The Human Group

George C. Homans

With new introductions by A. Paul Hare and Richard Brian Polley

THE HUMAN GROUP

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To the memory of

Robert Shaw Barlow

Social Philosopher

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Introductions to the Transaction Edition

The Significance of *The Human Group*

WHEN *The Human Group* was first published in 1950, Robert K. Merton provided an introduction noting that at that time there was a rapidly mounting interest in the study of the small human group, although, unlike Homans, most of the laboratory research by psychologists studied the group in isolation from its environment. Merton praised the book as a model of sociological analysis and described it as the first major contribution since the work of Simmel at the turn of the century. In a foreword to the volume, Bernard DeVoto discussed the value of general theory and Homans's contribution to a theory of the dynamic interrelationships in human behavior. Thus the importance of Homans's work was already apparent at the time of publication.

What can be added some forty years later as reintroduction to a volume that is now considered as a classic in the literature on organization and management? As a guideline, the editor of the reprint series suggested that the new introduction should place the book in the context of subsequent developments, emphasizing where it was prescient and where it was less so.

Before going forward, it is well to go back a bit to note where some of the major concepts came from that found their place in *The Human Group*. The book is an analysis of interpersonal relationships and the book's beginning is also found in the set of interpersonal relationships that Homans had with colleagues at Harvard University while he was a Junior Fellow. A key figure was L. J. Henderson who was the first chair of the Society of Fellows at Harvard that had been established in 1933 (Homans 1968a).

Homans became a Junior Fellow in 1934. Junior Fellows, in addition to receiving scholarships to study whatever they wished, dined together with the Senior Fellows once a week. Among the early Junior Fellows were C. M. Arensberg, B. F. Skinner, and W. F. Whyte. They soon became familiar with Henderson's views. In addition, the research of each of these Junior Fellows later became a source of ideas and data for Homans's books.

Henderson had conducted a seminar on the sociology of Pareto. One of the products of the seminar was *An Introduction to Pareto* by Homans and Curtis (1934), the first book on the subject in English. Henderson published his own book, *Pareto's General Sociology* (1935), in which he emphasized such matters as equilibrium, the social system, the mutual dependence of variables, and the problems of induction and abstraction. All of these ideas appear in Homans's *The Human Group*. Indeed the major concepts in Homans's work: interaction, sentiment, and function, had already been outlined in the last chapter of his Harvard thesis, *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century* published in 1941.

The term "function" was later changed to "activity" in a paper drafted while he was in the U.S. Navy in 1943 and published in 1947 (Homans 1984, 315). He added a distinction between the internal system and the external system (cross-boundary influences such as a factory layout of physical equipment). He suggested that the three classes of variables (interaction, sentiment, and activity) were mutually dependent in each system. Later he concluded that this was a mistake (1984, 316). Beyond the group boundary the variables need not be mutually dependent, rather the external system set the boundary conditions, or parameters, of the internal system.

Through Henderson and in his own relationships, Homans had another connection with the major social scientists of the day. Henderson was the Director of the Fatigue Laboratory at the Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration. Henderson's ideas became part of the intellectual atmosphere in which E. Mayo, T. N. Whitehead, and F.J. Rothlisberger carried out their research in the Western Electric Company. Their study of the Bank Wiring Observation Room was used by Homans as a source of data to introduce the major concepts in *The Human Group*. Through the Harvard Business School, Henderson had also come

in contact with C. I. Barnard and encouraged him to write his theory of formal and informal organization entitled *The Functions of the Executive* (1938). Barnard's ideas are cited frequently by Homans.

In addition to personal acquaintance with major contributors to the social science of his day, Homans was aware of the main trends in research on groups. In *The Human Group* he cites some ninety authors, some several times. Two thirds of the citations are drawn from industrial studies. anthropology, and social science classics, with a smaller number of references to community studies and group dynamics. Some of the citations are to works in natural science in support of his use of inductive theory building. The individuals who are cited most, in addition to those already mentioned, include E. D. Chapple, C. S. Coon, E. Durkheim, R. Firth, M. P. Follett, B. Malinowski, J. L. Moreno, G. P. Murdock, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, and W. L. Warner.

Homans was not alone at Harvard in his interest in groups and their place in organizations and larger social systems. His book introduced a method of analysis and a set of generalizations that cut across areas of specialization on the family, community, and industry. A similar approach was being taken by two of his colleagues, R. F. Bales and T. Parsons, who were later to influence a considerable amount of research on small groups and social systems. Bales had been developing a category system for the analysis of interaction in small groups that was published the same year as Homans's book (Bales 1950). Parsons, together with Bales and Shils would publish their integration of pattern variables with a functional analysis of small groups, based on Bales's theory and interaction process data, only three years later (Parson, Bales, and Shils 1953).

Thus at the time Homans was writing his book, Bales had not yet published his first major work based on laboratory studies of small groups. In any event, Homans concentrated more on the study of natural groups and in the relationships of these groups to their environment. Homans cites Parsons once by name, without a specific reference, along with Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown, and Malinowski whose ideas of "society as an organized whole or structure and the related idea of function . . . are among the great contributions of social anthropology and sociology to modern so-

cial science" (269). However, in later writings Homans makes it clear that he thought that Parsons's generalizations were too general to be of much use.

Homans relied on research carried out before World War II for four of the five case studies in *The Human Group*. The amount of research on small groups increased rapidly in the 1950s and 1960s with the high point in the mid 1950s reflected in the publication of the first collections of readings, Cartwright and Zander's *Group Dynamics: Research and Theory* (1953) and Hare, Borgatta, and Bales's *Small Groups: Studies in Social Interaction* (1955), special issue of journals, the *American Sociological Review* and *Sociometry* in 1954, and numerous special sessions at meetings of American psychological and sociological associations (Hare, 1976, 392). Swanson, Newcomb, and Hartley's *Readings in Social Psychology* (1952) and Lindzey's landmark first edition of the *Handbook of Social Psychology* (1954) both contained many contributions with a focus on behavior in small groups. Riecken and Homans's review of the literature on small groups is included in the Lindzey *Handbook of Social Psychology* (1954). Strodtbeck and Hare (1954) published the first comprehensive bibliography of small group research which recorded that Homans's *The Human Group* was one of the six most highly rated contributions to small group research.

Although Homans reflected the main sources of data on groups and the main interests of sociologists, psychologists, and anthropologists at the time his book was written, we can ask whether the field of study has changed markedly in the forty years since the publication of his book. An answer to this question will be proposed after summarizing the principal hypotheses in *The Human Group* and reviewing briefly Homans's subsequent publications.

First, we can look in some detail at the main foci of Homans's theory. Throughout his book he states hundreds of propositions in the form "if X, then Y." However, some of these are printed in italics and can thus be taken as his major propositions. Of these fifty-four hypotheses, the first thirteen (99-136) deal with the relationships between his major variables: activities, interaction, and sentiment. The case study of the Bank Wiring Observation Room is used to illustrate these hypotheses.

Each of the three variables is a fairly broad category. Activity can be either that formally required by the group task or some informal activity when group members are engaged in fun and games. Interaction usually refers to the frequency, duration, and order of reciprocal communication between individuals, regardless of content. Chapple had provided the operational definition for the concept of interaction as Homans used it. Ideally, Homans indicated that all concepts should also be operationally defined. Sentiment includes any type of internal state of the human body or feelings of individuals, especially their motivation to perform work and their likes and dislikes for one another. Years later Homans recorded that it was an error on his part to include *motives* as a kind of *sentiment* (1984, 318). He had defined *sentiments* as expressions of interpersonal feelings. However, motives (values) might not have anything to do with interpersonal behavior. In general, any change with regard to one of these three variables will result in changes in the other two which will in turn "feed back" and influence the first.

