The Nature and Significance of Groups

Donelson R. Forsyth
University of Richmond, dforsyth@richmond.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarship.richmond.edu/jepson-faculty-publications
Part of the Counseling Psychology Commons, Other Psychology Commons, and the Social Psychology Commons

Recommended Citation
CHAPTER 2

The Nature and Significance of Groups

Donelson R. Forsyth

Abstract

An understanding of group counseling requires an understanding of groups themselves, their basic nature and processes. Given that human beings are a social species and spend their lives in groups rather than alone, an individual-level analysis of adjustment, well-being, and treatment, with its focus on internal, psychological processes, should be supplemented by a group-level analysis. The defining features of a group are relationships linking a substantial number of members, boundaries, interdependence, structure, cohesion, and entitativity (perceived groupness); and groups with more of these features are more influential than other forms of association, such as social networks. The chapter reviews a number of group-level processes that influence members' adjustment, including loneliness, ostracism, social support, socialization, social identity, and performance, before recommending a synthesis of the individual- and group-level perspectives in a multilevel analysis of human development, adjustment, and potential.

Keywords: Individual-level analysis; group-level analysis; cohesion; entitativity; social networks; loneliness, ostracism, social support.

People, no matter what they are doing—working, relaxing, studying, exercising, worshiping, playing, socializing, watching entertainment, or sleeping—are usually in a group rather than alone. Some people seem to keep to themselves, but a preference for solitude is considered unusual by most; sociality is far more typical, for most people live out their lives in groups, around groups, and seeking out new groups. Humans are so group-oriented that at every turn we encounter groups. No one knows for certain how many groups exist at this moment, but given the number of people on the planet and their proclivity to form groups, 30 billion is a conservative estimate.

Groups are ubiquitous, not only in the context of day-to-day living but also in counseling settings. Group counseling, by definition, is an intervention that in some way involves groups and group processes. In schools counselors work with small groups of students as they deal with problems of development, adjustment, and achievement. Peers meet to offer each other support and wise counsel as they cope with problems they share in common. Hospital counselors meet with families to help them deal with the consequences of illness, disease, and death. Mental health professionals in a range of settings work with people in groups to set new goals for adjustment and help their clients learn the skills they need to connect with others. In communities social workers and organizers meet with residents to share information and identify solutions to communal issues. Consultants and trainers in organizations teach clients the skills they need to set realistic goals and to identify the steps they must take to reach them. Even when working with single individuals, the influence of groups cannot be ignored, for in many cases individuals' difficulties and satisfactions are intimately linked to groups: those to which they
belong, those that they are seeking to join, those that exclude them, and even those that reject and denigrate them.

This chapter is based on a single assumption: To understand group counseling—and, more generally, to understand people—one must understand groups themselves, their basic nature and processes. All too often a group-level explanation of people’s thoughts, emotions, and actions is overlooked in the search for an explanation of the causes of dysfunction and adjustment, just as a group approach to treatment is viewed as a second-best choice compared to an individualistic intervention. A truly multilevel approach, however, requires the integration of many levels of analysis in the development of a comprehensive theory of human adjustment and treatment. The chapters in this handbook stress the group rather than the individual not because the group level is viewed as more important than the individual but rather because the individual level has received favorable treatment for so long that an analysis that takes into account group-level processes is overdue.

This chapter examines three related questions. First, what does the analysis of groups and their dynamics contribute to an overall understanding of human behavior? For those who, by tradition, adopt an individual-centered approach to understanding individuals’ thoughts, actions, and emotions, what does a multilevel perspective that recognizes that individuals are also members of larger social units offer? Second, what are the unique characteristics of groups that provide the foundation for their psychological and interpersonal significance? From small, problem-focused, and highly structured psychoeducational groups to large and geographically scattered community groups, groups come in a staggering assortment of shapes and sizes. What qualities do these various groups have in common, and what distinguishes them from other social aggregations, such as networks of associations and communities? Third, what is the connection between the individual and the group? If individuals are not isolates but rather more frequently members of groups, in what ways do these groups influence the individual members, and how do the members in turn influence their groups?

The Reality of Groups
Emile Durkheim (1897/1966), at the end of the nineteenth century, presented evidence that suggested that suicide results more from interpersonal causes than intrapsychic ones. People did not take their own lives, he maintained, because of psychological maladjustment or delusion but rather when the groups that they belonged to no longer provided them with reliable alliances with others or regulative support systems. He maintained that groups provide a buffer against the stresses of daily life events, and as a result, those who were closely associated with traditional integrative groups enjoyed greater happiness and health (Joiner, Brown, & Wingate, 2005; cf. Kushner & Sterk, 2005).

Many scholars of that period agreed with Durkheim’s idea that groups profoundly influence their members (e.g., Le Bon, 1895/1960; McDougall, 1908). Others, however, took a different position. Allport (1924), for example, questioned the need to look beyond psychological processes when explaining why people acted as they did. Groups, according to Allport, were not even real; and he felt that the behavior of individuals in groups could be understood by studying the psychology of the group members since “the actions of all are nothing more than the sum of the actions of each taken separately” (p. 5). He is reputed to have said “you can’t trip over a group” (Pepitone, 1981).

Vestiges of Allport’s skepticism continue to influence theorists’ and researchers’ willingness to consider group-level concepts when explaining maladaptive and adaptive processes. Although most, in principle, admit that groups are influential, in practice when they search for the causes of behavior and when they make choices about the best way to solve personal and interpersonal problems, they adopt an individual-centered perspective rather than a group-centered one. This section examines the sources and the ramifications of the tendency to think individual first and group second, in theory, research, and practice.

Perceiving Individuals and Groups
The well-known face–vase visual illusion can be construed as depicting either a vase or the faces of two individuals looking at each other. Illustrating the figure–ground Gestalt principle of perception, when people report seeing a vase, the image of the vase becomes the figure and the individuals become the ground. Conversely, when people report seeing two individuals looking at each other, the faces become figure and the vase retreats into the background. The image hides a third image however: a two-person group, whose members are facing one another. Yet, the group is rarely noticed.

