can adversely affect the group as well as the pair. The group setting might be much more tense and uncomfortable, even hostile, due to the familiarity between two of the members. This familiarity, and the tension it creates in the group, may inhibit coordination between members and hurt performance (Eisenhardt, Kahwajy & Burgeois, 1997).

Familiarity can also influence an individual's behavior towards someone else as information about him or her is gathered and accumulated. Behaviors that may be affected by familiarity include trust, honesty, cooperation, deception, helping, conformity, and conflict. For example, if one knows and likes someone, they may be more likely to trust him or her, ask for help, or provide help. Each of these has implications at the group level. Behaviors such as trust, honesty, and cooperation foster active participation and commitment of group members (Edmonson, 1999). Behaviors such as deception, conflict, and competition can cause problems such as lack of participation and withdrawal from the group (Janis, 1972; Eisenhardt et al., 1997). This suggests that:

*Proposition 7:* Groups that report high levels of knowledge or positive affect between members will work better together than groups that report lower levels of knowledge or negative affect.

It is useful to note at this point that in order to conceptualize familiarity we have treated cognition, affect, and behavior separately. However, a phenomenological perspective recognizes that they are intimately tied. The phenomenological approach also identifies that the experiences of individuals in a group are made up of both experiences that they bring into the group, experiences that they develop while in the group, and even future experiences. So, in other words, prior knowledge can impact group behavior, group behavior can impact the gathering of knowledge in the future, affect can impact knowledge which in turn influences subsequent behavior, and so on.

As we indicated in the introduction, we were interested in exploring how the experience of familiarity between individuals plays out at the group level. Our data collection was designed to help answer the following questions: What elements influence familiarity? How does the familiarity between two members of the group impact behavior within the group and the desire to interact again? In the remainder of this chapter we describe our data and present tentative evidence for the propositions.

## DATA AND METHODS

One hundred and thirty part-time Masters of Business Administration (MBA) students enrolled in two Introduction to Organizational Behavior courses participated in this study. As part of the requirements for the course, students engaged in a semester-long research project on organizational change. The assignment required students to form groups on their own. Once formed, groups were required to select an organization and examine a change in the organization that had either already taken place, that was currently taking place, or that was going to take place in the future. The assignment was quite ambiguous and the final reports reflected this ambiguity. Projects ranged from explanations of the turnaround at Continental Airlines to explanations of the adoption of tuition reimbursement benefits at a local company.

At the end of the semester, reports were prepared and group members were asked to fill out an evaluation form for each of their fellow group members. The students were assured that their responses were completely confidential. In addition, they were told that the evaluations would not be examined before the projects were graded in order to reduce any social desirability bias that might arise.

The survey contained a number of open- and closed-ended questions. The closed-ended questions assessed the level of knowledge and level of liking that individuals had towards other group members. The open-ended questions asked for information about how members got to know the other group members and explored why they did or did not like the other group members. In addition, we asked whether students would like to work with each of the other members in a future class and whether they would like to get to know them better in a social situation outside of class. We also asked individuals to describe the consequences of their familiarity with each member on the group processes and outcomes as they worked on the project.

Each participant completed a survey for each of the other members of the group. In other words, in a group of four people, 12 surveys could be completed, one for each dyadic relationship in the group. From a possible 380 surveys, a total of 282 were completed and returned. This is an overall response rate of 72%.

We were interested in measuring several specific characteristics of familiarity: the antecedents of the relationship, the level of knowledge in the relationship, the affect in the relationship, the desire to interact in the future, and the behavior that resulted from the dyadic relationship in the group. The information from each survey was coded in the form of diagrams linking each of these characteristics. One of the authors who was ignorant of the group composition, performance, interaction, and the identity of the participants completed this coding.

## RESULTS

In this section, we review the results from the surveys completed by group members. For each variable of interest we present contingency tables with frequency counts. We use these tables to highlight the patterns in our data and we present some preliminary explanations for our findings.

