

## **Both Sides Now: A Bona Fide Group Perspective of Families and Divorce Mediation**

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*Families remain the basic group unit of society more and more often families find themselves adjusting to the realities of a divorce. Despite the legal separation the family as a group maintains and must continue its identity. This paper is an illustration of the effects of divorce mediation on families using the bona fide group perspective. It illustrates the complexities involved with post divorce groups.*

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Small group communication theories and studies have allowed us to better understand the nature of interaction in a wide range of groups. Putnam and Stohl state that “small groups are the building blocks of society” (Hirokawa & Poole, 1996). One of these groups includes the family. This is a group to which we all belong and therefore deserves more research. “The Family” is a phrase that contains both an ideal and a personal meaning. Families have a significant impact on society. The United Nations has stated that families are the “fundamental group unit of society” (Carlson, 1999).

No one relationship is immune to conflict, and sometimes those conflicts lead to divorce. During the 2005 general session, the Utah state legislature changed the process for contested divorces, and began requiring divorce mediation. The law was passed with the intent to “reduce the time and tensions associated with obtaining a divorce” (Ferry, 2005). Its sponsor, Ben C. Ferry also said its purpose was to “help keep families together” (Ferry, 2007). This study applies a Bona Fide Group Perspective (BFGP) to two families, functioning as small groups, and how the process of divorce and mediation may have influenced them. From this study we can conclude that both families benefited from the mediation process. This perspective provides a way of describing the process and group dynamics in a proven format. Our findings will show that successful mediating helped families resolve their differences and is a positive influence on divorcing couples

The Bona Fide Group Theory is one of several developed in the 1990s in contrast to studies that observed groups created in a sterile environment. One major component is that it recognizes groups “exists within a larger context and is defined, in part, by this context” (Hirokawa, Cathcart, Samovar, & Henman, 2003). Since its initial publication it has been widely used in a variety of group settings. Bona fide group theory is a descriptive theory that attempts to describe the functions of a group rather than predict their actions.

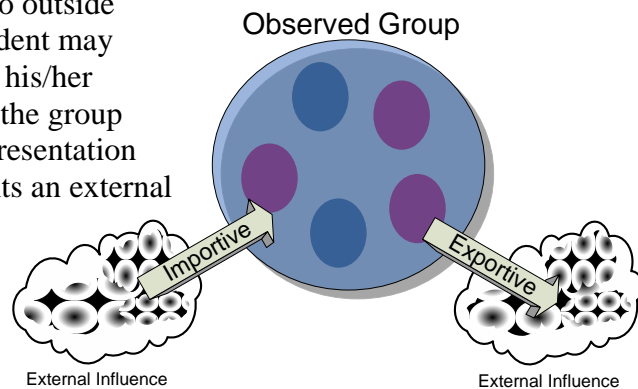
The theory contains three major sections, two of which are subdivided into four contributing elements. The first major area, “Groups have permeable and fluid boundaries,” recognizes that groups have some distinction from their environment in order to qualify themselves as a group. While there can be some distinction made between the group and its environment, the distinction is both defined and blurred by actions of the group members. Individuals within a group are naturally part of several groups.

For example, university students operate as part of a

- Groups Have Permeable and Fluid Boundaries
  - Group Members Maintain Multiple Group Memberships
  - Group Members Play Representative Roles
  - New Members Shift Role Functions
  - The Degree To Which Members Enact A Sense of Belongingness
- Interdependence With Context
  - Individuals Communicate With People Across Groups
  - Groups Within The Organizations Often Must Coordinate Actions
  - Group Members Often Must Negotiate Jurisdiction and Autonomy
  - Making Sense of Existing Intergroup Relations

defined group in order to complete an end of semester project for a communication class. These same group members also belong to a series of other groups which may include sports teams, clubs, other group projects, other classes, and religious groups. It's important to note that multiple group memberships are natural because prior to the group project for the communication class, each of the group members belongs to their respective families. It is pertinent to observe that each historical and current membership in other groups directly the current group's boundaries. These boundaries are defined by experiences in other groups and simultaneously made permeable by allowing the influences of the other group memberships to sway their current group.

The next influence in the group's boundaries is that group members play representative roles. Most of the literature refers to this function being played by "boundary spanners" (Hirokawa et al., 2003). Boundary spanning is a descriptive but also limiting term. In addition observations show that this role is evidenced in both *importive* and *exportive* representation. Exported representation can be evidenced when group members represent their group to outside individuals and other groups. One student may discuss part of the group meeting with his/her roommate and inadvertently represent the group working on the project. Importive representation occurs when a group member represents an external group to the one working on the communication class' group project. When discussing the timeline for project completion, one group member may say that he can't meet on a given day because of a family event. He has just served as an ambassador for his family (another group) to the group trying to complete the communication class' final project.