In terms of Gestalt principles of perceptions, groups are the ground, whereas individuals are the figure. The most famous painting in the world depicts a single individual. The number of words in
languages that can be used to describe individuals and their personality characteristics is substantial—Norman (1963), for example, identified 2,800 trait-descriptive adjectives in his study of personality—but how many words describe qualities that are specific to groups? Groups are not generally described as jolly, brave, playful, assertive, noisy, sensual, cool, reasonable, or stingy; but individuals are. Concepts that are used to describe qualities of individuals, such as personality, needs, intelligence, and self, have made their way easily into everyday language; but concepts that were developed to describe aspects of groups—for example, Cattell’s (1948) syntality, Bogardus’s (1954) groupality, and Moreno’s (1934) sociometry—rarely find popular acceptance. Even though people speak of such concepts as teamwork, leadership, and cliques in their discussions of contemporary issues, they tend to translate these group-level processes into individualistic ones. The key ingredient for teamwork, they suggest, is having a particular type of personality that stresses cooperation and communication. Leadership continues to be viewed as a personality trait, rather than a process that emerges during cooperative interactions. Cliques, and their negative tendencies, are attributed to the motives of the clique members, rather than group-level processes.

Individuals, when considering the causes of their own and others’ behavior, are less likely to favor an explanation that stresses group-level causes relative to one that stresses such psychological, individualistic causes as motivations, emotions, intentions, and personality. The well-documented fundamental attribution error occurs because perceivers are more likely to attribute a person’s actions to personal, individual qualities rather than external, situational forces (Ross, 1977). Evidence suggests that social perception starts with an assumption of dispositionality, the attributor initially categorizes the behavior as one that reflects a particular trait or quality and then uses this behavioral label to characterize the actor. Only then, and only if he or she has the cognitive resources and motivation to process fully information about the situation, does the perceiver consider group-level causes (Gilbert, 1998). Hence, even when individuals engage in unusual behaviors in response to an extreme degree of group pressure, perceivers believe that actions reflect qualities of the person rather than the group (Nolan, Schultz, Cialdini, Goldstein, & Griskevicius, 2008). Perceivers also expect that individuals will behave similarly in all groups to which they belong; after all, if personal, individualistic qualities are the primary causes of behavior, then group-level process should play only a minor role in determining outcomes (Darley, 1992).

This tendency to see individuals first and groups second may vary from one culture to another. Western countries such as the United States and Great Britain lean toward individualism: the equality of separate individuals and the rights of the individual over the group. Individuals are the center of such societies, and their rights to private property, to express themselves, and to engage in actions for their own personal gain are protected and even encouraged. Many non-Western societies, in contrast, stress collectivism. Individuals in such societies think of themselves as group members first and individuals second and, thus, emphasize the unity of all people in their group rather than each person’s individuality. Social existence is centered on group relations, for it is the group that creates social obligations based on respect, trust, and a sense of community (Triandis & Suh, 2002).

Because of these varying priorities, people raised in individualistic cultures differ in many ways from people raised in cultures that are based on collectivism. To speak in general terms (for people vary considerably within any given culture), individuals in Asian, western European, African, and Middle Eastern countries tend to be more loyal to their group and more suspicious of individuals who do not belong to their group. Collectivistic cultures also tend to be more hierarchical in organization, and they stress conformity and obedience to authority. Individuals’ self-concepts also differ in individualistic and collectivistic contexts, with greater emphasis on personal identity in the former and greater emphasis on social identity (e.g., roles, membership, relations) in the latter. Triandis and his colleagues illustrated this difference by asking people from various countries to describe themselves. As they expected, these self-descriptions contained more references to social identities—membership in groups, roles in society, ethnicity—when people were from collectivistic countries (e.g., Japan, China). They discovered that some individuals from the People’s Republic of China described themselves exclusively in interpersonal terms, whereas some US residents used only personal descriptors: They had no elements of a group-level identity (Triandis, McCusker, & Hui, 1990).

**Levels of Analysis**

Researchers, theorists, and practitioners, whether they are psychologists, social workers, consultants,
counselors, or clinicians, accept as givens some core assumptions about humans and their basic nature. These guiding assumptions, far from being biases, are instead useful heuristics, for they provide the means of dealing with the countless alternative and correct interpretations of the evidence and issues that they must confront and interpret in their work.

Coan (1968), Rosenberg and Gara (1983), and Watson (1967) present a sampling of the divergent assumptions that have characterized various approaches in psychology since the field's inception. Are unconscious processes influential determinants of behavior, or are actions primarily the result of reinforcement mechanisms? Is behavior caused by forces present in the immediate external environment or historical factors whose force is still felt in the distant future? Can psychological processes be broken down into specific elements, or is a holistic approach that avoids analysis more informative? Watson (1967) suggested that these "prescriptions" serve to orient researchers, theorists, and practitioners when they conceptualize problems and search for solutions.

THE INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL PERSPECTIVE
One of the most enduring prescriptions within the field of psychology is psychogenicism: the focus on the internal, psychological determinants of behavior. With behaviorists providing a notable exception, the theorists who provided the foundations for contemporary psychology offered models that included reference to the structure of personality, dynamic intrapsychic mechanisms, and the relationships between the individual's particular qualities and his or her behavior. Adler, Freud, Jung, Horney, Maslow, Murray, and others were generalists; but at the core their theories assumed that personality, needs, motivations, and other psychogenic mechanisms play a pivotal role in adjustment and dysfunction. The psychogenetic orientation was summarized by Urban (1983, p. 163), who argued strongly that when psychologists look for causes outside of the individual they "deny and distort the essential quality of human existence. Everything of significance with regard to this entire process occurs within the inner or subjective experience of the individual." Psychogenicism is also compatible with general endogenism, in which behaviors are attributed to a host of internal processes such as genetic factors, past events, and biological processes. Psychogenic approaches assume that psychological states mediate the relationship between the external world and the person's reaction to it (Forsyth & Leary, 1991).

