

# The Ontology of Social Groups

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Two major questions have dominated work on the metaphysics of social groups: first, Are there any? And second (for those who answer ‘yes’ to the first question), what are they? I will begin by arguing that the answer to the ontological question is an obvious ‘yes’, and worries that lead some to consider the contrary view are misguided. We do better to turn our efforts elsewhere, addressing the question: “What are social groups?” But to the extent that the term ‘social group’ has intuitive content at all, it has proven difficult to give an answer that includes all of those groups one might intuitively think of as social groups, without drastically overgenerating social groups. Moreover, one might worry that the question misleads us. For the general term ‘social group’ seems like a term of art—not a well-used concept we can analyze, or can presuppose corresponds to a real kind we can investigate. It is better to begin not by asking what a social group is, but rather by asking what *function* the concept of a social group does or can serve for us—why should want such a concept in our lives or in our theories? This clears the way to a kind of pluralism in answers to the question ‘what are social groups?’ For where different concepts of social groups aim to serve different functions, diverging answers need not be rivals.

But while the general notion of ‘social group’ may be a term of art, our terms for clubs and courts, races and genders, are not. It is worth stepping back to ask what function these social group concepts serve. I will argue that individual social group concepts function to give normative structure to our lives together. Paying attention to the role of norms in social groups, I will suggest, can enable us to provide a unified understanding of social groups and their importance, while still respecting the great differences among the sorts of social groups we commonly identify.

## 1. Are there Social Groups?

In my view it is unfortunate that such a great amount of space in debates about social groups are focused on debating whether social groups exist. For many such questions can be answered very straightforwardly, and in the obvious positive: Does the faculty senate exist? The natural response is: what do you mean? Is there a faculty senate at the University of Miami? Yes, it’s protected in the charter of faculty rights, it hasn’t been disbanded, it meets monthly... These all seem like perfectly adequate answers. This isn’t to say that *all* such questions can be given an obvious answer—it might be a more interesting and difficult question whether races exist, for example—or whether (if they do) they are a social group. But the general ontological question can be answered by having even one positive instance—and we have reams.

So why were there ever doubts? Let’s look at some of the reasons given for doubting or denying that there are social groups. Searle spoke of “Our sense that there is an element of magic, a conjuring trick, a sleight of hand in the creation of institutional facts out of brute facts” (1995, 45), and the thought that it might take

some sort of ‘magic’ to ensure that there are social groups ‘over and above’ their members is a recurring objection. Nikk Effingham objects to the idea that, for example, Church parishioners could create a football team by making a verbal agreement, saying, “I think it is strange that merely speaking and intoning certain phrases could cause anything to exist...The thought is that only wizards and warlocks can bring things into existence by merely uttering a few phrases” (2010, 253).<sup>1</sup>

But this worry is misguided on several levels.<sup>2</sup> First, to think that there are social groups is not necessarily to think that any social group may be created by declaration: the conditions for different sorts of social groups existing, or coming into existence, may be quite varied. In some cases (say, a college committee) a mere declaration in a wider meeting by a relevant body may suffice; in other cases, we might require constitutional amendments, acts of voting; in others, we might require years of living, working and struggling together; in others, we might require the presence of underlying biological or historical facts (and perhaps more besides).

Put in terms I have developed elsewhere (2015, chapter 2), terms for social groups of different kinds have different application conditions—conditions under which the term (‘team’, ‘subcommittee’, ‘union’, ‘race’, etc.) would refer and the relevant entity exist. In some rare cases, perhaps, the application conditions for a group name require only that certain linguistic acts be performed—*by someone with the relevant authority and against the background of appropriate social conditions*. In other conditions, far more may be required. But in no case is it a matter of ‘magic’ to think that, if the application conditions for a new term ‘T’ come to be fulfilled, a T exists. Consider the worst magic trick in the world:

- Nothing up my sleeves... I’ll just put this right glove and this left glove in a hat and... Shazam! A pair of gloves emerges!

So similarly, in a department meeting, one might try the following bit of ‘magic’:

Nothing up my sleeves, I nominate you, you and you to be the new climate committee—do you accept? Good. Shazam! A new climate committee appears!

In each case, it might sound odd to express what happens metaphysically: a new ‘object’—the pair of gloves or climate committee—‘comes into existence’. But that’s for explicable reasons to do with our sortal use of the term ‘object’. That is, as I have argued elsewhere (2009), ‘object’ is used sometimes as a covering term, guaranteed to apply if some first-order sortal does; but sometimes as a sortal intended to track spatiotemporally unified, cohesive, independently mobile entities. Clearly no ‘new object’—in the sortal sense of object—is generated in these cases. But that does not mean that there is not a pair of gloves, or a climate committee in the relevant situations. Indeed it would simply be false to say that no pair of gloves came out of the hat, or that this department still has no climate committee: the application conditions are fulfilled and there’s nothing more it takes. But only the Worst Magician in the World would treat these as ‘magic tricks’. While the ‘magic’ objection has been a recurrent piece of rhetoric, it is a complete red herring.

