CHAPTER 8

Human Groups Need (and Shape) Selves

Why do human beings need to construct and maintain a distinctive (even unique) identity at all? The answer may lie not in individuals but in groups. Yet, the benefits of groups don't need individual selves. As Moffett (2019) has documented, ants have highly effective societies, but an ant cannot recognize a particular other ant, even one who has toiled beside it for a long time. Ants only recognize the difference between their own colony and other colonies. It's as if you couldn't tell your spouse or best friend apart from any stranger on the subway but you always immediately spot a foreign tourist as different.

For me, the crucial insight emerged from an accident of other duties. When writing a textbook on social psychology, my coauthor (Brad Bushman) and I divided up the chapters as to who would write the first draft of each. Neither of us had ever had much contact with the research on groups. When the writing of the chapter on groups fell to me, I set out to read the research literature. As I read, I looked for big themes that came up repeatedly, so I could use those to organize the chapter. I found two big themes.

One theme running through the research literature is the basic wonderfulness of groups. People like being in groups. Groups can do things that lone individuals cannot do, such as surrounding an enemy or prey, or lifting heavy loads. If a group and a lone individual both want the same resource, such as a fruit tree, the group will likely get it. Modern corporations, universities, governments, and other groups accomplish things that would be impossible for a single person to do, and these mostly make society better.

The second theme was the destructive, nasty, even evil consequences of group life. When people form into groups, they become extra-hostile toward outsiders, less likely to compromise or to find mutually beneficial

solutions. Group members skimp on effort, leaving the hard tasks to others. Committees sometimes make stupid, self-defeating, irrational, destructive decisions. In warfare, genocide, oppression, and the like, groups do far worse damage than lone individuals.

So, I had two important themes; the only problem was that they contradicted each other. How can groups be both wonderful and terrible? In groups, people accomplish more good than they could do alone, but they also do awful things that loners would not and could not do. Put simply, sometimes groups are more and better than the sum of their parts—but sometimes they are less and far worse. What makes the difference?

Grappling with this problem led me and some colleagues to compare the lists of good and bad aspects of groups, searching for a key difference. The decisive factor, we found, was the individual, responsible, differentiated self.

The bad side of groups generally emerged when individual selves became submerged in the group. The next section addresses some of the main ways research has shown groups to be underachieving or positively destructive (for a full review and sources, see Baumeister, Ainsworth, & Vohs, 2016).

When Groups Are Bad

Groupthink

When members all embrace the group's views and values, and especially when some group members maintain the dominant view by suppressing dissent, groups become prone to make blunders, ranging from minor to catastrophic. Everyone thinks alike, no one questions the plans and decisions. Even very smart and well-intentioned groups fall into disaster in these ways.

Mob Violence

People merge into an angry, violent group that is prone to break laws, damage property, and even kill people seen as enemies or wrongdoers. The mob mentality is more destructive than most of the participants would be if they were acting as single, responsible individuals. Individuals stop thinking of themselves as autonomous moral beings and simply act along with the mob.

Selfish Practices

Selfish practices destroy commonly owned properties. The *tragedy of the commons* referred to how public grasslands were ruined by herdsmen who let their cows or sheep eat so much of the grass that there wasn't enough left to grow back, so the resource ran out instead of endlessly replenishing itself (Hardin, 1968). Today, this is happening worldwide in the oceans, as

individual fishermen (and presumably fisherwomen) catch as many fish as they can so that there are not enough left to reproduce the stocks, and fish populations dwindle. Many other natural resources show similar patterns. What is owned in common gets used up, whereas what is owned individually sometimes gets carefully husbanded and preserved.

Social Loafing

What happens when people all put their muscles together to do a big task? The answer has been labeled "social loafing" (e.g., Karau & Williams, 1995; Latané et al., 1995). Abundant laboratory experiments show that people reduce effort when part of a group, as long as their individual performances are merged into the group. Making individuals accountable eliminates the effect. For example, swimmers swim more slowly when part of a relay team than when competing as individuals. But if the times of individual swimmers in the relay team are posted so everyone knows how fast each individual swam, suddenly the loafing stops and they perform at their best.

Information Loss

Committees are supposed to be wiser than lone decision makers because different members can contribute their unique knowledge and perspectives. Unfortunately, what often happens is that the committee members get together and talk about what they all know in common. Beautifully designed experiments by Stasser (1999; Stasser & Titus, 1985) show that committees fail to bring up all their information and therefore make poor decisions because they focus on what they all know in common. If you can get them to contribute their own individual knowledge, they start to find the best answer more often.

Collective Brain Fog

So-called brainstorming sessions bring members of a creative team together to stimulate each other by tossing out ideas. When this technique to enhance creativity was first discovered (by advertising agencies in the 1950s), it was greeted with terrific excitement. But careful studies gradually showed that brainstorming groups produce fewer and less creative ideas than the same number of people working alone (Mullen, Johnson, & Salas, 1991).

