Groups, Sociology of

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Abstract

A 'group' refers to a bounded collection of interacting individuals who are functionally, cognitively, and structurally inter-dependent to various degrees. Groups also differ in the degree to which they are task- or sentiment-oriented and in which the members are unique or substitutable. Thus, friendship groups, clubs, crowd-sourcing groups, and teams are paradigmatically different types of groups. The sociological study of groups is dispersed in various university departments (ranging from social psychology and sociology to business and communications), but there is an important common theme: the collective phenomena that emerge in groups. The most important collective phenomena studies are 'social embedding' (including shared knowledge and reality, social identity, collective memory, belonging), norms, collectively induced motivations, and status structures. In turn, these phenomena have considerable influence on behavior, but this influence is more frequently studied by psychologists.
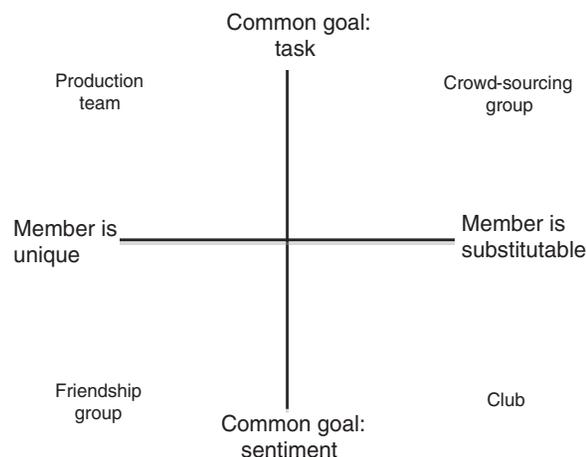
The Sociological Approach to Groups

In sociology, a group refers to a bounded collection of inter-acting individuals who are interdependent in various ways. The most prominent interdependencies that have been identified are functional, cognitive, and structural interdependencies (see Lindenberg, 1997). In a group, individuals are functionally interdependent with regard to the realization of one or more goals. For example, group members need each other to reach a common goal (task interdependence) and may also affect each others' outcome (cooperative outcome interdependence). They are cognitively interdependent with regard to their collective identity, memory knowledge, sense of reality, expectations, and perceptions. For example, members influence each other in the formation of expectations and depend on each other with their collective identity. They are structurally interdependent with regard to the effects of the ties between them. For example, each member is affected by the constellation of informal ties between other members or by different links due to division of labor among group members. The three interdependencies influence each other, but sociologists often differ in the degree to which they focus on one or more of these interdependencies at the same time.

Groups differ in important respects. Traditionally, sociologists distinguished between primary and secondary groups, mostly based on the distinction of relationships seen as constitutive of the group (close relationships for primary groups, impersonal relations for secondary groups). By now, it seems more useful to distinguish groups by their place in a two-dimensional space (see Figure 1). One dimension is the degree to which the specific identity of a group member matters (is the group member unique or, in principle, substitutable?). A second dimension is the degree to which the common goal is related to task fulfillment or sentiment. For example, in a friendship group, each member's personal identity is important and people cannot easily be substituted. In addition, the group is not linked to specific common tasks but mainly to the maintenance of common sentiment. Members in a social club (such as a faculty club) jointly create common sentiments and are not tied to specific common tasks. However, they may

stay or leave and are thus fairly substitutable. A team (such as a research team) is oriented toward common tasks with close coordination of activities, so that the identity of each team member also matters. By contrast, in a crowd-sourcing group (such as the makers of open source software), there are common tasks but contributors can come and go, so that identity matters little. For all kinds of groups, the 'groupishness' of groups (also called 'entativity' or 'cohesion' and mainly a matter of cognitive interdependency) can differ, but the uniqueness of members is likely to be linked to greater groupishness than the substitutability of members. Maybe because of this diversity of types of groups, sociology has not developed a field of research dealing with groups as such. The departments in which groups are studied from sociological points of view are also varied (e.g., sociology, social psychology, management, business, organization studies, social movements, communications).