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<sup>1</sup> Effingham does cite my position against this, but just says it is better to not get dragged into a

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed response to ‘magic’ objections, see my (2015, 215-220)

Other grounds commonly given for doubting or denying the existence of social groups are worries about lack of parsimony, or (again in the words of Effingham) positing a 'bloated' ontology (2010, 252). But (as I have again argued elsewhere (2007)) these concerns about parsimony (however apt they may be in developing empirical explanatory theories) have no role to play in asking whether social groups (say) exist. Given that one accepts that there are all the relevant people, meetings, decisions, declarations, intentions, etc. that fulfill the application conditions for a term like 'climate committee', it's not more parsimonious to accept that those conditions are fulfilled and yet deny that there is a climate committee. As I have argued elsewhere (2007, Chapter 9), where there are analytic entailments from the fulfillment of conditions C to the existence of an entity E, one does not get a more parsimonious theory by accepting C and denying the existence of E—we can't get a more parsimonious theory by rejecting use of a term.

Others reject social groups on grounds of worries that there is a hidden contradiction or at least tension in the concept. These show up in concerns about how to resolve puzzles about composition and identity over time (See Ritchie 2015, 311; Sheehy 2006 gives a response to the colocation problem)—worries that are no different in kind from those raised against the existence of ordinary natural objects and artifacts. Such concerns have to be addressed on an individual basis, and I have aimed to show how to resolve issues of these sorts elsewhere (2007). In any case, however, given the availability of easy arguments for the existence of many teams, committees, clubs, and the like, the right approach is to accept the existence of these social groups as we work to untangle challenges and conceptual puzzles—rather than to jump to the conclusion that such puzzles give us reason to deny the existence of social groups.<sup>3</sup>

The above issues arise equally as concerns about 'accepting' ordinary objects and social groups. But there are also some potential tensions more distinctive of debates about social groups. If the intuitive everyday concept of a social group attributes social groups features like intentions, rights, duties, and responsibility—and if one also thinks social groups couldn't be rightly ascribed these features—one might be led to deny that anything matches our everyday conception of a social group. Margaret Gilbert attributes something like this reasoning to Weber:

Possibly Weber thinks it obvious that nothing but an individual human being can act, have rights and duties, and so on... It is possible then, to discern in what Weber writes something like the following line of argument. According to the vernacular concept, a collectivity can act. But then there can be no collectivities in the sense in question. (1989, 6)

Of course many in recent years (Gilbert 1989, List and Pettit 2010) have laid out senses in which it seems apt to ascribe intentional states of certain kinds to social groups (states not reducible to those of its members) in a way that is non-spooky and should do a great deal to make plausible the claim that we can properly ascribe certain kinds of intentional states to certain kinds of social group. But even if one really resisted all such intentionalistic attributions, it is unclear why anyone would think that the right response to this problem is to deny the existence of all social

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<sup>3</sup> On this point, see also my (2015, Chapter 8).

groups rather than simply rejecting these attributions as metaphorical, misleading, or downright false.

Other considerations distinctive of debates about social groups center on the question of whether we need to appeal to social groups in order to make (or make better) explanations in the social sciences—or if we'd do better to stick to the advice of 'methodological individualists' (Ritchie 2015, 311-2). There are a lot of interesting issues here that I won't touch on. But again, even if social groups such as the Supreme Court or my philosophy department do not need to be appealed to in social scientific explanations, that seems little reason to deny that they exist. On the contrary, given that the application conditions for these terms are fulfilled, it seems simply false to deny their existence. Moreover, we seem to need to refer to them frequently in our daily lives, in determining our obligations, interacting with others, or expressing who we are. To deny that there are such things, and give up the idea that these terms may be used to refer, would be to give up a great deal.

## **2. What are Social Groups? Past accounts**

I have argued so far that we should reject the arguments commonly given for eliminating social groups—the question 'are there any social groups' may be given an easy and obvious answer: 'yes'. But that doesn't answer the question: What are social groups?

We have to approach this question carefully. For 'social group', in its generic form, is not a term we use much in everyday life. We do, of course, in daily life use terms *for* what we might think of as social groups of various sorts, speaking of the Supreme Court, the UM Philosophy Department, Girl Scout Troup 2115, or again of social groups such as American women, African-Americans, or the disabled. One goal of offering a theory of 'what social groups are' might thus be thought of as finding a way of understanding what all of these groups have in common—a way of unifying them while excluding other collections of people that intuitively are not social groups at all. Yet this has proven to be a difficult task.