The next ten hypotheses (141-86) focus on "rank," defined as the evaluation of a person as better or worse relative to other members of a group. This type of evaluation is included as one of the types of sentiment. Evaluation is made by comparing a person's activities with the group norms for good performance. Persons of high rank tend to conform more to the group norms and to initiate most of the activity for the lower ranking members. Hypotheses in this section are illustrated with data from Whyte's description of the Norton Street Gang (Whyte 1943). Whyte, following Chapple's interest in the frequency and duration of interaction between individuals (Chapple and Coon 1942), had observed how interaction, activity, and the feelings of members towards others in the gang were related to their social rank, especially in their bowling performance. Homans, in turn, used these observations of a single group to illustrate more general propositions.

Firth's (1936) account of the relationships between family members on the island of Tikopia in the South Sea is used to illustrate the next set of eight hypotheses (243-55). These deal with the relationships between three persons, A, B, and C in terms of their activity, interaction, and sentiment. The sentiments involved are primarily those of liking and disliking. In stating these hy-

potheses Homans anticipates the later interest of social psychologists in "balance theory" associated with the work of Heider (1958) and Newcomb (1953). The basic idea is that If A and B like (or dislike) each other they will tend to have similar feelings toward C.

The next set of twelve hypotheses (360-422) draw on data from an account of social disintegration in Hilltown (Hatch 1948) and social conflict in the Electrical Equipment Company (Arensberg and McGregor 1942). The hypotheses deal with the relationship between group norms and social control, a basic concern of social psychology for groups of any size. Homans notes that group norms are formed in a group as a set of expectations drawn from actual social behavior that has been developed to deal with the group's task and environment. Once formed, norms change more slowly than changes in actual behavior.

The last set of eleven hypotheses (425-40) Homans lists as rules of leadership. For this section he draws on the experience and research of Whyte (1948), Barnard (1938), Roethlisberger and Dickson (1939), and Rogers (1941), and his own experience as the commander of a small warship in World War II (Homans 1946). A good leader, following a military model, should be able to listen to the concerns of the members without becoming too close and involved and should take the initiative, but never give orders that cannot be obeyed. The subsequent literature on leadership, which ranks third as a topic of interest in social psychology after conformity to norms and interpersonal choice (Hare 1976, 394), tends to emphasize a more democratic orientation as a characteristic of an efficient and effective leader.

In a paper published in 1958, Homans shifted his focus to the analysis of social behavior as exchange. In this paper he outlined the concepts and relationships that were the basis for his second major work on *Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms* (1961). In this book Homans makes it clear that his primary interest is not so much in the behavior of individuals in small groups as it is in the actual behavior of individuals in direct contact. This contact may take place in a relatively small group where it is easy to observe, or it may take place in a series of interactions in a social network. Although this second work still includes some references to the organization in which a small group is embedded and the effect of

other aspects of the situation, the focus is primarily on the interpersonal level.

In the 1961 book Homans observes that "elementary social behavior . . . is not driven out by institutionalization but survives along side it, acquiring new reason for existence from it" (391). He asserts that he wishes to explain social behavior rather than merely describe it as he did in *The Human Group*. For this purpose he formulates, in the first four chapters of the book, five propositions and some corollaries based on behavioral psychology and elementary economics (53-75). The propositions state relationships between the value of a reward and the likelihood that a person will continue an activity. The propositions are illustrated, in the following twelve chapters, with data drawn from field and laboratory studies.

Although propositions similar to those of behavioral psychology and elementary economics are evident in the earlier work, they are made much more explicit in the analysis of the elementary forms of behavior. Together with an earlier article (Homans 1958) the new book became one of the leading influences in the approach to social interaction as a form of exchange (cf. Thibaut and Kelley 1959; Blau 1964; Gergen, Greenberg and Willis 1980; Cook 1987). Homans suggests that the principal aspect of social behavior is the exchange of activity, tangible or intangible, and more or less rewarding and costly (1961, 13). In chapter 21 in his 1984 autobiography Homans summarizes the material in the 1961 volume and answers his critics.

In addition to the two books that present his major theoretical contribution, Homans also published two collections of his articles (1962, 1987), *Marriage, Authority and Final Causes* with Schneider (1955), a small book, *The Nature of Social Science* (1967), an autobiography (1984), encyclopedia articles (1968a, 1968b), contributions to edited volumes that he did not reprint (cf. 1963), and other articles and book reviews. (None of his books included a complete bibliography of his works.) For the most part these later works reflect the same themes that are evident in *The Human Group*. Each of these themes has continued to be important for the analysis of interpersonal behavior in small groups. However a great deal of research on interpersonal behavior has flowed under the social science bridge in the fifty years since Homans began his

search for major generalizations. One bibliography in a handbook of small group research lists some 6,000 references covering the period from 1898 through 1974 (Hare 1976) and another handbook includes some 5,000 references for the period 1975 through 1988 (Hare, Blumberg, Davies and Kent 1991).

The 1976 and 1991 handbooks can be taken as a guide to the social psychological literature on social interaction in groups. The 1976 handbook includes, in part 1 on group process and structure, chapters on the elements of social interaction, norms and control, interaction and decision process, group development, social perception, roles, and interpersonal choice. A comparison of the content of Homans's book with the content of these chapters reveals that Homans deals with the same general set of elements. However, he made an important contribution by analyzing *activity* separately from *interaction.* He further emphasized the importance of the organization and larger environment in setting limits for the behavior of persons in small groups or social networks. (Although by 1961 he had included the organization as just another element in the larger environment.) Since so much of the social psychological research is based on laboratory groups of university students, the influence of the activity (group task) and the impact of the university environment are generally overlooked.

Homans does treat the problem of conformity to norms and social control. However many detailed studies were available after 1950. Not only is the problem of the relationships between the individual and the group the classic problem for social psychology, but the study of the relationship was given additional impetus by the concerns of refugee intellectuals and others in the United States, after World War II, who were concerned that the series of events initiated by Hitler in Germany in the 1930s could happen again.

Since Homans focused on the interaction between individuals, he has little to say about the activities of the group as a group. Thus he does not describe processes by which groups make decisions or distinguish separate phases in group development, although he does discuss factors related to the disintegration of Hilltown. Group development does not appear as a major topic in social psychology until the 1960s. He does discuss exchange and balance in interpersonal choice, drawing on the "sociometric" re-

search of Moreno and Jennings, however he does not include an analysis of social perception. The interest in social perception, which grew out of the sociometric studies, did not arise until the later 1950s. Group roles are described, but primarily those that appear in business organizations, such as leader or follower, or staff or line, or in families, such as father, mother, or uncle. Later research included the analysis of less formal roles, such as the joker (Hare 1968) and more distinctions in formal roles based on functional analysis (Olmsted and Hare 1978, 141).

Part 2 of the 1976 handbook, on interaction variables, includes chapters on personality, social characteristics of members, group size, task, communication network, and leadership. Homans has little to say about the influence of personality or social characteristics of members, other than skill in wiring electrical connections or bowling. He does discuss the impact of increasing the size of a group or organization. He makes an important distinction between the effects of the external task and environment on the group's "external system" and the effects of interpersonal relationships on the "internal system." Homans notes the differences between the formal communication network as indicated in an organizational chart and the informal network. However the series of more detailed studies of communication networks that followed Leavitt's (1951) work had yet to appear. As noted above, although a great deal of research on leadership was published in the years after Homans's book, he described some of the major aspects of the leader's role.