Next, new members to a group shift the way a group functions and change the boundaries of the group itself. For example, the communication group has met three times, and on their fourth meeting, a new member is introduced. During the previous three meetings, tasks have been assigned to conduct the research needed for a basic understanding of their topic. The new group member hasn't participated in this research and requires time during the meeting to be spent discussing the group's findings. In addition time must also be spent explaining the processes and functional norms established by the group during the previous three meetings. The new group member may ask questions requiring that the group justify their methods for attacking their project the way they have. Once they've completed this discussion, the new group member will apply his/her own skill-set to task completion requiring others to shift roles.

The final influence on fluid and permeable boundaries is the way group members enact a sense of belongingness. This is often evidenced by evaluating priorities. If there are several group projects going on at the same time which one takes precedence? Group members may choose to value one group (and project) over another. Because

communication classes are generally more fun and have better group projects, it's easy to sacrifice time on projects for other classes.

The second major section states that groups are interdependent with their relevant context. Just as John Donne stated that "No man is an island, entire of itself" (Donne, n.d.) bona fide group theory also recognizes that no group "is" without its context.

There are four areas of evidence that allow a researcher to observe the group's interdependence with its context. The first is that individuals communicate with people across groups. The group in the communication class not only belongs to several different groups but communicates with those groups. Roommates will share information about what happened at a group meeting. Family members may ask one group member to discuss their project over the holidays. What the theory suggests is that the more conversation that is occurring, the greater dependence of the group on its environment. Observations of external conversations serve as evidence of this dependence. Despite the fact that teenagers think they're independent, the vast amounts of food they consume suggests otherwise. This is the part of the theory that tracks the eating habits and suggests dependence based upon quantity.

The second indicator that groups are interdependent with their context is that groups must often coordinate actions. The group for the university communication class needs to coordinate and they plan a group meeting. They are all aware the library has group study rooms. In order to reserve a room the group must request it from a librarian. This communication between the group members and the librarian is an example of communicating across groups, but the act is more than just the conversation. It's the functionality of the group being dependent upon the resources under the control of another group.

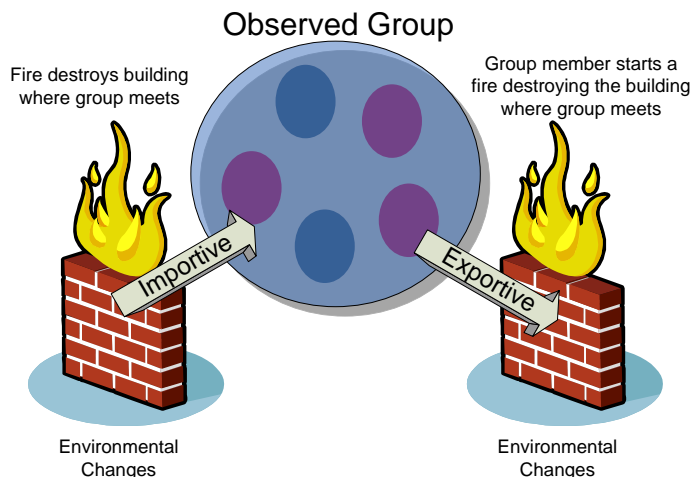
Group members also negotiate jurisdiction and autonomy. The university group's assignment is open to interpretation. When the students understand that the project is supposed to involve research, they coordinate for a series of interviews to be done with willing participants on campus. After a week, they report back to the professor about the plan they've committed to accomplish. The professor appears surprised the students would extend their idea of "research" to conducting research of their own, since the course hadn't trained them on methods. The conversation continues with the group working out where their jurisdiction lies and maintaining some sense of autonomy now that the professor is involved. Other natural groups negotiate their borders, and roles in their own respective fields.

The final area for evidence that groups are interdependent with their context is found by group members attempting to make sense of their intergroup relations. For the purpose of this theory they are called interpretive frames. The university group was discussing the instructions from their professor and specifically the word "research." As a result of their discussion they formed their own "group concept" of the word. The group's understanding took precedence over previous or individual understandings and

served as a common point of reference in shaping the group's relationship with their environment. This reference is an interpretive frame.

Another example of a group's interdependence with its context occurred when a university group looked at group cohesiveness during the course of a semester. In a survey one group member responded to the question of what "stage their group was in" through a metaphor. He said, "Embryonic, hopefully evolving to homo-erectus by the time the paper is due." The stages the group member applied to his understanding were based upon the theory of evolution, and served as his frame of reference to track group progress towards its final goal. It's evident from these examples that making sense of intergroup relations is done at individual and group levels. Both are descriptive of the group's interdependence with its context.

The final dimension of bona fide group theory is more evident with long term studies. Although it has been written different ways, the concept is that "Group members shape their environments as they are influenced by them" (Hirokawa, Poole, 1996). This interaction with the environment isn't to determine the interdependence, or establish the borders, but rather to identify how changes occur with the environment because of the group's actions or existence. One way this feature may become visible could originate with an observation of the environment. Another way would be to show that group actions changed because of an environmental shift. This dimension usually involves changes over time which requires a group with a long history, or a long duration study.