Some are tempted to identify social groups with fusions or sets of their members. Such attempted identifications run into well-known problems. One such problem is that groups (unlike fusions or sets) can survive changes in their membership (Uzquiano 2004, 135-6). Another well-known problem is that the same members may form two different social groups—as the same individuals might be both the Deacons of a town's First Baptist Church and the members of its Better Business Bureau—so we intuitively have two different social groups here, but not two different fusions or sets (Uzquiano 2004, 141).

Clever tricks may sidestep these problems—such as Nick Effingham's suggestion that we identify groups with sets of ordered pairs—where the first member is a possible world, and the second member is a set of ordered pairs, with the first member an instant, and the second either the empty set or a set of individuals. But of course (as Effingham acknowledges) that *drastically* overgenerates the number of social groups—as he puts it, it entails that he is a member of a social group with Tony Blair, with Genghis Khan and all of his sons, and so on—since the relevant sets exist no matter what. If there is any standard use of the term 'social group', it seems that it would exclude such things from being

social groups at all: if these are social groups, one might say, ‘social group’ has no meaning. As Margaret Gilbert puts it “It is generally acknowledged... that not just any set of people, in the logician’s sense of set, forms a social group intuitively” (1989, 9).

Of course we could take this in the spirit of a suggestion of how to use the term ‘social group’—in which case it may be only radically misleading. (And one may account for ‘strict truth’ by appealing to restricted quantification, as Effingham does (2010, 262-3)). But what is the basis for the suggestion?

The motives given for such ‘reductions’ appeal to many of the same illegitimate concerns that motivated eliminativism. If social groups are thought to be odd entities that would have to be ‘magically’ generated, or that would reduce the parsimony of our theories in ways that matter, then identifying them with eternal Platonistic objects like sets (which many ‘already have in their ontology’) might seem attractive. (Sometimes this is expressed as identifying them with ‘more familiar’ entities—but it’s hard to know what could be more familiar than social groups—didn’t we all start with knowing we were part of a certain family or kindergarten class?). In any case, we can reject the felt need to reductively identify social groups with ‘more familiar’ entities for the same reasons we rejected eliminativism. If the suggestion is done in the interests of ‘parsimony’ or meeting the other ontological desiderata above (like avoiding ‘magic’)—which, in Effingham’s case, it explicitly is—then once we see these criteria as entirely misguided, we will have absolutely no motivation for taking this convoluted, needless, and misleading proposal on board.

Gabriel Uzquiano offers a more natural view of the nature of social groups: that groups are constituted by their members, while capable of surviving changes of membership—much like artifacts are constituted by material objects while being capable of persisting despite (small, gradual) changes of parts (2004, 137-8, 147). Brian Epstein holds a similar view: that “a group is a thing constituted by and only by individual people” (2015, 133).<sup>4</sup>

The constitution view seems to give us a far more apt understanding of social groups, but it still leaves some questions unanswered: in virtue of what do some collections of people constitute a social group, and others not? To avoid Effingham’s overgeneration problem, it would be good to have some way of distinguishing the conditions under which collections of individuals constitute a social group.

Some proposals have been offered to distinguish those collections of individuals that constitute a social group from random assemblages. John Greenwood describes social groups as populations bound by shared social forms of cognition, emotion and behavior (2003, 102). At least if what we aim to do is to get a theory that matches our original list, however, this proposal seems to *undergenerate* social groups. For often it is simply not true that members of what we commonly

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<sup>4</sup> As Kate Ritchie has pointed out (correspondence) one might, however, want to allow that social groups needn’t be constituted *only by* individual people—one might, for example, want to allow that some social groups may be (at least in the first instance) constituted by others. For example, Major League Baseball might be constituted by a certain number of teams (themselves constituted by members).

treat as social groups (women, African-Americans, or even members of the Boston Symphony Orchestra or Supreme Court) actually share social forms of cognition, emotion and behavior—unless we water down that requirement so far that it ceases to be meaningful. Greenwood acknowledges that it's possible for a "population of individuals defined by a common property [disabled persons, African-Americans or women] to misrepresent themselves as bound by shared social forms of cognition, emotion and behavior" (2003, 102). Those groups that do not share such forms of cognition, emotion and behavior Greenwood labels mere 'aggregate groups' that may nonetheless be 'represented as socially significant by members of social groups' (2003, 104).

Margaret Gilbert famously gives an even more restrictive answer to the question 'what makes a collectivity out of a sum of living human beings' by treating social groups as plural subjects, created when individuals (in conditions of common knowledge) express a commitment to a being part of a plural subject of a shared goal, conditionally on others doing likewise (1989, 17, 204). This isolates a particular way of intentionally creating social groups—one that may be of particular interest for attributions of collective intentionality, responsibility, and so on. But of course it also leaves out races, genders, families, and many other intuitively interesting and relevant social groups.