The third part of the 1976 handbook on performance characteristics includes two chapters. One compares the performance of the individual with the group, a classic concern in social psychology, and the other compares groups with other groups of different characteristics. The comparison of individual productivity with that of a group was not an interest of Homans. As with the other topics that are not mentioned by Homans, the systematic comparison of the performance of different types of groups with regard to the characteristics of the members or group organization was to come later, with the major exception of the research by Lewin, Lippitt, and White on "group atmospheres" (1939) that Homans was aware of. Homans does describe the impact of different types

of norms on small subgroups in the Bank Wiring Observation Room and on groups in the Electrical Equipment Company.

Research during the period 1975 through 1988, as reflected in the 1991 handbook, elaborated the themes represented in the earlier handbook. There were more studies of the impact of arrangements of desks, chairs, and other objects in the physical space, such as Homans had noted in the Bank Wiring Observation Room. Studies of interaction in this later period contrasted nonverbal with verbal interaction, social exchange was evident in studies of helping behavior, positive interpersonal choice became intimate relations, and group decision making was observed in "choice shifts," jury deliberations, and bargaining games. With the exception of the studies of intimate relations that often involved men and women in clearly defined relationships of courtship or marriage, most of the research took place in the experimental laboratory with university students as subjects. Thus the more recent research would add primarily to Homans's analysis of the "internal system."

In addition to the general connections, noted above, between the themes that Homans discussed in his analysis of the human group one can find evidence that he was essentially looking at the same phenomena as his colleagues at Harvard, Parsons and Bales. In *The Human Group* (434) Homans describes the main elements in the total situation. In addition to the physical and social environment of a group, he describes four major aspects: (1) materials, tools, and techniques (which I would include in Parsons's *Adaptation* area [Parsons, Bales, and Shils 1953]), (2) the external system, that is, the relations necessary for group action (Parsons's *Goal-attainment* area), (3) the internal system, that is, the informal social relations of members, especially the extent to which members like or dislike each other (Parsons's *Integration* area), and (4) the norms and values (Parsons's *Latent pattern maintenance and tension management* area). As already noted, Parsons actually made the shift from a focus on pattern variables to the four functions approach during his collaboration with Bales that led to the publication of the *Working Papers in the Theory of Action* in 1953.

In his description of the Bank Wiring Observation Room (65), Homans examines the relationships between interaction, activity, and sentiment. As an instance of *interaction* he describes the

dominance–submission relationships between leaders and followers. As examples of *activity* he contrasts the task behavior required by work with the informal social behavior of the men during breaks in the work routine. As an example of *sentiment* he describes the friendly and unfriendly relations between members. Bales had included each of these types of behavior in his twelve-category system for the direct observation of groups, published as *Interaction Process Analysis* in 1950. Indeed, years later, after subjecting his twelve categories and other measures of behavior to factor analysis, Bales concluded that there were three principal dimensions of social interaction: Dominance vs. submission, task oriented and conforming vs. expressive and nonconforming, and friendly vs. unfriendly (Bales 1970; Bales and Cohen 1979).

Thus all three men, Homans, Parsons, and Bales were working from a similar perspective. However, Parsons is associated with the development of categories for the analysis of whole societies, rather than for small groups. Bales is associated with the development of category systems and questionnaires for the analysis of behavior in small groups, although his field theory approach can be applied to groups of any size (Bales and Cohen 1979). Like Parsons, Homans never developed a set of instruments to measure his concepts, thus making it difficult to apply his theoretical insights uniformly in different situations. Bales, in contrast, presented his work in the form of manuals on research methods, knowing that if others would accept his methods and instruments the theory would go along with them.

While Homans was a Junior Fellow at Harvard he was instructed to learn the historical method. He later records his pleasure in finding some document related to English villagers of the thirteenth century that provided a key fact for his analysis. As an historian he did not leave the facts of his life in some chance array for someone at some future time to piece together. Throughout his writing he was careful to indicate the sources or inspirations for his ideas. On several occasions he recorded in detail the main events in his intellectual biography including his evaluations of the work of his contemporaries (1962, 1-49; 1984). His own account of "the study of groups" (1968b), in which he describes his theoretical approach of codification and explanation, places his own work in the context of the major trends in group research. If

Homans's contribution to the study of groups were at all debatable, which it is not, Homans would have expected to have had the last word. For readers who would appreciate reading his own "introduction" to his work, his review of the study of groups is recommended.

In even shorter form, Homans summarized the main points in his approach to the science of sociology as follows (1984, 354): "the crucial importance of intuitive familiarity with human behavior, as embodied, for instance in field research; the organizing usefulness of a conceptual scheme; the covering law view of theory; in social science theory, acceptance of the unity of human nature and methodological individualism as embodied in the propositions (covering laws) of behavioral psychology; the creation by individuals of relatively enduring structures of interpersonal relations; and the back-effects of these structures once created upon the further behavior of individuals. Both the structures and their back-effects consist of behavior of individuals."

A. Paul Hare

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Biography and the Growth of Theory

IT IS DAUNTING to write a new introduction[1] for an author who held "words about other persons' words" in absolute contempt. No doubt George Homans would find the whole thing unnecessary. He interpreted Harcourt Brace's decision to include "two laudatory introductions" in the original edition as evidence that the publisher was a bit skittish about the venture, and must have been persuaded to publish the book only because Robert Merton argued for it. One can only imagine the reaction he would have upon hearing that two new introductions are being included in the new edition. So in deference to George Caspar Homans, I will try to stop this introduction somewhere short of "laudatory."

The Human Group was an accidental success. Like most *groups*, the book was born of a combination of chance encounters and irrational choices. Like most *successful* groups, it rested on a firm foundation.

Homans came to sociology under the guidance of L. J. Henderson, and through the study of Vilfredo Pareto's *Traité*, during his senior year at Harvard. Untutored in–and thus uncorrupted by–the sociology of the day, Homans accepted Pareto's assumption that the study of society should be guided by the "logic of the sciences." Failing to gain a position as a poet in Harvard's newly-established Society of Fellows, Homans spent his first year out of college collaborating with C. P. Curtis on *An Introduction to Pareto*. With Henderson and Curtis both Senior Fellows, Homans received an appointment as a sociologist to the Society the following year. His first year as a Junior Fellow (1934-35) was spent

learning the "historical method" by studying, under Charles McIlwain, the coronation oaths of English kings. Much of the remaining four years was spent in two seemingly unrelated pursuits: learning enough about the Hawthorne projects from Elton Mayo to write *Fatigue of Workers* for the National Research Council, and researching *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century*. Before these two books appeared in 1941, Homans had left the Society, spent two years as an instructor in Harvard's sociology department, and taken up a wartime commission as a naval officer.

Homans would have little patience for this story; *The Human Group* was, after all, an attempt to bring order to just such seemingly random narrative. It expands on the final chapter of *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century*, which introduced three interdependent sets of variables: interaction, sentiment, and function. By the time *The Human Group* was published, Homans had substituted "activity" for "function," and suggested that boundaries must be specified in order to differentiate between the "internal" and "external" systems. He would later regret having failed to substitute "motive" for Pareto's "sentiment," while delighting in the fact that no one else seemed to have caught his error. But here the conceptual framework is getting ahead of the story.

How did George Homans come to write *The Human Group?* The writing of a book falls into the category of "activity." We generally think of it as a peculiarly *solitary* activity, yet Homans would argue that choices of activity are inextricably tied to both interaction and sentiment. In seeking the origin of this activity, we are really asking two questions. First, why write *any* book? And second, why write *this* book?

While Homans recognized the necessity of publishing in order to gain academic advancement, his central motive for writing this book was to tie together the concepts that he had introduced in his study of English villagers. The conceptual scheme had been forming and reforming in his mind ever since he was pulled from Cambridge by the war. During the two weeks in 1943 that his boat was under repair in Curaçao, Homans sketched out the conceptual scheme that would form the core of *The Human Group*. On returning to Harvard, he published it in the *American Sociological Review*.