Individuals have needs that are satisfied by group member-ship, such as the need to belong (Baumeister and Leary, 1995), the need for meaning (Heine et al., 2006), and the need for

Figure 1 Two-dimensional group space with prototypical kinds of groups.
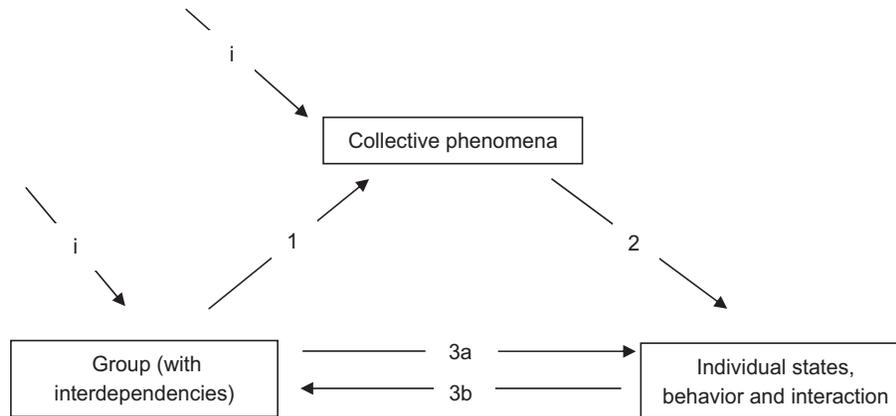
Figure 2 Schematic depiction of the study of phenomena related to groups.

status (Steverink and Lindenberg, 2006). However, the sociological study of groups focuses not so much on why people join groups but on the collective aspects related to such needs. For example, for sociologists, belonging is not an individual state but a joint product of interacting individuals just as, for them, memory is mostly a collective phenomenon. Thus, in the work of sociologists, all kinds of groups are seen as giving rise to durable or semidurable collective phenomena (such as social embedding, social norms, patterns of motivation, status structures). These collective phenomena, in turn, influence the behavior of individuals and their interactions, such as performance, conflict behavior, creativity, openness to information, etc. (see Figure 2). Most of the sociological work deals with relation 1, some deal with relation 2 and some deal with relationships 1 and 2 (as well as other combinations). Relation 3b allows explicit feedback mechanisms involving both levels (as in expectation states theory, see below). Psychological studies of groups focus more often on the direct influence of interaction (or the presence of others) and on attitude change, productivity, satisfaction, self-esteem, depression, etc., occasionally allowing for feedback mechanisms (3a and 3b). The extra arrows (i) indicate exogenous factors (such as genetic dispositions, rules, established categories, and externally established status differences).

Historical Background of Small Group Research

The scientifically serious investigation of groups in the sociological tradition started with anthropological studies of tribes, clans, and families in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Sumner, Durkheim, Simmel, and Cooley were early codifiers of this research. The most important turn in this development occurred in the 1930s. Within the span of a few years, five great books appeared, which had two very important messages in common: that groups are constituted by a cognitively mediated functional interdependence between individuals, that is, people who are dependent on each other for achieving some goal (including common sentiment) interact and something important happens to their minds and the way their minds operate when they interact. In addition, the actual situation in which their action is placed matters

most for behavior (as opposed to traits or other cross-situational constants). This point was elaborated in various ways by a number of important books. In 1932, Alfred Schütz published *Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt* (*The Phenomenology of the Social World*). In 1934, Mead's (then already posthumous work) *Mind, Self and Society* appeared. Two years later, Lewin's *Principles of Topological Psychology* and Sherif's *The Psychology of Social Norms* came out. A year later, Parsons' *The Structure of Social Action* made its appearance. Merton's early work on reference groups was also quite influential in this regard. From this time, group studies continued in two traditions: experimental and field studies; both traditions bore the mark of this convergent conception of groups. Under the leadership of Lewin and Sherif, 'group dynamics,' as the experimental study of groups was then called, achieved great heights. Field studies had Mayo's Hawthorne studies and Whyte's famous *Street Corner Society* as models. Both traditions owe their success to the simultaneous consideration of the three fundamental interdependencies in groups: functional (related to goal achievement), cognitive (related to common categorizations, shared beliefs, and knowledge), and structural (related to the configurations of social relations). See Lindenberg (1997) for more detail on these interdependencies. However, the precise nature of the interdependencies was not yet well investigated and in the late 1950 and early 1960s, specialized groups of studies on each of these interdependencies became dominant, with interesting crossovers between psychology and sociology. Homans (1950, 1958), a sociologist, combined both field and experimental traditions in the study of functional interdependencies in exchange relations. Inspired by Homans, two psychologists, Thibaut and Kelley (1959), developed the study of small groups as the study of functional interdependencies. Their book is to this day one of the best on the subject. It influenced Homans' further work on the subject (Homans, 1961). Cognitive interdependencies were elaborated by Sherif and turned into a major strand of group research called 'Social Identity Theory' by Tajfel (1982) and Turner (1982), both psychologists but very influential among sociologists and in turn influenced by sociological symbolic interactionism. In a related development, Moscovici, a psychologist,

