

1

Peer Group Lenses

Theories and Perspectives

theory, *n.*, **1.** a coherent explanation for events, behaviors, or observations. **2.** a proposed explanation or opinion, whose status can be tested. **3.** a guess or idea about what causes certain things to happen.

We are all theorists. Our ideas about why things happen, or what causes people to behave in certain ways, are integral parts of our everyday thinking. Our theories might be mistaken, of course, but they often help us feel in control of our social worlds. Our everyday theories also guide our choices—mental tools that can make other people seem (a little) more predictable and life events seem (somewhat) less uncertain. Our personal theories organize our thinking, for better or for worse.

Social science theories operate in much the same way. Their goal is to increase understanding about the world around us. Scholars agree, however, that what distinguishes social science theories from personally held theories is that we attempt to test scientific theories with research, and then to extend or refine these theories in systematic

2 Chapter 1

ways.¹ *Formal* theories and models about social behaviors attempt to fulfill one or more purposes:

- to describe behaviors,
- to explain behaviors,
- to predict future behaviors, or
- to offer variables that may change behavior in the future.

For example, Decisional Regret Theory²

1. *describes* how people talk and think about significant decisions,
2. *explains* how the counterfactual imagining of possible outcomes appears when people face decisional choices,
3. *predicts* that people who cannot imagine a positive outcome of a decisional choice will reject it, and
4. *offers variables* that affect behavior (importance of the decision, unwanted outcomes of past decisions, resolution of imagined unwanted outcomes, anticipation of decisional regret, to name a few).

When a theory or model performs any of these four functions well, helping us understand our own behaviors and those of others around us, it can be argued that such a theory is a practical theory.

Groups can be frustrating places in which to find ourselves (yet they are entirely impossible to avoid), so it is not surprising that formal theories have emerged that attempt to explain group processes and group behaviors. Group research was recently described by leading scholars Poole and Hollingshead as a “fragmented and discipline bound,” with few attempts to connect theory and research across disciplinary boundaries.³ Aptly reflecting the vagaries of real life, however, not all group theories have received their fair share of attention from scholars. Furthermore, some theories that have managed to grab the lion’s share of academic ink have devoted little, if any, attention to explaining or describing what happens in peer groups. *We spend most of our life-span group time communicating in peer groups.**

*And some of the behaviors of our peers in those groups seem to need a lot of explaining.

Seven useful perspectives are set forth to guide new thinking about peer group processes, drawing on the latest cross-disciplinary thinking about group dynamics. The specific assumptions of each is described to illustrate how each one is valuable in divergent ways, illuminates different constructs, and contributes to new knowledge about peer group communication, although each contributes differently. A visual tool is offered in Table 1.1 that sets out these theories and perspectives in a way that allows them to be more easily compared and contrasted. In Table 1.1, for each theoretical perspective included, the following is described:

- Key assumptions about groups from that perspective
- Applications to peer groups
- Challenges of studying group dynamics from that perspective

❖ THEORETICAL LIGHTS THAT ILLUMINATE PEER GROUP DYNAMICS

This book shines a spotlight on intriguing (and useful) theories or perspectives that have something to say about communication in peer groups—even though (or perhaps especially because) these newer perspectives have received less attention. These theoretical perspectives can help us understand more about group communication processes in general—and peer group dynamics in particular—because they invite more events to the scholarly group-thinking party.

Symbolic-Interpretive Perspective: The Effects of Symbol Usage

Symbols are one of the primary forms of communication that all people use to share meaning with others. Rituals, objects, colors, music, silences, humor, rewards, punishments, and language are symbolic tools for human communication.

Recently, Frey and SunWolf offered the Symbolic-Interpretive (S-I) Perspective as a useful theoretical framework for understanding small-group dynamics.⁴ An S-I Perspective is concerned with

- (a) understanding how group members use symbols,
- (b) the effects of symbol usage on individual, relational, and collective processes and outcomes, and

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Table 1.1 Group Theories and Perspectives that Apply to Peer Groups

| Theory or Perspective | Key Assumptions |
|------------------------------------|--|
| Bona Fide Group Perspective | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Argues that a group cannot be understood as a fixed entity apart from the contexts and environments within which it is embedded. • Groups are characterized by permeable boundaries that are symbolic socially constructed; that can be negotiated, defined, and redefined through the members' interactions. • A group's boundaries are interdependent with its relevant contexts (financial, political, social, temporal, and cultural) and change as group membership changes.¹ • Relevant contexts, in turn, affect internal group symbolic activity (which can also affect the contexts). |
| Decisional Regret Theory | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faced with making a meaningful decisional choice with uncertain outcomes, people experience anxiety, as they anticipate choice-regret. • Anxiety is uncomfortable. • People attempt to reduce that anxiety by imagining narratives about what might happen with each anticipated choice. • This story-thinking allows people to anticipate outcomes through self-talk (counterfactual thinking) or talk with others (counterfactual dialogue), as people search for a decision that has an <i>imagined</i> positive outcome.² |

| Applications to Peer Groups | Challenges of Studying Group Dynamics From That Perspective |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on the symbolic aspects of communication within a group. • Focus on the effect of environmental issues, events, changes on peer group vitality, membership, satisfaction, or conflict. • Gives attention to the effects of multigroup loyalties of members on specific peer groups. • Rich explanation of peer group events by taking into account multiple situational variables. • Allows consideration of the relationship between various community peer groups. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acquiring access to bona fide groups in natural settings. • Context-bound findings may be applicable only to particular groups and situations. • Multiple variables make it difficult to reach certainty about cause-and-effect outcomes. • Dense data require complex gathering techniques. • Context-sensitive variables suggest a need for longitudinal research, examining peer groups over time. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer groups facing important decision-choices will experience anxiety about uncertain outcomes. • Members will attempt to reduce their anxiety by imagining how choice-alternatives would play out, storying possible outcomes. • Members may attempt to reduce anxiety about outcomes from choices by talking with other members before making a decision, using group dialogue to anticipate imagined positive and negative outcomes of gift choices. • Peer groups or members with past experiences with those decisions will provide the primary pool from which members draw in creating imagined outcomes (positive or negative) for group decision-choices. Their secondary pool draws from shared stories others tell during counterfactual dialogue about possible choice outcomes. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acquiring access to real-world peer groups. • Gaining reliable access to mental processes in which regret is anticipated and storied. • Collecting distorted data in which group members did not accurately recall either their own thoughts or their dialogue with others. • Unwillingness of people to discuss their anxieties. • Collecting dense multilevel data, involving individual thoughts of multiple members, as well as group dialogue over more than one occasion. • Collecting data about negative emotions. |

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Table 1.1 Group Theories and Perspectives that Apply to Peer Groups

| Theory or Perspective | Key Assumptions |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Decisional Regret Theory | |
| Group Dialectical Perspective | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Tensions experienced by group members are both inevitable and pervasive.• Dialectical tensions will occur between contradictory elements that demand at least temporary resolution (wanting closeness and distance, for example).• Tensions will involve struggles with dependence and independence), as well as how to manage those tensions.• Tensions will be managed in a group through symbolic means of communication.• Groups are created in the dynamic interplay of dialectical tensions and communicative responses to those tensions among members.³ |

| Applications to Peer Groups | Challenges of Studying Group Dynamics From That Perspective |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In addition to group decisions, individual members facing choices about communication will feel uncertain when they are anxious about unknown outcomes (how other members will react). • Members may choose to speak or remain silent, how to frame what they say, or the timing of their communication, based on the regret they anticipate as they story and imagine the reactions to their choices. • Some group members will have a greater tolerance for the anticipation of regretted choices than will others, which may result in disagreement or lack of support within the peer group. | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suggests a focus on the challenges that peer groups face that are unavoidable and recurring. • Useful for understanding the simultaneous need peers have to conform to one another and to be acknowledged as special or unique in their groups. • Explains adolescent struggles with both dependence and independence within their own peer groups. • Offers explanations for symbolic behaviors, dress, signals, and nonverbal behaviors as ways of managing natural peer group tensions within and without the group. • Suggests reasons why some peer groups are more cohesive, successful, and desired than others. • Suggests areas for intervention to improve peer group life. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Member tensions are subjective and challenging to measure. • Tensions change over time and within single episodes. • It is difficult for a group outsider to gain access to or fully understand within-group tensions. • Individual group members will have idiosyncratic perspectives, tolerances, and understandings of any dialectical tensions experienced by other members. |

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Table 1.1 Group Theories and Perspectives That Apply to Peer Groups

| Theory or Perspective | Key Assumptions |
|------------------------------------|--|
| Social Comparison Theory | People have a basic need to know how they are doing, so they compare themselves to others they believe are similar (or slightly better) on dimensions such as same/different or superior/inferior. ⁴ |
| Social Identity Perspective | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Assumes groups provide a source of identity common to all members (social identity).• Members are motivated to sustain a positive social identity, which is accomplished through positive differentiation between their group and other groups.⁵• Group goals, norms, stereotypes, and influence are defined by the intergroup context (which can be implicit or explicit). |

| Applications to Peer Groups | Challenges of Studying Group Dynamics From That Perspective |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People are uncertain about how they are viewed by peer group members, so they compare their experiences to those of other members: What privileges did others receive at the same event? What rewards or punishments did other people receive for similar behaviors or omissions? • Peer group members will continually engage in two levels of thinking: Was my behavior or my effort <i>better or worse</i> than my peers in this group? In what ways am I similar to or different from my peers in this group? • Peer groups and individual members will continually engage in comparisons between their groups and perceived similar groups: better or worse, same or different? • Satisfaction with peer groups will be affected by these continual comparisons. • Peer group members may differ in the frequency and mental outcomes of their comparison to others. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social comparisons are not always highly conscious to individual members, thus it is difficult to accurately assess them. • The degree to which social comparison is healthy or dysfunctional in a peer group involves value judgments. • Social comparisons are painful for members to acknowledge. • Social comparisons of same-different or better-worse are not static or singular, but rather are dynamic and multidimensional. • Negative comparisons may produce fractured relationships with a group and lessen commitment and cohesion, even when accurate. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explains members' sense of the social groups to which they belong. • Describes members' identification with these groups and how members construct social identity based on this identification. • Explains what drives the dynamics that occur between ingroups and outgroups, based upon members' identification with their groups. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requires some measurement of inner cognitive processes. • Requires fieldwork in natural settings, rather than laboratory work. • Suggests attention to multiple groups to understand a single group. |