THE GROUP-LEVEL PERSPECTIVE
The individual-level approach suggested by psychogenicism contrasts with a group-level approach. This orientation assumes that if one wishes to understand individuals, one must understand groups. As a highly social species, humans are rarely separated from contact and interaction with other humans, and in most cases these connections occur in a group context. In consequence, groups and their processes have a profound impact on individuals; they shape actions, thoughts, and feelings. Although people often consider their cognitive ruminations, including thoughts, decisions, attitudes, and values, to be private and personal, these are shaped by the groups to which they belong. Sherif (1936) and Asch (1957), in early demonstrations of the impact of a group on members' most basic judgments, discovered that people will base their decisions on the statements made by other group members rather than the evidence of their own senses. Groups prompt their members to endorse certain ideas and attitudes, and even nonconformists will eventually take on the standards of the groups to which they belong (Newcomb, 1943). People also process information collectively, through discussion and other group communication processes, so such basic cognitive processes as planning, evaluating, judging, decision making, and problem solving are made, not by individuals, but by groups (Kerr & Tindale, 2004).

Groups also influence members' emotions, in both direct and indirect ways. As Schachter and Singer's (1962) classic study of how people label their physiological states indicates, people often rely on cues in the group setting to decide if they are happy, sad, angry, or frightened. Emotions are also sometimes contagious in groups, with the feelings of one individual passing rapidly from one member of the group to the next (Smith, Seger, & Mackle, 2007). Crowds and mobs, for example, often experience waves of strong emotions, to the point that external observers often feel that such groups act as if they possess a shared, or collective, conscious. Even members of more commonplace and highly structured groups, such as work groups and sports teams, become more and more similar in their overall mood the longer they remain together (Kelly, 2004).

Groups also influence members' actions and reactions. As Durkheim concluded, people respond very differently when they are isolated rather than integrated in a group, and this shift has been documented time and again in studies of a wide variety of behaviors in many different situations. Young children imitate the way their playmates dress, talk,
A group's actions are guided by their family's influence, until adolescence the peer group becomes the primary determinant of behaviors (Harris, 1995). Groups can, in some cases, change people's behavior so dramatically that their behavior in a group bears no relationship to their behavior when isolated. The early group psychologists may have exaggerated the apparent madness of people when immersed in large crowds, but contemporary researchers have confirmed the discontinuity effect: In many cases the actions of individuals when in groups cannot be predicted by studying the qualities and actions of each individual group member (Wildschut, Pinter, Vevea, Insko, & Schopler, 2003).

A group-level approach also assumes that information will be lost, or at least overlooked, if the focus is solely on individuals rather than the larger social unit since groups possess characteristics "that cannot be reduced to or described as qualities of its participants" (Sandelands & St. Clair, 1993, p. 443). A group's cohesiveness, for example, is more than the mere attraction of each individual member for one another (Hogg, 1992). Individuals may not like each other on a personal level, yet when they form a group they experience powerful feelings of unity and esprit de corps. As Lewin's (1951) Gestalt orientation argued that a group is greater than the sum of its parts, so it cannot be understood through piecemeal, individual-only, analysis.

THE MULTILEVEL PERSPECTIVE

Theorists, researchers, and practitioners offer a range of solutions to problems of human adjustment and dysfunction. Some highlight aspects of the individual: their personalities, motivation, emotions, and perceptions. Others focus on interpersonal factors, such as relations with friends and relatives and group memberships. Some stress the larger social context by suggesting that the most important factors to consider are cultural ones. These perspectives are often viewed as mutually exclusive views that resist integration. As Sarason (1981, p. 175) explained, "built into psychology, part of its world view, is the polarity man and society. Call it a polarity or a dichotomy or even a distinction, it makes it easy for psychology to focus on one and ignore the other."

A multilevel perspective, in contrast, does not favor a specific level of analysis when examining human behavior, for it argues for examining processes that range along the micro-meso-macro continuum. Asked why an individual acts altruistically, acts in ways that create conflict with others, or engages in aberrant actions, a multilevel approach does not stop at the micro level by considering only the qualities, characteristics, and actions of the individual members. A multilevel approach also considers meso-level group processes, including group influence, cohesion, composition, and structure. The approach also considers macro-level factors, which are the qualities and processes of the larger collectives that enfold the groups, such as communities, organizations, or societies. Groups, then, are nested at the meso level where the bottom-up micro-level variables meet the top-down macro-level variables (Forstyth, 2010).

A multilevel approach has several advantages to a one-level-only analysis of human behavior. An individual-level analysis stresses the causal importance of the individual's past and future and best deals with situational factors by filtering them through individual-level mechanisms. Because personality, experience, attitudes, and values must be represented within the individual, a group-level-only analysis tends to ignore them, choosing instead to focus on contemporaneous causes present in the immediate setting. The result is a model that suggests people are mechanistic, static, and purposeless, whereas they are, in reality, motivated, goal-seeking, and dynamic. A multilevel approach is more theoretically egalitarian, recognizing the causal influence of factors that range along the individual-group-organization continuum.

The Nature of Groups

A group-level analysis argues that groups influence their members' adjustment and mental health, but the magnitude of this impact depends on the nature of the group. Groups, unlike individuals, are not all created equal. Some aggregations of individuals seem, intuitively, to deserve to be called "groups": Families, gangs, support groups, school boards, production teams, and neighborhood associations are examples. Other collections of people—bystanders to a mugging, the audience in a theater, or Internet users arguing with one another via commentaries to a blogger's post—may lack the defining features of a group. But what are those defining features?

Relationships

Definitions of the concept of group abound, but most theorists would agree that a group comes into existence when people become connected by and within social relationships. Both Lewin (1948) and Cartwright and Zander (1968) stressed the importance of relationships among members as the key
defining feature of a true group, with Cartwright and Zander (1968, p. 46) concluding a “group is a collection of individuals who have relations to one another that make them interdependent to some significant degree.”

Groups create and sustain relationships between individual members, but the relationships that link the members of a group together are not of one type. In families, for example, the relationships are based on kinship, but in the workplace the relationships are based on task-related interdependencies. In some groups members are friends of one another, but in others the members express little mutual attraction, liking, or loving for one another. Nor are the relationships linking members of different types of groups equally strong or enduring. Some relationships, like the links between members of a family or a clique of close friends, are enduring ones, which have developed over time and are based on a long history of mutual influence and exchange. In other cases, however, the ties between members may be relatively weak ones that are so fragile they are easily severed. Nor need all relationships be mutual ones.