The writing of theoretical outlines must have paled in comparison to the much more satisfying experience of digging deeply into a case; Homans was anxious to apply the new framework to matters of substance. Thinking big, he decided to attempt a book on the organization of societies. Fortunately for the field of small group research, "interaction" intervened, "sentiment" shifted, and the direction of "activity" was altered. While en route to the 1946 American Sociological Association meeting in Chicago, Homans happened upon Conrad Arensberg, who told Homans of his intention to write a book on social organization. Revealing nothing of his own intentions, Homans privately adjusted his course. If Arensberg was committed to thinking big, Homans would rescale, applying his new framework to case studies of small groups. While working on this new project, he discovered that Edward Shils was preparing to publish a book to be titled *The Small Group*. By then, the first draft of *The Human Group* was nearly complete, and so a second reversal of direction was impractical. Thus the momentum of activity confounds an intriguing question of sentiment. Had Homans originally intended to write a book about small groups and encountered Edward Shils on the train to Chicago, would he have ended up writing a book on social organization instead? An argument based on the momentum of activity would say "yes," but an argument based on sentiment might say "no." Arensberg was an old friend, and former colleague from the Society of Fellows. Shils was a close ally of Talcott Parsons, and was soon to become second author on *Toward a General Theory of Social Action*, the "Yellow Book" of Social Relations doctrine against which Homans so often and vociferously rebelled. Would Homans's desire to compete with Shils have overshadowed the dangers of coming in second with a book on small groups. If not, would his friendship with Arensberg have outweighed the effort that he would have already expended on a first draft? The fact that Arensberg never wrote his book on social organization, and that Shils never published a book called *The Small Group* does not diminish the impact that the aroused sentiments had on the activity of writing *The Human Group*.

Homans's academic work, like most activity, was pulled along in a net of interaction and sentiment. Curtis was an old family friend, reencountered in Henderson's seminar on Pareto, an infor-

mal study group that also included Henderson's colleagues from the Fatigue Laboratory: Elton Mayo, Fritz Roethlisberger, and T. North Whitehead. This growing web of interaction and sentiment led first to the activity of co-authoring, with Curtis, *An Introduction to Pareto.* The close and positive association with Henderson and Curtis then led to Homans's transformation from poet to sociologist, and on to his acceptance into Harvard's Society of Fellows. There, interaction again shaped activity. As a Junior Fellow, Homans was thrown into close association with other Junior Fellows: Willard Quine, B. F. Skinner, Conrad Arensberg, and William Foote Whyte. Throughout this period, he also continued his association with Elton Mayo and the Harvard Graduate School of Business.

But perhaps the point is now clear: a chain of face-to-face interaction extends to link virtually every case and concept that appears in this book. The central theoretical concepts had their origin in Henderson's seminar on Pareto. The emphasis on empirical verification was reinforced by discussions with Quine. The first hints of behaviorism, later to overwhelm Homans's rich sociological perspective in *Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms*, took root through long dinner conversations with Skinner. Indeed, the only theoretical contribution that appears not to have come through direct association with the author was Moreno's sociometry, and even that was the result of Arensberg's suggestion that Homans read *Who Shall Survive?* Arensberg's functional anthropology also found its way into the book, both in the form of his own case study of Irish peasant life and in an extended analysis of Polynesian kinship patterns drawn from Raymond Firth's *Tikopia* writings. Homans's other major cases, the Norton Street Gang and the Bank Wiring Observation Room, came from William Foote Whyte's *Street Corner Society* and Mayo, Roethlisberger, and Whitehead's studies of the Western Electric Hawthorne Works. We have a tendency to forget that almost all interests and endeavors are rooted in face-to-face interactions. *The Human Group* serves as a self-referential reminder; where positive sentiment developed as a result of interaction, activity resulted and *this* book was written.

This is a book that would be almost impossible to get published today. The case material is entirely second-hand. Even the famous

Bank Wiring Observation Room study was completed before Homans first met the Hawthorne researchers. Much of this book is devoted to retelling cases that have already been told well, and in print. That Harcourt Brace had the good sense to publish it after it had been rejected by Alfred Knopf was a bit of good fortune for both sociology and the publisher. It was Homans's most financially successful book, and a favorite of both academics and students.

The Human Group was *not* George Homans's favorite. In looking back on his life's work, he concluded that *Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms* was a substantial improvement over the earlier book. The controversy over the relative merits of these two books continues, though probably for all the wrong reasons. It serves as a proxy for the turf battle between Psychology and Sociology. Social psychology in general, and small group research in particular, lies squarely at the intersection of the two disciplines. Social Relations at Harvard had the potential to bridge the gap. Whether the new department formed in response to a convergence of sociology, anthropology, and psychology–as suggested by Parsons–or as a result of flight from personal animosities existing within each department, as suggested by Homans, Social Relations was a useful experiment with a curious result. While in the same department with the social and personality psychologists for twenty-four years, Homans never collaborated with any of them nor drew on their work. His primary contact in psychology remained B. F. Skinner, the "animal psychologist" from whom the more socially-minded psychologists had fled. This opened him to charges of "reductionism." While Homans viewed the arguments surrounding this controversy as spurious, he recognized the deep sentiments that drove them. Psychological reductionism was viewed, by many of his contemporaries, as robbing people of their volition and thus of their humanity. However, for him the logic of the sciences demanded that lines not be drawn between disciplines, that general propositions be derived whether "sociological" of "psychological" in origin.

At the risk of ending this introduction on a laudatory note, I am forced to conclude that *The Human Group* was Homans's best and most important book. Three years before its publication, Kurt Lewin's untimely death had left the field of small group research

without an intellectual leader. Nicholas Mullins was quite right in arguing that Homans was the best hope for filling this vacuum. It really *was* irrelevant that Lewin was a psychologist and Homans a sociologist. They shared an interest in small groups and, more important, they shared a genuine understanding of the richness of human social interaction. Lewin's name does not appear in Homans's autobiography, and I am drawn to the single reference to him that appears as part of a footnote in this book: "We have also much to learn from K. Lewin." Activity is driven by interaction and sentiment; what might this book–and, more importantly, Homans's later work–have looked like had Kurt Lewin been present at those long Society of Fellows dinners?

This book stands today as a warning and a challenge. In 1950, Robert Merton argued that it was the most significant contribution to the understanding of small groups since Simmel's "pioneering analyses of almost half a century ago." That judgment has stood the test of time. Homans presented five richly detailed case studies and tied them neatly together with a chain of logically consistent propositions. What made this work unique was the combination of story and analysis. In his later writings, and those of the "behavioral sociologists" who followed him, much of the story was sacrificed in the interest of analysis. *Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms* is disappointing not so much for its psychological reductionism as for its lack of richness and context.

The Human Group taught different lessons to different audiences. Sociologists learned the importance of specifying testable propositions; students of organizational behavior learned the importance of a compelling story. The Hawthorne studies, and particularly Homans's telling of the Bank Wiring Observation Room and Relay Assembly Test Room stories, have inspired a generation of organizational researchers. Life in the Bank Wiring Observation Room consisted of more than a sterile web of interaction, sentiment, and activity; it included the hopes and fears, as well as the friendships and animosities, of fourteen men. Homans not only defined the relationships between variables that controlled the rate of production in manufacturing plants, he told us that "rate-busters," "speed kings," and "chiselers" were in danger of being "binged" by their fellow workers. He not only told us that the development of informal social groups in a factory could lead to an

increase in productivity, he told us that the women in the Relay Assembly Test Room, randomly selected and separated from the larger shop at Hawthorne works, spontaneously began bringing each other birthday gifts, passing around boxes of chocolates, and "carrying" each other when necessary. The field of organizational behavior has never been the same. Taylor's "scientific management" gave way to McGregor's "human side of enterprise." Engineering made way for human relations. Perhaps the reissuing of this classic will help to revitalize the study of small groups in sociology, psychology, and management. The message that the story is as important as the analysis is one that bears repeating.