As we have seen, it is difficult to give an account of what social groups are that does not either overgenerate social groups or leave out many groups we are inclined to treat as social groups. This may not, however, be a very deep objection. For 'social group' may not be a term used enough in our ordinary discourse to have a firm grip on what it would take, or to be sure that it forms anything like a 'kind' of which we can give a uniform analysis. We do indeed speak of teams and courts, racial and ethnic groups, committees and clubs. But we don't use the generic term 'social group' much, and there doesn't seem much assurance that the groups we do tend to speak of are all of the same kind. Perhaps the difficulties in giving conditions under which individuals constitute a social group arise because there are different *kinds* of social groups, with different conditions.

Katherine Ritchie (2015, 316-7; forthcoming) makes a step towards pluralism by dividing social groups into two types: Type 1 groups (including teams, clubs, committees, and courts) are 'structured wholes', where the nodes of the structure are occupied by some members and stand in required relations.<sup>5</sup> Type 2 groups (including racial groups, gender groups, sexual orientation groups), by contrast, don't require structural organization and are identified by a 'shared feature'. These types of groups, as Ritchie describes them, are quite distinct: as Type 1 groups require structural-functional organization, their members must have collective intentionality, may freely choose whether to belong to the group, and needn't share any (other) features with other group members (Ritchie 2015, 314). By contrast, none of these applies to members of Type 2 groups. Moreover, while Ritchie initially identifies social groups of Type 2 as groups that 'share a feature', as she notes, this must be interpreted carefully. For we cannot presume that members

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<sup>5</sup> In her (2015) Ritchie labels these simply "Type 1" groups; in her (forthcoming) she gives the more descriptive labels of 'Organized Groups' and 'Feature Groups'.

of race groups, for example, share a natural essence or property. We might add that even when we *can* pick out a set (or fusion) of entities with a shared property, they may not form a social group: consider the set of individuals with a longer second toe, or with hazel eyes, or who are 42 years old, or who have an obscure mitochondrial disease. Though these collections of people share a feature (in some cases an easily observable one), they do not thereby form what we would normally regard as a *social* group (cf. Gilbert 1989, 9).<sup>6</sup> To avoid these problems, Ritchie suggests treating social kinds of Type 2 as sharing a socially constructed property—leaving open exactly how to understand the notion of a socially constructed property. Regardless of the details of how we distinguish types of social groups and characterize groups of each type, it seems undeniable that there are different types of social groups. Even if we seek a unified account of social groups, we should respect the important differences among them.

### 3. The function of social group concepts

There is room for an even deeper sort of pluralism in accounts of social groups. Since the term ‘social group’ (unlike terms for particular kinds of social groups) isn’t really a part of our normal parlance, it’s hard to think of us in answering this question as doing a straightforward conceptual analysis of how our term ‘social group’ ordinarily works; still less of independently identifying the entities it refers to and searching for a ‘common essence’. We will do better, and make our own arguments more transparent, by thinking of it instead as asking how we *should* use the term—and noting that different uses indeed may be useful for different purposes. So let’s step back from the metaphysical question ‘What are social groups?’ to a functional one: What do we want the concept of a social group for?

Much of the focus in work on social groups has been on answering questions about whether social groups of various kinds may be aptly attributed intentional states, actions, and responsibility. This is obviously an important and morally and legally relevant question. Much of the focus on what Ritchie calls Type 1 groups, I would suggest, has been with a view to answering this question by appeal to the kinds of interlocked intentions and commitments, and institutional regulations, that can plausibly enable them to meet conditions for a kind of group intention, decision, and responsibility. Gilbert’s work, for example, may be seen as aiming to draw out a sense of ‘social group’ on which it clearly makes sense to attribute group beliefs, intentions, and responsibilities. And this work may be quite valuable.

What other functions might a concept of a social group play? In some contexts, the notion of a social group may play an important role in social scientific explanations (of patterns of settlement, divisions of labor, distributions of income or other rewards). Conceptions of social groups like Greenwood’s—as populations bound by shared social forms of cognition, emotion and behavior—might be thought of as designed to serve this kind of explanatory and predictive purpose—useful perhaps in demographic analyses in economics and political science.

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<sup>6</sup> Perhaps it is for this reason that Ritchie later shifts to treating type 2 groups as sharing a (causally and/or constitutively) socially constructed property (2015, 317).

But there are also reasons to be interested in social groups of other sorts: races, genders, classes or castes, families... where (unlike Type 1 groups) there is no voluntary creation or joining, no internal structure; and unlike Greenwood's groups, we cannot presuppose shared forms of cognition, emotion, or behavior. As Sally Haslanger has made clear, some social group concepts, including race and gender concepts, may be needed for a different purpose: not to attribute joint responsibility or to predict and explain, but rather to engage social critique and social justice: only if we can employ race and gender concepts can we track and aim to correct race and gender based injustices. This is explicit in Haslanger's work in ameliorative conceptual analysis. As she writes "At the most general level, the task is to develop accounts of gender and race that will be effective tools in the fight against injustice" (2012, 226). Where this is the function we want our social group concepts to serve, we will do better to neither identify them on the basis of interlocking intentions and commitments, nor on the basis of supposedly shared natural or cognitive features. For there seem to be no shared natural features in the case of races or classes; and even if there were, this would not be sufficient either to justify the norms or to mark this group out as a *social* (as opposed, say, to medical) group. Haslanger does not offer a generalized analysis of social groups, but she does suggest understanding racialized groups as having members "socially positioned as subordinate or privileged along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.) and the group is 'marked' as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of ancestral links to a certain geographical region" (2012, 236).