In a group of friends, for example, some members may be liked by all the group members but these group members may like only a subset of the group members in return. But no matter what the nature of the relations, a group exists when individuals are connected to one another by some type of social tie. Theoretically, the number of relationships needed to create a completely interconnected group—one where every member is linked to every other member—is given by the equation \( n(n - 1)/2 \), where \( n \) is the number of people in group (and if we assume that all relationships are mutual). A relatively small group—for example, a 12-person jury or committee—would require the development and maintenance of 66 relationships if every member was connected to every other member. In consequence, in many cases the number of ties in a group is less than the number of potential relationships. Evolutionary theorist Dunbar (2008) goes so far as to suggest that the need to track connections with others—to remember who can be trusted to share, who will act in helpful ways, or who is owed a favor and who is not—spurred the development of a larger brain in primates. Dunbar’s social brain hypothesis assumes that group life is more psychologically demanding than a more isolated, independent one. Moreover, given the number of relationships that must be tracked in larger groups, Dunbar suggests that humans likely evolved to live most comfortably in groups of 150 people or fewer.

In general, the stronger the relationships linking members, the more influence the group has on its members. A young man who is part of a gang, for example, may act in ways that the group requires because the relationships that bind him to the group are so numerous and so strong that the group is too powerful to resist. In contrast, a member of a club may break the group’s attendance rules regularly because there are few ties that bind him or her to the group or those ties are relatively weak. As with other relationships, such as friendships and partnerships, the strength of the relationship is determined, in large part, by the rewards the group provides, the costs the relationship incurs, and the member’s degree of commitment to the group (Thibaut & Kelly, 1959).

**Boundaries**

The relationships that sustain a group not only link members to one another but also define who is in the group and who is not. A group is therefore **boundaried**, in a psychological sense, with those who are included in the group recognized as members and those who are not part of the group excluded as nonmembers. These boundaries set the members apart from other people, and hence, they distinguish a group from another psychologically significant aggregate: the social network. To become part of a social network, an individual need only establish a relationship of some sort with a person who is already part of the network. If persons A and B already know each other—they are linked by a social relationship—then person C can join their network by establishing a relationship with either A or B. But a group, unlike a network, is more than a chain of individuals joined in dyadic pairings. Even though A and B are friends and B and C are friends, if these individuals are linked only in these dyadic pair-bonds, then they are part of a social network but not a group. A group exists when members form a relationship with the group as a whole and when it is the group that sustains, at least in part, the relationships among each of the individual members. If A, B, and C are not linked to a supervening aggregate, then they are just sets of friends and not members of a group.

Groups’ boundaries vary from the stable and relatively formalized to the unstable and highly permeable. As Ziller’s (1965) theory of open and closed groups suggests that group membership can fluctuate for various reasons: members are voted out of the group (e.g., governing committees), members voluntarily come and go (e.g., community service groups), and so on. Regardless of the reasons for
group fluctuation, open groups are especially unlikely to reach a state of equilibrium since members recognize that they may lose or relinquish their place within the group at any time. Members of such groups, especially those in which membership is dependent on voting or meeting a particular standard, are more likely to monitor the actions of others. Ziller writes, “In the expanded frame of reference of the open groups in which transfers frequently occur, more accurate and more reliable ratings of the members are possible” (1965, p. 168).

In contrast, closed groups are often more cohesive as competition for membership is irrelevant and group members anticipate future collaborations. Thus, in closed groups, individuals are more likely to focus on the collective nature of the group and to identify with the group. Ziller's theory suggests that open groups, by their very nature, are less cohesive.

Interdependence

Groups entwine the fates of their members. As Cartwright and Zander (1968, p. 46) noted, it is not just that the members are related to each other but that these relationships “make them interdependent to some significant degree.” Shaw (1981, p.454), in his definition, concluded that a group is “two or more persons who are interacting with one another in such a manner that each person influences and is influenced by each other person.” When individuals are interdependent, their outcomes, actions, thoughts, feelings, and experiences are determined in part by others in the group.

Some groups create only the potential for interdependence among members. The people standing in a queue at the checkout counter in a store, audience members in a darkened theater, or the congregation of a large mega-church are only minimally interdependent; but other groups—such as gangs, families, sports teams, and military squads—create far higher levels of interdependency since members reliably and substantially influence one another's outcomes over a long period of time and in a variety of situations. In such groups the influence of one member on another also tends to be mutual; member A can influence B, but B can also influence A in return. In other groups, in contrast, influence is more unequal and more one-directional. In a business, for example, the boss may determine how employees spend their time, what kind of rewards they experience, and even the duration of their membership in the group. These employees can influence their boss to a degree, but the boss's influence is nearly unilateral.

Interdependence increases the degree of power the group holds over each member, for the greater the members’ dependence on the group, the more likely they are to act in ways that will sustain their membership—even if that means engaging in behaviors that they find personally objectionable. As social exchange theory explains, the greater the individual members’ commitment to the group—with commitment generally increasing with time spent in the group, the costs already incurred by membership, the level of rewards received from the group, and the lack of alternative group memberships—the greater the group’s power.

Structure

Moreno (1934), in his analysis of the nature of groups and their durability, argued that the psychological impact of a group on its members depends largely on the group's structural integrity. He believed that groups with harmonious attraction and authority relations among members were likely to survive and that the individuals in such groups would be more likely to prosper psychologically.

Groups are structured, rather than unstructured, when roles, norms, and patterned relations organize the actions and activities within them. Sherif and Sherif (1956, p. 144), suggest that these structural features are what differentiate a group from a haphazard assortment of individuals: “A group is a social unit which consists of a number of individuals who stand in (more or less) definite status and role relationships to one another and which possesses a set of values or norms of its own regulating the behavior of individual members.”

The more structured the group, the more clearly defined the actions taken by specific members. Many groups are structured by design, for by defining roles, norms, and relations the group and its founders hope to facilitate goal attainment. But even without a deliberate attempt at organizing, the group will probably develop a structure anyway. Initially, members may consider themselves to be just members, basically similar to each other. But over time each group member will tend to perform a specific range of actions and interact with other group members in a particular way. The role of leader emerges in many groups, but other roles arise in groups over time. Benne and Sheats (1948), in one of the earliest analyses of the roles that members take in groups, concluded that a group, to survive, must meet two basic demands: it must accomplish its tasks and the relationships among its members must be maintained. They suggested that the roles
that frequently emerge in groups match these two basic needs, with task roles including coordinator, elaborator, energizer, evaluator-critic, information-giver, information-seeker, and opinion-giver and the relational, socioemotional roles including compromiser, encourager, follower, and harmonizer. Benne and Sheats also identified a third set of roles: the individualistic roles occupied by individuals who stress their own needs over the group's needs.