### *Antecedents*

We begin by presenting data collected on the antecedent of individuals' relationships. In an open-ended question, students were asked to describe, for each group member, how they knew them at the beginning of the group project. The content of the responses to this question were then analyzed and six different categories were developed, as presented in Table 1. The categories for responses included: no previous relationship, a previous course together, a social relationship (i.e. a pre-existing relationship not connected to school), third party

**Table 1.** Relationships Antecedent to Group Formation (Start of Project).

	Number Reported:	
Antecedent to Familiarity Project in Group	No Prior Relationship	210
	Previous Course Together	36
	Social Relationship	17
	Third Party Contact	9
	This Course	8
	Family Relationship	2
	Total	282

contact (i.e. people in the group have a common friend), this class (i.e. people who sat next to each other for several weeks or people who completed class activities together), and family relationship (i.e. two brothers taking the course together).

The results show that the vast majority of students did not have pre-existing relationships before their work in the group project. However, a number of students did know one another either from a similar context (i.e. another course) or from a different context (i.e. social relationship). Our first proposition suggested that individuals are likely to choose to work with individuals that they have some knowledge of. It was fairly evident that the decision to work in a group with someone they knew stemmed from this knowledge of them, which suggests that our first proposition may have some support. For example, individuals who knew one another from another course had responses that highlighted similarities such as "we each had another class together, so we saw each other frequently, we seemed to get along from the beginning, and had a similar work ethic" and "[she] and I have similar interests." Individuals who knew one another socially focused more on how they knew the person as illustrated in responses such as "I went to school with him at [name of school] and his fiancée is one of my best friends" and "I have known [him] for many years. We worked in the same camps during summer." However, we did not gather data about people they may have known previously, but chose not to work with in this class. As a result, our data does not provide enough information to fully address the issue of how individuals decided whom to include in their groups.

In addition, some individuals used information derived from others (i.e. third party contacts) to define their knowledge about another, which lends some support to proposition two. Sample responses included "[My friend] had worked with him in another class, so I felt comfortable if someone I knew liked [him]" and "through one of the other group members." Some group members had also

interacted earlier in the course, and presented this as the antecedent for their work in the group. Typical comments included “we sit in close proximity in class and formed a study group first then formed our class project group” and “we were all early for the first class and we immediately began interacting out in the hall.” Finally, one unique situation arose from two brothers who were completing the course together. These brothers provided the strongest relationship antecedent to the project group activity. When one of them was asked how he got to know his brother, he responded, somewhat sardonically, that he “had the opportunity to live with him for 16 years.” In the next sections, we will consider how the antecedents to the relationship affect other aspects of familiarity, such as the perceived depth of knowledge regarding others and the affect in the relationship.

### *Knowledge*

Previous research has suggested that knowledge regarding the target person is a critical element in the development of familiarity. In this study, we asked group members to rate how well they knew other members of their project group at the end of the semester. These ratings were done based on a 7-point scale (1= “do not know at all” to 7= “know very well”). The data are presented in Table 2 and are organized based on the type of relationship antecedent that group members reported.

In Table 2 we can see that individuals in these groups reported the full range of knowledge regarding others, from “Very Little” to “Very Well.” Again, this supports the notion that individuals make distinctions regarding their knowledge about others. In addition, Table 2 also shows how the relationship antecedent might influence the development and evaluation of knowledge regarding others.

Proposition three suggested that individuals who knew one another before participating in a group together are more likely to rate one another as familiar than those who were strangers before they joined the group. The data suggest some support for this proposition. For example, while many people reported knowing others only somewhat or less (with a score of four or less), these reports came overwhelmingly from individuals who did not have a prior relationship. In addition, it is interesting to note that none of the individuals who had a prior relationship based on a third party reported knowing the other person very well (a score of six or higher). At the same time, all of those who had a prior social relationship reported high levels of knowledge regarding the other party (with a score of six or higher). Finally, all of the group members who had a relationship from a prior class reported knowing the other person at least somewhat (scores of four to seven).

**Table 2.** Level of Knowledge (End of Project) vs. Relationship Antecedent.

		No Prior Relationship	Previous Course Together	Social Relationship	Third Party Contact	This Course	Family Relationship	Total	
<b>I Know This Group Member</b>	<b>Very Little</b>	<b>1</b>	11	0	0	1	0	<b>12</b>	
		<b>2</b>	21	0	0	0	0	<b>21</b>	
		<b>3</b>	36	0	0	2	0	<b>38</b>	
	<b>Somewhat</b>	<b>4</b>	59	4	0	1	5	0	<b>69</b>
		<b>5</b>	46	7	0	5	0	0	<b>58</b>
		<b>6</b>	23	20	3	0	2	0	<b>48</b>
	<b>Very Well</b>	<b>7</b>	14	5	14	0	1	2	<b>36</b>
<b>Total</b>		<b>210</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>282</b>	

Conversely, few people reported liking someone they knew very little. In many cases this was due to few interactions between members as evidenced by the statement "Interaction with this individual was minimal."