## Method

The two groups participating in this survey are represented by four and one group member respectively. Group 1 consisted of a family of seven while Group 2 consisted of a family of three plus their mediator. Group 1 has a history of twenty-seven years while Group 2's history was shorter than four years. To gather information on group actions and experiences, interviews were conducted over a period of three weeks in November of 2007.

Two of the interviews were conducted in person and three over the phone. This method of gathering information on the groups allowed for more data to be gathered in a short amount of time. Interviewers were able to respond to the inflection in the participant's voice, unclear statements, and provide an interactive environment. This technique also allowed for non-scripted answers, and observation of body language (in some cases). This method did allow for multiple perceptions of similar events. Prior to

conducting these interviews all interviewers were CITI certified, and conducted practice interviews with other students.

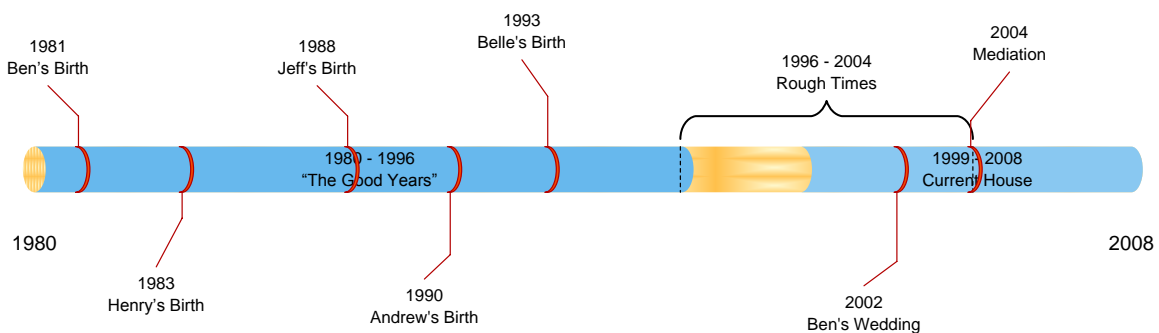
Although an interview of only a few minutes ascertained much of the actions and environment within the groups being studied, there were some limitations to the method. One limitation was allotting the time needed to conduct the interviews. This required coordination between the group doing the research and its participants. In some instances this also meant travel and necessary arrangements. Members of Group 1 were scattered across four time zones and personal interviews were impractical due to lack of funding by our patron. These interviews allowed for an only limited exposure with the group members, making the study susceptible to a variation of the Hawthorne effect (Weber, 2002 & Myers, 2004). A group member could “act their way” through an interview of an hour and appear to be a different person. This method required that those being interviewed had a good memory and were of a sound mind. It also allowed for contradictions to occur between participants.

Some of the members of both groups were inaccessible. In both Group 1 and Group 2 inaccessibility occurred due to availability, age, maturity, and parental consent for conducting interviews with minors. Because of these limitations, and the brevity of time allotted to conducted research, this study was limited in the number of families who participated. Although the sample size may be small, the attempt of this project is to replace quantity with quality, allowing future researchers the opportunity to build on this study.

### *Participants*

Before discussing findings it is important to introduce the groups and group members more thoroughly. In 1980 Abby and Sam were married, their son Ben was born in 1981 and Henry in 1983. Nearly six years later Jeff joined the family with Andrew and Belle each following about three years apart.

Abby has just finished her doctorate in communication studies and teaches at a university about 2 hours from home for part of the week. Sam works for a computer programming company that creates software for the airline industry in a nearby city. Both Ben and Henry have left home. Ben lives in Las Vegas with his wife and makes a

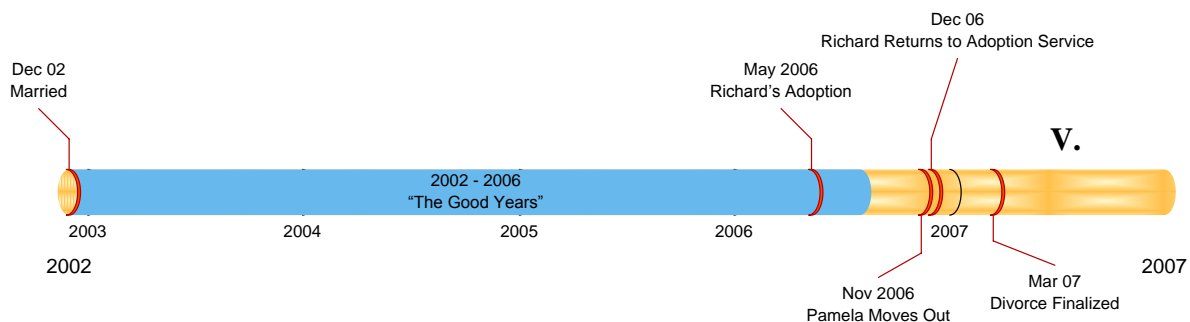


living as a lawyer. Henry is a medical student living in the Boston area. Jeff’s currently

attending a small in state college and hopes to pursue his musical talents. Andrew and Belle still live at home and are both attending high school.