Where the concept of a social group is employed to serve different functions—legitimizing ascriptions of group intentions and responsibility, serving in social scientific prediction and explanation, or exposing and reducing injustice—there need be no rivalry between the different conceptions. The generalized notion of a 'social group' (unlike terms for individual courts, clubs, or gender terms) is a technical introduction, and to a broad extent we may formulate a set of conditions for certain people forming a social group that will best serve the function we have in mind, without much concern for including all of those groups we might have thought of as 'social'. This pluralism of function may then account for a pluralism in the kinds of accounts of social groups one sees, and in the kinds of social groups that would correspond to them. Debates in this area may be reevaluated accordingly: for we needn't feel that Gilbert, Greenwood, and Ritchie, for example, are contradicting each other in purported discoveries about the 'real essence' of social groups, rather than each articulating a notion (or notions) that might be useful for some purpose at hand. We can evaluate each proposal more clearly if we see the function(s) it aims to serve, and can go about determining whether it serves it well.

#### **4. Social Groups as Normatively Structured**

Should we just give up, then, on trying to get a more general conception of what a social group is—one that might exclude random assemblages or groups of the long-toed, and include both clubs and courts on the one hand, races and genders on the other? I actually think we don't have to, and that the function-first approach

provides the basis for a new general account of what social groups are, arrived at in a slightly different way.

While we can proceed by asking what function we want the general term 'social group' to serve for us, we can also begin by looking back to the individual terms for social groups of various kinds and asking what function it serves to have terms or concepts for specific (kinds of) social groups—concepts like 'University of Miami Student', 'Supreme Court', 'Women's Basketball Team', 'Faculty Senate', and like 'African-Americans', 'women', 'gay men', or 'the working class'? Even if 'social group' is a term of art, these particular terms are not. On the contrary, they form core parts of our daily life, experience, and thought.

What function does it serve to have concepts for clubs or courts, nationalities, races, or genders? What would an individual be missing, if she lacked all such concepts? We use concepts of particular social groups in our own deepest forms of self-identification (as people identify as Asian-American, as democrats, as chemists, as lesbians, as members of the women's basketball team). And we use them to identify others to whom we may appeal for help, must defer to for various kinds of authority, assign grades to, work with in solving a problem, making a ruling, or winning a game. An individual who lacked all social group concepts would, quite simply, have no idea how she was to act, what was expected of her, or how to understand the reactions of others. Given all the roles social group concepts play in organizing our shared lives together, we seem to have need to keep the terms and concepts in our conceptual economy, and perhaps to get clearer about what these things are they refer to—even apart from any roles they may or may not be needed to play in attributing collective responsibility and rights, or in explanatory theories of the social sciences.

More generally, we might say, social group concepts have *significance* for us because they function to normatively structure our lives together: marking how we are to treat others and how we are to behave in a variety of contexts and towards a variety of people. This much all social groups may have in common. But there are many ways norms can be relevant to social groups, and isolating these enables us to also respect the differences among types of groups. This enables us to identify what social groups of Ritchie's Type 1 and Type 2 have in common, and more broadly to say what intentionally created organized social groups have in common with *de facto* groups of people by race, ethnicity, gender, or disability.

First, there are shared *internal* norms—norms regarding how members of the group are to behave, regard themselves and other group members, and so on (what they are to wear, how they are to eat and prepare food, what they are (and are not) to do...). In strict religious communities of various sorts—e.g. among Orthodox Jewish communities, Amish and Mennonite communities, etc.—such internally binding norms are particularly thoroughgoing, affecting nearly all aspects of life. But they may also be more informal and less thoroughgoing, e.g. norms of dress for students at a particular university.

Second, there are *structuring* norms that place different group members at different nodes, with different norms regarding those who occupy different nodes (members of the congregation, the priest, the organist, the bishop; the president, secretary, treasurer, member-at-large, new initiate...; privates, corporals,

lieutenants, colonels...). These are the norms emphasized by Ritchie as applying to Type 1 social groups: requiring structured roles such that members are obliged to act in ways defined by their roles. Such structuring norms are standard in political organizations, the military, corporations, universities and other complex and sophisticated clubs and organizations.