Norms are the consensual and often implicit standard that describe what behaviors should and should not be performed in a given group context and are part of the group's socially shared structure. Although agreement among members is often implicit and taken for granted, only when a degree of consensus emerges regarding a standard does it function as a norm. Sherif's (1936) seminal work confirmed the interpersonal, group-level status of norms by experimentally creating norms in a laboratory setting. The norms his groups generated had a reality independent of the individual members who supported them so that when new members joined the groups they learned, and subsequently passed on, the standards that they themselves had acquired through group interaction.

Roles, norms, and other structural aspects of groups, although unseen and often unnoticed, lie at the heart of their most dynamic processes. Individuals who occupy roles that grant them more status within the group tend to be more influential, even when examining issues that fall outside their areas of expertise. When several members form a subgroup within the larger group, they exert more influence on the rest of the group than they would individually. When people manage to place themselves at the hub of the group's information-exchange patterns, their influence over others increases. As Moreland and Levine (1982) explain in their theory of group socialization, when people join a group, they initially spend much of their time trying to come to terms with the structural requirements of their group. If they cannot meet the group's demands, they might not remain a member for long. As their commitment to the group increases and the group becomes increasingly committed to the individual, individuals transition into the role of full member and tend to fulfill the requirements of their position within the group.

Cohesion
A group is not just the individuals who are members or even the dyadic pair-bonds that link members to one another. A group, viewed holistically, is a unified whole; an entity formed when interpersonal forces bind the members together in a single unit with boundaries that mark who is in the group and who is outside of it. This quality of "groupness," solidarity, or unity is generally termed cohesion and is a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for a group to exist. A group without cohesion would disintegrate since forces that keep the group intact are insufficient to counteract the forces that pull the group apart (Dion, 2000).

Durkheim (1897/1966, 1900/1973) discussed how groups vary in terms of cohesiveness; he proposed that groups with greater solidarity had more influence over their members. A more formal analysis of cohesion was supplied by Lewin (1948), who suggested that cohesion involved both individual-level and group-level processes. At the individual level, cohesiveness derives from each member's attraction to other group members, whether this attraction is based on liking, respect, or trust. At the group level, cohesiveness reflects that "we-feeling" that joins people together to form a single unit (Cartwright, 1968; Festinger, 1950). Many factors combine to determine a group's level of cohesiveness, including attraction among members, similarity of members to one another, group size, and structural features such as the absence of subgroups, a flatter status structure, and so on.

Cohesion is a uniquely group-level concept, for cohesion comes about if, and only if, a group exists. Although a group with low levels of cohesiveness may be a durable one, cohesiveness usually signals the health of the group. A cohesive group will be more likely to prosper, over time, since it retains its members and allows them to reach goals that would elude a more incoherent aggregate. The group that lacks cohesion is at risk, for if too many members drift away, the group may not survive. The concept of cohesiveness, too, offers insights into some of the most intriguing questions people ask about groups: Why do some groups fail to retain their members, whereas others grow rapidly in size? Why do some groups stand loyally behind the decisions of their leaders, whereas the members of other groups dissociate themselves from their group at the first sign of conflict? When do members put the needs of their group above their own personal interests? What is the source of the feeling of confidence and unity that arises in some groups and not in others? If one understands the causes and consequences of cohesion, then one is further along in understanding a host of core processes that occur in groups, including productivity, members' satisfaction and
turnover, morale, formation, stability, influence, and conflict.

**Entitativity (Groupness)**

Groups are real not just in a physical sense but also in a perceptual sense. Groups are often construed to be unified Gestals whose parts mix together to form a single thing by members and nonmembers. Perceivers readily hypostatize groups: They perceive them to be real and assume that their properties are influential ones. Brown (2000, p. 3) considered this aspect of a group—that members define the group as real and see themselves as members of it—to be the sine qua non of a group. He writes: “A group exists when two or more people define themselves as members of it and when its existence is recognized by at least one other.” Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, and Wetherell (1987, pp. 1–2) similarly suggested “a psychological group is defined as one that is psychologically significant for the members, to which they relate themselves subjectively for social comparison and the acquisition of norms and values . . . that they privately accept membership in, and which influences their attitudes and behavior.”

Campbell (1958) believed that this aspect of a group was so essential to understanding how people perceive groups that he coined the word *entitativity* to describe a group’s perceived unity. Entitativity, as perceived cohesiveness, depends on certain perceptual cues that perceivers rely on intuitively to decide if an aggregation of individuals is a true group or just a collection of people. Many aggregates of individuals occupying the same physical location—commuters waiting for a bus or spectators at a sporting event—may lack entitativity since they seem to be a disorganized mass of individuals who happen to be in the same place at the same time, but if they begin to cheer, express similar emotions, and move together, they may look more like a group to those who are observing them. Entitativity, according to Campbell, is substantially influenced by degree of interdependence (common fate: Do the individuals experience the same or interrelated outcomes?), homogeneity (similarity: Do the individuals perform similar behaviors or resemble one another?), and presence (proximity: How close together are the individuals in the aggregation?).

Calling an aggregation a “group” is not mere labeling. Groups that are high in entitativity tend to be more cohesive (Zyphur & Islam, 2006), and their members also experience enhanced feelings of social well-being (Sani, Bowe, & Herrera, 2008). When people believe they are part of a highly entitative group, they are more likely to respond to the group’s normative pressures (Castano, Yzerbyt, & Bourguignon, 2003); and this tendency is particularly strong when people feel uncertain about themselves and the correctness of their beliefs (Hogg, Sherman, Dietscheluis, Maitner, & Moffitt, 2007). The concept of entitativity also helps to explain the varied reactions people display when they are part of groups that are created using technology, such as conference calls or Internet-mediated connections. Some members do not consider such groups to be very entitative because they lack physical presence, but others report that such groups are as high in entitativity as any face-to-face group to which they belong (Lowry, Roberts, Romano, Cheney, & Hightower, 2006). Entitativity, then, is often in the eye of the beholder. As Zander and his colleagues demonstrated many years ago, simply telling a collection of people they constitute a group is sufficient to trigger intragroup dynamics. When they repeatedly told women working in isolation that they were nonetheless members of a group, the women accepted this label and later rated themselves more negatively after their “group” failed (Zander, Stotland, & Wolfe, 1960).