Despite the divorce in 2004, “Home” for this family still refers to the same dwelling. The unique decisions of Sam and Abby during divorce mediation allowed for some rather unique living arrangements. Abby occupies the upstairs with the children, and Sam lives downstairs. This current arrangement began several years before the divorce and remains because both parents have expressed a strong desire to witness the children’s emergence into adulthood.

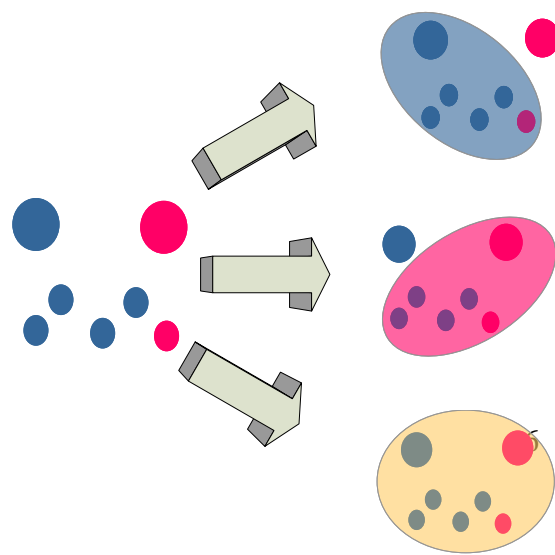
The second group participating in this study begins in 2002 when Bruce and Pamela were married. In May of 2006 they adopted Richard, a newborn, through a local adoption service. In the fall of that year the relationship deteriorated and Pamela moved out at the end of November. The separation came seventeen days short of finalizing the adoption, causing Richard to be placed with another family. Bruce has now started his own company with a close friend doing real estate. Pamela has moved back to her home town, and is working as a waitress.



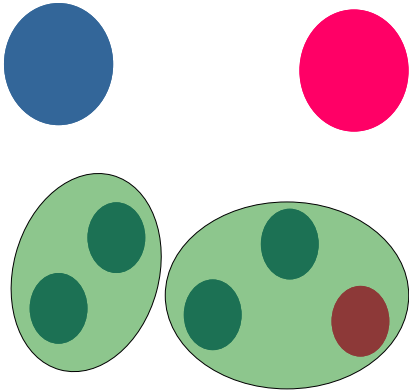
## Discussion of findings

Society has a defined version of “family” that shifts depending upon generation, culture, and history. The dictionary defines a family as “parents and their children, considered as a group, whether dwelling together or not” (Lexico, 2007). It is important to note that the definition for the word “family” refers to a “group.” This paper will discuss the family based upon a bona fide group perspective.

Families often divide into different groups to accomplish a variety of tasks. Sometimes it’s the “older kids” and dad that go camping. Sometimes it’s “I’m taking the girls shopping.” Depending on the task families can be divided into groups several different ways. Sam and Abby’s family has been legally divided by divorce, but has also been divided in other ways. The family can still be viewed with the traditional definition

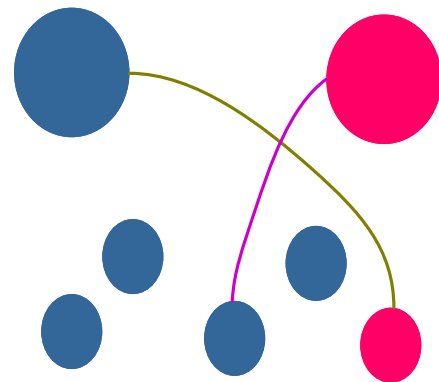


(mom, dad, and children), but what has happened in the divorce is that there have been multiple groups created. Each parent maintains a relationship with the children, but does so separately. There's a functional group that consists of dad and the kids. Separately there's another group that consists of mom and the kids. The children, who maintain a multiple group membership within their own family, define their family as Mom and Dad and all the kids. Henry even described the setting in the living room with all of the family members watching television together.



The children divide themselves up further depending upon experience and perspective. Because the “rough times” leading up to the divorce occurred when the older two were less dependent upon Sam and Abbey they have grouped themselves separately from the other children. Capitalizing on the five plus year age gap between Henry and Jeff’s birth they seem to be the curators and occupants of the “older kids” group.

Although each parent has a paired relationship with each of their children, the relationships between Abby and Jeff, and Sam and Belle were evident in more than one of the interviews. These pairs influence the larger group’s borders as tensions between parents occur when discussing the details of how to raise their children. Other group memberships appear in the table to the right. According to Stohl or Putnam this “amoeba-like” (Hirokawa & Poole, 1996) group structure is typical of natural groups with multiple group memberships.