Richard Brian Polley

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1. While I will not attempt to reference the sources for specific pieces of background information mentioned here, this introduction owes debts to Homans's autobiography, *Coming to My Senses* (Transaction Books, 1984), the obituary that Ezra Vogel wrote for *Footnotes* (American Sociological Association, December 1990), and B. F. Skinner's preface to Behavioral Theory in Sociology (R. L. Hamblin and J. H. Kunkel, eds., Transaction Books, 1977).

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Preface

IN THIS BOOK as elsewhere, my chief intellectual debt is to three great men, Lawrence Joseph Henderson, Elton Mayo, and Alfred North Whitehead, under whose influence I was lucky enough to come rather early in life. Other intellectual debts will be readily apparent in the pages that follow. This book also relies heavily on the field research of certain sociologists and anthropologists, in the sense that it tries to state, in a single conceptual language, some of the generalizations implicit in their work. Thanks are therefore due to Fritz Roethlisberger and William Dickson, the authors, and to the Harvard University Press, the publisher, for permission to reproduce quotations and charts from *Management and the Worker;* to Conrad Arensberg, Solon Kimball, and the Harvard University Press for permission to reproduce quotations from *Family and Community in Ireland;* to William F. Whyte and the University of Chicago Press for permission to reproduce quotations and one chart from *Street Corner Society;* to Raymond Firth and George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., for permission to reproduce quotations and charts from *We, the Tikopia;* to Raymond Firth and Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd., for permission to reproduce quotations and one chart from *Primitive Polynesian Economy;* to David L. Hatch for permission to reproduce quotations from his unpublished Harvard Ph.D. thesis, "Changes in the Structure and Functions of a Rural New England Community since 1900;" and to Conrad Arensberg, Douglas Macgregor, and the editors of *Applied Anthropology* (now *Human Organization*) for permission to reproduce quotations and charts from an article entitled, "Determination of Morale in an Industrial Company." The concrete field data cited in this book come largely from these sources. Permission to use other quotations and figures is acknowledged in the text. In my thinking, and in some societies, a debt does not divide

debtor and creditor but links them closer together. I am therefore particularly happy to acknowledge my heavy indebtedness to my friends Florence Kluckhohn and Robert Merton for reading and criticizing in detail the manuscript of this book, to my friend Bernard DeVoto for much good advice, not always taken, on publishing problems, and to my wife, Nancy Parshall Homans, for redrawing all the charts.

GEORGE CASPAR HOMANS

Cambridge, Massachusetts
August 1950

THE ANCIENT EMBLEM *that represents life by the circle formed by a snake biting its tail gives a sufficiently just picture of the state of affairs. In effect, the organization of life in complex organisms does form a closed circle, but one that has a head and a tail, in the sense that all the phenomena of life are not equally important although all take part in the completion of the* circulus *of life. Thus the muscular and nervous organs maintain the activity of the organs that make blood, but the blood in turn nourishes the organs that produce it. There is in this an organic or social solidarity that keeps up a kind of perpetual motion, until a disturbance or cessation of the action of a necessary vital element shall have broken the equilibrium or brought about a trouble or stoppage in the play of the bodily machine.*

CLAUDE BERNARD
Introduction a la medicine experimentale:
Paris, 1865.

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CHAPTER 1

Plans and Purposes

Why Study the Group? . . . A New Synthesis . . . Sociological Theory . . . What Kind of Theory? . . . How Shall the Theory Be Built? . . . The Problem of Abstraction . . . Clinical and Analytical Science . . . Rules of Theory-Building . . . Social Science and Literature . . . Method of Presentation . . . Separation of Fact from Theory . . . The Human Qualities Needed

IN THIS book we shall study the most familiar features of the most familiar thing in the world—the human group. We mean by a group a number of persons who communicate with one another often over a span of time, and who are few enough so that each person is able to communicate with all the others, not at secondhand, through other people, but face-to-face. Sociologists call this the primary group.[1] A chance meeting of casual acquaintances does not count as a group for us.

The study of the human group is a part of sociology, but a neglected part. As the science of society, sociology has examined the characteristics and problems of communities, cities, regions, big organizations like factories, and even whole nations, but it has only begun to study the smaller social units that make up these giants. In doing so, it has not followed the order of human experience, for the first and most immediate social experience of mankind is small group experience. From infancy onward we are members of families, childhood gangs, school and college cliques, clubs and teams—all small groups. When, as grownups, we get jobs, we still find ourselves working with a few persons and not with the whole firm, association, or government department. We are members of these

[1] C. H. Cooley, *Social Organization*, 23-31.

larger social organizations, but the people we deal with regularly are always few. They mediate between us and the leviathans. The group is the commonest, as it is the most familiar, of social units, and on both counts it is at least as well worth study as any of the others. Sociology might have begun here.

WHY STUDY THE GROUP?

We here—and this is the collaborative, not the editorial *we:* author and reader are learning together—will have two reasons for studying the group: the sheer interest of the subject and the desire to reach a new sociological synthesis. In a utilitarian age, the first reason must get special emphasis. If we want to study social behavior at all, we shall want to study the commonest of social units, and in this book we shall study the group primarily because the study is interesting and not because it is useful. The story goes that an English politician came to visit Faraday in his laboratory just after he had built the first electric motor.[2] The politician is supposed to have asked him—the business of politicians is to ask these questions—what the gadget was good for. At this point the story splits into two versions. One has it that Faraday replied, "Someday you can tax it." Another, that he asked the counterquestion, "What good is a baby?" Either way the moral is clear. For the great men of science, knowledge was good because it might have a future, but in the meantime it was, like a baby, good in itself. Knowledge is power, but it is also, for some men, happiness. *Felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas.* We must no longer quake at the question: "Knowledge for What?"[3] It need not put us in the wrong. There is only one paramount reason for studying anything but the multiplication table. Either you are so interested in a subject that you cannot let it alone, or you are not. In the end, it is a matter of intellectual passion. Willard Gibbs, the greatest of American theoretical physicists, said of his own work, "Anyone with the same desires could have made the same researches."[4] The stress is on desire. Accordingly the chief motive for writing or reading this book

[2] The same story with variations has been told of other scientists, including Franklin.

[3] The title of a book by R. S. Lynd.

[4] M. Rukeyser, *Willard Gibbs,* 381.

is the interest of the subject, and the aim of the book is sheer intellectual enlightenment.

A NEW SYNTHESIS

The second reason for studying the group is that through this study a new sociological synthesis may be reached. The first generation of sociologists, the generation of Comte and Spencer, and the second, the generation of Pareto, Durkheim, and Max Weber, made great, if inadequate, syntheses. The third generation, which flourished between World War I and World War II, shunned the example of its predecessors, but it followed up their many suggestions and made a number of excellent, detailed studies of particular social groups. In the course of the work of this generation, many hypotheses were hammered out, but they remained bound to the material from which they came. They were so stated as to apply to the particular groups being studied, but not beyond. They were not generalized to apply to all, or at least many, groups. Although this provincialism was wise in its time, the present, or fourth, generation of sociologists feels once more the need for synthesis, for putting together, making explicit and general, the ideas that special studies have brought out. Sociology has been gorged with facts; it needs to digest them. And yet, if there is a need for synthesis, the last generation has taught us to be modest in our aims. We now know something of the endless complexities in the study of society. Perhaps we cannot manage a sociological synthesis that will apply to whole communities and nations, but it is just possible we can manage one that will apply to the small group. Synthesis of the microcosm—that may be an attainable end. The group may be small enough to let us get all the way around it.

SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

To say that a study is synthetic and general is to say that it is theoretical. "It is the office of theoretical investigation," said Willard Gibbs, "to give the form in which the results of experiment may be expressed." [5] If he had put "observation" for "experiment," Gibbs would have stated the purpose of this book. It is to provide

[5] *Ibid.*, 232.

one form—not the only possible form—in which may be expressed the results of observation in sociology. We now have, besides the treasury of human history and literature, many good studies of social groups of various kinds, from primitive societies to modern factories and communities. Granting that these studies are not everything they may sometime become, for what we see grows with what we are taught to see and in turn helps the latter to grow, many of us still feel that they sum up close observation in clear exposition. In what form, then, can the results of this work be expressed so that we can see whether or not they apply, not merely to single groups, but to many or all groups?

If we have a great deal of fact to work with, we also have a great deal of theory. The elements of a synthesis are on hand. We shall only put together ideas that have been lying around for some time in the literature of the social sciences, so that our novelty—if we are new at all—will consist not in what we combine but how we do so. Some theoretical work has illuminated the descriptions of particular groups: it needs to be expressed with full generality. Some of it has been hinted at in asides and suggestions, cryptically: it needs to be spelled out. Some of it has been beautifully general and explicit, but partial: many elements need to be added to make a satisfactory whole. Yet whatever the weakness of this statement or that, there have been signs of convergence in the body of theory as a whole. This book tries to make the most of the convergence and state one way in which the meeting of minds, the agreement on a synthesis, might take place.

The behavior of men, usually in small numbers, has inspired the largest part of human literature and eloquence. If we investigated no further than we have today, we should have plenty of material to study. But until recently this great mass of observation has led to nothing. Some leaders, perhaps those of the past more than those of the present, have shown great capacity for handling men in groups, but their know-how could not easily be communicated in words from one man to another. There have been a few maxims of practical wisdom, always at odds with one another because the limits of any single maxim were never stated. Whatever a man did, he could always find a rule to back him up. But until recently there has been little growth. Our knowledge is Babylonian.

Our proverbs are carved on the pyramids. A new fact in physics or biology fits into an old theory, or by not fitting starts a new theory. Either way one can build on it. Think of the mass of old work summarized and new work suggested by the periodic table of the elements. But every adventurer in the science of human behavior from Aristotle to Freud has had to make a fresh start, or something like it.

If the outlook has changed since the opening of this century, the reason is that we have begun to sketch out systematic theories of human behavior and to use them. Einstein taught the world, what it ought to have known long ago, that no theory is permanent. If an old theory survives new conquests of science, it survives as a slave. But even the most fragile theory has its uses. In its lowest form, as a classification, it provides a set of pigeonholes, a filing cabinet, in which fact can accumulate. For nothing is more lost than a loose fact. The empty folders of the file demand filling. In time the accumulation makes necessary a more economical filing system, with more cross references, and a new theory is born.

But in sociology we have not made as much progress as we might have, and the reason is clear. We have pursued the higher branches of our science before the trunk was strong. We have not grown because we have had nothing to grow from. We have given ink-blot tests to Navahos; we have computed differential fertility rates among ethnic groups in Kansas—all worthy subjects if we had also studied ordinary, everyday social behavior. Make no mistake about it, *that* we have not done. Perhaps we were afraid that, if we studied the commonplace, we should lay ourselves open to the familiar charge that a sociologist is a man who discovers at infinite pains what everybody knows. Or, as one novelist put it, a sociologist is a man who spends forty thousand dollars to find a whorehouse. We should have had enough self-confidence and enough sense to forget such fears. The fact is that the popular diagnosis of our shortcomings is wholly mistaken. Far from discovering facts that are too familiar, we have not discovered facts that are familiar enough. Prostitution is not one-millionth as common as some of the behavior we shall study in this book. The basic characteristics of social behavior are well known in the sense that everyone, so far as he leads a social life, has some intuitive familiar-

ity with them, but they are not well known in another, and more important sense. They have not been stated in such a way that a body of scientific knowledge can be built on them. Above all, the links between the different aspects of social behavior have not been made clear. A fact is commonplace or not according to its connection with other facts. The fact that an apple would fall was the dreariest fact in the world until Newton showed that an apple and a planet obeyed the same laws of motion. The theoretical synthesis developed in this book will attempt to state some perfectly familiar ideas about social behavior—the more familiar the better—in such a way that their relation to other equally familiar ideas will become clear. We shall try to make the commonplace strange by showing it in new connections.

This book has, then, a twofold purpose: to study the small group as an interesting subject in itself, but also, in so doing, to reach a new sociological synthesis. Since this book will try to state one general form in which the results of particular observations may be expressed, it will be, in Gibbs' sense, a book of theory. These observations include some excellent modern studies of groups of various kinds. The book aims to be true to them, to make explicit what is implicit in them and to make general what is partial. And the book will deliberately concentrate on the most familiar aspects of group behavior.

WHAT KIND OF THEORY?

We have spoken of the need for sociological theory. The next question is: What kind of a theory shall we try to develop in this book? The rest of the book is the answer to this question; we can now anticipate our results only briefly. First, group behavior will be analyzed into a number of mutually dependent elements. Second, the group will be studied as an organic whole, or social system, surviving in an environment. Third, the relations of the elements to one another in the system will be found to bring about the evolution of the system with the passage of time.

Perhaps we can illustrate our meaning by a cursory analysis of one of the simplest groups: two friends. The two men like one another. If we ask why they do so, we are told that they have inter-

ests in common or that the personality of the one is compatible with that of the other. That is, their emotional feeling for one another is not something in itself; it does not exist in a vacuum, but is determined in part by other factors. What we perceive next is that the relation between their friendship and these other factors is a two-way one. They are friends, for instance, because they have interests in common, but if we are good observers of human behavior, we know that the reverse is also true: if they are friends they will develop interests in common. Which comes first, the friendship or the common interests? The answer is that neither comes first, but that they wax or wane together. In this book we say that the two factors, or elements, are mutually dependent. But personality, interests, and the sentiment of friendship are not the only factors that need to be considered. We must also take into account the number of times the two men meet. If they meet and have interests in common, they are apt to become friends; on the other hand, if they are friends, they will find occasions for getting together. And if they do not meet, their friendship is apt to ebb away. Absence makes the heart grow fonder for only a short time. As before, the two factors: the feeling the two men have for one another and their association with one another, are mutually dependent. But "getting together" is not something in itself, any more than friendship and common interests are. People do not just get together; they get together to do something. Let us suppose that the two friends are interested in camping, and go off on a camping trip together to the north woods. We now perceive that the emotional tie between them will be affected by the success of the trip. If everything goes well, or if difficulties are met and overcome, their friendship is, we say, cemented. If everything goes badly, they may get disgusted with one another. Their friendship and the success of the joint enterprise are mutually dependent. For if the success of the enterprise affects their friendship, so their friendship—their *morale* we might call it now—affects the success of the enterprise, enabling the friends to carry on through difficulties, to *make* a success of their trip. Moreover, the success of the enterprise is determined in part by the environment in which the pair find themselves. Does a bear eat the food? Are the rivers low, so that the canoe is holed on a rock? And finally, the nature of this little group

will change or develop with time. If the two men associate with one another, undertake activities in which both are interested, and are successful in carrying them through, their friendship will grow.