WHEN GROUPS ARE GOOD

In contrast to the foregoing, the powerful successes of groups capitalize on the differences among individuals (again, see Baumeister, Ainsworth, & Vohs, 2016). Some revealing examples follow.

Division of Labor

Early factories, called "manufactories," consisted of multiple expert craftsmen working in the same place but each producing an entire product by himself. Over time it was discovered that quality and quantity of production could be sharply increased by splitting the process into parts and having different people perform different parts. The modern social science of economics was launched by Adam Smith (1776/1991), with his famous description of a pin factory. Each man performed a different task, making the production more efficient and cheaper. A huge bonus was that the level of expertise required of each worker was much lower, saving enormously on labor costs. As a classic example, in 1900 each automobile was made by one or two men, who had to know pretty much everything about how to make a car. As a result, their labor was enormously expensive, and it took them the better part of a year to make a single car. Plus, they had to be paid at their high rate even when tightening screws or sweeping up, so the whole process was a money trap. Only very rich people could afford these expensive cars—paying two super-expert mechanics for a year, plus all the materials.

But by 1915 the Ford assembly line had revolutionized the process. Each man on the assembly line only had to be able to perform one task, a limited skill, so the labor was much cheaper than that of an expert mechanic. And he could become an expert at his small part of the job so that the cars were actually better in quality. Plus, they were made much more rapidly. Thus, division of labor produced more and better cars, faster, and at much less cost, than the old system of having an expert mechanic do the whole job.

A more recent study compared two flute factories (West, 1999). One only employed expert craftsmen, each of whom made the entire flute himself. The other used division of labor, with each worker doing only one part of the job, and proficient only at that. But the second one produced more, better, and cheaper flutes. Capitalizing on the differences among cooperating selves produced the best result. That's a key clue to what the human self evolved for.

Accountability

Holding people responsible for their actions, identifying who does what, and asking people to explain and justify their actions all lead groups to perform better (e.g., Lerner & Tetlock, 1999, 2003). Incentive structures can reward and thereby increase good actions, and can punish and thereby decrease bad actions. I strongly suspect that all human societies do this. Indeed, making people identified individually to the group counteracts some of the negative effects of groups listed above. People who are individually accountable to other group members behave better and perform better than people who aren't.

One could go on, but these are enough to make the crucial point. *Groups go bad when individual selves merge into the group. Groups flourish when they capitalize on individual selves each different from the others, individually accountable and responsible, thinking for themselves.* This is a vital point, especially in the context of assuming that humans evolved their specific traits, including selfhood, in order to capitalize on the advantages of groups.

There is one qualification that is a technicality, relevant for the most skeptical and critical readers. Anonymity is not quite the same as merging into the group, and in fact sometimes being anonymous enables people to think and choose as individuals. For example, secret ballots enable voters to express their opinions freely, without fear of being punished for not conforming to what other people prefer.

Sometimes, anonymity protects individuality. Sometimes, it interferes with it. Anonymity prevents the group from controlling the individual. If the goal is to make people do something that is a sacrifice to them, such as putting forth hard work or contributing money to the joint project, then identification works better because the lazy loafers and free riders can be identified and punished, while the virtuous contributors are recognized and rewarded. In contrast, when it's a matter of getting informational input from multiple sources, then anonymity protects the individual from pressure to conform. It lets people think for themselves, and that's what helps the group succeed.

In both cases, what matters is that the person participates as a distinct individual. Groups do best when different individuals contribute as best they can, based on their different knowledge, abilities, and other resources. A distinct, autonomous, unique, responsible self is a great boon to a productive social system.

All of this is tremendously important for understanding the human self. We evolved our unique human capacities in order to capitalize on the advantages of groups, indeed a new (as far as nature is concerned) kind of group based on sharing information, collective planning, and coordinating different individuals. Human beings took over planet Earth not by virtue of being the most ferocious animals, with fearsome claws or fangs, but instead by virtue of being able to work together in small groups. Recent work (see Tomasello, 2014; von Hippel, 2018) suggests, for example, that early human groups collected stones and developed collective stone-throwing skills that would drive away other animals.

Many social animals hunt together, and it is instructive to examine the case of our closest animal relatives, the chimpanzees. Chimps do hunt as groups and do manage something akin to division of labor. But, as Tomasello (2014; Tomasello et al., 2012) explains, each chimp is really out for himself. (Pronouns here are male: Female chimps do not work together as much as males.) For example, if a group of chimpanzees finds a monkey,

they want to kill and eat it. But they don't share deliberately. The one who catches the monkey will eat as much as he can, while the others will come over and try to grab a piece of the meat.