Negative affect was also present in some of the groups. Negative affect seemed correlated with both task-related problems, such as a member missing meetings and/or failing to do his/her fair share of the work, as well as personality conflicts. Comments related to task-related problems included "he did not show up for any group meetings" and "I think [he] did not pull his share of the work on the research project and coasted on the work of other members of the team." Comments based on personality differences included "I dislike him because of his personality being so harsh and brash" and "[I] dislike her personal values and her attitude. I felt she was egocentric."

Negative affect was particularly strong in a group that had a member who explicitly stated that she did not "attend [class] to socialize [with other class members]." Other members reported that she made it very clear in several statements to other group members that she was really irritated with having to participate in a group. In addition, she reported that she "would personally choose not to ever be in ANY MBA group again because of the scheduling problems, cancelled appointments, undependability, etc." (emphasis in original). The interesting thing is that the other members indicated that she was the cause of most of the scheduling problems and cancelled appointments due to the fact that she dictated that she could only meet during a two-hour block on Saturdays. Other group members were negative in their evaluation of her and her participation, commenting that "she was not committed whatsoever" and that they "would never do a project with her" again.

There are two interesting points to note in regards to negative affect. One is that negative affect was often not reciprocated. In many cases when an individual rated another negatively, the converse was not true. In other words, the person who was rated negatively responded in a fairly positive manner about the other. Also, in the case of a dyadic dislike, it was fairly common for the other group members to be unaware of the dislike. For example in one group, a dyad reported disliking one another intensely as evidenced by responses such as "she often raised her voice and acted a bit too aggressively" and "I found her to be unreliable and disrespectful". However, another group member seemed to take no notice of the problems as he indicated that he thought that the group worked well together.

Neutral affect might be the most interesting, and at the same time the most problematic, case of all. Many individuals rated their affect towards another as neutral on the numeric scale, but when asked why they liked or disliked the other in an open-ended question, they proceeded to harshly criticize them. Typical

**Table 4.** Level of Liking (End of Project) vs. Level of Familiarity (End of Project).

		I Like/Dislike This Group Member							Row Total	
		Dislike		Neutral			Like			
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
I Know This Group Member	Very Little	1	0	1	0	5	3	1	2	12
		2	0	1	4	9	6	1	0	21
	Somewhat	3	1	1	3	13	16	3	1	38
		4	2	2	3	14	29	13	6	69
		5	0	0	2	4	20	20	12	58
	Very Well	6	0	0	0	1	3	18	26	48
		7	0	0	0	0	1	3	32	36
<b>Column Total</b>		<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>282</b>	

responses in the neutral category include “[I] would never do a project with her or recommend her” and “she was, at times, a bit pushy.” Thus, it appears that the “neutral” responses in fact hid many negative relationships. It appears that admitting to the dislike of others may be socially undesirable, leading to neutral responses even when very negative opinions are held about the target.

#### *Desire to Interact in the Future*

We were also interested in examining the desire to interact with others in the future because it is an intent of the individual influenced directly by the individual’s experience with others within the group. Familiarity allows people to develop behavioral intentions in a manner similar to attitudes (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Thus, it is useful to consider the relationship between behavioral intent and other constructs in familiarity. In this study, we collected data on the desire to interact in the future. This is an interesting question in our context, because the sample is composed of part-time students in a Master of Business Administration program in which the opportunities for future interaction will be significant. Group members were asked to indicate their desire to interact (Yes/No) in two parts. First, we asked group members to indicate if they would like to interact in the future with this person in a class context. We then asked the question again, specifying a social context. The data for this question we present in Tables 5 and 6.

Table 5 cross classifies the desire to interact in the future according to the depth of knowledge that people indicated regarding the target. In this table, we can see that people with varying degrees of knowledge indicate no desire to interact with others in the future (Column I). At the same time, people with all levels of knowledge indicate their desire to work and socialize with another (Column IV). One distinction that is made by individuals, though, appears to be between work interactions and social interactions. While there were a substantial number of individuals who expressed a desire to only work together in the future (Column II), very few people indicated a desire to socialize only (Column III). The table, however, shows no overall pattern.

