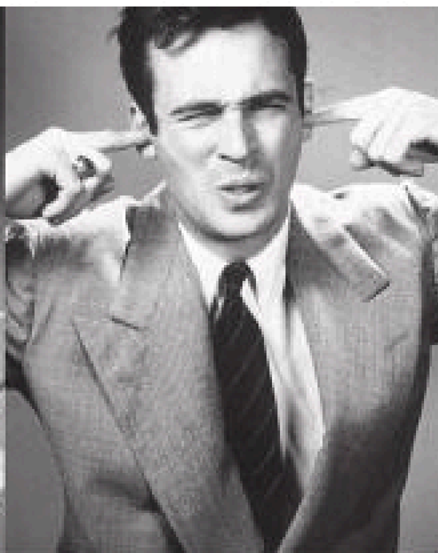
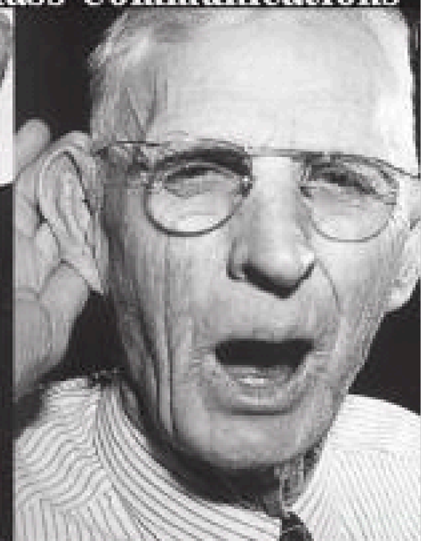


Personal Influence

The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications



Elihu Katz & Paul F. Lazarsfeld

With a new introduction by Elihu Katz and a foreword by Elmo Roper

from careful case studies some of the *reasons why* we are warranted in our expectation that this is the case. Several reasons have been put forward quite convincingly.

The Instrumental Function: The Benefits of Conformity

First of all, we might consider what can be called the *instrumental value*—the "benefits"—that can be derived from sharing the opinions and attitudes of those with whom an individual desires to be identified. We may cite here, as an illustration, Newcomb's well-known study of the political attitudes of a class of Bennington College girls.[5] By beginning his study in the freshman year and recording changes in attitudes over the four-year period of college, Newcomb was able to show that those students who were postively oriented toward the college community and who aspired to be accepted or to achieve leadership tended to assimilate the liberal attitudes and sentiments which prevailed on campus, despite the strongly conservative family background from which they had come. On the other hand, Newcomb demonstrates, a major factor associated with non-acceptance of the prevailing political climate was a strong positive identification with the family group. Thus, the family group, on the one hand, and the small college community, on the other—each serving as "positive" or "negative" reference points of varying intensity—seemed to be associated with the steadfast conservatism of some of the girls and the increasing non-conservatism of the majority. In Newcomb's own words,

> In a membership group in which certain attitudes are approved (i.e., held by majorities, and conspicuously so by leaders) individuals acquire the approved attitudes to the extent that the membership group (particularly as symbolized by leaders and dominant subgroups) serves as a positive point of reference.[6]

In other words, to the extent that a group is attractive for an individual, and to the extent that he desires acceptance as a

---

5. Newcomb (1952).
6. *Ibid.*, p. 420.

member of that group, he will be motivated—whether he is aware of it or not—to accept that group's outlook.

Another set of findings supports the implications of Newcomb's study very neatly. In *The American Soldier*,[7] Stouffer *et al*, compare the attitudes of those "green" soldiers (no combat experience) who had been sent as replacements to divisions composed of combat veterans, with the attitudes of equally "green" soldiers who were members of divisions composed only of others like themselves. Noting that 45% of the latter but only 28% of the former express attitudes reflecting a "readiness for combat," the authors indicate that this difference may derive from the two different social contexts in which these otherwise indistinguishable "green" troops were placed. It is suggested that those troops who found themselves in veterans' divisions were strongly influenced by the attitudes they encountered there since the combat veterans' own response to the same set of questions was overwhelmingly negative (only 15% indicated readiness for combat). The new men were seeking acceptance, it is argued, and they adjusted their opinions accordingly.

Conformity is not exacted from "new" members or potential members alone. Even long-time members who "deviate" too far from group opinion lose status, or may even lose membership in groups to which they already belong. Several recent experimental studies demonstrate this everyday fact quite well. In one study of a housing community by Festinger, Schachter and Back—(we shall refer repeatedly to this "Westgate" housing development study and to others by these authors and their associates)—it was found that those who conformed least to the opinions of their immediate neighbors (as far as the particular item being studied was concerned) tended also to be the ones who were "underchosen" when people were asked in an interview to name their three best friends.[8] From another study by one of this same team of

7. Stouffer *et al.* (1949) Vol. II, p. 244. See Shils' (1950) summary and analysis of this subject, and in the same volume, the treatment of the same subject by Merton and Kitt (1950).