Suppose the monkey climbs a tree, and the nearest chimp follows it up the tree. The other chimps are smart enough to realize that they won't be able to get to the monkey ahead of their colleague who is already halfway up the tree, so some of them might try to predict what will happen if the monkey manages to escape that chimp. They might spread out to block the possible escape routes. This looks like group coordination, and it is a step in that direction. Still, whoever catches the monkey will eat as much as he can before the others converge. There is no consensus of working as a group and sharing the rewards. A human group will spread out so as to be sure that someone will catch the prey—but then they share it.

What is the big point here? The individuated human self exists, not because the individual brain or body needs it, but because groups need it. People can only make complex systems work if they have selves who are up to the task of performing their roles in the system. They have to be both willing and able, and they have to consent to do what is best for the group even if not immediately best for the self. The individual, differentiated human self exists because of the requirements of a functioning society. As noted above, division of labor improves performance and increases the total resources, so there is more to share, and lots of people (thus the group as a whole also) are better off.

Society is a big group composed of little groups. The groups flourish better if the individual members are differentiated and participate as distinct, individual selves. Differentiation of individual selves is what makes human social systems superior to all other animal social systems.

As Chapter 3 emphasized, full cultivation of individuality is a modern phenomenon. For most of history, and even today in many cultures, social life was and is heavily organized around extended families and other kinship groups (see Henrich, 2020). These benefit some from individuality but Western history started weakening those ties, which enabled European society to surge ahead of other world cultures and achieve economic, military, and scientific dominance.

Precisely How Do Different Selves Help Groups?

Thus far we have seen abundant evidence that human groups are at their best and have the most success when they capitalize on the different identities of their various members. To some extent, this flies in the face of much conventional wisdom. After all, the very idea of a group means sameness: all the members have the same identity as a member of the group. To be

an Italian or a Rotary Club member or a Floridian is to have an identity as a member of a group who all identify themselves that same way. There is a marvelous body of theory and research on what's called "social identity theory" (e.g., Hornsey, 2008), all based on the essential assumption that what the self gets from being in a group is sameness. The defining fact about a group is how they are all the same.

In contrast, the emphasis here is how group members are different from each other. The more the group recognizes that and takes advantage of it, the better it fares. Ideally, selves emphasize how they are different, special, unique. Ideally, too, each self finds a niche where it can contribute to the group effort as well as thriving itself. Often those are linked, such as when people who perform valuable and difficult jobs in society get paid high salaries. Their work enables the group to thrive, and they are well rewarded so they can thrive individually.

Do selves indeed seek to be different? Certainly, there is always plenty of conformity. But perhaps conforming is the easy way out when one is uncertain. Perhaps people conform in lots of ways but still cultivate some kind of uniqueness or specialness in particular domains. Just being chosen romantically by someone else is a huge affirmation of your uniqueness: He chose you instead of another woman because he thinks you are special. *You're the one he wants.* (Or she, of course.)

Back in the 1970s two psychologists developed a "need for uniqueness" scale to measure that personality trait (Snyder & Fromkin, 1977). It proved useful and valid. The idea was to capture the motivation to be different from everyone else. Because there is a scale to measure differences among people, it is assumed that this desire is stronger among some people than others. So yes, people do seem to have some desire to be different, but some people have more of that desire than others.

If the self is designed to capitalize on its individual traits and talents, then people should be extra-interested in those. Sure enough, evidence indicates that people identify more with their distinctive (unusual) traits than with the traits they share with many others (Miller, Turnbull, & McFarland, 1988). After taking some tests, research subjects were told they had one trait that was fairly common and another that was unusual. When given the opportunity to gain more information about these traits, they were much more interested in learning about the unusual one. That is, they wanted to know how they stood out from the group. In other studies, they sought to learn how they compared with other members of their group, even if they could learn just as much about themselves by comparing with someone else not in the group.

The desire to learn how one differs could mean multiple things. In theory, it could mean that people want to find out how they are different so they can change, so as to be more like everybody else. But, more likely, it reflects how groups use individuals. The most effective group capitalizes on

each person's unique talents and capabilities. Your value to the group may lie in what you can do that nobody else can. Hence, you are eager to learn what makes you special within the group.

To be sure, these studies were run in North America (Canada), which is an individualistic culture. Possibly people with a more collective style of self-definition would identify more with what makes them the same as others. Some cultures emphasize individuality more than others. Much has been written about that (see Chapter 4). The gist is that the collective generally comes first, as in historical and evolutionary precedence. The shift toward greater individualism emerged somewhat recently in Western history. Asians tend to be more collectivistic even today, while Westerners have become increasingly individualistic over the centuries. But what is better?