Table 6 presents the data on desire to interact cross-classified with the affect reported towards other group members. In this case, a more evident pattern emerges. Proposition six, which suggested that group members that report positive affect towards an individual will report a desire to interact again in the future, while those who report negative affect will not want to interact again in the future, received some support. While people indicated no desire to interact with others at almost all levels of affect, almost everyone with a ranking of “neutral” or less was marked as someone with whom people did not want to

**Table 5.** Level of Knowledge (End of Project) vs. Desire to Interact in the Future.

			No desire to interact in the future (I)	Desire to interact for work only (II)	Desire to interact to socialize only (III)	Desire to interact to work and socialize (IV)
<b>I Know This Group Member</b>	<b>Very Little</b>	<b>1</b>	1	4	0	7
		<b>2</b>	9	5	0	7
		<b>3</b>	7	12	4	14
	<b>Somewhat</b>	<b>4</b>	16	12	3	38
		<b>5</b>	8	5	1	44
		<b>6</b>	0	4	1	43
		<b>7</b>	0	0	1	35
<b>Very Well</b>						
<b>Total</b>		<b>41</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>188</b>	

*Table 6.* Level of Affect (End of Project) vs. Desire to Interact in the Future.

			No desire to interact in the future (I)	Desire to interact for work only (II)	Desire to interact to socialize only (III)	Desire to interact to work and socialize (IV)
I Like/Dislike This Group Member	Dislike	1	3	0	0	0
		2	5	0	0	0
		3	11	0	1	0
	Neutral	4	16	14	5	11
		5	5	20	2	50
		6	1	4	2	52
		7	0	4	0	75
Like						
Total		41	42	10	188	

interact (Column I). In addition, everyone who was interested in interacting in both work and social situations had a reported affect level of neutral or above (Column IV). Finally, almost everyone who was judged as desirable to interact with in either a work (Column II) or social (Column III) setting also received an affect score of neutral or above. As previously mentioned, neutral responses are problematic because they may indicate the presence of the social desirability bias.

### *Behavior*

Knowledge and affect towards other individuals seem to have definite implications for behavior in the group. In the questionnaires, we asked group members to discuss how they thought their relationship with other members affected the group as a whole. Two major behaviors that were reported by students were "working well" as a group and "working poorly" as a group. These two categories contained a subset of specific behaviors that were identified by individual members. These behaviors are discussed in more detail in the following paragraphs.

The data suggested some support for proposition seven, which postulated that groups that report high levels of knowledge and positive affect between members will work better together than groups that report lower levels of knowledge and negative affect. Most of the groups that reported that they worked well reported high levels of knowledge between all group members. Behaviors that were often mentioned as a part of working well together included good contributions by group members, humor, and trust. Examples of good contributions included responses such as "[she] offered some sound direction in the construction of the final paper" and "this group member was our research workhorse." All of the groups that reported high levels of knowledge of each other also reported that other members made good contributions. Humor was another behavior reported in several of the high knowledge groups. These groups routinely used humor to ease the group process. Humor often helped smooth over minor difficulties that the group was having, such as difficulties with communication or coordination. One response really illustrates the use of humor: "we fed off each other's humor, lightening up the group atmosphere at times." Trust was explicitly mentioned only in the groups reporting the highest level of knowledge regarding each other. A high level of knowledge of the other led to "better trust in understanding what was being said at critical times."

Affect was also a strong predictor for groups to work well together. The highest levels of positive affect were associated with the most reports of working well together. Most of the groups reporting high positive affect indicated that

group members made good contributions. An interesting finding is that humor was not always reported in the highest levels of affect, but rather seemed present in the groups with moderate levels of positive affect. Humor seems to serve as a way to alleviate tension. None of the groups with very high levels of positive affect reported tension. Groups with very high levels of positive affect may not need humor to ease interactions. On the other hand, it may be that humor may not even be seen as a behavior worth noting because it happens so naturally in the group. In a manner similar to knowledge, trust was only reported by those groups with the highest levels of positive affect. It would appear that individuals required both a high level of knowledge and a high level of positive affect in order to report trusting others.