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Table 1.1 Group Theories and Perspectives That Apply to Peer Groups

| Theory or Perspective | Key Assumptions |
|--|--|
| Social Identity Perspective | <p>Groups that share identity are cohesive. This identity affects cohesiveness more than other variables (conflict, status, attraction, conformity, or relationships).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Face-to-face interaction is not necessary for social influence to occur within a group since group action will be activated by prototypical group position.⁶ |
| Structuration Theory | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assumes that social systems (groups) become patterned with respect to collective practices. • Assumes that group processes must be understood through analysis of the structures that underlie them. Underlying group structures will include rules (how things should happen) and resources (materials, knowledge, or skills) members create or bring, in order to sustain the group system. • Group processes are produced and reproduced through members' use of rules and resources.⁷ |
| Symbolic-Interpretive Perspective | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Any group is a significant symbol to its members and to outside others. • The symbolic meaning of a group is created through the members' symbolic activities. • A group's symbolic activities are the predispositions of its members, its group practices and processes, and the products of those practices and processes. • Predispositions, practices, processes, and products of a group are influenced by the environments in which a group is embedded.⁸ |

| Applications to Peer Groups | Challenges of Studying Group Dynamics From That Perspective |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Casts light on the effect of the groups in which a peer group is embedded on the behavior, cohesiveness, and identity of peer group members. • Offers an explanation for the function some peer groups perform for their members and the attractiveness of belonging to some peer groups. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benefits from a multivariable approach in which many factors (such as norms, language, status, roles, or dress) are examined within a single study. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Casts light on the creation and emergence of rules within a peer group. • Acknowledges the resources each peer brings to the group. • Suggests that a peer group contains observable structures that, in turn, are produced and reproduced by peer members. • Takes both a macro view (group processes and environment, for example) and a micro view (rules and resources of individual members) of peer groups. • Makes room for the changes that occur as peer group membership shifts. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requires a focus on multiple variables that influence one another (such as words, behaviors, and outcomes) over time in a group. • Benefits from studies that involve real-world groups and is difficult to apply to short-term artificially constructed peer groups. Requires a knowledge of a group's history. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increases the importance placed on understanding relational dynamics of peer groups. • Suggests a focus on rituals within groups. • Illuminates individual practices of peer members, such as symbolic dress, language, signage, or colors. • Increases understanding of peer group behaviors as having symbolic meaning to members that may be invisible to, or misunderstood by, outsiders. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acquiring access to natural real-world groups and their communication processes. • Collecting the dense data needed to make claims about symbolic communication in groups. • Findings are context-bound, often limited only to particular situations. • Research is largely descriptive rather than predictive. |

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Table 1.1 Group Theories and Perspectives That Apply to Peer Groups

| Theory or Perspective | Key Assumptions |
|--|-----------------|
| Symbolic-Interpretivist Perspective | |

¹ Putnam, L. L., & Stohl, C. (1990). Bona fide groups: A reconceptualization of groups in context. *Communication Studies*, 41, 248–265.

Putnam, L. L., & Stohl, C. (1996). Bona fide groups: An alternative perspective for communication and small group decision making. In R. Y. Hirokawa & M. S. Poole (Eds.), *Communication and group decision making* (2nd ed., pp. 179–214). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

² SunWolf. (2006). Decisional regret theory: Reducing the anxiety about uncertain outcomes during group decision making through shared counterfactual storytelling. *Communication Studies*, 57(2), 1–29.

Landman, J. (1993). *Regret: The persistence of the possible*. New York: Oxford University Press; and Roese, N. J., & Olson, J. M. (Eds.) (1995b). *What might have been: The social psychology of counterfactual thinking*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

³ Smith, K. K., & Berg, D. N. (1987). *Paradoxes of group life: Understanding conflict, paralysis, and movement in group dynamics*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Johnson, S. D., & Long, L. M. (2002). "Being a part and being apart": Dialectics and group communication. In L. R. Frey (Ed.), *New directions in group communication* (pp. 25–42). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

| Applications to Peer Groups | Challenges of Studying Group Dynamics From That Perspective |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Useful to group leaders and facilitators by suggesting symbolic practices that create cohesion, satisfaction, and solve peer group challenges (for example, losing a group member or competing with other peer groups). | |

⁴ Festinger, L. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

⁵ Tajfel, H. (1982). *Social identity and intergroup relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁶ Abrams, D., Hogg, M. A., Hinkle, S., & Otten, S. (2005). The social identity perspective on small groups. In M. S. Poole & A. Hollingshead (Eds.), *Theories of small groups: Interdisciplinary perspectives* (pp. 99–137). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

⁷ Poole, M. S., Seibold, D. R., & McPhee, R. D. (1996). The structuration of group decisions. In R. Y. Hirokawa & M. S. Poole (Eds.), *Communication and group decision making* (2nd ed., pp. 114–146). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

⁸ Frey, L., & SunWolf. (2005). The symbolic-interpretive perspective of group life. In M. S. Poole & A. Hollingshead (Eds.), *Theories of small groups: Interdisciplinary perspectives* (pp. 185–239). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Frey, L. R., & SunWolf. (2004). A symbolic-interpretive perspective on group dynamics. *Small Group Research*, 35(3), 277–306.

14 Chapter 1

- (c) the manner in which groups and group dynamics themselves are the products of such symbolic activity.*

This perspective is particularly appropriate as a foundation at the outset of this chapter, because the S-I Perspective is a conceptual framework that holds or includes other group theories, including Symbolic Convergence Theory, Structuration Theory, the Group Dialectical Perspective, Decisional Regret Theory, and the Bona Fide Group Perspective (discussed individually below).

The S-I Perspective offers a dynamic understanding of two primary aspects of group life, the *use* of symbolic communication, and the *products* of such use. Group research that fits an S-I Perspective might investigate (1) the ways in which group members use *symbols* (words, objects, or actions that stand for or represent something else) to communicate, as well as the effects of symbol usage on individual, relational, and collective processes and outcomes; or (2) how groups and group dynamics themselves are *products* of this symbolic activity.

People (therefore, peers) may possess a basic need for symbols, which is said to distinguish them from animals. Even a cursory review of the underlying concepts behind the S-I Perspective demonstrates its applicability to peer groups. Frey has acknowledged the intellectual-philosophical-historical contributions to the S-I Perspective on group life. Symbols allow people to share meaning and to participate in collective action.⁵

Burke asserted that human beings were basically the “symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol-misusing) animal.”⁶ MacIntyre claimed that people are “essentially a story-telling animal.”⁷ Fisher offered an entire narrative theory of communication, based on understanding humans as *homo narrans* who organize experience into stories with plots, central characters, and action sequences that carry implicit and explicit lessons.⁸ Furthermore, collectively, humans create and construct their realities. As people interact in social groups, new truths,

*The relationship between symbols, language, social interaction, and accomplishments (such as the construction of reality) was more fully articulated in *symbolic interactionism*, the study of how social interaction creates and maintains the self, shared meanings, and social structures. Mead (1934) concentrated on how symbols and communication give rise to the self, whereas his disciple, Blumer (1969), who coined the term “symbolic interactionism,” focused on how having a common community of symbols allowed interactants to create shared meaning and to act together on the basis of that shared meaning.

perspectives, and “facts” emerge for the members of those groups. Social constructionism, therefore, is a basis for the S-I Perspective. Social constructionism has brought us concepts such as *transactive memory* (shared systems for encoding, storing, and retrieving information),⁹ *shared mental models* (mental processes in which people create descriptions of how things function and predict future events),¹⁰ and *negotiated order* (when group interaction does not proceed smoothly and individual behaviors do not mesh, individuals must adjust, through explicit or implicit negotiation).¹¹

As a perspective, S-I makes certain assumptions about groups:¹²

1. Any group is, in reality, a concept socially constructed by its members and outside others, rather than an entity in an objective sense.
2. Groups are not fixed containers with static boundaries. They do not exist apart from their environments.
3. Groups are dynamic products resulting from the symbolic activities of their members, which are the primary means by which members create shared reality and groupness.
4. Studying the social construction of any group requires methods that focus on the use and interpretation of symbols.

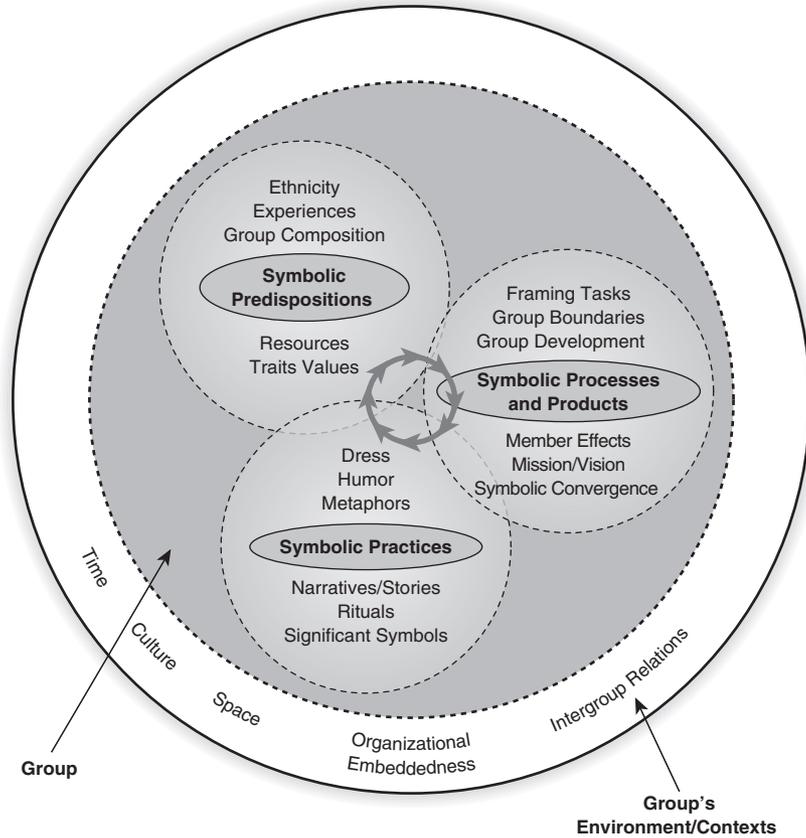
Frey and SunWolf offered a visual model that articulated the symbolic nature of group dynamics and the constructs of interest to this perspective, reproduced as Figure 1.1.¹³

As portrayed in this model, an S-I Perspective on groups focuses on three aspects of symbolic activities that occur within a group, each of which contains specific constructs of interest:

1. symbolic *predispositions*,
2. symbolic *practices*, and
3. symbolic *processes and products*.