Third, there are public *external* norms—norms regarding how members of that group are to be treated, regarded, behaved towards by those who are not members of the group. It is such external norms that play the prominent role in Haslanger's ameliorative analysis of race and gender concepts: she takes the gender category of 'woman' as defined "in terms of how one is socially positioned, where this is a function of, for example, how one is viewed, how one is treated, how one's life is structured socially, legally, and economically" (2012, 229) where one is 'marked' as a target for the treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female's biological role in reproduction. We may generalize this by saying that one way social groups may be constituted is by their members having shared external norms of treatment (privileging, subordinating, or just different), based on any of many kinds of different 'markers' (bodily features real or imagined, accent, geographic origin, or simple enumeration). Such groups may include not only race and gender groups but also class or caste, clique or social group among school children, ethnic groups or immigrant groups.

In each case, the internal, structuring, and external norms involved may be official and institutional, and supported with official sanctions; or they may be unofficial, informal, and noticed and sanctioned only at the level of feelings of discomfort, offense, and/or disapproval (among those who notice violations), disinclination to transgress or guilt, shame or fear among those who violate the norms.

Institutional social groups like the US Army, the Supreme Court, the Miami Heat, or the Catholic Church typically have members characterized by all of these sorts of norms. But these norms may also come apart: members of an egalitarian religious or political group—or a simple club like a book club—may have internal norms (they are all to be pacifists, they are all to read the book) but no structuring norms. Secret societies may have internal norms and/or structuring norms without any external norms for how non-members are to treat them—for they wish to keep it unknown that they are members of such a group, hindering the ability for outsiders to establish any norms for treating them. Gender groups in our society generally lack structuring norms, but are distinguished by both internal norms (what they are to wear, what they are to do, what toys they are to play with when young, what household responsibilities they are to perform and jobs they are to pursue when older...) and external norms (making it more permissible to interrupt women, to give them unsolicited 'advice' and explanation, to invade their physical space, to regard them as less worthy of respect, income, promotion...). As Mark Lance and Alessandra Tanesini put it:

...whether one is taken to be a woman, or a man, single or not, makes a difference to how others treat you as well as to how it is generally assumed you ought to be treated. Identities are a matter of social significance (2000, 44).

Members of ‘racial’ groups or class groups may be subject to external norms that treat them as *to be regarded as* less worthy, not requiring deference, permissible to interrupt, shortchange, abuse or insult in all sorts of ways—even if the members of the group share no internal norms about how they are to act and even if there are no structuring norms to give organization to the group.

Thus we can see social groups of different kinds as having in a shared normative structure, while still respecting important differences across different kinds of social groups. We can also identify what distinguishes all of these social groups from arbitrary assemblages of people, or groups of people who merely share some physical characteristic(s). There are no governing norms for how Ghenghis Khan and I are both to be treated, nor (in our culture) for how people with a longer second toe, or hazel eyes, are to be treated, or are to act. There are, unfortunately, such norms for how people of color, and women, are to act and be treated. As participants in the social world, we can be blind to these norms and fail to recognize the social groups (which *is* in part a matter of recognizing or reacting understandingly to the norms) only at our own peril—peril of sanctions, ostracism, or worse. (Girls with autism spectrum disorders—who have far more difficulty recognizing social norms—are also far more likely to be sexually abused.)

So we may propose an answer to the question ‘What is a social group?’: a group of people constitutes a social group when those individuals are united by internal, external and/or structuring norms. Membership in a social group has normative significance: significance for how people (group insiders and/or outsiders) are to behave towards, regard, and treat group members, and/or for how the members themselves are to behave, to regard themselves and others.<sup>7</sup> Arbitrary mereological sums or sets of people (or people, worlds, and times) will generally carry no such significance. Similarly, groups of people that involve merely shared characteristics (a longer second toe, hazel eyes, sufferers of mitochondrial disease) do not constitute groups of *social significance* unless or until these groups are linked to norms: for how members of the group are to behave, or for how others are to regard or treat them. Left-handed people do not form a social group now, in this country, but they might—or might have—in societies in which left-handedness was taken as a sign of being ‘sinister’, in league with the devil, marking out left-handed people as to be treated in certain ways differently from their right-handed counterparts. To be part of a social group is to be part of a group that is significant for how you are to act and to regard yourself (it may be part of your social ‘identity’) and/or for how others are to behave towards and regard you.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> This makes the above analysis of social groups analogous to Heidegger’s treatment of the ready-to-hand, as characterized by norms regarding who is to use it, in what way, for what purpose... Also, like Heidegger’s ready-to-hand (but unlike the more standard category of artifacts) social groups may be, but need not be, intentionally created.