Compared to groups that reported working well, there were fewer groups that reported working poorly as a group, and most of these reported low levels of knowledge. Groups that reported lower levels of knowledge seemed to report fewer contributions and more personality clashes. Conflict and tension were much higher in groups with lower levels of reported knowledge. One example of this is found in the statement "he seems out to prove others wrong instead of looking at the validity of other's points of view."

Most of the groups that worked poorly also reported dislikes among members. When groups reported working poorly, they included specific behaviors such as poor contributions, personality clashes, conflict and tension, and in some instances, wanting to kick out one of the members from the group. Group members were identified as poor contributors if they missed meetings, lacked commitment, lacked participation, and freeloaded. Groups with the lowest reported levels of affect were the most likely to report poor contributions. Comments ranged from "meetings were missed and contribution was minimal" to "his group submission contained many errors. I told him I was too embarrassed to turn their final draft in with my name on it." Personality clashes were another element that was only reported by groups with the lowest levels of affect. Examples of personality clashes are evident in comments such as "his personality seemed to conflict with me" and "I treated [him] as a kid who needed to be told what to do." Conflict and tension seemed to arise from both poor contributions and personality clashes in those groups reporting dislikes among members. One group reported tension because one of the members "did not pull his share of the work on the research project and coasted on the work of other members of the team". Another person reported tension because "she tried to slant the group against me at first." As mentioned, in some extreme cases, problems were so bad that group members wanted to expel one of the group members. These cases were among the groups that reported the most dislike among members. One member reported that one of the other

members was freeloading and “eventually I ended up telling her to contribute or leave.”

It is important to note the difference between actual behavior and behavioral intent. Groups that worked well together reported no difference between intent and actual behavior, that is, between working well now and a desire to work together again in the future. This is most likely due to the fact that group members intend to act positively towards one another and, in most cases, they can do this with few obstacles. However, in some of the negative groups there was a reported difference between intent and actual behavior. This was found especially in the cases in which groups wanted to kick a member out. For example, intent was shown in the statement “initially other group members wanted her out of our group”, but actual behavior was shown as “I made suggestions to keep her involvement in our group to the best of our advantage.” In groups with problems, members were able to find an accommodation that allowed them to continue working together. One group member summed it up best by saying, “everyone in the group felt the same tension, but we are adults and we worked it out.” The knowledge that this was a short term project and they only had to deal with the problematic member(s) for a semester seemed to help members continue to work through this situation although they expressed no desire to interact with the other person in the future.

This divergence between intent and actual behavior at the negative affective end of the scale may be due to the inability or unwillingness to express negative sentiments in the group setting. This may be due to the need to complete the project as a group, which made it necessary to resolve any problems they had to get the work done. In addition, norms about how one behaves in a group make certain types of negative behavior inappropriate. The incentive to behave in a positive (or neutral) manner and the stigma against acting out negatively seemed to keep these groups in check.

The dyadic relationship between members often had a direct impact on the group. Groups identified two phenomena that occurred as a result of the familiarity between two individuals. The first was that pre-existing familiarity helped the group. Groups with members who had relationships prior to the project recognized that the familiarity between the individuals helped the group process because, as one individual reported, “we already had an idea of what each other’s strengths and limitations were.” Another phenomenon, the formation of subgroups based on previous familiarity, was reported as detrimental to the group. The formation of a subgroup occurred for various reasons, such as when two people who knew one another previously excluded other members from decision-making. Other group members were not only aware of the subgroup, they were also irritated and intimidated by it. One member of a

subgroup admitted "others might think that we are ganging up against them when decisions need to be made." So it seems that the dyadic relationships can either have positive or negative impacts on the group, depending on how they are expressed and managed. If the familiarity is used to help bring group members in and make them feel comfortable in the group, then it can be positive. However, if familiarity is exclusive, and other members are not invited to join in, it seems to have negative affects.

## DISCUSSION

Before we begin discussing the implications of the results presented here, we would like to acknowledge some limitations in this study. First, because we used student groups to gather our data, we may not be able to generalize these results. One of the limitations with using students is that the project was short-term with a clear deadline. Students could expect that once the semester was over they would never have to interact with someone again if they did not want to. However, since these groups were involved in a research project that involved extensive interaction, and given that the structure of the task dictated much of this interaction, we believe the relationships among these group members mimic many organizational ones.