8. That is, they were not named as frequently as they named others. This is one of the standard sociometric procedures employed in Festinger, Schachter and Back (1950).

authors, we learn that when participants in clubs were asked, following their initial discussion periods, who among the participants they would like to see dropped from the club, those who had maintained extremely deviant opinions (these extremists were in the employ of the experimenter) were named most of all.[9]

Individuals conform, we have seen so far, and obtain acceptance and friendship in return. In order to become a *leader,* too, one must share prevailing opinions and attitudes. Merei demonstrates this very vividly in his study of leadership in children's groups.[10]

Children were observed at play in a day nursery and those children who displayed leadership qualities were singled out and separated from the other children. The remaining children were formed into twelve groups, homogeneous as to age and sex, comprising three to six members each. Each of these twelve groups met separately over a period of several days and very soon each developed group "traditions" with regard to its activities, most of which centered about an experimentally prescribed task. The author reports that it took from three to six meetings (35 to 40 minutes each) for the development of group "traditions" such as permanent seating arrangements, permanent division of objects (who plays with what), a stable sequence of games, preference for certain activities rather than others, group jargon, etc. Then the original leaders, who had not been included in these twelve groups, were reintroduced. In every case, when an old leader attempted to assert authority which went contrary to a newly established "tradition" of the group, the group did not respond. Some of the leaders, as a matter of fact, never returned to power. Others, who were successful, did achieve leadership once more but only after they had completely identified with the new "tradition" and participated in it themselves.

In sum, all these studies seem to indicate that if an individual desires to attain, or maintain, an intimate relationship

---

9. Schachter (1951).

10. Merei (1952). For confirmation, with case study illustrations, of the relationship between social status and degree of conformity to group norms, see Homans (1950) on "social ranking and norms."

with others, or if he wants to "get somewhere" either within a group or via a group, he must identify himself with the opinions and values of these others. That does not necessarily mean that this identification is therefore rationally calculated. It may be quite unwitting. But conscious or not, the *consequences* of conformity or non-conformity which we have noted will remain the same.

Thus, from the "instrumental" point of view, we are led to expect that an individual's opinions will be substantially affected by the opinions of others whose company he keeps, or whose company he aspires to keep.[11]

Providing a Social Reality

Let us now consider another of the reasons which may help explain our confidence in the assertion that individuals very largely share their opinions with other people who surround them. Here, we are thinking of the group not in instrumental terms (that is, not in terms of the "benefits" of conforming) but rather in terms of the function of the group as a provider of *meanings* for situations which do not explain themselves. Experimental social psychologists concerned with the impact of the group on perceptual processes,[12] and particularly the

11. Warner and Lunt's (1941) "discovery" of the clique in Yankee City indicates that upward mobility in the social status system of a community involves being accepted by (and presumably, therefore, conforming with) small groups which personify each successive step on the status ladder. A whole series of such examples—cutting across traditionally rigid boundary lines in sociology—are provided by Merton and Kitt (1950) in their reference group paper. They begin with data from *The American Soldier* to indicate that army privates who at Time A have attitudes more closely resembling those of non-commissioned officers than other privates, are more likely at Time B to have attained a higher rank than other privates. Generalizing from this finding, they say: "An army private bucking for promotion may only in a narrow and theoretically superficial sense be regarded as engaging in behavior different from that of an immigrant assimilating the values of a native group, or of a lower-middle-class individual conforming to his conception of upper-middle-class patterns of behavior, or of a boy in a slum area orienting himself to the values of the street corner gang, or of a Bennington student abandoning the conservative beliefs of her parents to adopt the more liberal ideas of her college associates, or of a lower-class Catholic departing from the pattern of his in-group by casting a Republican vote, or of an eighteenth century French aristocrat aligning himself with a revolutionary group of the time."

12. For an interesting formulation of the contributions of gestalt psychologists to the study of group processes as these influence perception, judgments, motivations, etc., see Katz, D. (1951).

late Kurt Lewin and those who continue in his tradition, have studied this phenomenon. The Lewinians have named it "social reality" and they explain it as follows:

> Experiments dealing with memory and group pressure on the individual show that what exists as "reality" for the individual is to a high degree determined by what is socially accepted as reality. This holds even in the field of physical fact: to the South Sea Islanders the world may be flat; to the European it is round. "Reality," therefore, is not an absolute. It differs with the group to which the individual belongs.[13]