Each group member has his/her own unique perspective on group functions, norms and expectations. Sam is not without having opinions and desires for his group. The mediation process which provided the structure for their divorce was the result of Sam investigating possible solutions. He had read an article of a divorced couple living together and applied the idea to his own situation. When interviewed, he had this to say: “I wanted to watch my children grow up daily, not every other weekend, not every other holiday.” His sense

- |   |
|---|
| Mom with children                           |
| Dad with children                           |
| Children with Mom and Dad                   |
| Mediators with husband/wife                 |
| Abby as professional with associates        |
| Abby as student/ doctorate committee        |
| Abby as professor with students             |
| Sam with fellow workers                     |
| Sam with friends from work                  |
| Abby with her parents/siblings              |
| Sam with parents/siblings                   |
| Children with extended families, both sides |
| All children with school or work groups     |
| Children with friends                       |
| Sam with sons at ballgames                  |
| Mom with sons, talking                      |
| Family with community (ies)                 |
| Ben with wife                               |



of belongingness transcended his personal feelings.

Their situation shifts the role from typical divorcing parents arguing “who’s got the kids” to saying “the kids have us.” The problem arises when the two halves to the “us” they attempt to provide, don’t form an “us” anymore. The interpretative frame for “us” has been dissolved and without it Abbey has labeled the relationship abnormal. She openly acknowledges their uniqueness to make sense of her surroundings, by placing the slogan “Around here Normal is just a setting on the dryer” in two prominent locations of the house.

Other important family artifacts appear throughout the house as well. The walls upstairs are showcases for photographs of family members. At least four walls of the house are largely taken up by photographs or memorabilia of one family member or another. These

family photos are one way that families express a sense of belongingness.

Family photos allow us to be “both seller and consumer of the idea of the ideal

family” (Foss, 2004). Varallo identified seven common themes among family photos (Foss, 2004). These points are usually visible in most family photos and help the family to enact this sense of belongingness.

1. Higher (status) positioning of the patriarch and /or matriarch
2. Close physical proximity of the family members
3. Mothers touching the children and touching more in general
4. Women more concerned with presenting a pleasing image
5. Optimism, usually evidenced by smiles
6. A posed group
7. Backgrounds with special meanings

(Foss, 2004)



A family photo, taken during the “rough times” containing all seven family members, sits prominently on the piano in a room near the entranceway to the house. Although the photo has intentionally blurred for anonymity, you can see the family defined with a patriarch and matriarch in higher positioning. The family members are sitting in close proximity to one another. Abby is touching the child closest to her. Although not evident in the blurred version, both Abby and Belle spent time preparing themselves for the photograph, and

several of the family members photographed are smiling. The photo is posed around a table to accommodate the inclusion of all family members. The background is significant because it is the reception hall where the family gathered to celebrate Ben’s wedding.

Certainly this photo fits the genre of family photographs, and attempts to provide an image of the family as the unit being represented. Although this photo is “ideal,” the photo’s placement is evidence of Abby negotiating jurisdiction and autonomy. The photo clearly displays the family, including Sam, but when placed on the piano Abby intentionally adjusts the photo to exclude him by placing the photo of Ben and his wife in front of the frame. When questioned why she doesn’t “cut him out,” Abby responds that the kids would view her as being too cruel. In contrast to this border establishment, an anonymous family member will frequently separate the photos so it displays everyone in the group.



Abby and Sam still have conflicting views about their family. When asked if Sam is still a member of the family, Abby plainly said, “He is not a member of MY family.” Without prompting, she then begins to elaborate. Prior to Thanksgiving of 2006 Sam approached her and asked, “Is our family going to be together for this Thanksgiving?” Abby’s response was “Who the hell is your family? Who are you talking about?” Sam then explains, “I just want our family, our little family [together for the holiday].” Abby pounds the table in the interview and says that her response was, “WE don’t have a little family. Get it?” Sam was asked in his interview if Thanksgiving dinner would have been a “Thanksgiving dinner” without her there? He flatly said, “No,” then followed, “and it would seem awkward to the kids too [if she weren’t there].” His focus seems to keep the kid’s perspective in mind, thus reinforcing how the children view their family.

The children seem either less aware, or are less concerned about the division between their parents than Abby and Sam are. On Mother’s Day, one of Abby’s children hand drew a card for her. On the card are stick figures each representing a different family member. Most of the family members displayed items showing off a particular talent or occupation. From left to right there’s Ben with his law degree, Henry with his stethoscope, and Jeff with his saxophone. Andrew is posed next to the dog and Belle is holding a book.