We have not carried the analysis as far, or made it as rigorous, as we might. After all, we do not want to tip our hand as early in the book as this. But we have said enough to make our points clear. What have we done? We have separated the concrete behavior of the two men into factors or elements: emotion, personality, interests, association, activities, and the success of those activities. We have seen how these elements are mutually related to one another, and how their mutual relations make a recognizable, ongoing entity: not just two men, but two men linked together; not just two individuals, but a new kind of unit, a group. We have seen that this unit exists in an environment, and that some of its characteristics are determined by the nature of the environment. And we have seen how the relations between the various factors in the group life tend to make the group develop or evolve with the passage of time. The problems we encounter in analyzing this pair are the problems we shall encounter in analyzing any group.

By way of further illustration, we turn from our statement, which was tied to a particular group, to a much more general statement of the nature of a complex whole. Mary Parker Follett, social worker and one of the most sensitive writers on problems of human organization, struggled, far more eloquently than we, to say what we have tried to say. In her study of administrative control, she argued, as others had done, that in studying any organized social activity we must study the "total situation." But we must not merely "be sure to get all the factors into our problem." We must examine "not merely the totalness of the situation, but the nature of the totalness. . . . What you have to consider in a situation is not all the factors one by one, but also their relation to one another." The relation is such that the parts make a whole, the elements make an organism. And Mary Follett affirmed "that the whole determines the parts as well as that the parts determine the whole." She recognized that the unity is not a static, finished thing, but an ongoing process: "The same activity determines both parts and whole. . . . We are speaking of a unity which is not the result of an interweaving, but *is* the interweaving. Unity is always a process, not a prod-

uct. . . . I have been saying that the whole is determined not only by its constituents, but by their relation to one another. I now say that the whole is determined also by the relation of whole and parts. . . . It is the same activity which is making the whole and parts simultaneously." Finally, the activity, the process, she spoke of always leads to something new. Something emerges. She summarized her ideas as follows: "My first point concerned the total situation; my second, the nature of the interacting which determines the total situation; my third, the evolving situation. We have come to see that reciprocal adjustment is more than mere adjustment; that it is there we get what the psychologist has called the 'something new,' 'the critical moment in evolution.'" Here perhaps we had better leave Mary Follett, but in the pages to come we shall be concerned with all three processes she called the interacting, the unifying, and the emerging.[6]

Writers of great sensitivity, like Mary Follett, may give us a vision of our subject: the unity that is at the same time a process, the unity whose parts taken separately slip out between our fingers like sand but in integration are as strong as steel. And yet the vision is not enough. It is one thing to see where we are going and quite another to get there: to build up, piece by piece, a picture of the dynamic unity of a group when, in taking the pieces out of the whole, we may falsify them and it. In his discussion of "internal relations," that is, the relations between the parts in a whole, Alfred Whitehead, perhaps the greatest of modern philosophers, stated the difficulty clearly: "The difficulty which arises in respect to internal relations is to explain how any particular truth is possible. Insofar as there are internal relations, everything must depend upon everything else. Apparently, therefore, we are under the necessity of saying everything at once." [7] We shall indeed, in the rest of this book, know the despair that comes when one cannot follow up immediately all the connections in an interconnected whole, when one cannot ride off in all directions. But we may take comfort in Whitehead, who went on to say: "This supposed necessity is palpably untrue. . . . [The

[6] All quotations from "The Psychology of Control," in H. C. Metcalf and L. Urwick, eds., *Dynamic Administration: The Collected Papers of Mary Parker Follett*, 183-209.

[7] A. N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, 235.

general scheme of relationships] discloses itself as being analysable into a multiplicity of limited relationships which have their own individuality and yet at the same time presuppose the total relationship within possibility." [8] That is, a statement of the relation between any two parts of a whole is not incorrect just because it says nothing about the relation of each of the two to all the other parts. Remember these words of Whitehead's. We are glad to have his reassurance, as we shall be forced in any event to work with limited relationships. Whether or not it is a philosophical necessity, it is certainly a literary impossibility to say everything at once.

HOW SHALL THE THEORY BE BUILT?

The group will be described as an organic whole, surviving and evolving in an environment. We do not want just to get the feel of this whole. We want to be men and *understand.* We want to build up in detail the articulation of the whole, and in these mazes we shall certainly go astray unless we have a method of attacking our problem, a method that we can apply patiently, repeatedly, and systematically, at whatever risk of dullness. The question then is: How shall we go about constructing our theory of the group?

We shall begin with semantics, the science of tracing words back to their references in observed fact. In sociology we are devoted to "big" words: status, culture, function, heuristic, particularistic, methodology, integration, solidarity, authority. Too often we work with these words and not with observations. Or rather, we do not wed the two. No one will make progress with this book who does not train himself to extensionalize,[9] who does not habitually catch himself as he mouths one of the big abstractions and ask: What does this mouthful mean in terms of actual human behavior that someone has seen and reported? Just what, in human behavior, do we *see?* The question is devastating, and we do not ask it half often enough. Carefully working out the referents of existing concepts will help us to reach a simple method of classifying what we see, and in the classification itself we shall gain a new set of concepts more adequate than some of the old ones for the purposes we have in mind.

[8] A. N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World,* 239.
[9] See S. I. Hayakawa, *Language in Thought and Action,* 58-60.

Let us take an example. Let us take the concepts *status* and *role,* which are commonly used in social science. What do they mean? Ralph Linton, the anthropologist, who gave these concepts an important place in his social theory, has this to say: "A *status,* in the abstract, is a position in a particular pattern [of social behavior] . . . A status, as distinct from the individual who may occupy it, is simply a collection of rights and duties . . . A *role* represents the dynamic aspects of a status. The individual is socially assigned to a status and occupies it with relation to other statuses. When he puts the rights and duties which constitute the status into effect, he is performing a role. Role and status are quite inseparable, and the distinction between them is of only academic interest. There are no roles without statuses or statuses without roles." [10]

Now let us try, if we can, to translate these words into observations, and, leaving out of consideration the fact that a person may hold several statuses—he may be a *father,* an *officer* of a lodge, a *deacon* of a church—let us consider only a single status, that of *foreman.* Foreman is a status in that the position may be occupied by a number of individuals in succession; the position does not disappear when an individual leaves it. Let us suppose that a man is foreman in a factory, and that we are watching him at work. What do we see and hear? We watch him, perhaps, overseeing a battery of punch presses, going from one man to another as they tend the machines, answering their questions and showing them, if they have made mistakes, where they have gone wrong. We see him also at his desk making out records. That is, we see that he has a certain kind of job, that he carries on certain activities. We see also that he deals with certain men in the plant and not with others. He goes to certain men and talks to them; others come to his desk and talk to him. He gets his orders from a boss and passes on the orders to members of his own department. That is, he communicates or, as we shall say in this book, interacts with certain persons and not with others, and this communication from person to person often takes place in a certain order—for instance, from the boss to the foreman and then from the foreman to the workers—, so that we can say, in Linton's words, that the foreman occupies a posi-

[10] R. Linton, *The Study of Man,* 113-4.

tion in a chain of communications. If, moreover, we stay in the factory and listen sharply, we shall hear remarks to the effect that a foreman's job is lower or worse than the president's but higher or better than the ordinary workingman's. That is, the foreman's job is given an emotional evaluation. We shall also hear statements of one kind or another about the way the foreman ought to behave, statements that may come both from the boss he works for and from the men who work for him. That is, we hear norms of behavior being expressed. These make up "the collection of rights and duties" that Linton speaks of: notions of what the foreman's behavior ought to be, not necessarily what it really is. And finally, if the foreman's behavior departs outrageously from the norms, we shall see his boss and even his own men take action to bring him back into line. That is, we see men acting so as to control the behavior of others.