This concept provides an alternative or better, a supplementary, explanation for the soldiers' attitudes we reported above. Instead of attributing the attitude of the replacements (compared with their peers in all-"green" divisions) simply to their motivation to be accepted in the veterans' outfits, we might have suggested there, as we shall here, that the "reality" of the combat experience toward which attitudes were being expressed might well have been different for those who were in daily touch with combat veterans as compared with those who were not. The Westgate study makes this point very well:

> The hypothesis may be advanced that the "social reality" upon which an opinion or an attitude rests for its justification is the degree to which the individual perceives that this opinion or attitude is shared by others. An opinion or attitude which is not reinforced by others of the same opinion will become unstable generally. There are not usually compelling facts which can unequivocally settle the question of which attitude is wrong and which is right in connection with social opinions and attitudes as there are in the case of what might be called "facts." If a person driving a car down a street is told by his companion that the street ends in a dead end, this piece of information may easily be checked against physical "reality." . . . The "reality" which settles the question in the case of social attitudes and opinions is the degree to which others with whom one is in communication are believed to share these opinions and attitudes.[14]

This is the way that stereotypes develop; and it is one of the

---

13. Lewin and Grabbe (1945). The notion of "social reality" has an important parallel in Harry Stack Sullivan's (1953) "consensual validation."
14. Festinger, Schachter and Back (1950), p. 168.

reasons why ideas about what is real in religion or in politics vary from group to group. So many things in the world are inaccessible to direct empirical observation that individuals must continually rely on each other for making sense out of things. Several experimental studies illustrate this. For example, there is Sherif's now classic study which is perhaps the best single beginning point for a review of the twenty or so years of attention in experimental social psychology to the role of the small group as an influence on opinions, attitudes and actions.[15] Sherif constructed experiments using the "autokinetic effect" which is the name given to the illusion of movement created by an actually stationary pinpoint of light when it is flashed on in a totally darkened room. He first tested each of his experimental subjects singly, asking them to make judgments about the number of inches the light "moved" each time it was lit. After each individual had developed a personal "norm"—that is, a modal number of inches—around which his judgments centered, Sherif brought his subjects together in groups of twos and threes, and asked them to repeat the experiment once more. Each of the subjects based his first few estimates on his previously established standard, but confronted, this time, with the dissenting judgments of the others each gave way somewhat until a new, group standard became established. Thus, knowing what each individual brought with him to the situation, Sherif was able to show how the effect of the judgments of others resulted in the convergence of substantially different private standards and the emergence of a shared norm. When the experiment was reversed—that is, when the group situation came first and the private situation second—individuals accepted the group standard as their own and carried it away with them into the private situation. The group norm thus became the norm of each group member. Interaction had given rise to a definition of "reality" which each participating individual retained.

Such laboratory experiments are sure to encounter a barrage of critical objections concerning the dangers of generalizing laboratory findings to "real life" situations. Often these

---

15. Sherif (1952).

warnings are very sound. Often, however, they are not more than pat pronouncements about the impossibility of studying human behavior in a laboratory. It may be interesting, then, to digress for a moment to consider some of the possible objections to the study we have just reported. Consider, for example, the arguments that (1) the situation was completely *unstructured* and therefore unreal, for, after all, nobody could know that the light did not move at all; (2) it was completely *without emotional affect* for the participating subjects—that is, they could not have cared much about the validity of their judgments; and (3) it was a situation where people were *forced* to make a decision in response to the artificial demands of the experimental situation. In short, these three objections taken together would imply that Sherif's experiment can be legitimately generalized only to situations where individuals are (1) forced to make decisions (2) about something they know nothing about and (3) about which they care not at all. The critic of laboratory experimentation too often retires at this point; but we shall continue. Let us suppose, now, that these objections are in fact valid and do limit the generalizability of Sherif's finding, as in fact they probably do. Still, that leaves us with a question: are there any real-life situations that resemble this laboratory one? And our answer happens to be —yes. Consider one: For very large numbers of people the presidential voting situation can be characterized as a situation where social pressures (1) force people to make a decision they would not otherwise make (2) between two candidates about whom they may know nothing and (3) about whom they may care not at all. In such a situation, for such people, we may expect informal groups to play a large part in defining the situation, and in influencing decisions. And let us add, that it would be wrong—in the case of almost any of the complex issues on which people in our society are expected to have opinions—to overestimate the objective verifiability of any social situation.

Interaction: The Process of Convergence

If we recall now that we are still engaged in the task of reasoning out the thesis that the opinions and attitudes of

individuals are rooted in the social spheres to which they belong, we will find something more in the Sherif study. The Sherif study points out for us two basic ideas: first, that individuals turn to and depend on others, when they have to form opinions or make decisions in unclear situations—this we have called the "social reality" function of groups; and secondly, that individuals interacting with each other relative to a particular problem which concerns all, will develop a collective approach to that problem and thus create an opinion, an attitude, a decision, or an action which they then will grasp in common.