<sup>8</sup> This account of social groups fits reasonably well with the notion employed by social identity theories of norms—which hold that group norms are obeyed because one identifies with being a member of the group. For this to have any plausibility (even as a partial account of norms) the groups in question must be governed by internal and/or structuring norms: mere belonging in a group of people with a longer second toe intuitively does not affect one’s feelings of identification, and doesn’t bring with it any norms to comply with. In short, social identity theorists about norms must think of

When I say that social groups serve to give normative structure to our lives, one might wonder what sense of ‘norm’ is in question. I’d like to remain as neutral on that as possible—but some requirements are clear for the notion of ‘norm’ to do the work needed here.<sup>9</sup> Roughly following Bicchieri, we can think of norms in the sense at issue as prescriptions and proscriptions of how one is *to act* (including in this how one is to think, feel, regard an individual or situation), in various contexts, towards others of various sorts, etc., and the corresponding expectations<sup>10</sup> (Bicchieri 2006, 2). Though norms may be made explicit in institutionalized rules, they need not be; they may be what Bicchieri calls “informal norms that emerge through the decentralized interaction of agents within a collective and are not imposed or designed by an authority” (2006, x). As Bicchieri emphasizes, they need not be the products of human design and planning, and need not be socially advantageous or efficient (2006, xii). So to say there are certain norms is not to endorse them either on practical or moral grounds. Moreover, norms (as I shall use the term here) need not be even consciously acknowledged (or accepted, or believed in) by those guided by them and subjected to them. As Bicchieri again puts it:

...most of the time, we are not aware of our expectation, and compliance may look like a habit, thoughtless and automatic, or it may be driven by feelings of anxiety at the thought of what would happen if one transgresses the norm. Upholding a norm is not a matter of conscious cost/benefit calculations; rather, people tend to repeat patterns of behavior that they have learned and, on average, work well in a variety of situations” (2014, Section 7)

Instead, norms might best be revealed by our tacit expectations about how others behave (when are we surprised, when we take notice), feelings of discomfort, inappropriateness, offense, or criticism that arise when the norms are violated; feelings of transgression, discomfort, anxiety, or even triumph at violating them oneself; they may show up even in what do (and do not) show up as ‘live options’ for action in various situations.<sup>11</sup> Those who are subject to gender and race based norms, for example, might fail to recognize or even vehemently deny that they are subject to these norms, yet their subjection to them may still show up in differential ways they notice, respond to and feel about being interrupted or overlooked; how

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social groups as normatively structured (though more specifically, as having internal and/or structuring norms—not just external norms).

<sup>9</sup> In particular, I can remain neutral about what underlies norm compliance—why we tend to follow these norms (the point here is just that the presence of these norms is in part constitutive of what it is for there to be a social group). But the view proposed here is quite coherent with Bicchieri and Muldoon’s account that empirical and normative expectations (about others conforming to the norm, expecting them to do likewise, and perhaps sanctioning them if they don’t) underlie norm compliance. (2014, Section 7).

<sup>10</sup> Including both empirical expectations (about what others will do) and normative expectations (about what others will think ought to be done).

<sup>11</sup> See Bicchieri and Muldoon (2014, Section 7) for clarity that while expectations—about others conforming to the norm and expecting them to conform to the norm and perhaps sanctioning them if they don’t—underlie norm compliance, these expectations may not be things we are aware of.

much physical space they feel entitled to take up on an airplane or at a conference table; how much credibility and deference and speaking time is to be granted to them by interlocutors, how they are treated during arrest and interrogation, how aggressive or domineering a speaker or management style is taken to be, and so on.

### **5. Advantages of the normative understanding of social groups**

Earlier I raised the question: What function does it serve to have individual terms and concepts for social groups in our lives? We now have an answer: having terms and concepts for social groups is important because these social groups give normative structure to our lives together—providing norms of behavior by and/or towards individuals belonging to different groups or occupying different nodes in a group's structure. In order for our social group terms to serve this function, they must carry with them *normative significance*, whether for how group members are to act (including but not limited to how they treat each other or members at different positions in the structure), or for how others are to treat group members..

The role of norms in structuring the world into social groups has often been overlooked in prior accounts of social groups.<sup>12</sup> But acknowledging that role and adopting this proposal for understanding what social groups are has a number of advantages. First, by paying attention to the role of norms of these various kinds, we can avoid the overgeneration problem and say why only certain groups of people count as *social* groups (groups with social significance)—and why other groups (even those that are unified by some shared characteristic) do not constitute social groups.

On the flip side, it enables us to capture the unity in a broader swath of social groups than prior theories. The normative understanding enables us to classify races and genders as social groups, even if we acknowledge that there may be no shared natural or cognitive features that ground or legitimize these norms (this may be an illusion—this may be the point of critiques and of some forms of eliminativism), no structuring norms, and perhaps even in some cases no internal norms. But it does so without blurring the crucial distinctions between these groups and social groups unified by internal and structuring norms. It also does so in a way consistent with using identification of these social groups to identify and attempt to correct systematic forms of injustice, without either being blind to the existence of the relevant groups or treating them as unified by shared physiological or cognitive features.