Symbolic predispositions are the tendencies a person may have to do something (that is, to act in a certain way), so symbolic predispositions include the ways in which people are initially inclined toward other people. As group members interact, the S-I Perspective suggests that they engage in *symbolic practices* (specific communication such as humor, metaphors, rituals, or stories). During symbolic practices, members

Figure 1.1 Symbolic-Interpretive Model of Group Predispositions, Practices, Processes, and Products



Source: Frey, L. R., & Sunwolf. (2005). The symbolic-interpretive perspective on group life. In M. S. Poole & A. Hollingshead (Eds.), *Theories of small groups: Interdisciplinary perspectives* (pp. 185–239, Figure 1). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Reproduced with permission.

create *symbolic processes and products*, which refer to both macrolevel group dynamics (group identity and culture) and the specific outcomes of group symbolic activity (strategies, activities, or decisions). Frey noted that the linking together of processes and products, as opposed to treating them as separate entities, highlights their recursive and reflexive relationship, arguing that group culture is both a process and a product that results from and influences symbolic practices.¹⁴

The S-I model demonstrates that these domains are not mutually exclusive (as visually indicated by overlapping circles) and that they influence one another (as indicated by bidirectional arrows between circles). For example, ethnic diversity in a group (a symbolic predisposition) may create dialectical tensions in the group (symbolic processes and products) that need to be managed through particular rituals (symbolic practices) that subsequently affect how the diversity of new and current members is perceived and interpreted.¹⁵ Symbolic predispositions, practices, processes, and products emerge and merge continually during group formation and, in fact, throughout the course of a group's life. Every group has permeable boundaries (as indicated by the broken circle surrounding the group, consistent with the Bona Fide Group Perspective, below) and is embedded in multiple environments and contexts that influence internal group dynamics and necessitate that a group interact with other individuals, groups, organizations, and communities in its environment.

When peer groups are studied through an S-I Perspective, the language, clothing, colors, rituals, music, writings, initiations, ceremonies, stories, metaphors, humor, or signage would be significant.

A classic study from the S-I Perspective would be that of Adelman and Frey in the 1990s, who described a peer group's grieving ceremony at a hospice.¹⁶ They described how a balloon ceremony held for each resident who passed away (in which residents, staff, and loved ones stand together in a circle holding balloons tied to long ribbons, offer remembrances of the deceased, and then release the balloons simultaneously) not only helped members to remember the deceased but also to "re-member" as a group of peers, all of them, in this case, living with AIDS.

Using humor—which itself is a social phenomenon, generally requiring both a sharer and a recipient—is another symbolic practice engaged in by group members, often for the purpose of relieving the dialectical tensions associated with group life. One study, for instance, explored how humor was created in narratives of peers within work groups in a childcare center, in order to unify members in the face of divisive values and behaviors.¹⁷ This study found that humorous stories, teasing, and jokes were employed to de-stress the work environment, create cohesion, and avoid miscommunication, and that shared humor provided a nonthreatening way of acknowledging group disagreement and diversity, and thereby promoted unity among group members by reinforcing the shared values. Negative humor can be targeted at one peer member, while intending to be symbolic of power, attraction, or entertainment. Children's sport teams constitute an

underutilized but rich field for harvesting an understanding of dynamic processes in everyday peer groups. Fine, studying preadolescent culture in boys' Little League baseball, using taped accounts of instances of preadolescent verbal combat, reported the utility of the unfortunate victim to the group, as the lad unwittingly enabled his attackers to impress one another with their negative verbal skills.¹⁸

Social Comparison Theory: The Urge to Measure Up Against Others

Comparisons are odious.

—15th-century saying¹⁹

Throughout the last decade, Social Comparison Theory has reemerged as a popular area of inquiry for social psychologists, though researchers have begun to recognize the complexity of the comparison process and the theoretical significance of this complexity. According to Social Comparison Theory, people have a basic need to know how they are doing in their lives.²⁰ As a result, people continually compare themselves to others that they believe are similar (or slightly better), using dimensions in two general directions:

SAME/DIFFERENT

SUPERIOR/INFERIOR

This comparison to our *perceived* peers (or those we may consider slightly better than we are) begins in childhood. Children compare their appearance to that of children in their school classes, athletes compare their statistics to those playing similar sports or to those on the same team, students ask others in the class what grade they received on a test, workers check with coworkers to see if they are making more or less than they are, people compare the cars they drive to others' cars, people decide whether or not they have dressed appropriately by looking at others, and class reunions are replete with anxiety-producing social comparisons (some overt, some covert) about family, income, career, weight, and perceived general happiness, to name a few of the myriad everyday comparisons that season our lives. As a result of these comparisons, people trigger continual satisfactory or negative emotions for themselves. A large portion of our satisfaction with our own lives, in fact, is fragile—depending, as it does, on continual comparisons to our peers.

Members of peer groups perceive that they are *like one another*, in one or more salient ways; that is, group members are aware of their *peerness*. The working framework for distinguishing *peer groups* from other groups used in this book is particularly relevant for discussing Social Comparison Theory:

Peer groups are made up of members who consider one another to be equals in terms of abilities, background, age, responsibilities, beliefs, social standing, legal status, or rights. *Not all group members agree about the equality of all other members at all times, but there is overt consensus that members of the group are primarily equal.*

In order to conclude that “sameness” exists, however, peers within the group must engage in both intragroup and extragroup social comparisons. Sometimes, in fact, other people do that task for us, pointing out how we measure up (or do not measure up) to our peers. Social Comparison Theory casts light on the dynamic intragroup and extragroup comparisons peer members continually make, resulting in a sense of belongingness, loyalty, superiority, exclusiveness, or satisfaction with peer group membership (or the lack thereof).

Using the lens of Social Comparison Theory, peer group researchers might see the manner in which member comparisons function to block or bond group relationships. Comparisons may occur at the individual member level (How do I measure up against her?) or at the group level (How does our group measure up against theirs?). Some groups, for example, purposefully isolate themselves from others, following comparisons that find others to be unacceptably “different,” even among adults and within organizations. A case study of teams in a cooperative supermarket showed how the organizational hierarchy, the nature of the strong ingroup identity of some departments, and the lack of “living up” to the hoped-for cooperative principles resulted in relatively autonomous teams at the cooperative (teams that, essentially, attempted to treat themselves as separate containers).²¹ The strong-identity peer teams avoided direct confrontation with team members they considered “external,” including even those members who were assigned to their team.

It follows that when peers compare themselves to others in their group, jealousy or envy may result. As one example, *group envy* (feelings of resentment or inferiority relative to other group members) was found to result between members, which can subsequently affect

members' behaviors and even group outcomes. Duffy and Shaw documented the sabotaging nature of envy, which was directly and negatively related to group performance and cohesion, and which indirectly influenced members' absenteeism and satisfaction with the group by increasing their social loafing.²² They offered the phrase "Salieri syndrome" to describe the emergence of peer envy in groups. Each member has a number of communication choices concerning how to manage that envy, when that emotion is recognized. It would be expected (but has not, to date, been widely investigated) that children and adolescents experience difficulty in choosing appropriate communication tools to cope with intragroup peer envy, for example.

Relevant for understanding of peer groups was a study that investigated how medical students compared themselves to their classmates.²³ The social comparison strategies of fourth-year medical students (peers) were surveyed to determine the influence of a student's gender when that student engaged in self-comparison within a peer group of mixed-gender others (in this case, those in the medical school class). Questions were included to see what comparisons were made about diagnostic ability, relationships with patients, clinical skills, writing of patient reports, and relationships with physicians. Results showed that women compared themselves to both male and female medical students in their peer class, while men tended to compare themselves only to male medical students in their peer class.

Other areas of study might include

- how peer groups regulate membership,
- how peer group leaders are chosen,
- how peers rely on the successes of outside peer groups to determine whether their group is worthy,
- how members "count" their value in a group,
- whether group satisfaction is based on negative social comparisons, and
- the degree to which social comparison leads members to leave or attempt entry into a peer group.

Group renewal rituals may occur after a member leaves a group, as the remaining members compare "what we were" to "what we are now." Sinclair-James and Stohl have described this group renewal among groups of peers as functioning to rejuvenate group identity.²⁴

Structuration Theory: Creating and Recreating Group Rules or Structures

Structuration Theory attempts to explain the processes by which groups become patterned with respect to collective practices.²⁵ This theory starts by assuming that the key to understanding group practices is through analysis of the structures that underlie those practices. Structures are the *rules* (statements about how things ought to be done, the order of things, procedures, or consequences for infractions) and *resources* (such as materials, knowledge, experience, or skills) that members bring to generate and sustain the group system.

Structuration Theory, therefore, draws our attention to the processes by which group systems are produced and reproduced through members' use of rules and resources.²⁶

The study of a peer group, using a structural approach, might focus on

- the specific skills, networks, or resources members bring to the new group,
- the rules for behavior, communication, and tasking that members bring,
- the rules that are subsequently created during discussions (procedures, voting, or turn-taking),
- the structures suggested, rejected, or created to accomplish group goals,
- the manner in which leadership is enacted over the course of time and by various members,
- structure and rules to repair damages and cope with mistakes, and
- rules to govern member infractions of group rules or norms.

A structural approach might examine both the initial structures of a peer group, and, later, the emergent structures and rules that are created or sustained during group communication processes. An ethnographic study of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), for instance, is an excellent example of a peer group that relies on the perception that all members share similarity around their historical use and abuse of alcohol. In that study, the structures of the global organization (AA) were appropriated and reproduced in the local organizational (chapter), through recursive group practices and individual actions.²⁷

Researchers using Structuration Theory have also focused on how small group members appropriate technology in their group interactions

and how such appropriations mediate the impact of that technology.²⁸ Two aspects of technological structures have been distinguished that emerge during small group processes: the structural features built into a particular technology (for example, giving each group member one vote) and the symbolic spirit of a particular technology, the general goals and attitudes the technology promotes (for example, democratic decision making).²⁹ Poole and his colleagues have documented how different appropriations of the spirit of technology (group decision support systems) influenced the quality of team efforts.³⁰

When peers disagree, those authors argued, and when this occurs in peer groups, a structure emerges to manage the argument. Scholars have used a structurational approach, for instance, to reveal the structuration of arguments in small groups, including how arguments are sometimes produced by “tag-team” discourse among members.³¹ Meyers and Seibold analyzed the argument structures of many peer groups and concluded that group argument involves the production of interactive group discussion messages. These messages are patterned, rule governed, and collaboratively produced.³²

Often, people enter new peer groups with preconceptions about what *structures or rules* ought to guide that group’s processes. This is a structurational question of interest about group life. Researchers in one study used Structuration Theory to look at peers called for jury duty, for instance. The study reported that citizens waiting to be called for jury service in a courthouse jury assembly room had already brought with them (and were able to immediately describe and apply to hypothetical vignettes) specific *structuring rules* for their *anticipated* group verdict-rendering task, such as how time should be used and valued, how leadership should be created, what symbolic meaning should be contained in a note sent to the judge about the jury’s competency to perform the task, and how dialectical tensions between loyalty to the group (jury) or loyalty to the organization (judicial system) should be resolved.³³

Decisional Regret Theory: “Woulda/Coulda/Shoulda” Mental Minefields

I’ve never looked at the consequences of missing a big shot. When you think about the consequences, you always think of a negative result.

—Michael Jordan
(retired American basketball player, 1963–)

I see it all perfectly. There are two possible situations—one can either do this or that. My honest opinion and my friendly advice is this: Do it or do not do it. You will regret both.