The final character drawn is Sam, who like the rest of the family members, is wishing Abby a “Happy Mother’s Day.” Abby explains how she doesn’t appreciate him being

depicted, but recognizes the importance of her children, including Sam in wishing her a Happy Mother's Day.

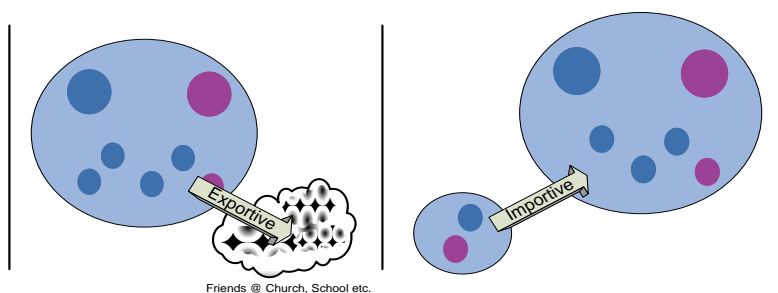
At some levels they do participate in their parent's battle of jurisdiction and autonomy, and at other points they don't. The children often find themselves forced participants spanning the boundaries between one parent and another. In one instance Belle was being used as a human telephone. She was instructed by Abby to relay a message to Sam and then Sam would instruct her to deliver his response. After some time, Belle decided that if her parents had something to say, they could say it to each other in person. She let them know that using her was no longer an appropriate option.

In other instances boundary spanning is less directed. Belle was anxious about a test at school. In response to her concerns, both parents took an active role reassuring her and setting her at ease. The anxiety over this test pulled the two major groups (Mom & Kids, Dad & Kids) of the family together, at least long enough to resolve the issue.

Henry has also had to play a representative role. He relates an instance where Abby was saying some rather unflattering things about Sam, a habit into which she had fallen. Finally Henry stepped in and reminded her that Sam was HIS father. The words he used struck a nerve and Abby acknowledges that the conversation changed her behavior.

Individual changes aren't exclusive to Abby. The group also changes as each child were born; role functions were shifted as these new members were accommodated. They've all grown accustomed to one another since their latest member, Belle, was born in 1993. After nine years of group members getting, assigning, and acting out their group roles, a new member was introduced that caused a shift to group functions. This most recent addition to the family was Ben's wife, Heather. Heather was introduced to the family over a phone call announcing their marriage. Ben was the first one to introduce a new group member to the family. Not only did the family have a twenty-two year history, but they had 1/3 of that recent history without anyone new joining. It was not a part of the "norm" to accommodate new group members. Belle went from being the only girl in the family to being one of two. This addition to the family caused stress, particularly between Heather and Belle. Heather's cultural background (being from Brazil) was also something for which the group had to make adjustments.

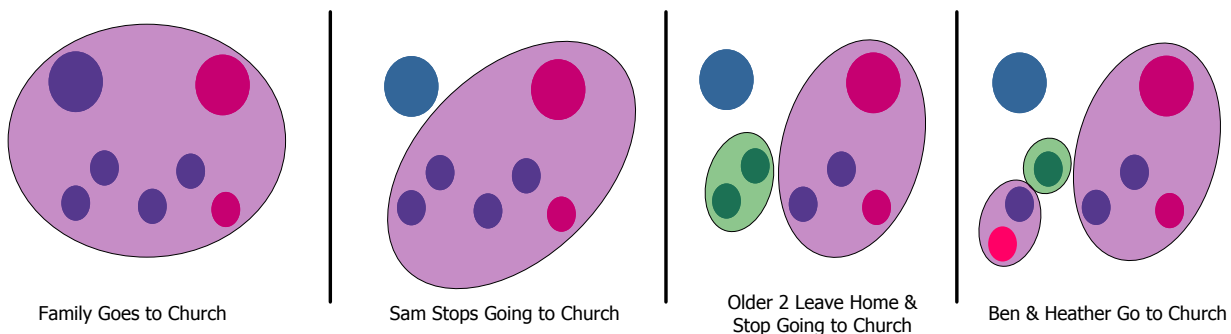
Initially Ben, like most group members, had played an exportive role. He represented Sam and Abby's family to other groups he was involved with, church, school, etc. Since the addition of his wife his role shifted from



primarily exportive to primarily importive. He now represents the family he has with his wife to his historical family.

When group members leave they also shift role functions. In one observed instance this shift occurred when Sam decided not to participate in a family activity. Part of a group's definition of itself is established by the activities they do together (Ellis & Fisher, 1994). The older kids in this group saw themselves as "the older kids" because they were mostly out of the home when the divorce occurred. The kids at home are in a separate category because they were the one's at home dealing with the problems they saw. This idea that someone belonged not just to their family, but the part of the family that does certain activities, isn't foreign to bona fide group theory. It is a modification of the sense of belongingness that helps determine the fluid and permeable boundaries of the group.

