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Societies and other kinds of social groups

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Abstract

People live in distinct groups, notably territory-holding societies, whose boundaries aren't neatly defined by the traits that Pietraszewski describes for his socially aligned groups (or SAGs), as I propose calling them, which occur both within and between our societies. Although studying SAGs could prove enlightening, societies are essential human groups that likely existed long before the complex SAGs of today.

David Hume wrote, "The chief obstacle… to our improvement in the moral or metaphysical sciences is the obscurity of the ideas, and ambiguity of the terms." True, but certain terms can be useful because of their vagueness. Hence, any piece of English writing will likely employ the word "group" in a myriad of ways – even to refer, as Pietraszewski says, to people "waiting around for a bus." Although Pietraszewski's ideas intrigue, my concern is, first, with the author's assertion that such a commonplace term (one psychologists have no alternative to using in all sorts of contexts) can be redefined to narrowly serve an academic purpose. What this means is that the groups described by Pietraszewski need a moniker of their own; I propose calling them Pietraszewski groups or socially aligned groups (SAGs).

Another difficulty for Pietraszewski's usage gaining traction except among a few specialists is that a succinct way of expressing what he has in mind seems hard to come by: He doesn't distill a definition of SAGs in the abstract, where one might be expected, but rather buries the lede by only laying it out in an extended passage that begins 3,000 words into his discussion.

My chief argument with Pietraszewski's article, however, is that the word "group" is equated with cooperation (and then in the context of conflict). He's writing from a prevalent perspective that sees human sociality in terms of coalitions and strategic alliances; for example, a society is defined as a "group organized in a cooperative fashion," in the classic *Sociobiology* by my mentor Wilson (1975). The evolution of cooperation is Q82 an important research field, yet I've argued (Moffett, 2013) Q83 that for territory-controlling societies – that is, groups of well-defined memberships that remain stable over generations, which in one form or another have always been a fixture of human life (Moffett, 2020) – too much emphasis can be placed on cooperation.

Thinking of sociality in this way comes easy for evolutionary psychologists given how central cooperation is to human survival. The difficulty with seeing societies as based on cooperation, although, is that only their positive attributes are thus recognized; their equally significant discord is overlooked. Simmel (1908), one of the founders of sociology, recognized cooperation and conflict as inextricable "forms of sociation," each inconceivable without the other. Societies contain shifting tapestries of positive and negative interactions that fluctuate widely, depending on current social stresses and such factors as familiarity among the members and their relative social status. Instead of neatly defining, and separating, the societies themselves, SAGs exist in numerous forms both within and between societies and may change fluidly even while society borders remain stable.

Like it or not, our worst enemies are probably members of that group we call our nation, which we are nevertheless willing to fight for, even sometimes die for, while a hermit who contributes nothing has as much claim to a passport as community-minded citizens. Furthermore, individual citizens can decline to fight on behalf of their country; a nation's political adversaries can retreat from any hint of collaboration; states such as Venezuela can descend into social chaos yet have citizens that remain patriotic; and, at the same time, distinct societies can band together should trade between them be beneficial (Moffett, 2019, Ch. 1). In short, society memberships generally track poorly with Pietraszewski's "group-constitutive roles."

I see social identity as the foundational feature of societies and the primary basis for distinguishing one society from the next (and in modern societies, formed from centuries of conquests and assimilations, one ethnicity or race from the next). As I've written elsewhere (Moffett, 2019, p. 27), "a society is [best] conceived not as an assembly of cooperators, but as a certain kind of group in which everyone has a clear sense of membership brought about by a lasting shared identity. Membership in societies of humans and other species is a yes/no matter, with ambiguity [e.g., the status of recent immigrants] rare. The prospects for alliances, whether from friendship, family ties, or social obligations, may rank among the paramount adaptive gains of having societies in many species, yet aren't necessary to the equation." Indeed, the advantages of collaboration may be purely accidental ("proto-cooperation": Allee, 1931; Herbert-Read et al., 2016). Societies are obligatory across the portion of the evolutionary tree (clade) humans share with chimpanzees and bonobos, which live in "communities" that primatologists recognize as well-defined over the long haul (despite females emigrating upon reaching adulthood: Wrangham, 1996). These essential groups would have been universal among our ancestors long before intricate SAGs.

The evidence from psychology suggests that "the foundation of the human ability to form useful social categories is in place in infancy" (Liberman, Woodward, & Kinzler, 2017). The purely perceptual recognition of such categories as native-language speakers (Kinzler, Dupoux, & Spelke, 2007) underlies the later-

developing (e.g., Pauker, Xu, Williams, and Biddle, 2016) conceptual understanding of those groups as socially relevant (Charlesworth & Banaji, in press). One imagines that these categories, largely arising through exposure to identifying "markers," serve as frequent reference points to which humans apply their observations of cooperative and antagonistic interactions (Smaldino, 2019) relevant to the emergence of SAGs. Indeed, one hypothesis is that, even as children (Meyer, Roberts, Jayaratne, & Gelman, 2020), we rapidly and automatically (e.g., Ito and Senholzi, 2013) categorize what we see as essentialized human groups, in much the way we distinguish other species (Gil-White, 2001). In instances where group borders are fuzzy, our minds draw from a variety of cues to tidy them up and thereby reduce the ambiguities of what would otherwise be a confusing world (MacLin & MacLin, 2001; Timeo, Farroni, & Maass, 2017).

Pietraszewski asks "what the human mind is representing when it represents a social group," but for certain groups this representation needn't be built on anything more complex, at its core, than how we distinguish tiger from panda, with our fear of the *other* developing, with time and experience, toward the former; whether our minds represent any collection of things as a group – humans included – isn't necessarily determined by calculations around whether, and how, they might cooperate.

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Can group representations based on relational cues warrant the rich inferences typically drawn from group membership?

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Abstract

Pietraszewski's model – although promising in many respects – needs to be extended so that it can explain the multitude of rich inferences that people draw from group membership. In this commentary, we highlight some facets of group thinking, especially from the field of developmental psychology, that cannot be unambiguously accounted for by a model that is built solely on relational cues.

Pietraszewski's paper provides a fascinating new approach to describing what the mind represents as a "social group" and how such representations are formed. Essentially, the present model proposes that "group membership is a relational property (…), who 'belongs' to what group is borne out of a calculation of the relative relationships among the agents involved" (p. 29). While welcoming this new approach, in this commentary, we would like to highlight a few phenomena observed about group psychology (especially, in the field of developmental psychology) for which it is not quite clear how the current model would account. We suggest that either the theory should be extended so that it provides a framework for interpreting these phenomena as well or the limitation of scope should be made more explicit.

Specifically, representations generally appear to be more elaborate than merely involving information about specific roles in certain social interactions: Ample evidence in psychology suggests that these representations of social groups are conceptually rich not only in the minds of adults, but also in those of very young children as well (Liberman, Woodward, & Kinzler, 2017). In fact, perceived group membership allows even young children to draw inferences not only about how people will relate to each other (Rhodes & Chalik, 2013), but also about, for example, what knowledge (e.g., Liberman, Gerdin, Kinzler, & Shaw, 2020; Soley, 2019) or preferences (Shutts, Kinzler, McKee, & Spelke, 2009) they possess. Moreover, even young children are selective in what kind of inferences they draw from different group memberships. For example, they expect friends to share knowledge of personal affairs, while they expect members of a cultural group to share knowledge of cultural norms (e.g., Liberman *et al.*, 2020). Importantly, these inferences seem to arise as early as 12 months of age (Shutts *et al.*, 2009) and based on cues that are not presented to children in the context of social relations (e.g., language). These examples illustrate that from very early on,