—Søren Kierkegaard
(Danish philosopher, 1813–1855)

The Decision is not the problem. The Outcome is the problem.

—Zen teaching

The outcomes of our decisions are not predictable, but that does not stop us from attempting to make future predictions before we settle on a decisional choice. In fact, decision tasks are not always welcomed (since decisions require complex cognitive effort), so it stands to reason that the more important any decisional outcomes, the greater the dislike of having to decide. Each time we make an important decision, we experience some uncomfortable dissonance—since there are often both advantages and disadvantages to all choices.*

People *do* reflect, it turns out, on roads not taken. Landman, a scholar who examined how people conceptualize and cope with “regret,” described four destructive functions that regret can have for individuals:

1. Excessive regret can provoke excessive hesitation.
2. Specific regrets might be assigned excessive weight, resulting in distracting preoccupation.
3. Anticipation of regret interferes with future-oriented optimistic thinking.
4. Entertaining regrets entails an admission of personal deficiency or poor judgment.³⁴

On the one hand, groups can be crippled by painful regrets (presently felt or remembered) that are being nurtured by *any* of their members. On the other hand, imagining alternative worlds (what-might-yet-be) is arousing, producing either soothing or discomfoting feelings.

*One line of research describing mental processes *after* a decision has been made has pointed out that people often experience *post*-decisional dissonance. Further complicating decision-making challenges, immediately after making a decision some people have a tendency to focus on the *negative* aspects about the choice made, as well as the *positive* aspects of the choice rejected (Aronson, Wilson, & Akert, 1999).

The inevitability of *regret* creeping into our group decision-making tasks is more understandable when we pause to consider how the media surrounds us with reminders that trigger our fear of regretting a decision. Lottery advertising, for example, often exploits the normal human capacity for “what if” thinking (“It could have been you!”), inviting high personal involvement and perceived proximity of positive outcomes.³⁵

Our everyday *predecisional* thoughts and feelings of anticipated regret are also affected by consumer marketing strategies (“What if I find it cheaper someplace else?”), which attempt to anticipate a buyer’s subsequent regret by offering price guarantees.³⁶ Personal ruminations may contaminate the enjoyment of life choices (“What if I had decided not to have children?”), while teams may become paralyzed by second-guessing strategies (“What if we hadn’t traded our quarterback?”). There is something at once obsessively compelling and oddly unsettling about confronting the unrealities that *could have been*.³⁷

Faced with decisions that are particularly important, a person can experience *anxiety* (while anticipating possible choice-regret in the future). Decisional Regret Theory (DERT)³⁸ describes a type of *communication* that emerges when someone is anxious about making a decision,* so DERT is useful for understanding a variety of decision events that occur among peers in decision-making groups:

The communicative dynamic of Decisional Regret Theory is the production, sharing, and reconstruction of predecisional imaginary narratives (stories about what might happen) that allow people to anticipate various alternative decisional outcomes before actually making the decision.³⁹

DERT predicts a specific type of shared communication (stories), hence it is useful for studying peer groups that face decision-making tasks. The type of communication DERT predicts is *counterfactual storytelling*. DERT predicts that under specific circumstances (having to make a meaningful decision), a person will talk to others about all of the imagined *unwanted* outcomes of the choices.

We all naturally engage in *thinking contrary to reality*. When we think, “If only I had been accepted at Harvard,” we are thinking contrary to reality—the *reality* is that Harvard turned us down, yet we are imagining the wonderful things that might have followed, if we had

*Although DERT may be applicable to a number of communication contexts, including both intrapersonal (self-talk) decision making and dyadic (person-to-person) decision making, the theory conceptually emerged from a study of real-world peer group arguing (videotapes of jury deliberations).

been accepted. If we think, "I don't know the answer to question #7, so I am probably going to flunk this test, which means I will flunk the course, so I'll never graduate from college," the *reality* is that we just don't know the answer to question #7. The other thoughts are merely future dismal guesses that might not occur.

Thinking contrary to reality can be contagious in group settings, although some members may more often engage in it than others. As with the above examples of thinking contrary to reality, *counterfactual thinking* involves

- the mental creation (that is, imagining),
- of fictional story-plots (concerning either past events or anticipated future events),
- about *antecedent* facts that already occurred, and
- how an outcome might have been (or might still be) different.*

Social psychologists have investigated factors⁴⁰ that constrain or inhibit the production of counterfactual thoughts,⁴¹ individual differences in counterfactual thinking,⁴² the process of comparison during counterfactual thinking,⁴³ antecedents and consequences of upward and downward counterfactual thinking,⁴⁴ dysfunctional implications,⁴⁵ the impact of counterfactual thinking on emotion, attitudes, and behaviors,⁴⁶ superstitions resulting from anticipated regret,⁴⁷ gender bias and explanations for performance,⁴⁸ and counterfactual thinking in light of traumatic life events, to name a few. More recently, interaction between mood as a motivator to generate counterfactual production has been investigated. Scholars have reported that people in good moods generated the greatest number of downward (worse than reality) counterfactuals, while people in bad moods generated the greatest number of upward (better than reality) counterfactual stories.⁴⁹ Peers, it seems, have spent a lifetime engaging in what-if or if-only thinking, which would be expected to emerge, to some degree, during group decisional talk.

People who face making decisions generally want to avoid outcomes that might have them thinking afterwards with regret, "If only!" One way to avoid a bad decision is to engage in what-if thinking *before* the decision choice is made. DERT also predicts, however, how *listeners* might respond.

*For a full discussion (with group dialogue examples) of how counterfactual thinking emerges for peer group members during jury deliberations, see SunWolf (2006).

When someone who is trying to make a decision shares *imaginary narratives* (what might happen if), listener(s) might (1) reproduce the story, (2) alter the story, (3) create an alternative story, or (4) disconfirm the story. In particular, when we imagine unwanted outcomes from a decision and share our mental stories with others, some people will agree with us, while others, instead, will tell us different imaginary outcome stories that have more positive endings. Decisional Regret Theory argues that an individual will not make a decision unless that person can at least *imagine a positive outcome* from the decision, or, alternatively, *imagine a positive way of handling any imagined negative outcomes* of the decision.

How might regret or counterfactual thinking emerge during small group decisional talk? Figure 1.2 is a moving model (sequential), illustrating the emergence of shared (anticipated) decisional regret by members in a group. Figure 1.2 should be viewed from the bottom to the top, sequentially.

A complete model, visually describing the entire process of regret thinking and regret talk in groups appears in Figure 1.3.

Additionally, Figure 1.3 illustrates the emergence of group regret (see also Appendix), decisional deadlock, the restorying of any imaginary outcome tales shared by group members, and, finally, the sequential nature of counterfactual thinking about decisions.⁵⁰ The next decision may be impacted by how counterfactual talk was handled by a group for previous decisions.

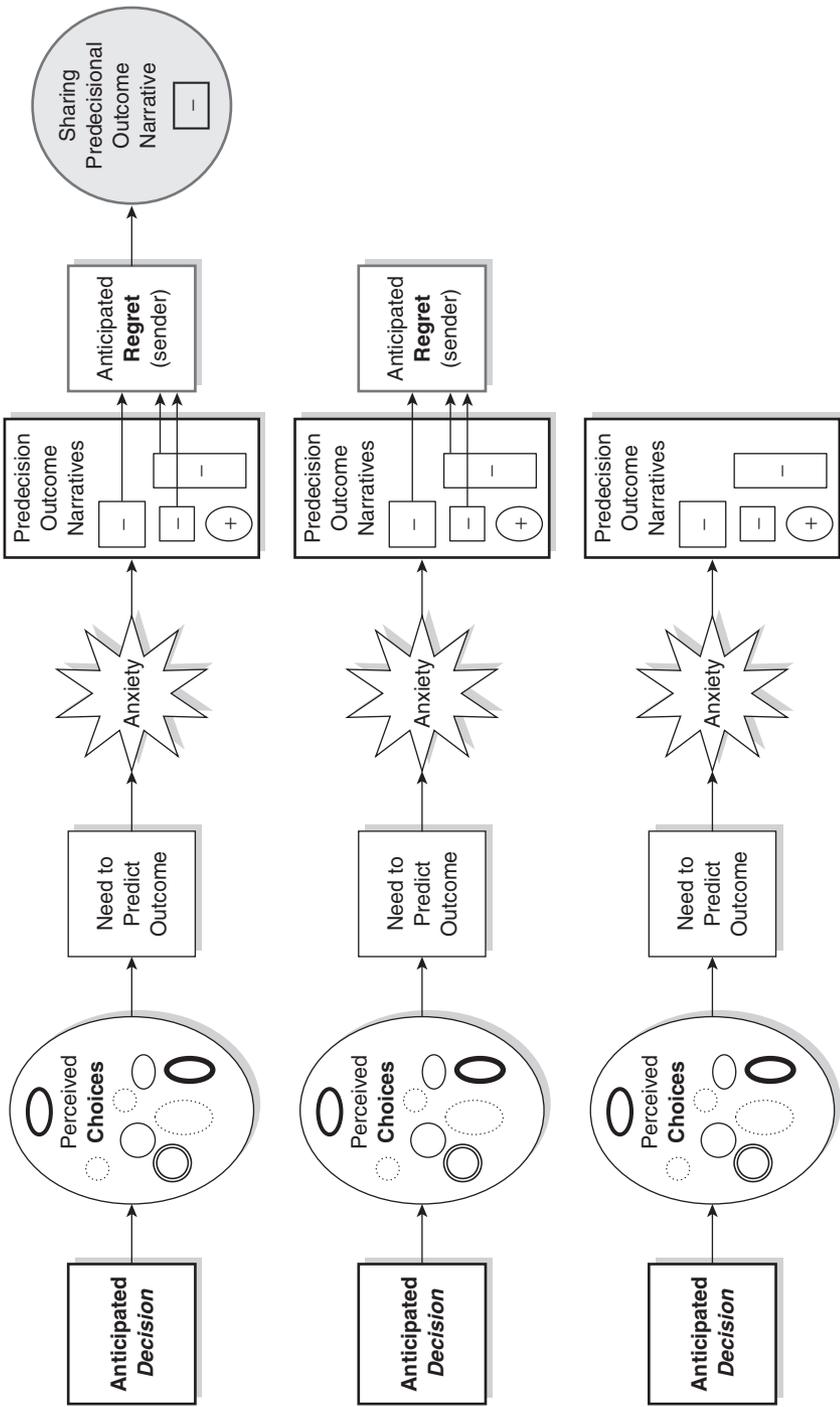
Since it is natural to evaluate our life events not simply by the reality of what comes to pass, but also by thoughts of *what might have been*, it follows that some peer group members may be constantly revisiting unwanted outcomes of their group decisions, as well as attempting to avoid future poor-decision-making outcomes.* Decisions are a pervasive part of every peer group's life.