These boundaries changed as group members chose to participate in the family activity of going to church. Sam, who was first to choose not to participate, becomes the first group member excluded from this part of the family's functional identity.



Each family member was forced to choose how to deal with the divorce. Sam and Abby's marriage had deteriorated over several years. Ben was aware there were issues because Sam had moved into the basement of the house several years before the divorce was initiated. To add to the children's confusion of Sam and Abby's marital status, they didn't even tell the children about the divorce for approximately eighteen months after it was final. It was only when the children started asking for explanations as to why Sam wasn't participating in an upcoming family trip, which the knowledge of the divorce was made public. The children have been forced to make sense of the group's environment and operations without having a full knowledge of what is going on. Henry's reaction and sense making is worth noticing.

Henry is the family member that lives the furthest away (Boston) and presents the image that he is affected little by the divorce. When asked about the situation leading up to the divorce he said, "I never really bothered much with their dynamics. As long as it wasn't affecting me, it didn't bother me." This is how he has chosen to make sense of the intergroup relations that exist within the family. When asked, "Who's in your family?" instead of responding with names, he paints the picture of the family (everyone) sitting in

the living room watching television. The multiple groups created by the divorce are ignored. Both Abby's and Sam's construction of the family groups are consciously set aside and Henry's individual perception becomes the frame of reference for all his interaction with his family.

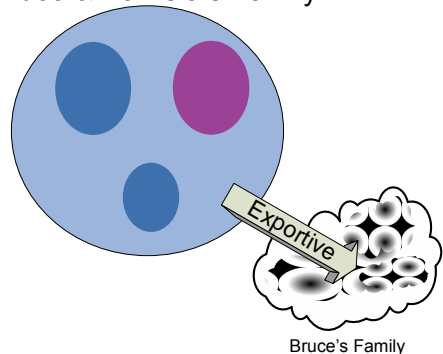
Abby and Sam recognize that their history together is still a strong influence on their family as a group. Abby refers to the years before their downward spiral as "the good years." Sam likewise has a positive memory of how things used to be. Prior to the formal individual interviews, we visited Sam and Abby in their home. One of our group members was relating the story of giving birth to one of her children. It was a lead in to a snowball conversation. Another group member added a few sentences about their experience with children being born. Sam told a relating experience over the birth of one of their children, recalling dates of the week and speaking with great fondness. Abby chimed in selecting parts of the narration and they'd alternate with ease. During the "good years" there was a lot of laughter. Some of that laughter reappeared, Sam on one end of the couch, Abby on the other, in the living room setting that Henry sees as the iconic location of "family."

Mediation for Sam and Abby was a paper-thin experience on the timeline of their relationship. It was crucial in facilitating the communication practices that have allowed them to be a functional couple. Without mediation Sam and Abby would have been unable to work through their differences. The major issues included the children and their living conditions. Neither one of them applies the principles learned in mediation to the interaction in their daily lives. In contrast Bruce openly acknowledges that he has adapted the skills gained in mediation to his professional environment. The dynamics between him and Pamela are quite different than Sam and Abby's.

Like Ben, Bruce plays an exportive role in dealing with his historical family and friends. He made comments to family members regarding their issues as the relationship was deteriorating. He announced the divorce to friends and family over email and asked for the widest possible distribution of the email. In his own words: "Spread it like you're a Mormon Relief Society President and the Bishop just did something really bad." In the letter he draws the lines of what is and isn't acceptable conversation regarding Pamela and the divorce. The email spends a lot of time answering questions about his feelings and plans for the future. With regards to Pamela he introduces the new rules for the relationship saying:

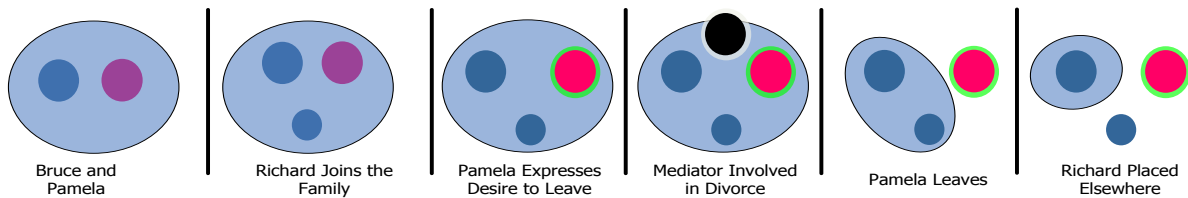
If you feel like you have to say something, remember that I am a funny guy and seldom serious. I would prefer some loving mockery like "It's not like she didn't know you were ugly when she married you." or "look on the bright side at least you can sleep with your dogs again." Please keep the slander in reference to me though. I still love [Pamela] and may

Bruce & Pamela's Family



have difficulties with you making fun of her. So I reserve that right to be the only one making slanderous comments about [Pamela], at least for the next year or so.