Entitativity also influences nonmembers’ perceptions of the group and its members. Perceivers are more likely to stereotype specific individuals when they are members of a group that is thought to be high in entitativity (Rydell, Hugenberg, Ray, & Mackie, 2007). Observers are more likely to assume the members of such groups are highly similar to one another (Crawford, Sherman, & Hamilton, 2002) but different in significant ways from nonmembers (Pickett, 2001). Their perceptions of such groups also reveal a tendency toward *essentialism*; the belief that the group has deep, relatively unchanging qualities that give rise to their more surface-level characteristics (Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2002; Yzerbyt, Judd, & Cornelle, 2004). When people think that a group is entitative, they assume that the group members act as they do because that is simply the nature of people who are members of that particular group.

**The Significance of Groups**

Groups are scientifically, practically, and clinically significant. Groups—particularly groups with many, rather than few, of the defining features of groups, including relationships linking a substantial number of members, boundaries, interdependence, structure, cohesion, and entitativity—influence the thoughts,
emotions, and actions of their members, so a scientifically informed understanding of people requires understanding groups. Groups, as the final section of this chapter concludes, provide members with the resources they need to meet the demands they encounter in a wide range of environmental contexts across the span of their lives.

**Groups and the Need to Belong**

Baumeister and Leary's (1995) belongingness hypothesis argues that "human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and impactful interpersonal relationships" (p. 497). Although groups with superficial relationships among members do not satisfy this need, members of long term, emotionally intensive groups—therapeutic groups, support groups, combat units, and high-demand religious organizations—display strong bonds between themselves and other group members—to the point of showing withdrawal when someone leaves the "family." A psychodynamic perspective suggests that groups provide a means of regaining the security of the family by creating emotional ties among members by providing a sense of security like that of a nurturing parent and making possible relations with others that are similar in affective tone to sibling bonds (Freud, 1922; Lee & Robbins, 1995).

**Loneliness**

Studies of people who are socially isolated attest to the distress caused by too few connections to others. Loneliness covaries with depression, anxiety, personality disorders, and interpersonal hostility; and prolonged periods of loneliness have been linked to such physical illnesses as cirrhosis of the liver, hypertension, heart disease, and leukemia (Hojat & Vogel, 1987; Jones & Carver, 1991). Individuals who are extremely lonely display elevated levels of Epstein-Barr virus and reduced levels of B lymphocytes—characteristics that are associated with reductions in immunity and increased vulnerability to mononucleosis (Kiecolt-Glaser, Speicher, Holliday, & Glaser, 1984). Loneliness is also linked to suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts (Van Orden et al., 2010).

Individuals who are members of social groups report less loneliness than individuals with few memberships. Weiss (1973) draws a distinction between social loneliness, which occurs when people lack ties to other people in general, and emotional loneliness—the absence of a meaningful, intimate relationship with another person. Open, transitory groups do little to prevent either social or emotional loneliness; but closed, highly engaging groups are sufficient to prevent social loneliness, and a group with many of the defining characteristics of a group (relationships, boundaries, interdependence, structure, cohesion, groupness) may meet members emotional as well as social needs. People who belong to more groups and organizations report less loneliness than those who keep to themselves, and this effect is stronger for groups with many interconnections among members (Kraus, Davis, Bazzini, Church, & Kirchman, 1993; Stokes, 1985) and highly cohesive ones (Anderson & Martin, 1995; Schmidt & Serin, 1983).

**Isolation and Rejection**

Membership in a group promotes a range of positive social and psychological outcomes, but these benefits are not as positive as the effects of exclusion are negative. Voluntary isolation apparently has few negative consequences, but unintended, involuntary isolation is associated with emotional instability, insomnia, memory lapses, depression, fatigue, and general confusion (Suedfeld, 1997). Deliberate social exclusion, or ostracism, has particularly negative consequences, in part since the isolation from groups it produces is intentional rather than accidentally produced. When Williams (2007) asked people who had been ostracized to describe themselves, they used words such as "frustrated," "angry," "nervous," and "lonely." They evidence physiological signs of stress, including elevated blood pressure and cortisol levels (a stress-related hormone), and brain-imaging research suggests that the pain of exclusion is neurologically similar to pain caused by physical injury (Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003; MacDonald & Leary, 2005).

Leary (1990) suggests that people are satisfied when a group takes them in but a group that actively seeks them out provides maximal inclusion. In contrast, individuals respond negatively when a group ignores or avoids them, but maximal exclusion—the group rejects, ostracizes, abandons, or banishes—is particularly punishing (Williams & Sommer, 1997). He and his colleagues found an association between ostracism and acts of violence, often aimed at those group members who were the rejectors (Leary, Kowalski, Smith, & Phillips, 2003).

Exclusion also influences self-esteem. Leary's sociometer model, for example, suggests that self-esteem is not based on private, personal appraisals of worth. Instead, Leary maintains that "self-esteem is part of a sociometer that monitors people's
Attitude and Values

When people find themselves in stressful, difficult circumstances, they often cope by forming or joining a group (Dooley & Catalano, 1984). In many cases support is drawn from dyadic relationships, such as a single close personal friend or intimate partner, but in other instances the support stems from membership in an informally organized friendship group or some other type of social aggregate. Hays and Oxley (1986), for example, found that college students cope with the stresses of entering college by forming extensive social networks of peers, which evolve into friendship clusters. Stressful life circumstances increase the risk of psychological and physical illness, but groups can serve as protective buffers against these negative consequences (Herbert & Cohen, 1993; Uchino, Cacioppo, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1996; Wills, 1991). This buffering effect argues that individuals who are part of a group may not be able to avoid stressful life events but they respond more positively when these stressors befall them.

It should be noted, however, that the bulk of the research has focused on the effects of support from friends and loved ones rather than groups per se. Hence, until recently, it has not been possible to distinguish between support drawn from close relationships, such as dyadic relationships or a family member, and support drawn from friendship cliques, networks of acquaintances, or social groups such as clubs, sports teams, church groups, work units, or self-help associations. Overall, however, the evidence suggests that people who belong to groups are healthier than individuals who have few ties to other people (Stroebe, Stroebe, Abakoumkin, & Schut, 1996). Work by Stroebe and Stroebe (1996) and Sugisawa, Liang, and Liu (1994) even suggests that group members have longer lives.