The normative conception of social groups brings with it other advantages as well. It enables us to say how it can be that the same collection of people may constitute two or more different social groups—as quite different norms may apply to individuals *as* Deacons of the First Episcopal Church versus *as* members of the Better Business Bureau. This is kind of a neat answer, since it is well known that normative and modal features do not supervene on physical features—so it should be no surprise if what distinguishes a constituted social group from its basis in mere people is differential norms.

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<sup>12</sup> With the exception of Haslanger's account of racialized groups.

This model also enables us to see why some social groups are so prominent in our lives—those that form the fault lines around which many systems of central norms cluster—like religion, race, and gender—play a more central role, and are more likely to figure centrally in our self-identification, than membership in groups that is fleeting, voluntary, and only comes with a few norms in force at fixed times (e.g. being a member of the book club).

This way of understanding social groups thus hooks up usefully with discussions about what it is to self-identify as a member of a particular social group: it is to recognize the relevant norms as binding on oneself, even if one dislikes the relevant norms or would gladly change or reject them, or takes them to be illegitimate. As Lance and Tanesini put it: “identities pose demands on us to which we are sensitive, provided that we take that identity to be part of who we are” (2000, 43). I can take the norms about the predominant role women are to spend in childcare and resent them, resist them, attempt to avoid them by remaining childless, or follow them through in a spirit of joy or duty. But the only way I can take any of these stances is if I see these norms as binding *on me*, which is (in my society) part and parcel of self-identifying as a woman.

It can also enable us to identify other sources of injustice and social problems by enabling us to note the sources of tension that arise in cases in which we belong to more than one social group—in ways that invoke conflicting norms. In many cases of course there may be complex and contextually sensitive interactions of norms—for treating someone as a professor, as a woman, as an African-American, and for behaving as a member of each of these groups. A female manager can’t simultaneously follow the deferential norms of womanhood and the aggressive norms of manager—and so faces inevitable criticism and barriers to getting the high social approval required for leadership positions. When President Obama says that the victims of police violence could be him, could be his sons, he is calling attention to himself as a member of a population subjected to these norms of brutal police treatment—self-identifying as an African American, even while he at the same time rejects the legitimacy of these norms, and calls attention to the clash of norms that comes with him also being President and so subject to conflicting norms of respect. As Lance and Tanesini put it, when our commitments that come with different groups are systematically brought into tension and “social facilitation is not forthcoming, as in the cases of working mothers or gay parents, we are dealing with *prima facie* cases of oppression” (2000, 44).

Another interesting consequence of this normative conception of social groups is that it enables us to acknowledge the possibility of even informal, Type 2 social groups ceasing to exist—as the relevant norms fade away. Categories like ‘quadroon’ (person of one quarter African ancestry, three quarters European ancestry) and ‘octaroon’ (one eighth African ancestry, the rest European) used to be social groups, significant for structuring norms of treatment and even explicit legal rights and responsibilities in the pre-war slaveholding society of the American South and European colonial areas. But such terms and groups have (thankfully) fallen out of use and the groups, as groups of social significance, have ceased to exist. (This also gives a picture of what the ideal of a race-less or gender-less world would be.)

Bringing to the fore the role of norms in social groups of all kinds can show what they have in common, as well as highlighting ways they differ. It can also enable us to make explicit many of the governing norms that give structure to our social lives together, in ways that may open them up for critique, reevaluation, or change. So the focus on shared norms rather than shared intentions or shared (natural) features may bring with it both theoretical and practical benefits.

## **6. Conclusion**

The arguments of this paper have been both methodological and substantive. Methodologically, I have pressed for a reorientation of work on social groups. First, I argued, we should give up debating whether social groups exist—for many plainly do. A better question is what social groups are. But here I urged caution as well. For ‘social group’ is a term of art; we should think of ourselves not as potentially discovering the true essence of social groups (by sorting through competing accounts), but rather as faced with the task of determining what function we want the notion of ‘social group’ to serve—whether of playing a role in legitimating attributions of group responsibility, of helping identify and correct forms of injustice, or of serving in social scientific prediction and explanation. For different purposes, different notions may be appropriate.

Even if ‘social group’ is largely a term of art, however, our terms for various social groups—clubs and courts, races and genders—are not. We can, I have urged, address the general question by asking if there is a function terms and concepts of these sorts have in common. And I have suggested that there is: they all function to articulate a normative structure for our lives together, marking internal, external or structuring norms for group members. This normative analysis of social groups enables us to get a highly general account that at the same time excludes the ‘overgenerated’ cases of some prior accounts, while showing what social groups of different types have in common and what still distinguishes them. It also, I have argued, enables us to solve old problems like how the same individuals may constitute different social groups, and to connect interestingly with accounts of self-identification and identification of sources of injustice. It is, at the least, an interesting and under-recognized proposal to consider.

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