In this group two new members were introduced and three left the group during the timeline shown earlier. The first new member introduced was the adopted son, Richard, who like any newborn causes major adjustments within the family. Richard remained with Bruce during the course of the deteriorating relationship, the mediation, and departure of Pamela. In his email Bruce states “Richard is priority number one.” He encouraged friends and family to come and say their goodbyes prior to his placement in another family.



The mediator functioned as a new group member. Bruce and Pamela participated in at least three mediated sessions to finalize the issues with their separation. Prior to mediation, the communication process had escalated to the point where both Bruce and Pamela were raising their voices when engaging in conflict. The mediator immediately set out ground rules to control the process, and eliminate the need for this type of conflict tactic. In addition, when one group member’s concerns weren’t being met to their satisfaction, the mediator used a caucus to address specific issues and feelings with that individual. He ensured both parties concerns were well represented and discussed.

In this family the child didn’t function as a boundary spanner between the two parents. In Bruce’s second email he mentions, “[Pamela], deciding that it would be easier for her to say goodbye to Richard knowing he would be with me then to leave him with two strangers, left as soon as she had made arrangements.” The mediation process had such an impact that Pamela didn’t bother to wait until the divorce was finalized by the court. She felt the process of mediation had enough validity to solidify the termination of their relationship.

Pamela’s leaving was an extension of what bona fide group theory terms as “negotiation jurisdiction and autonomy.” Initially it was her decision to leave and despite the best efforts of a husband, son, two levels of religious leaders, marriage counselor, social worker, and parents, her decision stuck. A month after the initial email Bruce wrote again, and this time it was his turn to establish the lines of jurisdiction. He writes, “I have purposely been avoiding you my friends and family” making himself autonomous. The second email also announces he is over that stage and he transitions to a different form of jurisdiction, the one between him and Pamela.

If [Pamela] were to suddenly change her mind again, and try to come back in to my life now, I could not accept it. I will not allow it. This event has caused a rift that I have thus far decided [cannot] be overcome. With the

terrible things that have been said, and the loss of our son, there is no way we could be together again in this life. I do not hate [Pamela], I am not angry with her.

In April of 2007 Bruce began participating in the single-person-ritual of creating a “MySpace” account. Pamela has had an account since her sister encouraged it in early 2006. Amy Campbell has some poignant insights regarding the culture of MySpace:

It's the way that words lose their meaning that scares me... "friend", "buddy", "comment" ... These things used to require effort, investment, thought and emotional risk. At first I was sending a personal note, introducing myself, with each "friend request" I made to an artist I admire. But within a week I came to realize that MySpace culture doesn't even require this... "add", "approve", "deny" ... that's all there is to it. But somewhere in the back of my mind, a little voice keeps chiming "Approval and the approve button are not the same thing"....

With the diffused meaning of the word “friend” on MySpace, and the fact that both Bruce and Pamela are aware of one another’s accounts. It’s noteworthy that neither is listed as a “friend,” and neither has posted on the other’s page. When interviewed Bruce acknowledges that they have talked a handful of times since the divorce, and no longer than two to three minutes. Mediation was a key factor in creating this form of separation. Bruce admits the mediation was “phenomenally easy” compared to what he imagined.

## **Conclusion**

Our study set out to show that mediation is a positive influence on divorcing couples. With Sam and Abbey’s family the group functions are manifested across seven group members and illustrate a complex system of multiple groups. This complexity would not be possible if it weren’t for the mediation process in which they participated. Although this was a paper-thin experience on the timeline of their relationship, it was crucial to providing the functionality both parents desired in order to raise their children. With regards to Bruce and Pamela, the mediation facilitated as a way to cleanly dissect the relationship.

The bona fide group perspective we’ve applied describes how these families as “real groups” function. It shows their complexity, diversity, similarities, interconnectedness within their own groups, and their environment. Both groups have had to make sense of their intergroup relations, changing their identities, and emerging in new roles. Mediation functions as a catalyst to negotiating the conflict issues surrounding divorce including establishment of the new roles all group members must embrace.

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Authors' Notes: We have been told that this paper is the first undergraduate level paper to be published in the ACJ. In order for undergraduate students to approach, learn, and apply a theory within a 16 week semester and produce something of this caliber is no small task. The group members responsible for this work put the project before a great deal of other responsibilities. It also represents a team far beyond the listed authors that contributed to the process of this production. Family members who supported us while researching and writing and they deserve our greatest thanks.

On par with our families is our professor Nancy Tobler, who dedicated countless hours to inspire her students to produce quality research and believe that their productions were significant. She is a credit to the long list of great educators that have influenced students for generations. Typically educators see little rewards in their efforts and we're grateful to provide this accomplishment as the fruit of her labors as well as ours.

Finally we'd like to say that our research was not the only significant research developed in the small group theory class at Utah State University in the fall of 2007. We were significantly more impressed by the research others had done than what you have just read.