Groups and Social Support

When people find themselves in stressful, difficult circumstances, they often cope by forming or joining a group (Dooley & Catalano, 1984). In many cases support is drawn from dyadic relationships, such as a single close personal friend or intimate partner, but in other instances the support stems from membership in an informally organized friendship group or some other type of social aggregate. Hays and Oxley (1986), for example, found that college students cope with the stresses of entering college by forming extensive social networks of peers, which evolve into friendship clusters. Stressful life circumstances increase the risk of psychological and physical illness, but groups can serve as protective buffers against these negative consequences (Herbert & Cohen, 1993; Uchino, Cacioppo, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1996; Wills, 1991). This buffering effect argues that individuals who are part of a group may not be able to avoid stressful life events but they respond more positively when these stressors befall them.

It should be noted, however, that the bulk of the research has focused on the effects of support from friends and loved ones rather than groups per se. Hence, until recently, it has not been possible to distinguish between support drawn from close relationships, such as dyadic relationships or a family member, and support drawn from friendship cliques, networks of acquaintances, or social groups such as clubs, sports teams, church groups, work units, or self-help associations. Overall, however, the evidence suggests that people who belong to groups are healthier than individuals who have few ties to other people (Stroebe, Stroebe, Abakoumkin, & Schut, 1996). Work by Stroebe and Stroebe (1996) and Sugisawa, Liang, and Liu (1994) even suggests that group members have longer lives.

Attitudes and Values

Cooley (1909) drew a broad distinction between two types of groups: primary groups and secondary groups (or complex groups). Primary groups are small, close-knit groups, such as families, friendship cliques, or neighbors. Secondary groups are larger and more formally organized than primary groups. Such groups—religious congregations, work groups, clubs, neighborhood associations, and the like—tend to be shorter in duration and less emotionally involving. Both of these types of groups provide members with their attitudes, values, and identities.

Cooley maintained that groups teach members the skills they need to contribute to the group, provide them with the opportunity to discover and internalize the rules that govern social behavior, and let them practice modifying their behavior in response to social norms and others' requirements. Groups socialize individual members (Parsons, Bales, & Shils, 1953).

In most cases, when conflicts over opinions, choices, and lifestyle occur, they can be traced back to the socializing effects of groups. Norms in gangs encourage members to take aggressive actions against others. Adolescent peer cliques pressure members to take drugs and commit illegal acts. Fraternities insist that members engage in unhealthy practices, such as drinking excessive amounts of alcohol. Work groups develop such high standards for productivity that members experience unrelieved amounts of stress. Sororities may convince members to adopt habits with regard to dieting and exercise that trigger bulimia (Crandall, 1988). Some groups can adopt even more unusual standards, and members may come to accept them. Radical religious groups, for example, may be based on beliefs that nonmembers consider extraordinary but that members accept without question.

These emergent group norms are sustained by a common set of group-level informational, normative, and interpersonal processes (Forsyth, 1990). Informational influence occurs when the group provides members with information that they can use to make decisions and form opinions. People who join a group whose members accept bizarre ideas as true will, in time, explain things in that way as well. Normative influence occurs when individuals tailor their actions to fit the group's norms. Many people take such norms as "Bribery is wrong" and "Contribute your time and resources to the community" for granted, but some societies and some groups have different norms which are equally powerful and widely accepted. Normative influence accounts for the transmission of religious, economic, moral, political, and interpersonal attitudes, beliefs, and values across generations. Interpersonal influence is used in those rare
instances when someone violates the group's norms. The individual who publicly violates a group's norm will likely meet with reproach or even be ostracized from the group. These three factors—informational, normative, and interpersonal influence—can be readily observed in groups as diverse as military units, street gangs, college fraternities, and religious denominations.

Identity
The self is often viewed as an aspect of personality—the outgrowth of private personal experiences and self-reflection. But the self is also shaped, in part, by group-level processes. Just as Freud (1922) believed that identification causes children to bond with and imitate their parents, identification with the group prompts members to bond with, and take on the characteristics of, their groups. The psychological experience of group membership is a central premise in social identity theory of groups and intergroup relations. Tajfel and Turner (1986) and their colleagues originally developed social identity theory in their studies of intergroup conflict. In their studies they created what they thought were the most minimal of groups, for their groups were temporary assemblages of completely unrelated people with no history, no future, and no real connection to one another. Yet, they discovered, even in these minimal conditions, that group members began to identify with their groups, even to the point of favoring their group and its members over other groups. The groups became, very quickly, psychologically real for members.

Social identity theory suggests the group becomes represented in each individual member, so their selves share some qualities in common (Turner et al., 1987). Brewer and her colleagues further divide the group-level side of the self into two components: the relational self and the collective self (Brewer, 2007; Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Brewer & Chen, 2007). The relational self is defined by ties to other people, particularly dyadic and reciprocal roles such as father-son and leader-follower, whereas the collective self is determined by membership in larger groups and categories if individuals consider these groups important and relevant to their self-concept. Individuals may, for example, come to define themselves as employees of the place where they work, as dedicated followers of a particular religious group, or as patriotic citizens of their nation.

People who identify with their groups experience a strong sense of belonging in their groups and take pride in their membership. They are more involved in the group's activities and willingly help the group meet its goals (Abrams, Hogg, Hinklé, & O'Fen, 2005). But with the increased identification with the group comes the tendency to engage in self-stereotyping: the integration of stereotypes pertaining to the group in one's own self-descriptions (Biernat, Vescio, & Green, 1996). Social identity is also connected to feelings of self-worth. People who belong to prestigious groups tend to have higher self-esteem than those who belong to stigmatized groups (Brown & Lohr, 1987). However, as Crocker and Major (1989) noted in their seminal analysis of stigma, even membership in a socially denigrated group can sustain self-esteem. In many cases members of stigmatized groups and minority groups protect their personal appraisals of their groups from unfair negative stereotypes by rejecting the disparaging elements of their group's label. So long as individuals believe the groups they belong to are valuable, they will experience a heightened sense of personal self-esteem.