An additional limitation is that we did not gather data on all possible previous relationships in class. Once people were in groups we asked what their relationships were with other group members. However, we did not get information about relationships with people that they did not choose to form groups with. This is especially important because we cannot say either that previous positive relationships ensured that people would work together in this class, or that previously negative relationships ensured that people would not work together. Future research could address this issue by gathering data on relationships between individuals prior to the formation of groups.

Another possible difficulty is the potential for a social desirability bias in the responses. We tried to reduce this by assuring the students that the surveys would not be looked at until after the projects were graded. However, we believe that a significant social desirability bias appeared as "neutral" responses on our question about liking and disliking. However, we believe we were still able to capture some of the variance in the levels of liking. Future work should extend the findings in this research by addressing some of these limitations. In the remainder of this section, we discuss the findings for each section of the results, with an emphasis on what the results indicate, and on potential avenues for future research.

The first results we considered are those for relationship antecedents, that is, the different ways in which group members knew one another before the group interaction began. The responses we received to the question about relationship antecedents supports the notion that individuals are keenly aware of their level of familiarity with others. Without being prompted, individuals provided information on how they categorized those relationships based on the type of knowledge and the depth of knowledge they possessed regarding others.

Our results also evaluated differences in the perceived depth of knowledge among group members. These findings suggest several relationships between relationship antecedents and depth of knowledge. Broadly speaking, it appears that individuals who had a relationship antecedent were more likely to perceive greater knowledge regarding the target person. This is reasonable, given that one of the outcomes of exposure should be increased familiarity with the target (Zajonc, 1968). In addition, it appears that social relationships have a definite impact on the perceived level of knowledge regarding the other party, increasing it. It may be that the "self-selection" nature of social relationships leads to greater knowledge about relationship partners. It is also possible that social relationships have longer durations, allowing for greater opportunities for the accumulation of knowledge regarding others.

These findings on the depth of knowledge also reveal one difficulty with studying familiarity and its relationship to group activity. In particular, we must consider the possibility that some individuals were familiar with one another and chose to avoid one another. As indicated earlier, we have no way of evaluating how many of the people who indicated "no prior relationship" with their team members may have had a prior relationship with someone in class that they chose not to continue. Naturally, we also do not know why they may have made that choice. This is important as another direct measure of the behavior that is impacted by familiarity.

When we consider the results on affect, two findings stand out. The results indicate that people with previous relationships with the target do not have (or do not develop) negative affect towards the target person. On the other hand, this may also provide evidence that individuals will avoid interacting with those they dislike. That is, if previous relationships existed with negative affect, individuals may have chosen to avoid continuing the relationship with those people. This is an area that could be better understood with additional research.

Our second finding on affect suggests that it may not require as much knowledge to form a negative opinion of someone as it does to develop a positive opinion. For example, it may be that the evaluation of the question "how well do you know X" triggers the response "I know them well enough to dislike them." This both indicates a low threshold of knowledge to make a

negative determination of the target and also indicates a reluctance to gather additional knowledge about the target. On the other hand, liking may require a higher level of knowledge regarding the target person.

This finding also has implications for research on familiarity. Previous research (Okhuysen, 2001; Rockett, 2000; Shah & Jehn, 1993; Williams et al., 1997) formed familiar groups by using only individuals who rate each other as "very familiar." To the extent that this method is followed, the findings presented here suggest that these groups may always be composed of people who have positive affect towards one another. In other words, by using this method it is unlikely that two individuals who dislike one another will ever be assigned to the same "familiar" group.

When we considered behavior, we also noted that group members tended to report a fairly limited range of behavior. These behaviors led to one of two outcomes, either working well together or working poorly together. The groups that reported higher levels of positive affect and knowledge reported working well together. The ability to work well together was based on members making good contributions, using humor, and trusting one another. In an environment with high positive affect, members probably feel much more comfortable suggesting ideas and joking around with one another. The addition of a high level of knowledge seems to make it possible for them to trust one another as well.