The assumption is that competition among societies and cultures will favor the superior ones. The weak ones will fade in competition with others. The better system will defeat the dysfunctional system, in the long run, by and large.

So what is the long-term trend? There is a global increase in individualism (Santos et al., 2017). Over time, the cultures and societies all over the world are drifting toward more and more individualism. That's the macro trend. It suggests that individualism (i.e., emphasis on the unique single individual person, respecting difference more than sameness) has advantages over collective systems.

The Miller and colleagues (1988) findings fit the view that groups capitalize on differences among members—so the self is motivated to find out what sets it apart from others. Your opportunities, even your value to the group (indeed to society as a whole), rest on what makes you a little different from others. The things you know that others don't, the abilities you have that others don't, the perspective or charm or other traits that set you apart are precious and important.

Even studies on the influence of stereotypes on self-concepts have found that people form self-concepts to emphasize how they are better than the stereotype of their group (von Hippel, Hawkins, & Schooler, 2001). Women and African Americans formed strong impressions of themselves as intelligent if they performed well, more so than White men. Meanwhile, the White men identified with athletic skills if they excelled at sports. The things that set you apart from your group in a good way become central to your self-concept—and, no coincidence, these are also the things that contain your value to your group. These are what you're good for, in terms of contributing to the group benefit.

Thus, one take-home message is that many people do seek to define themselves with an emphasis on how they are different from others. Now let's look back at the evidence on groups benefiting from having lots of individually identified, different selves. What other patterns emerged?

The self has to want to be integrated into the group. It certainly has that desire. As psychology researcher Warren Jones once remarked in a major symposium, "In many years of doing research on loneliness, I have met many people who say they have no friends. I have never met anyone who says they don't want to have any friends."

When we surveyed all the research literature about groups and selves, we pushed ourselves to articulate the ways groups benefited from having individualistic selves (Baumeister, Ainsworth, & Vohs, 2016). There were several themes that came up repeatedly in different areas of study. These will be key clues to the essence of the self, going forward into future chapters:

- *Do your part.* Many group projects depend on total effort, but that is maximized if the individuals heed the pressure or responsibility to contribute their effort or other resources, for example, money. For example, any country has an advantage if its citizens willingly pay their taxes, as opposed to dodging and underpaying. Society can use the culpable individual self as a tool to increase and stabilize its revenue.

- *Moral responsibility.* The group functions better if the individual members understand their moral responsibility to act in ways they can justify to the group. Groups perform best if people are esteemed and respected for their prosocial actions. Likewise, groups benefit when individuals are dissuaded via punishment and ostracism from performing antisocial actions. People must know that what they do today will affect how others treat them in the future, perhaps for years to come. All of this will help motivate people to participate constructively in the social system. And when most people do that, the system helps society to flourish so that the group as a whole is better off. Moral reputation is such an important foundation of the self that the next chapter is devoted to it. It, too, extends across time.

  Moral responsibility is related to the first point, doing your part. The group can morally condemn individuals who fail to contribute their fair share.

- *Information agent.* Groups build up collective stocks of information. They share many understandings—the doxa, "that which goes without saying," of which there is a great deal. But individuals must operate in relation to this collective stock of information. Research found that groups who let people think and judge for themselves, collecting information from individual and different perspectives and then pooling it, performed best in the long run (e.g., Janis, 1972; Surowiecki, 2004). Ideally for the group, each individual self will collect information, share information with others, critique new information

carefully, and help build the collective body of knowledge. The self is partly an information agent.

- *Specialized performance*. Breaking up the group task into parts and assigning different parts to different people, who become specialists, creates a huge advantage. (We saw this in the flute factory study, and the assembly line generally.) The self will be most helpful to the group if it can operate a specialized role in the system. Toward that end, it helps if people perform distinct, even unique roles in the group. Everyone can specialize and thereby become expert at his or her part of the group job—and because everything is done by experts, the total group achievement is improved. The downside is that one individual can accomplish nothing unless the others do their part.

To conclude: What matters is how you are different. Groups work by having people specialize in different things, and so different talents could, if matched to social roles, improve the efficiency of society. Individuals come to understand themselves based on what they have to offer the group in the way of unusual, positive capabilities.

More broadly, the lesson is that human brains evolved to capitalize on advanced social systems. These systems work best with differentiated selves. Societies with such selves have better, stronger social systems that enable them to wipe out the competition.

KEY POINTS

- Groups go bad when individuals' selves merge into the group.
- Groups flourish when they capitalize on different individual selves, individually accountable, responsible, and thinking for themselves.
- Groups need the individuated human self. The most effective groups capitalize on each person's unique talents and capabilities.
- Many people seek to define themselves with an emphasis on how they are different from others.
- What matters is how you are different. Groups work by having people specialize in different things so different talents, matched to social roles, improve the efficiency of society.

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