Research adopting DERT to predict or explain group behavior, processes, or outcomes might focus on decisions peers make about

- how to best recruit new members,
- how to handle deviant group members,

*In fact, Sherman and McConnell (1995) compellingly argued that staying focused in the present is a challenge for people, since our minds constantly wander to the past (last night or years before), with floodings of nostalgia about people, relationships, or experiences.

Figure 1.2 Sequential Model of the Emergence of Shared Anticipated Decisional Regret in a Group



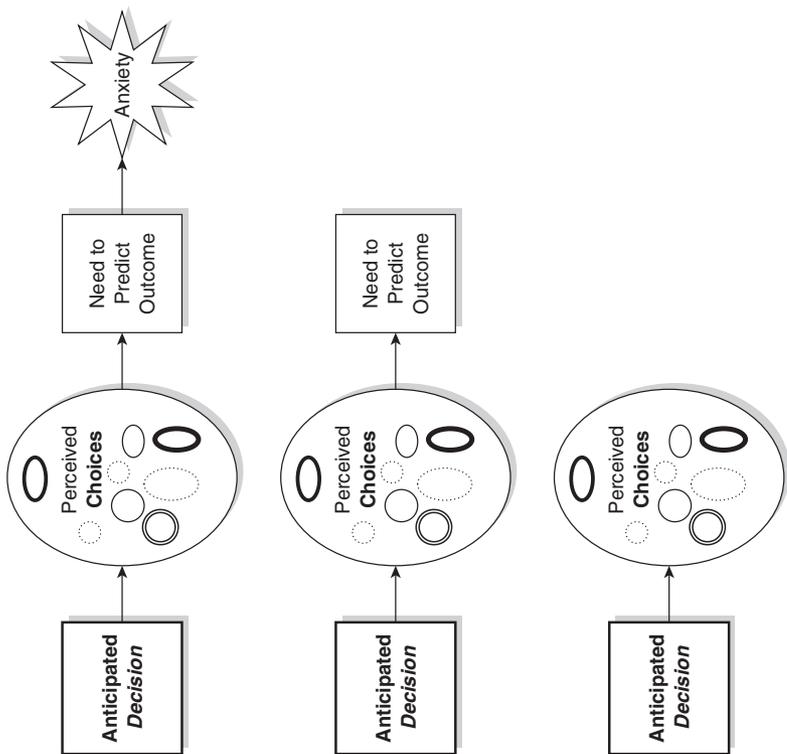
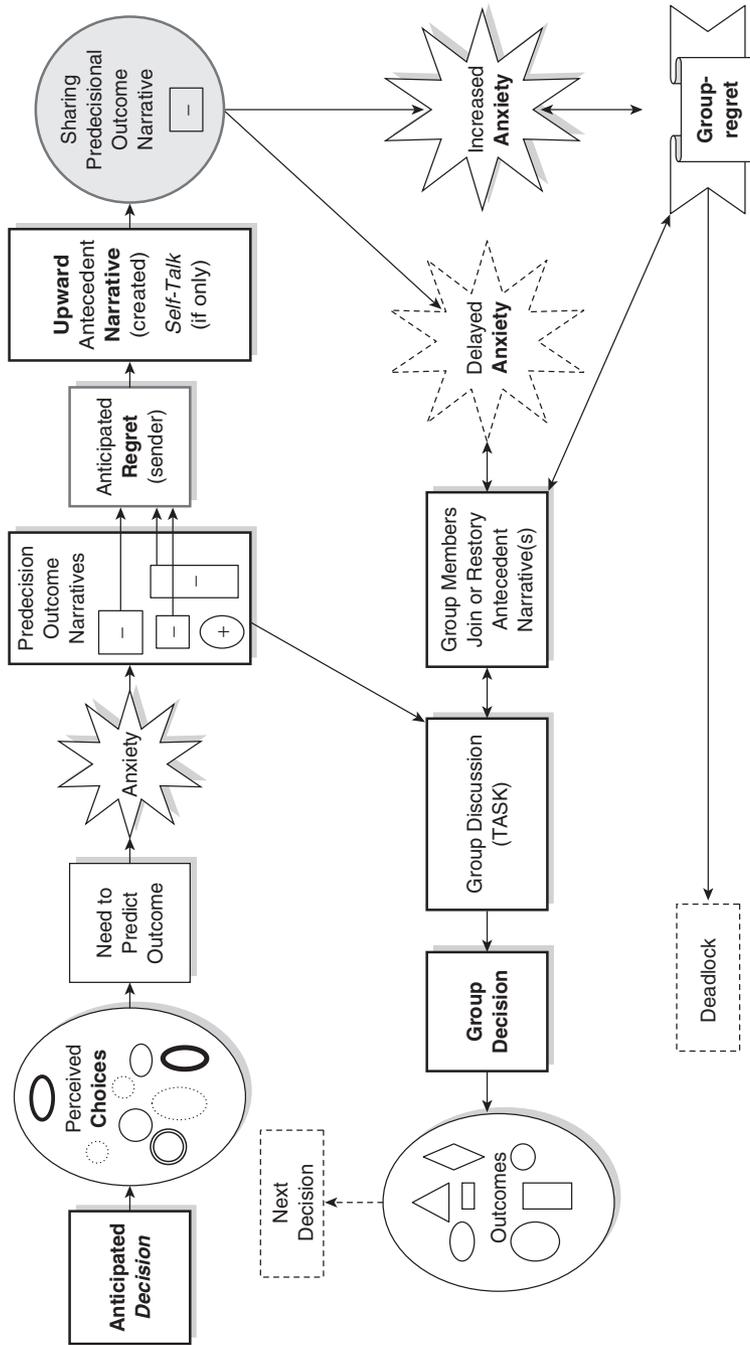


Figure 1.3 Decisional Regret and the Production of Shared Counterfactual Stories to Avoid the Decision



Source: Author.

- what activities deserve the group's commitment,
- what rules are needed,
- how to generate more ideas,
- who should lead,
- how to deal with member behaviors,
- what ceremonies to adopt,
- how to win (beat the competition) more often,
- how to deal with crises, threats, or challenges,
- how to do things faster,
- how to please more people,
- how to deal with slackers, or
- how to construct positive branding of their group to outsiders.

Decisions and decisional consequences are a part of every peer group's life, whether the group is on the playground, on a ball field, listening to evidence in a courtroom, hanging out together in a neighborhood, performing surgery, worshipping in a church, making music on a stage, flying planes, exploring new territories, sailing a boat, or trying to survive on a battlefield.

Social Identity Perspective: Identifying Us and Them

*Father, Mother, and Me,
Sister and Auntie say
All the people like us are We,
And everyone else is They.*

—Rudyard Kipling
(English author and poet,
1865–1936), *We and They*

Sometimes we define ourselves by exclusion. We may come to make sense of who we are, as individuals or as groups, by gaining clarity on who we are *not*—as well as who is *not* welcome in our groups.

A person's identity is shaped and reshaped by the groups to which he or she belongs. Peer groups, consequently, can have a powerful influence on our personal identities (whether we are members of these peer groups or whether we are outsiders looking in). An individual's identity is also shaped by the groups that exclude him or her, or the groups that person *chooses* not to join ("Include me out!"). Likewise, a small group defines itself, in part, by member exclusion and group

boundaries. Unchecked inclusion, in important ways, blurs the clarity about who we are as individuals or as groups. Social Identity Perspective has been available since 1982, yet remains underutilized by scholars who study small groups. This perspective helps explain a specific social need to perform identity *by exclusion* of others.⁵²

While frequently applied by multicultural and intergroup scholars,⁵³ the Social Identity Perspective has been used less by those who study small group processes—yet the perspective offers rich insight into peer group dynamics. Social Identity Theory argues that our social identities are primarily determined by the groups to which we belong. Consequently, we are motivated to join the groups we perceive to be most attractive. Once we are in the group, we give them our resources and evaluate them more positively than we evaluate groups to which we do not belong.⁵⁴ As a result, we develop a sense of “us” and “them,” which influences, in turn, our sense of self.

Ingroups and outgroups are constructs of interest to the Social Identity Perspective. Social identities are said to be primarily based on the comparisons that people make between *ingroups* (groups we belong to) and *outgroups* (groups we do not belong to). The Social Identity Perspective is, as a result, consistent with Social Comparison Theory, though Social Identity Perspective narrows the focus of the comparison of interest to that of ingroups and outgroups. The basic premise is that, once a group is formed, subsequent pressures to evaluate one’s own group positively (using comparisons to outside groups) leads peer groups to attempt to differentiate themselves from other similar groups.

Social Identity Perspective and the Theory of Thin-Slicing

The human brain’s cognitive-thinking-associating activities take place at high speed, on multiple simultaneous levels, and are continual.

A key concept embedded in the Social Identity Perspective is the fact that our ingroup outgroup thinking, while inevitable, may be either *mindless* (we are unaware of it) or *mindful* (we know we think that way). We all hold on to (and are influenced by) more outgroup thinking than we realize.

Implicit associations, for example, are mental connections our minds make between two separate things. We are largely unaware of the way implicit associations happen in our thinking. Furthermore, it is difficult to turn off this implicit thinking. That is, when it comes to thinking about other people, we are often thinking unaware.

This mindless implicit social thinking nonetheless influences our experiences in peer groups—as well as our assumptions about groups to which we do not belong. One opportunity to obtain a glimpse of the thinking-unaware-about outgroups that your own mind experiences is available online at the Harvard University Web site in a study called, “Project Implicit.”* First brought to my attention by author Malcolm Gladwell, I have shared this online exercise that measures our own mental associations with lawyers, judges, law students, and undergraduates, all of whom have been amazed about what they learned about their own “mindless” thinking:**

We are all (often) willing to let a little bit of knowledge go a long way, when it comes to thinking about other people.

We get hunches about other people (especially those we know little about) and our brains love to leap to conclusions—rather than wade through unfamiliar murky thinking places.***

Malcolm Gladwell’s *Blink* is an extraordinarily useful concept for understanding and strategizing about the snap judgment functioning

* Implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/demo. The demonstration tests, and *not the actual study*, give you feedback about how your thinking compares to that of other people. One of the most revealing demonstration tests is the RACE IAT, because we believe we know our biases. A wide variety of other tests are also available, including Arab-Muslim IAT, Sexuality IAT, Asian IAT, Gender-Career IAT, or Age IAT. Your measured bias on each scale that you choose will be immediately given to you. Share this Web site with friends, family, coworkers, and colleagues to gain great insight into the outgroup and ingroup thinking of people you know. (Feel free to participate, later, in the full Harvard study, rather than just the “demo.” Due to the methodological requirement of random assignment, however, you cannot pick which sub-tests you will do on the full study.)

**One of the most frequent results, in fact, of exposing people to this intriguing exercise is that a law student, judge, or undergraduate returns to report that they insisted that their roommate, coworkers, colleagues, parents, or true love take the same test! It appears that we are equally fascinated with the mindless thinking and associations of those with whom we work, live, or love. (Social Comparison Theory, discussed earlier, suggests that we evaluate our own test results about our thinking by seeing the results of those with whom we associate.)