The identity-sustaining aspects of group memberships have a downside however. Membership in a group or social category may provide a social identity, but it can set in motion the tendency to derogate members of other groups. Group-based identities sow the seeds of conflict by creating a cognitive distinction between "us" and "them." According to Tajfel and Turner (1986, p. 13), the "mere perception of belonging to two distinct groups—that is, social categorization per se—is sufficient to trigger intergroup discrimination favoring the in group." Groups thus sustain individual members' self-esteem but at the cost of creating animosity toward those who belong to other groups.

Goal Attainment
Groups, in addition to yielding substantial psychological benefits for members, are the means by which most of the world's work is accomplished. Although the accomplishments of lone explorers are often highlighted by historians—Columbus, Marco Polo, Sir Edumund Hillary—these individuals were supported in their efforts by groups. Most inventions are not developed by single individuals working in isolation but by teams of collaborators. In some cases even great artists—such as the impressionists and da Vinci—produced their works as members of groups. A hundred years ago single craftspeople created commodities which were then sold to others, but in modern times most things are built by groups. Groups also make nearly all
decisions—at least ones dealing with complex or consequential matters.

McGrath (1984) uses two dimensions (generate/negotiate and choose/execute) to generate an eight-category typology of group goals. Generating groups concoct strategies to be used to accomplish their goals (planning tasks) or to create altogether new ideas and approaches to problems (creativity tasks). Choosing groups make decisions about issues that have correct solutions (intellective tasks) or answer complex questions that defy simple solution (decision-making tasks). Negotiating groups must resolve differences of opinion among members regarding their goals or decisions (cognitive conflict tasks) or resolve competitive disputes among members (motive-tive tasks). Executing groups do things, including competing against other groups (contention/battles/competitive tasks) or working together to create some product or carry out actions that require coordinated effort (performance/psychomotor tasks). McGrath's model thus distinguishes between conceptual-behavioral goals and purely collaborative goals—they require that group members work together to accomplish their goals versus those that pit individuals and/or groups against each other.

Adopting the Group-level Perspective: Future Directions

Twentieth-century theorists, researchers, and practitioners made great strides in their quest to understand human behavior. They maintained that individuals are psychologically complex, that their inner mental life can be described and examined systematically, and that issues of psychological adjustment and dysfunction are determined, in large part, by such psychological states and processes as needs, motivations, thoughts, personality, and perceptions. As Baars (1986, p. 412) concluded, "psychodynamic thought, broadly conceived, has probably provided the richest and most humanly relevant vein of psychological theorizing in the century." What is the next step that will be taken in the analysis of the human condition?

What Level of Analysis?

A multilevel approach recommends augmenting the individual-level perspective with other perspectives, including one that focuses squarely on groups and group processes. At the level of the individual, people's actions, thoughts, and emotions cannot be understood without taking into consideration the groups they belong to and the groups that surround them. Culturally, all kinds of societies—hunting/gathering, horticultural, pastoral, industrial, and postindustrial—are defined by the characteristics of the small groups that compose them. On a practical level, much of the world's work is done by groups, so enhanced understanding of their dynamics may mean they can be designed to be efficient. To improve productivity in a factory, problem solving in a boardroom, or learning in the classroom, one must understand groups.

What Discipline Will Take Responsibility for the Study of Groups?

A multilevel approach requires that researchers share the study of groups with researchers in a variety of scientific disciplines and professions. Groups are and will continue to be studied in psychology, sociology, communication studies, business, political science, economics, and anthropology; but in many cases researchers in these fields are not mindful of one another's work. By tradition, researchers tend to publish their findings in their own discipline's journals and to present their findings at conferences with colleagues from their own fields but only rarely explore connections between their work and the work being done in other disciplines. Since no one discipline can claim the study of groups as its rightful domain, future investigators should strive to adopt a multidisciplinary, as well as a multilevel, perspective on groups, and changes in communication across fields should facilitate that process.

Will Groups Continue to Be Influential?

Political scientist Robert Putnam (2000) wrote, in his whimsically titled book Bowling Alone, about the declining frequency of traditional groups. His analyses suggested that, since the 1960s, the number of groups and people's involvement in groups have steadily declined. He did not fully consider, however, changes in the nature of groups that have occurred recently. Interest in some types of groups—community groups, fraternal and professional organizations, or even church-based groups—has decreased, but other types of groups—book groups, support groups, teams at work, and so on—have taken their place. In fact, even though Putnam's book title suggests that people are bowling alone rather than in groups, bowling remains a popular social activity, for hardly anyone bowls alone. They now bowl with friends, coworkers, and family members. Given that the desire to join groups is likely woven into humans' genetic makeup, it is likely that groups—in one form or another—will continue to play a central role in human existence.
Will Group-Level Approaches Gain Momentum?

In 1950 Slavson predicted that group therapy would largely replace individual methods of treatment. In 1954 Bogardus predicted that researchers would soon develop extensive measures of group personality and that groupuality would become as important a concept in group psychology as personality is in individual psychology. In 1974 Steiner predicted that the 1980s would see groups emerge as the centerpiece of social psychology.

These predictions have not been fully confirmed. Group approaches have proven themselves to be effective, but they are not the preferred mode of treatment for most therapists and clients (Durkin, 1999). Concepts like groupuality and saliency have failed to generate theoretical unity or empirical interest. The surge of interest in groups predicted by Steiner did not occur, for groups are understudied relative to such topics as personality, social cognition, attitudes, and relationships (Wittenbaum & Moreland, 2008).

What does the future hold for the group-level approaches to understanding human adjustment and well-being? Although the course of science, because of its stress on discovery and innovation, is difficult to predict, the contents of this volume suggest that group-level approaches are garnering increased interest among theorists, researchers, and practitioners. Past theoretical, empirical, and applied work has built a sturdy foundation for the continued development of the study of groups. Interest in meso- and macro-level processes has increased steadily in recent years, suggesting that a purely individualistic orientation is giving way to a multilevel orientation. Therapeutic applications that utilize a group setting are becoming increasingly common, and empirical studies of their utility have documented their therapeutic effectiveness (Burlingame, Mackenzie, & Strauss, 2004). As theorists, researchers, and practitioners confirm the central importance of groups in people’s lives, people will in time begin to think of themselves as group members first and individuals second (Forsyth, 2000).

References