elaborated Durkheim's theory of collective representations (see Flick, 1998). Berger and Luckmann (1967) elaborated the social construction of reality and Goffman (1961, 1974) showed how this construction might take place in social interaction. Structural interdependencies were more formally elaborated by the psychologist Cartwright and the mathematician Harary and turned into a full-blown network approach by sociologist White and his followers (see White et al., 1976). This approach is now often combined with the exchange approach.

Collective Phenomena That Emerge in Groups

Because for sociologists the emerging collective phenomena are the most important aspects of groups, the remainder of this overview will discuss such collective phenomena. Studies of social dilemmas are covered elsewhere. Due to space restrictions, the reader will be referred mainly to 'collections' rather than individual works.

Groups and Social Embedding

Often, just differences in labeling groups of strangers will induce an instant tendency to favor the 'in-group' (Durham et al., 2011). Individuals need to belong. For sociologists, a particularly interesting aspect is that belonging is not just an individual need and its satisfaction, but a product of processes of social embedding. There is also an epistemological need for shared reality and groups provide such a reality. An individual experience remains ephemeral until it is recognized, shared, and mutually confirmed (Kruglanski et al., 2006). As groups develop, they will engage in activities that make the group recognizable and special, supplying a shared reality (including shared knowledge and collective memory) and collective identity, and often setting the 'in-group' off against 'out-groups.' An important instrument for bringing this embedding about is what Fine (1987), in a famous study on Little League baseball teams, has called 'idioculture.' It consists of shared knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs, such as jokes, nicknames, slang, superstitions, rituals, and taboos. An important part of this process is the emergence of the collective memory, together with ceremonies and commemorative objects (Misztal, 2003; Olick et al., 2011). Sociologists have studied processes that make belonging, shared reality, knowledge, and memory joint products in all sorts of groups: music bands, work groups and teams, sports clubs and teams, primary care units, educational groups (e.g., school classes), and more loosely structured groups, such as social worlds and Internet groups (see, e.g., Engestrom and Middleton, 1998; Lim et al., 2011). Much of group-related ethnographic research in sociology is focused on these processes and much of it is said to be based on 'grounded theory' (see Charmaz and Bryant, 2007). Grounded theory means many things but in this context it refers mainly to four interrelated features: firsthand data collection (as in ethnography); a high degree of contextualizing (i.e., the constant search for social embeddings); varying the (sub)categories used for coding observations in order to facilitate discovery; and moving back and forth between data, analysis, and emerging theory.

There are also quantitative approaches to shared cognitions. For example, the study of 'shared mental models' quantitatively maps group members' similar mental models of content (say of a common task), of structure (say, networked associations of components of the task), and the degree to which the members' models are truly shared in content, structure, and realization of collectiveness (see DeChurch and Mesmer-Magnus, 2010). Yet another approach to social embedding focuses on coorientation (Scheff, 1967) or what is now often called 'interactive belief systems.' Here the emphasis is on the intertwining of (higher orders of) knowledge: "I know that you know that I know," etc. For the coordination of behavior in interacting groups and the development of trust (as a collective phenomenon), the development of coorientation has been identified as vital (Moldoveanu and Baum, 2011). What is taken for granted in game theory (there referred to as 'common knowledge'), is for sociologists an important group product all by itself. Related studies deal with certain aspects of collective knowledge and memory referred to as 'transactive memory' (Hecker, 2012; Lewis and Hemdon, 2011). The idea is that group members can mutually reinforce each other's memories of facts, events, and expectations that are collectively deemed important, which, in turn, increases coorientation and thus communication, trust, and coordination. Another kind of transactive memory refers to distributed memory whereby group members individually remember different things so that the total memory capacity of the group is greatly enhanced (Gupta and Hollinghead, 2010).