***The human brain loves a short-cut. Our **social hunches** are the modern manifestation of the *evolutionary adaptive unconscious*, acting like a giant computer that quickly and quietly processes large quantities of novel data. The brain’s decision-making parts are capable of making quick judgments based on little information when sizing up the world, in order to warn us of danger: this is a good thing. However, making quick judgments about other people: not so good.

of a human's thinking brain.* In the everyday world, "snap judgment" carries a negative connotation (as in, "*Hold on, don't make any snap judgments, here.*"). We assume that the quality of a decision is directly related to the time and effort that went into making it. "Haste makes waste." "Don't judge a book by its cover."

What if, instead, some of our most profound judgments about other people were the products of rapid cognition (snap judgments)? What if our spontaneous impressions and conclusions about a new person happen in *two seconds*? The Theory of Thin-Slicing (see Appendix) explains how our frugal brains are willing to let a little bit of knowledge go a long way. Our brains thin-slice the available data in order to make that data manageable. Thin-slicing describes the ability of our brains to find patterns in situations and behaviors, based on *narrow slices* of experience or information:

We thin-slice other people and, correspondingly, they thin-slice us.

For peer group perceptions, this mental tendency has a lot of explanatory power.

One theory that lets us use blink and the Theory of Thin-Slicing when studying peer groups is Social Identity Theory (see above and Table 1.1), since this theoretical perspective focuses our attention specifically on ingroup versus outgroup thinking. Social Identity Theory was developed by social psychologists and offers a rich perspective from which to understand the social behaviors and thinking about peer groups.

From this perspective, group scholars might examine

- the speech styles of gangs,
- group processes and leadership on competitive sports teams,
- hostile groups of students on a campus,
- cliques in high schools,
- neighborhood racial tensions,
- elite military squads, or
- the sorority and fraternity "Rush Week," where outsiders stressfully compete for bids from desired groups to become insiders (even when the standard to become a peer is admittedly fuzzy).

*This book will make you see other people and yourself in a different way. Gladwell (2005) revolutionizes the way we understand our inner thinking worlds. How do our brains really work, when it comes to thinking about other people?

Peer group scholars taking an ingroup versus outgroup perspective, consequently, would be interested in the effects of sport team rivalries (both between teams and between avid fans of sport teams) on peer member and group identities, on the identity-creating-maintaining role of group rivalries, or on the use of symbolic communication to display ingroup status (clothing, colors, or language, for example).

Conquergood's intensely participative and engaged ethnographic study of Chicago street gangs and the complex ways cultural space is claimed through identity not only with a neighborhood gang but, furthermore, through allegiance to either the People or Folks nation is an excellent example of knowledge that would be important to peer group students and scholars taking a Social Identity Perspective.*

Prosocial Helping Behaviors: Distressed Strangers in Our Pathways

Why should group scholars be concerned with prosocial behavior in the first place?

This book urges the enduring theme that we all live in a forest of peer groups, yet only some of these group are considered by us to be "our" groups, that is, those we perceive to be "like us," and a few we think of as "them," "enemies," or "outsiders." Furthermore, throughout our life spans, there will be occasions when we either need help from—or, alternatively, have the opportunity to render help to—someone "not of our clan."

A prosocial behavior approach may help us recognize some common and enduring issues about how our peer group affiliations, perspectives, values, and experiences impact *who we help* (or ignore) and *who helps us* (or ignores our needs). Prosocial research is profoundly about people encountering other people. As a result, it can also provide a powerful framework for understanding the variances in prosocial behaviors *within* peer groups: peer to peer. Not every peer group member, as pointed out before, is always equal to every other member, even within a peer group.

Living in a forest of social peer groups, it is, nonetheless, sometimes difficult to find a Good Samaritan when we need one. Too often,

*See Conquergood's (1994) description of gang systems, in particular Table 2.1, "Chicago Street Gangs Aligned with Nation," as well as Figure 2.1, "The Gang System."

individuals find themselves a member of an *outgroup* who nonetheless needs immediate help from an unfamiliar or hostile group in the path. The Parable of the Good Samaritan was, historically, a tale of hostile peer groups, each of whom nurtured intense ingroup vs. outgroup thinking. *Not* well known is the fact that the Samaritan, in the tale, had been in reality the *least* likely person to show compassion toward the Jewish victim.* Here is the backstory:

The importance of the fact that this act of compassion was performed by a Samaritan rests in the historical reality that Samaritans were looked down on by Jews. In the time of this tale, Israel existed as a double nation, with another nation in between (much like the geography of Pakistan and India today). In the case of Israel, between the Galilean portion to the north and the Judean portion to the south, the nation in between was Samaria. Samaritans were believed to have been the descendants of intermarriages between Jews and local Gentiles (Philistines, Edomites, Syrians, and Moabites). Their worship focused on a mountain in Samaria, rather than on the mountain in Jerusalem. Jews considered Samaritans to be better than Gentiles, but inferior to Jews. Jews permitted Samaritans to travel freely in the two parts of Israel (since the Israelites often needed to pass through Samaria on their way from one part to the other). However, Jews and

*And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself."

So he said to the lawyer, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live." But the lawyer (desiring to justify himself) said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho when he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. Likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where the man was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day the Samaritan took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, "Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back."

Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" The lawyer replied, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go, and do likewise." *Luke 10:25-37*

Samaritans did not mix socially. Jews did not want to risk their social position by being associated with inferior persons, and the Samaritans wanted as little as possible to do with the “snobbish Jews.” This contemptuous relationship with Samaritans continued into New Testament times “for the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans.” For the Jews, the term “Samaritan” became a term of derision. Once, when the Pharisees were upset with Jesus, they were said to have used a Samaritan insult: “You are a Samaritan and have a Devil!” (John 8:48). Jesus began teaching that a new attitude must be taken toward the Samaritans when he passed through their towns, which he started to do instead of crossing the Jordan River to avoid them (John 4:4–5) and when he spoke with a Samaritan woman, contrary to Jewish custom (John 4:9). When asked whom to regard as our neighbor, Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan—precisely because Samaritans were despised.⁵⁵

Among social scientists, the behavior of interest is known as *prosocial behavior*, and some of us have it in larger doses than do others; it may also be contagious in groups. Researchers who study prosocial behavior ask, *Why do people help?* They also want to know the situational determinants of prosocial behavior and ask, *When will people help?* Finally, moving forward from the findings of their studies, researchers began to ask, *How can helping behaviors be increased?*

Few group scholars have examined the dynamics of prosocial behaviors in peer groups. Here, for the first time, you are invited to consider the profound connections between research on prosocial behavior, the Social Identity Perspective, and peer group dynamics.

At the outset, Social Identity Perspective necessarily invites our scholarly attention to the issue of *compassion* for others and how that impacts various peer groups. In fact, when compassion for others collides (as it must) with a peer group’s ingroup versus outgroup division of the world, a (social) *group dialectical tension* emerges (see the discussion of Group Dialectical Perspective, below):

COMPASSION AND COMPETITION
HELPING AND OBSTRUCTING

What do we know about *prosocial helping behavior* that impacts peer group behaviors and processes? The most famous study to investigate helping behavior took place at a location that appeared likely to find considerable amounts of prosocial helping behaviors: a seminary. John

Darley and Daniel Batson designed a study that mirrored the parable of the Good Samaritan, wherein many passersby had failed to stop to help a man lying unconscious on the side of the road.⁵⁶ Those participants might be considered more altruistic, in fact, than most of us. They were seminary students preparing to devote their lives to the ministry. In the study, the students were asked to walk to another building, where they were told they would be recorded making a brief speech; some students were told they were late and should hurry, others were told there was no rush. Furthermore, some students were specifically asked to *speak about* the parable of the Good Samaritan.

As the seminary students walked to the building where they would lecture, each passed a man who was slumped in a doorway, who coughed and groaned, and who appeared to be in distress. Ninety percent of the seminarian students in a hurry did not help. Even when seminary students were *not* told to hurry, only 63 percent of them stopped to help the man in distress. (Seminarian students on a college campus!) Findings also, surprisingly, revealed that helping behavior did *not* increase for those seminarian students who had *just prepared a speech about the parable of the Good Samaritan*.

What explains why religious individuals would not help a groaning man, on their way to giving a talk about the Good Samaritan? Individuals vary, it turns out, in the degree to which each is motivated by prosocial helping behaviors (compassion), yet all people experience compassion for others (compassion is not a dichotomy but a continuum). Compassion does not consistently translate into action, and may, furthermore, be affected by our perceptions about whether someone in distress is "us" or "them."

Compassion comes in two major flavors: compassionate love for *close others* and compassionate love for *strangers*. According to the Social Identity Perspective, peer group members generally experience one another as close others, while they experience outsiders as strangers.* (Recently, Susan Sprecher and Beverley Fehr developed a

*Susan Sprecher and Beverley Fehr developed a scale for measuring compassionate love across relationships, depending on whether people were more or less religious/spiritual. Their working definition of compassionate love is useful for trial lawyers and suggests, in itself, ways to talk to jurors about compassion in their lives: "*Compassionate love* is an attitude toward others, either close others or strangers or all of humanity; containing feelings, cognitions, and behaviors that are focusing on caring, concern, tenderness, and an orientation toward supporting, helping, and understanding the others, particularly when the others are perceived to be suffering or in need" (Sprecher & Fehr, 2005, p. 630).

scale for measuring compassionate love across relationships and depending on whether people were more or less religious or spiritual.)⁵⁷

Here are some of the generally agreed on findings from social science about people and prosocial behavior:

- *The empathy-helping connection.* When people feel empathy for another person, they will attempt to help for altruistic reasons, regardless of what they may gain.
- *A social modeling prosocial childhood.* Developmental psychologists have discovered that prosocial behavior occurs early in life and that parents can increase prosocial behavior in their children by behaving prosocially themselves.⁵⁸
- *Prosocial behavior norms can be different for men and women.* Men and women learn to value different behaviors. This varies, furthermore, by culture and situation. In a review of more than 170 studies on helping behavior, two researchers found that men were more likely to help in chivalrous, heroic ways,⁵⁹ while women were more likely to help on long-term nurturing tasks.⁶⁰
- *Mood affects prosocial behavior.* Positive moods provoke do-good behaviors in most people. Two researchers found that when they boosted the moods of shoppers in a mall in San Francisco and Philadelphia (by leaving dimes in coin-return slots of telephones), they were more likely to help someone (a confederate) who dropped a pile of papers. The effect was dramatic: phone users who didn't find the dime helped pick up papers 4 percent of the time, while dime-finders helped 84 percent of the time.⁶¹ The effect is robust and not limited to occasions when we find money. People are more likely to help others when they are in a good mood after doing well on a test, receiving a gift, listening to pleasant music, receiving a compliment, or landing a job. It turns out that good moods increase helping for several reasons: good moods help us look on the positive side of life and it allows us to prolong the good mood.
- *Guilt triggers helping.* While bad moods can diminish helping behavior, guilt about anything can trigger it. One researcher found that churchgoers were more likely to donate money to charities before attending confession than afterward (presumably because confessing to a priest reduced their guilt).⁶²
- *Cognitive-overload reduces helping.* The effect of "information overload" is such that prosocial behavior motivation diminishes as cognitive tasks multiply. When someone is bombarded

with task stimulation or stress, that person may feel overloaded and, consequently, have little energy left to give to strangers or outsiders.