No doubt we could make other observations, but we have cited enough to illustrate our point. We do not directly observe *status* and *role*. What we do observe are activities, interactions, evaluations, norms, and controls. Status and role are names we give to a complex of many different kinds of observations. Or, as an expert in semantics would say, a word like *interaction* is a first-order abstraction: it is a name given to a single class of observations; whereas a word like *status* is a second-order abstraction: it is a name given to several classes of observation combined. Second-order abstractions are useful for some purposes but for others have serious drawbacks. They spare us the pain of analysis when we should not be spared. To speak of a man's status as if it were an indivisible unit is a convenient kind of shorthand, but to think of status in this way may prevent our seeing the relations between its components. It may prevent us, for instance, from seeing that as a man's position in a chain of communications changes, so the way he is evaluated by his fellows will change. Since it is just this kind of relation that we shall be examining in this book, the concepts that enter our theories will be, so far as possible, first-order abstractions. At least we shall not use the higher abstractions until we have established the lower ones.[11]

[11] See G. C. Homans, "The Strategy of Industrial Sociology," *American Journal of Sociology*, LIV (1949), 336.

What we have been saying, though it may sound complicated, is in fact too simple. If we follow out its implications, we shall find it naïve. We have implied that we can gaze passively on human behavior and then, all of a sudden, find it has fallen into several classes of observations. But no one just "sees" human behavior. The eye is never quite innocent, but comes to its task sensitized. We see what our experience and ideas teach us to see—and this is never the whole story. The world and its meaning are always negotiating with one another, with experience as the go-between. Even common-sense language implies a theory of behavior and tells us, for instance, to look for actions and motives. We have some notion how to cut the cake. But for the time being we need not worry about the subtlety of the mutual relation between thinking and observation. The great point is to climb down from the big words of social science, at least as far as common-sense observation. Then, if we wish, we can start climbing up again, but this time with a ladder we can depend on.

When we divide our observations of social behavior into classes and give names—our concepts—to the classes, we take the first step in the analysis of the group. We shall take this step in the next chapter. When we examine systematically the relations between the facts to which the concepts refer, we take the first step in synthesis. We shall take this step in the later chapters of the book. By "examining systematically" we mean only that we shall consider in regular order the relation of each set of facts to each of the others. In so doing, we shall be patient, methodical, and slow. We must be so if we are to keep control over the whole of our material while giving special attention to each part of it in turn. Unless we hold our material down in this way, it may get away from us. It has a lot of spring.

THE PROBLEM OF ABSTRACTION

Let no one be deceived by our systematic attack. It means that we shall study methodically the aspects of social life we choose to take up; it does not mean that we shall study every aspect of social life. There are always more observations than can possibly be summed up in any one theory; or rather, if the theory is to be

formulated at all, it must leave many observations out of account. Galileo took a fateful step for science when he left friction out of the study of motion. He framed, for instance, his law describing the motion of a ball rolling down an inclined plane on the assumption that there was no friction between the ball and the plane. He was justified in doing so because he could set up his experiments in such a way that they approximated this ideal state more and more closely, although they never quite got there. And he could not have framed a simple, general law if he had not used this method. It is, in fact, the necessary method, but its victories are abstract. As every one of us knows, friction always does exist in any piece of machinery and for practical purposes must be taken into account, often by methods far from elegant. Abstraction is the price paid for generalization.

The method of abstraction seems to create no such mental conflict in physics as it does in sociology. Electrons are members of a group—the atom—, and if we were electrons and knew man's theory of the atom, we might be amused by it, as an educated Hindu might be amused by a missionary's picture of Hindu culture. The theory would seem so gross, so statistical, so simplified, even if it was adequate enough to show man how to split electrons out of the group. But we are not electrons; we study the atom from the outside; we have no way of comparing the theory with the reality, and therefore our shortcomings create no mental conflict in us. This is not true of our social theory. We have inside knowledge of our own society, and this immediate familiarity with group behavior is at once an asset and a liability. It is an asset because we always have our experience to check our theories against. They must be in some degree true to experience. It is a liability because people are too easily able to say of any social theory, "You have left such and such out." They are quite right: we always leave something out. We must if we are to make theories at all. But such people make no attempt to see what we have got in. For them, the social equivalent of friction is a ghost at the table. They do not understand that a theory may be true, and yet not the whole truth.

CLINICAL AND ANALYTICAL SCIENCE

It is high time we knew the difference between clinical and analitical science. Clinical science is what a doctor uses at his patient's bedside. There, the doctor cannot afford to leave out of account anything in the patient's condition that he can see or test. He cannot leave it out either in itself or in its relation to the whole picture of a sick human being. It may be the clue to the complex. Of course the doctor has some general theories at the back of his mind, theories of the connections between a limited number of physiological factors: what the others will do when one is changed. These doctrines may turn out to be useful, but he cannot, at the outset, let them master his thinking. They may not take into consideration, and so may prevent his noticing, the crucial fact in the case before him.

In action we must always be clinical. An analytical science is for understanding but not for action, at least not directly. It picks out a few of the factors at work in particular situations and describes systematically the relations between these factors. Only by cutting down the number of factors considered can it achieve this systematic description. It is general, but it is abstract. As soon as he left friction out of account, Galileo's science became analytical. To return to our medical illustration, a description of particular cases of anemia is clinical science, whereas a theory of blood chemistry is analytical. When progress is rapid, clinical and analytical science help one another. The clinicians tell the analysts what the latter have left out. The analysts need the most brutal reminders because they are always so charmed with their pictures they mistake them for the real thing. On the other hand, the analysts' generalizations often suggest where the clinicians should look more closely. Both the clinician and the analyst are needed. We ought to be sick and tired of boasts that one is better than the other. This is a book of analysis, but it relies heavily on work that is clinical, as the word is used here, and this work was stimulated by earlier analyses.

Elton Mayo, a pioneer in the field of industrial psychology and sociology, used to say that it was better to have a complex body of fact and a simple theory—a working hypothesis—than a simple body

of fact and a complex theory. Of course it is better, and many a social scientist has damned himself by taking the second course. Yet you can be just as damned by the first. You may become a man who is sensitive and intuitive about people, and yet incapable of communicating any but your most obvious intuitions; or one who theorizes in spite of his theories but always at the highest level, never among those middle-level generalizations that Francis Bacon felt were the most fruitful.[12] But we need not, unless we insist, be impaled on a nonexistent dilemma. There are always more choices than two. What we need is a theory neither more nor less complex than the facts it subsumes, but adequate to them. If we hesitate to generalize, we lose both our generalization and the observation it might have suggested. If there is a body of fact crying for theoretical synthesis, no doctrinaire stand need stop us from making it. Let us follow Rabelais' advice and do what we like. Above all, let us not be merely sensitive souls; let us be men and understand.

RULES OF THEORY-BUILDING

All these ideas can be summed up in a set of rules that, as experience seems to show, are wisely followed in setting up a theory of the kind we propose. A theory, we will remember, is a form in which the results of observation may be expressed. The rules are:

1. Look first at the obvious, the familiar, the common. In a science that has not established its foundations, these are the things that best repay study.

2. State the obvious in its full generality. Science is an economy of thought only if its hypotheses sum up in a simple form a large number of facts.

3. Talk about one thing at a time. That is, in choosing your words (or, more pedantically, concepts) see that they refer not to several classes of fact at the same time but to one and one only. Corollary: Once you have chosen your words, always use the same words when referring to the same things.

4. Cut down as far as you dare the number of things you are talking about. "As few as you may; as many as you must," is the

[12] *Novum Organum*, Bk. I, aphorisms lxvi, civ.