The groups that reported lower levels of affect and knowledge reported working poorly. This was directly attributable to specific behaviors that were mentioned in association with working poorly, such as poor contributions, personality clashes, conflict, tension, and wanting to expel a group member. It is interesting that liking, and especially disliking, has such a strong impact on behavior. The presence of dislike among members was a better predictor of negative behaviors than the presence of low levels of knowledge. If groups have members that feel negatively about one another it is likely that it affects the group by causing some members to withdraw, which then decreases the quality of contributions. In addition, personality clashes raise the level of conflict and tension in the group. However, many groups that worked poorly realized that the project was only one semester long and they reported that they were able to get past the dislike in order to get the work done, which led to a divergence between their reported intention and their behavior.

Familiarity at the dyadic level can affect group level processes and outcomes in both positive and negative ways. Dyadic interactions translated directly to group level behavior in several instances. Members of groups with a dyad that had extremely negative affect towards one another often picked up on the tension and limited their interaction with those members. Also, pre-existing relationships between dyads seemed to help the group process. This is probably because

members who knew each other before the project also liked each other. This enhanced cohesiveness and seemed to create an open, friendly environment. However, if two members formed a subgroup of their own and engaged in exclusionary behaviors, the group suffered as a result. Conflict and tension arose and "outgroup" members limited their contributions.

Many individuals reported that the group setting moderated their own and others' behavior. For example, in negative groups, individuals may have wanted to avoid one another, but could not because they were expected to perform as a group. Avoidance is not one of the options when work is interdependent in a group setting. In a dyadic setting, people can avoid each other through the use of e-mail and voice-mail, as some of these group members did. However, this becomes more difficult as the size of the group increases and the complexity of the project increases. In such cases, face-to-face interactions in a group become necessary to attend to allocation and coordination issues.

We also examined the desire of individuals to interact with the target person in the future, in both work and social situations. The results suggested that knowledge might have an impact on desire to interact. However, our data collection procedure does not allow us to fully disentangle this effect. The results may suggest that knowledge regarding others is acquired in a situational manner and that the intent that can form from it may also be situational. For example, we found many individuals who were agreeable to interacting with others in the future, but only on work matters. We did not find many individuals who, after acquiring knowledge in a work context, were willing to interact with others only in a social context. Finally, we found many individuals who, after acquiring knowledge in a work context, were willing to interact with others in both a work and social context. The exact meaning of these relationships between knowledge and behavior is another area appropriate for future research.

Our findings on the desire to interact with others also show a clear relationship with liking. When individuals disliked others, they expressed no interest in interacting with them in the future. Conversely, in order to express a desire to interact with someone in both a work and social situation, individuals had to like them. It may be that liking is a critical component in trying to understand behavioral intent and, to the extent that action is reasoned (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), it may also help explain behavior.

A final point to note is that all of these groups may look very similar if we only examine their behavior. The data reported here suggest that there is more to groups than their behavior. In other words, while behavior may look the same, it may be important to consider the impact on future interactions and intentions of group members who like or dislike one another. In particular, it will be important to examine the moderating effect of the group on the dyadic

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relationship. It will also be of importance to see if the group mediates the transformation of behavioral intent into behavior. The data suggest that while people consider their level of familiarity when interacting with others, they frequently moderate that interaction based on the group context in which the relationship unfolds.

Our research suggests that familiarity is a much more complex construct than previously thought. While it is an individual experience, it influences, as well as it is influenced by, the group process. It is not just knowledge, or affect, or behavior, but rather it is the intertwining of the three. The phenomenological approach helps us explain how they are connected as seen through the lens of the individual's experience within the group.

## CONCLUSION

The existential-phenomenological approach suggests that we should study the experiences of the individual in order to help understand the group as a whole. We propose that familiarity, by encapsulating the experiences of the individual with other group members, presents us with an excellent opportunity to explore this perspective. We propose that the information necessary to determine familiarity has its basis in dyadic interactions, but also includes information about groups in which individuals participate. In other words, the group has an impact on familiarity among members. At the same time, familiarity also has an impact on the group.

In this paper, we are taking a small step in trying to understand the complexity of familiarity. Previously, familiarity has been defined as interpersonal knowledge of another individual. However, we believe that this cognitive component does not act in a vacuum separate from the affective, situational, and behavioral components. Instead, they are closely interrelated. This paper begins to develop the links between these components to provide a starting point for research on familiarity. The depth of knowledge one has about another and the positive or negative feelings one develops influence behavior. Having started to disentangle and explore familiarity, we find additional avenues for research, which should help us understand the nature of groups in a more complete manner.

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