- *Idle bystanders reduce helping.* Remember the Kitty Genovese incident reported by the media? In March 1964, she was murdered in an alley in New York City although many people admitted that they heard her cries for help. In Fredericksburg, Virginia, a convenience store clerk was beaten in front of customers who did nothing to help, even after the attacker left and the clerk lay bleeding.⁶³ A Good Samaritan peer, for example, may be less likely to aid someone in distress while in the presence of a “bystander” member of the peer group who is also not helping.
- *In the presence of their peers, “diffusion of responsibility” may block some individuals from helping an outsider.* In one experiment, when people were led to believe that they were the only one listening to a student have a seizure, 100 percent helped within two and a half minutes, and most had helped within 60 seconds. When people were led to believe that there was even one other student listening, the helping dropped dramatically, and it dipped shockingly if people believed four other students were listening.⁶⁴ This has been described as a “diffusion of responsibility,” whereby each bystander’s sense of duty to help a stranger *decreases* as the number of others present *increases*. An individual does not feel a strong sense that it is his or her personal responsibility to take action when there are others present who could (but do not) help.

It becomes clear that the literature on prosocial helping behavior has powerful explanatory power for examining the values, choices, and processes in competitive peer groups, gangs, cliques, military troops, and, especially, peer groups embedded in complex hostile environments. As hostile ingroup vs. outgroup thinking increases, it might be predicted that individual peer member prosocial behaviors decrease.* Alternatively, a focus on prosocial behaviors and social identity (us vs. them) would be useful for understanding differences between prosocial peer groups, such as religious groups, community

*“The whole idea of compassion is based on a keen awareness of the interdependence of all these living beings, which are all part of one another, and are all involved in one another.” (Thomas Merton 1915–1968, American monk, poet, and author)

social activist groups, relief agencies, specific Peace Corps task groups, Doctors Without Borders, and various task groups within charities. Finally, prosocial behaviors and social identity perspectives illuminate how groups may seek to survive and maintain a vital identity by limiting prosocial helping to within group members.

The Group Dialectical Perspective (discussed next) further illuminates these ingroup versus outgroup tensions and dynamics for peer groups.

Group Dialectical Perspective: Managing Unavoidable Social Tensions

In any free society, the conflict between social conformity and individual liberty is permanent, unresolvable, and necessary.

—Kathleen Norris,
(American novelist, 1880–1960)⁶⁵

Group Dialectical Perspective (or Dialectical Theory) initially developed to offer students and scholars an alternative view of relationship issues in *dyads* (two people), rather than groups (three or more people).⁶⁶ A Group Dialectical Perspective encouraged a focus on how people manage the normal tensions between *opposing desires and needs* in close relationships.⁶⁷ Three pairs of dialectical tensions that are consistently mentioned in the dyadic relationship literature concern competing needs for both:*

CONNECTEDNESS AND INDEPENDENCE

PREDICTABILITY AND NOVELTY

OPENNESS AND PRIVACY

In addition to identifying various reoccurring dialectical tensions in close relationships, scholars have described a number of interpersonal strategies that people use in an attempt to manage or balance these tensions.

*Excellent discussion of these basic dialectics, as well as an overview of Relational Dialectics Theory, can be found in West and Turner (2007).

Since we all spend significant parts of our lives in small groups, it follows that these same three sets of unavoidable opposing forces or needs would regularly emerge in our group relationships. As a result, scholars have moved toward Group Dialectical Theory, as evidenced by the work of Kramer, who offered a communication theory of group dialectics.⁶⁸ He suggested that four main issues that may trigger dialectical (with subcategories) tensions can usefully be applied to study group dialectics:

1. member commitment
2. group activities
3. group membership
4. behavioral norms⁶⁹

Encouraging future group scholarship using a dialectical perspective, Kramer also suggested a number of strategic choices that members have for managing these tensions: talking about them, remaining silent, avoiding them (people or issues), minimizing them, segmenting them, or denying them. Kramer also pointed out that members of a group may combine or alternate between coping strategies.

As described above in the discussion of the application of Social Identity Perspective to group work, normal *prosocial* motivations may collide with group affiliation loyalties creating at least two dialectical group tensions:

COMPASSION AND COMPETITION
HELPING AND OBSTRUCTING

In addition, unwanted or unanticipated changes that occur within peer groups may trigger dialectical tensions. Changes in a group's membership, for example, are evidence of the inevitable dialectical tensions that occur between *inclusion* and *exclusion* of people, accompanied by a second dialectic: *tolerance* and *judgment* of others. A third dialectic triggered when peer membership changes involves choices between *emotional expression* and *emotional management* (both of which are necessary).^{*} Hence, three more dialectics for peer group members are possible:

^{*}As shown above, dialectical tensions are generally described in paired "ands," which gives expression to two unavoidable colliding tensions that coexist (requiring, as a result, relational management). Both tensions must be accommodated.

INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION
TOLERANCE AND JUDGMENT
EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION AND EMOTIONAL REPRESSION

University undergraduates are often assigned to task groups in their classes, which traditionally causes tension, frustration, and complaints from many. It may be that a dialectical perspective can help explain the distress peers feel when asked to work on a task with other peers:

1. Students have experienced few, if any, models for leadership by peers (their teams had coaches, their scout troops had leaders, for example).
2. Students have a high need to belong, as well as to receive approval from their peers, which may trump the class task and approval (grades) from the teacher, causing some peers to remain silent rather than prodding their peers to work harder. (See Appendix: social loafing, sucker effect, and free rider.)
3. Social fears may collide simultaneously with social needs. (See Appendix—inclusion fragility—wherein students simultaneously experience being in a peer group and being at risk for exclusion.)

Symbolic practices are used by peer groups to survive such changes. An exemplar of a study that illuminates peer group dialectical tensions in an unusual religious group was the study of a witches' coven.⁷⁰ A coven is, in fact, an excellent example of a group whose members consider themselves to be similar in a significant way that may not be obvious to an outsider. The coven of peers that was studied faced a complex transition after the loss of one of its members, which demonstrated the dialectical tensions that had to be solved and survived by the remaining members. Group meetings that followed the member who left included exhaustive *metacommunication* (communication about communication), with stories produced and shared about the group's history, founding vision, core group values, group structure, and members' hopes for the future. Performed *ritual imagined stories* engaged in by coven members during this period cast themselves as protagonists, with forces antagonistic to the group depicted as enemies, threatening the group's existence and stability. Coven members also engaged in symbolic strategies, such as a planned farewell ritual, to recognize the loss of the member, while simultaneously preserving the group's desired identity and continuity.

Another example of group research that takes a dialectical perspective with peer groups is Kramer's ethnographic study of a community theater group.⁷¹ He described one member's frustration with the group that emerged from dialectical tensions between the need for precision and the need for flexibility. Describing the group members' frustration with the lack of planned leadership at rehearsal, one member described how she managed her need for planning with her need for flexibility:

It was irritating me at first and then I just sort of changed perspective and decided this would be my free time and I was going to, you know, read a book or talk with people, because I was just so irritated by it that I—it wasn't helping the situation any, so I was just sort of like, well, change perspectives. Make the best of it.⁷²

A study of children's peer groups⁷³ found that adolescents who were members of desired peer groups at school experienced tension between their need for group belongingness and their need for individual value autonomy. When describing incidents where they personally disagreed with their peer group's rejection of another child, many described choosing the strategy of remaining silent, which was painful for them. In fact, across 682 adolescents, fears of group reprisal and general social fears accounted for more than 60 percent of the reasons that adolescents perceived for feeling paralyzed to speak during peer group exclusion events they disagreed with at the time (findings were consistent across gender and ethnicity). Functionally, children may have fewer social strategies available to them for managing peer group dialectical tensions, even though the emergence of those tensions is inevitable and even though successfully managing them may be necessary to continued peer group inclusion.

Thinking forward, the application of a Group Dialectical Perspective to peer groups remains an underused and unexplored theoretical perspective, particularly as it applies to everyday peer groups. Which competing tensions emerge in cliques and professional teams, for example? Which strategies do peer group members use to manage their loyalty to the group with their desire for autonomy? How do faculty scholars, as a departmental group of peers, manage commitment to group and commitment to their personal lives? (Who, in fact, do professors consider to be members of their peer group at universities? Must others have tenure or even full professorship to be peers?) To what degree are people aware of dialectical tensions in their important peer groups, and are they aware of the dialectical tensions that their peers experience? Do competing dialectical tensions in peer groups

prevent some members from leaving an unwanted group or from disavowing a group's norms without leaving?

To date, however, at least eight robust paired dialectical tensions have emerged from various scholarly programs that offer useful lenses for understanding and describing peer group processes. Each pair of opposite needs or desires could be expected to emerge during normal group life, and, as a result, could be expected to confront a peer group with the additional task of managing the following competing or unavoidable tensions:

CONNECTEDNESS AND INDEPENDENCE

PREDICTABILITY AND NOVELTY

OPENNESS AND PRIVACY

COMPASSION AND COMPETITION

HELPING AND OBSTRUCTING

INCLUDING AND EXCLUDING

TOLERANCE AND JUDGMENT

EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION AND EMOTIONAL REPRESSION

The Bona Fide Group Perspective: Walking the Peer Group's Neighborhood

I grew up playing war. We threw dirt and rocks at each other. We'd lead attacks. We'd break up into squads. It became a neighborhood thing for a while, our neighborhood against the other neighborhood. There was always a war breaking out somewhere.

—David James Elliott (Canadian actor, 1960–)*

Since real-world peer groups are naturally occurring (rather than artificially assembled). As a result, peer groups are *not* best understood when considered in isolation from their environments. Peer groups are richly embedded in communities, surrounded by other groups; each of their members has, in turn, multigroup loyalties and shifting group memberships. Each peer group is surrounded by other groups that have political, geographic, religious, social, familial, historic, or

*Elliott appeared regularly on the television program *JAG*.

economic power (to name a few) that can affect the peer group. Peer groups face religious and political environments, and economic stresses and influences from their neighborhoods. The Bona Fide Group Perspective (BFGP) attempts to account for the effects and outcomes of this embeddedness (Table 1.1).⁷⁴

A Bona Fide Group Perspective (BFGP) encourages us to study naturally occurring groups and these complex contexts, hence this perspective is particularly important for understanding the dynamics of peer groups. The BFGP challenges a traditional view of small groups as “fixed containers,” suggesting, instead, that groups exist in dynamic interrelationship with their environments.⁷⁵ One of the assets of BFGP lies in its specific recognition of two significant characteristics of real-world groups:

1. The “boundaries” of natural groups are both symbolic and penetrable.
2. Natural groups are embedded in a social context that creates dynamic interdependence with groups outside their boundaries.