The development of social embedding depends in part on the heterogeneity of groups. A growing number of studies focus on such preconditions of the development of collective group phenomena (see, e.g., Chatman and Flynn, 2001; Flache and Mäs, 2008). Such studies are important complements to the studies that focus on social embedding.

Groups and Norms

Groups are the primary producers of social norms (Hechter and Opp, 2001). There are four important kinds of norms. First, norms develop for social embedding in groups. They are specific to the group and help create a social (i.e., group) identity, increasing groupishness and making each group special and different from other groups (see above). Examples are norms about attitudes toward certain out-groups; norms about religious beliefs; norms about what is and is not funny; norms about clothes, hairstyle, and form of greeting. Second, there are norms about positive and negative externalities, such as helping and not hurting others. In contrast to the embedding norms, such norms are often quite general in content across groups (e.g., about helping in need) but specific with regard to the circumstance of application (what constitutes need) and with regard to legitimately expected sacrifice for conforming to the norm (see Lindenberg, 1994). Third, there are norms that deal with the fact that groups have common goals and that attainment of these goals must be facilitated by consensual rules and norms. For example, for teams, there are norms that regulate roles, cooperation,

coordination, and conflict (Mathieu and Rapp, 2009). What are the different roles and responsibilities? How are they related to the common task? When is it necessary to consult others? Who is responsible for completing certain activities? How often and when will individuals meet to discuss issues relating to reaching their common goals? How should conflicts be resolved? Fourth, there are 'metanorms.' They regulate the applicability of and conformity to all sort of norms (such as norms on externalities and norms about the severity of deviance and about desired reactions to deviance, Lindenberg, 1994); and, importantly, they regulate collective memory: (what needs to be remembered, what forgotten). Norms on collective memory also pertain to all three groups of norms (e.g., to remembering commemorative events, feasts, and losses) but also to externalities (when should what effect on others be remembered) and to reaching common goals (such as details of the work design and distribution of responsibilities in teams).

Sociologists have also dealt with 'ghost norms' that are based on a false consensus, in the sense that everybody thinks they apply, whereas everybody believes himself or herself to be the only one who does not subscribe to them. For example, in groups, many members might believe that heavy drinking is expected by the others even though they do not support such a norm themselves. The driving force behind the stability of such ghost norms is a perverse product of an important feature of the stability of norms in general: the metanorm that if you believe that something is an important norm, then you should give social approval to others who follow the norm and disapproval to those who don't, even if you don't subscribe to the norm yourself. In this way, the others interpret your behavior as endorsement of the norm (see Willer et al., 2009).

Groups and Motivation

The motivation to follow group norms and to be oriented toward group goals has been an important subject in group research. Traditionally, in sociology, norm conformity has been linked to socialization processes, in which persons learn to want to do what they have to do. By contrast, modern rational choice explanations maintain that people conform to a norm when rewarded for doing so and punished for not doing so. However, the cognitive interdependence that has long been central to the study of groups leads to a different view – one that has been elaborated in social identity theory, and in cognitive sociology and social psychology. Even though rewards and punishments are important, it is people's ability to identify with group goals ('We' rather than 'I') and the activation of this orientation through cues in the environment that are the major drivers of norm conformity (especially where people are not monitored). Thus, studies that are concerned with the processes of identity formation in groups (Tyler and Blader, 2003; Postmes et al., 2005) and studies that deal with the activation of group orientation (see Lindenberg and Foss, 2011 for overview) have become most important for the explanation of norm conformity in groups. Processes that increase people's social identity will increase their sensitivity to demands relating to group goals and norms