As applied to peer groups, BFGP suggests that peer group boundaries change—hence these boundaries are both redefined and negotiated by peer members within the group. This boundary-defining-negotiation task is ongoing, yet it may be the source of intragroup conflict. Furthermore, peer membership in a group itself changes over time. Group boundaries are symbolic, socially constructed through interactions with others, penetrable, and continually redefined and negotiated—in part, as a function of group identity formation and reformation.⁷⁶ Stohl and Putnam have specifically issued a call to group scholars to address boundary issues as a problematic for group researchers, worthy of exploration.⁷⁷

Are all peer groups *bona fide groups*, according to this perspective? A naturally occurring group does not necessarily mean the members are volunteers (jurors, military, and office task forces may all consist of some who were drafted). However, in general, scholars agree that university courses that artificially assign students to groups for a class task and grade have *not* created a naturally occurring group. Consequently, laboratory groups (typically assembled by researchers in order to manipulate variables of interest) and course-assigned groups are generally beyond the scope of a Bona Fide Group Perspective. Importantly, such groups are peers who perceive one or more significant points of

similarity, rights, and responsibilities with one another. Many of the other theoretical perspectives would be useful for understanding their processes (see, for example, the above discussion of group process problems that emerge in assigned student groups per the Group Dialectical Perspective).

Using a BFGP, researchers have found that allegiances to outside groups (multiple peer group memberships) challenged the ability of helping groups of peers to be successful at work. Allegiances to other groups can have potentially disastrous consequences. This was discovered in a study of a hospice team, where allegiances to other groups prohibited effective role coordination among team members, undermined the team's effectiveness, led to information-dissemination problems, and resulted in dissatisfaction and alienation among team members.⁷⁸ Conquergood specifically claimed a BFGP for his ethnographic study of Chicago's Albany Park neighborhood, not only studying an embedded group, but also embedding himself within the group.* More recently, journalists are embedding themselves in military units (peer groups) in war zones.

Each of these seven theoretical perspectives illuminates some aspect of communication in groups: types of talk, effects of talk, symbolic talk, and contexts of talk.

In addition to these seven theoretical and perceptual tools for understanding peer groups and their communication processes, there are a number of social science concepts that describe, reveal, or explain specific behaviors or outcomes that may occur in peer groups.

❖ BEYOND THEORIES: CONCEPTUAL LIGHTS THAT REVEAL PEER GROUP DYNAMICS

While less encompassing in explanatory scope than a theory, a *concept* usefully draws our attention to and names an event that occurs with enough regularity to be noticeable and intriguing. Sometimes these

*In December 1987, Conquergood (1994) moved into the Big Red tenement in a notorious quarter of that neighborhood called Little Beirut. He lived in that area until June 1992, experiencing the severe state of deterioration and disrepair of the living conditions that impacted the groups he wanted to describe.

Table 1.2 Theory/Perspective and Examples of Communication Focus

| Theory/Perspective | Examples of Communication Focus |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Symbolic-Interpretive Perspective | Symbols, language, rituals, objects, music, humor, silences, stories, art, competitions, and clothing |
| Social Comparison Theory | Words of comparison from self or others, self-talk, put-downs, praise, scoring, grading, ranking, competitions, and contests |
| Structuration Theory | Rules, norms, turn-taking, methods of voting, selecting leaders, procedures for decisional talk, and creation and recreation of structures that facilitate group goals |
| Decisional Regret Theory | Stories, fantasies, what-if scenarios, if-only regrets, resolving unwanted outcomes with other people, and helping others reduce anxiety about deciding |
| Social Identity Perspective | Using language to construct us-them perceptions, competitions, acts of inclusion or exclusion, prosocial behaviors, constructing group boundaries, labeling others, and put-downs |
| Group Dialectical Perspective | Managing tensions by sharing competing needs or desires and negotiating conflicts or issues concerning these need-tensions with others: sharing, negotiating, and arguing |
| Bona Fide Group Perspective | Use of language and symbols to construct boundaries, penetrate boundaries, negotiate embeddedness, deal with other groups, and talk about competing group loyalties of members |

concepts come from traditional group scholarship, whereas sometimes they are borrowed from related disciplines such as social psychology, cognitive sciences, or persuasion, to name a few.

Social science concepts (for example, anchor points, social loafing, or emotional contagion) that help explain communication events in peer groups are set out in a second visual tool (see Appendix, Social Science Theories and Concepts That Help Explain Events in Peer Groups). In addition, the Appendix table borrows a number of useful theories from the social sciences that are not traditional group theories, but that explain events and dynamics that occur in peer groups (for example, Attribution Theory, Expectancy Violations Theory, or Face/Politeness Theory). Using three columns, this table names each theory or concept, describes the assumptions, then offers specific applications of that concept or theory to the dynamic processes of peer groups.

The Appendix table has two functions: (1) as a current reference (concepts and theories will be used to explain specific exemplar behaviors or dynamics of peer groups in this book), and (2) as a future resource (concepts and theories may expand your independent thinking about what happens in various peer groups, and why).

❖ USING MULTIPLE THEORETICAL OR CONCEPTUAL LENSES

This book will draw on these theories and concepts throughout, examining some of the trees in the forest-of-peer-groups that claim us: cliques, crowds, circles, gangs, hoodies, homies, hot groups, and juries. These concepts and theories can help us understand, differently, the communication processes and products of peer groups, the effects we might have on other group members, and the impact others have on our own experiences in these groups.

It turns out that the social context of any peer group may alter an individual member's perception of the world. There is recent evidence from neurobiology that our perceptual and emotional *perceptions* change in the presence of relevant others. People in small groups are profoundly affected by the "rule of the majority," which assumes that the collective wisdom of many people overrides the judgment of a single person. The supposed superiority of the majority, however, can disappear *when peer pressure is placed on those who see things differently*.

In a 2005 study using magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scanners* that painted pictures of brain activity of group members during social conflict,** results showed that even when a group member *realized that the majority was factually incorrect*, many individuals decided to agree with the known incorrect answer. The MRI scanner showed that when wrong information originated from other people, *conformity to that wrong information* showed up as activity in the regions of the brain that deal with perception—and not in the regions of the brain that deal with higher-order mental activities. Going against our peers may be so uncomfortable at times that our decision-making thinking is short-circuited. The implications for teams, military troops, juries, gangs, athletes, or cliques are far-reaching. When it comes to disagreeing with a majority of our peers, the unpleasantness of standing alone can make a wrong opinion seem more appealing than sticking to one's own conclusions.

Studying communication in peer groups casts light on puzzling aspects of our social worlds, while suggesting vulnerabilities (as well as potential solutions) for facilitating different outcomes.

What other people say may change what you see.

—Folk wisdom

Critical Thinking About Group Theories and Concepts

- Consider whether certain theories may be more appropriate to explain the processes, behaviors, or experiences of specific peer groups than other theories. Which of these seven theoretical perspectives do you believe might be more useful in understanding adolescent cliques, rescue teams, or deliberating juries, for example?
- Using Table 1.1 for comparisons, when you want to understand more about a *specific* peer group, think of specific examples that illustrate what some theoretical perspectives, compared to others, *might miss*.

*MRI scanners detect which brain regions are active when people are performing various mental tasks.

**Researchers found that when people went along with their group on wrong answers, activity increased in the right intraparietal sulcus (spatial awareness), with no activity in brain areas that make conscious decisions. People who made judgments that went against the group showed activation in the right amygdala and right caudate nucleus (emotional salience areas). On average, people went along with the group on *known* wrong answers 41 percent of the time (Berns et al., 2005).

- Select some of the concepts in the Appendix table that help us understand peer group behaviors. For each concept that interests you, list several peer groups you believe these concepts might help us understand. Why doesn't each concept help us understand every possible peer group?
- What *anchor points* (see Appendix) might members of a gang hold that would not be shared by members of a baseball team?
- What *attributions* (see Appendix) about outsiders do you believe family clans have that are not generally shared by church youth groups? Now, apply the fundamental attribution error to these same two groups. What errors in thinking about outsiders may be occurring? Generate your own examples.
- Think of a task group you have belonged to where you were not satisfied with the efforts of some of the members in that task group. How does the Collective Effort Model explain those differences in effort or motivation? Now, consider *social loafing* (see Appendix). Does this concept explain in a different way your frustration with the lack of effort of some members than the explanatory power of the Collective Effort Model? Does the concept of *nominal group member* explain differently the perceived slacking behavior? Finally, critically think about the concept Free Ride Effect. Does this concept give additional or different perspective to what you experienced in that task group of peers?
- Applying concepts to explain the *behaviors of others* can be easier than applying those same concepts to our own choices and behaviors. Apply the same three-part exercise (see above) to a time when you realize you did not give your full effort to a task group of peers. Which of the three concepts best helps you understand your own lack of effort at that time?
- Consider the concept *Groupregret* (see Appendix). Name two examples of peer groups that you believe may regularly encounter this jointly experienced anxiety about making the wrong decision. What are your thoughts about whether groupregret more often has value for a decision-making group of peers (that is, keeps a group from moving toward a bad decision) or waste (that is, blocks groups from moving forward).
- The Investment Model of Relationships suggests that we may stay in and remain members of peer groups that no longer satisfy us, or, furthermore, that we wish to leave. Consider groups of which you have been a member, and reflect on whether you realize that some members were no longer satisfied with the group. Think about whether you find it difficult to leave peer groups to which you have invested time, effort, or shared history. In what ways might this reluctance to leave peer groups be beneficial or ultimately costly to a specific peer group?
- *Peer-suasion* explains one method that peer groups use to achieve *conformity* by exerting pressure on all members to feel they must comply

in order to gain (or sustain) group acceptance. What examples have you experienced that illustrate this?

- Recall an experience you have had in a peer group that might be explained by the *peak-end rule* from the Science of Happiness (see Appendix). In what ways do you now believe you may have been cognitively averaging how good or bad your best moments or worst moments in that group were, compared to the ending? Do you have an example of how “recalling a bad event is sufficient to make people who thought they were happy reframe their happiness downward?” Do Olympic teams, Super Bowl competitors, or World Cup teams regularly experience a peak-end rule at the end of the season, rather than actually considering the total pleasure or pain of their group successes? Might this thinking for individuals on these teams be different for winners, losers, gold medal winners, or bronze medal winners, in your view? As you consider this elite team-member thinking process now, in what ways might athletic teams face this more often than some social peer groups?