(Simpson, 2006). The same will be true for cues that increase a 'normative goal frame' (Lindenberg and Foss, 2011). Much group-related research thus focuses on the conditions that lead to a strengthened group orientation. For example, fairness of procedure and outcomes will strengthen social identity (Tyler and Blader, 2003). Common rituals can serve the same purpose (Islam and Zyphur, 2009). True to the collective aspect of norm conformity, cues that others show respect/disrespect for norms are highly effective in strengthening or weakening a collective orientation (Keizer et al., 2008). This cue effect derives its power from the fact that it is not just limited to imitation (I don't help if others don't help), but that it 'jumps' across norms (e.g., observing somebody else not helping may induce stealing), called a 'cross-norm effect.' Another important influence on norm conformity is 'transformational' group leadership that does not motivate by contingent rewards but by vision, example, and care. Group leaders can develop and articulate a shared vision, they can serve as role models, and they can attend to the needs of group members, thereby increasing trust in the group's collectivity and cohesion (Wang et al., 2011).

For task groups, there is an extra kind of motivation that relates to the joint production of a valued result. The classical example is collective barn raising in villages where all chip in to get the project done. Seemingly, we are hardwired to be especially dedicated to what we perceive to be a common task with individual responsibilities (Lindenberg and Foss, 2011). This contrasts with sentiment groups ('community'), in which there are no individual responsibilities and thus there are the possibilities of depersonalization and social loafing when common tasks suddenly appear (Williams and Karau, 1991). For the special motivation for joint production to occur, the collective orientation must be high (as for sentiment groups). However, in addition, the task must be clear and well understood in order to create a clear picture of one's own responsibilities in relation to those of others. For this reason, increasing the understanding of not just one's own role but also that of others ('cross understanding') is an important contributor to the motivation for joint production (see Huber and Lewis, 2010).

Groups and Status Hierarchies

One of the best-studied collective phenomena with regard to groups is the formation and maintenance of status structures. There are two main approaches that should be distinguished and both apply particularly to task groups. One is based on expected differences in the ability to contribute to a common task (expectation state theory); the other is based on inequalities of resources in social exchange. Expectation state theory (see literature in Berger and Zelditch, 1998) has a long-standing research tradition in sociology. In this theory, following the tradition of Bales in the 1950s, factual power and prestige are conflated and their combined structure is conceived in terms of behavioral aspects (opportunities and influence) rather than the distribution of scarce resources. The higher a person is on the power and prestige structure, the more opportunities to act he or she receives, the more often he or she takes advantage of these

opportunities, and the more often he or she wins disagreements, if and when they occur. However, the basic mechanism that creates this structure lies with cognitive interdependencies: the pair-wise interaction (between, say, Ego and Alter) that is governed by performance expectations with regard to the common task. It is the (unobservable) structure of these performance expectations that keeps generating the observable power and prestige structure. When Ego has positive performance expectations regarding Alter, he or she will give more action opportunities to Alter; and Alter is more likely to take up each opportunity offered. Alter has influence over Ego. It is assumed that there is an evaluation bias. Ego is more likely to judge Alter's performance to be positive if the performance expectation was positive and vice versa. And if Ego nonetheless voices disagreement, he or she is more likely to eventually yield to Alter if the performance expectation was positive to begin with. Such evaluation biases greatly enhance the stability of the power and prestige structure in task groups (provided the task endures), without necessarily undermining the groupishness of the task group.

The link between functional (aspects of the tasks) and cognitive (performance expectations) interdependencies is made even stronger through extensions of the theory to include external status characteristics (see literature in Berger and Zelditch, 1998). Task groups are embedded in a wider culture in which such status and competence beliefs exist (such as 'men are better at mathematics'). People seem to follow the maxim "when in doubt, assume that a salient characteristic is task relevant (especially if it is diffuse, such as race or gender)" (Simpson and Walker, 2002). With regard to gender, this favors men in general tasks as well as in 'masculine' tasks, and it favors women only in stereotypically 'feminine' tasks (see also Webster and Rachotte, 2010). Newer developments are mainly concerned with the ways in which status beliefs arise in group contexts. Seemingly, performance expectations are not only generated by clear perceptions of competence or diffuse status characteristics imported from the outside, but also by persistent inequalities in resources (say rich or poor) that are mis attributed as causally linked to group success. In this way, nominal characteristics can become status characteristics (Ridgeway et al., 2009). A classical variant of these status-building processes (outside expectation state theory but compatible with it) has been suggested by Coleman (1961). He highlights the importance of intergroup rivalry for internal status hierarchies. For example, competitive sports teams in schools develop status hierarchies due to the players' contributions to success in intercollegiate competition.

Dependency Networks, Groupishness, and Individual Differences

Status differences in groups can also come about by a process that is independent of expectation states. As Blau (1964) has shown in a pioneering study, asymmetric exchanges among group members can lead to status structures in task groups. The central idea is that people cherish status and thus also cherish being called superior by others. This is likely to happen if a group member needs something from another group member but has nothing else to offer than to admit

his or her inferiority and the superiority of the other (who cherishes this gesture and, in return, is thus willing to give up information or other valued resources). If exchanges are made among members who are unequal in resources, this can lead to inequality in exchange which, in turn, can lead to people claiming (and others accepting) superior status. Newer versions of this theory (in combination with the exchange theory by Emerson, 1976) deal mainly with power-dependency differences rather than status structures, even though some theorists link the two by using status effects to explain power-dependency effects (Thye et al., 2006). In contrast to status research, power-dependence research emphasizes functional and structural dependencies (especially dependencies due to possible exclusion) and de-emphasizes attention to cognitive interdependencies, as mutual perceptions play no important role (see Cook et al., 2006; Willer, 1999). Thereby they focus less on the group embeddedness of social networks than approaches that include cognitive interdependencies. Still, the structural emphasis has its own advantage in that it shows that the network structures (that are possibly embedded in groups) have their own considerable influence that may undermine groupishness in favor of gain-related and/or affect-related individual outcomes (Burt, 2002); and that this influence is mostly due to dependencies (Bonacich and Bienenstrock, 2009). The structural focus also shows that seemingly individual characteristics (such as being powerful, being successful, being a failure, having high or low self-esteem, etc.) can be collective phenomena generated by social structures. It is also evident that for fostering groups, pure power asymmetries do not work well, compared to generalized exchange structures (Willer et al., 2012). With generalized exchange, cognitive interdependencies (in the form of group identification) are more likely to emerge. As we have seen above, when there are power differences, it is the powerful members' contribution to group goals (best aided by transformational leadership) that can neutralize the negative effects of power differentials and stress positive cognitive interdependencies, thereby fostering groupishness (Wang et al., 2011). Finally, there is also research that deals with the reverse process: certain cognitive interdependencies (in the form of reflected appraisals of one's own position) can be the source rather than the consequence of power differentials within groups (Friedkin, 2011) that may or may not support groupishness.

In short, groups give rise to social embeddings, to norms, to collectively induced motivations, and to status structures. However, embedded dependency networks within groups and the resulting power structures may undermine groupishness to various degrees, producing instead structured differences in individual characteristics. Contributions to group goals by the powerful may neutralize this potentially negative effect of dependency structures.

Evaluation

Sociological research on groups mainly deals with collective phenomena that emerge in groups, such as social embedding (including belonging and identity, shared knowledge and

reality, collective memory), social norms, collectively produced motivation, and status structures. Ideally, the study of groups include attention to functional, cognitive, and structural interdependencies, but often the focus is only on one or two of these three structures. There is much productive research going on but, unfortunately, it is spread over a wide variety of university departments and journals, ranging from social psychology, sociology, management, business, to social movements, communication, and simulation journals. Groups themselves are presently not a 'field' in sociology, even though they are the wellspring of society's most important collective fabrics. A common field would make sense, given the communality among the various types of groups that are now dealt with as separate topics in the literature. It is the articles in encyclopedias that keep at least a semblance of a field called 'groups' alive.

See also: Collective Memory, Social Psychology of; Conformity: Sociological Aspects; Cooperation and Competition; Cooperation: Sociological Aspects; Deindividuation, Psychology of; Evolutionary Group Dynamics; Exchange: Social; Gangs, Sociology of; Group Processes in Organizations; Group Processes in the Classroom; Group Processes, Social Psychology of; Identity and Identification, Social Psychology of; Social Dilemmas, Psychology of; Social Identity in Sociology; Teamwork and Team Performance Measurement; Tribe; Youth Gangs.

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