Here, then, is another "reason" why we can have confidence in the contention that opinions, attitudes and actions of individuals are likely to be connected with interpersonal relations. For, in Sherif's experiment, we find an early attempt to meet the problem of *the way in which* shared norms are created and we are offered the suggestion that when individuals interact with each other relative to a problem they have in common they begin to "see" things in the same way and consequently create a social norm. If the "benefits" of conformity and the "social reality" function of groups begin to answer the question *why* individual opinions and attitudes are so often anchored in groups, then the observation that norms arise from the interaction of individuals begins to answer the question *how*. We shall consider now the way in which individuals, interacting together, simultaneously *create* a shared way of looking at things or of doing them.[16]

The Westgate study presents an opportunity to watch norms arise in the "real-life" context of a newly-built housing community for married veterans who had come to study at a large Eastern university.[17]

The community was made up of residential courts, each court consisting of several buildings and each building of several apartments. Apartments were assigned at random and

---

16. In an essay on "Social-Psychological Theory," Newcomb (1951) remarks that it is "to Sherif's eternal credit that he . . . formulated the problems of social norms in terms of perceptual processes." "Norms," Newcomb says, "represent shared ways of perceiving things (or, more exactly, shared frames of reference in which things are perceived)."

17. Festinger, Schachter and Back (1950).

none of the residents seems to have known each other prior to moving in. Research began just as the project was completed and the residents arrived. The researchers opened their investigation by focusing on factors which were influencing the growth of friendships; and we are told that friendship ties—at least in this homogeneous population[18]—can be related directly to factors like physical proximity and functional proximity (where your daily route takes you by someone's door). Thus, the largest share of all friendships grew up among people living in the same court or the same building. "These ecological factors," say the authors, "determine not only specific friendships but the composition of groups as well." Stated otherwise, it is quite clear that contact—or interaction—was the basis for the formation of social groups. Now let us see about the rise of norms.

Friendships and informal groupings were mapped by means of a sociometric questionnaire which requested each member of the entire community to name the three people "whom you see most of socially." Then, some time following this sociometric questionnaire, an attitude questionnaire was administered in order to study the distribution of attitudes for and against a newly-formed Tenants' Council. In the majority of cases, the attitude of an individual was found to be identical with the prevailing attitude of the other members of the court in which he lived. And since we know that contact centered primarily around the residential court—and since the attitude toward the Tenants' Council varied from court to court—we may conclude, as the authors do, that the shared opinions of the members of each court arose out of their mutual contacts and interaction.

Variations in group "cohesion" from court to court were also examined by distinguishing the extent to which sociometric choices were confined to fellow court members by the residents of each court. They report that the greater the cohesiveness (and thus, the interaction) the greater the uniformity of attitudes. And furthermore, by studying the sociometric choices

---

18. These were all young married couples, of about the same age and similar social and economic status. The husbands were all veterans of military service in World War II, and were all students at the university.

of those individuals who did *not* share the attitudes of their courts, the authors discovered that often these non-conformists were residents whose friends and social life were centered not only outside the court in which they lived but outside the housing community altogether.

What we learn is that individuals who were randomly assigned to apartments throughout a housing community quickly formed themselves into friendship groups and once formed, these groups of friends adopted shared ways of thinking and judging things to which their members adhered. Here are real-life groups and real-life evidence for our contention that ostensibly private opinions and attitudes are often, in fact, opinions and attitudes which are generated and maintained in interaction with small groups of other people.[19]

The Attraction of Shared Values

Now that we have talked about propinquity and motivated interaction as a basis for the collective creation of norms, we should point to one other factor which will also help us to explain how it happens that an individual's opinions are likely to be liked with the opinions of those around him. The phenomenon to which we refer now is the tendency of people with like opinions and values *to seek each other out* as companions. In a forthcoming study, Robert K. Merton will call this notion "value homophily" and will deal with its as a central concept for the study of interpersonal relations.[20]

"Value homophily"—or, mutual attraction on the basis of shared values—is a difficult problem to study empirically because one must demonstrate, to do the job thoroughly, that

19. In Chapter V, below, some of the processes of interpersonal communication are explored in greater detail. Here, we are concerned with the fact that interpersonal communication—or interaction—seems, somehow, to lead to shared opinions and attitudes and with some of the reasons why we might expect this to be the case. The "how" of the case is also implicit, of course, but while it is touched on at various points in this chapter, it will be given more attention later.

20. Merton *et al.* (forthcoming). Merton deals also with "status homophily," that is, mutual attractions based on similarities of social class, religion, nationality, etc., but we are concerned here only with "value homophily." Another study which will treat the relationship between friendship and like-mindedness is the study by Lipset, Trow and Coleman (1955) of a printers' union.

common values *precede* rather than follow from interaction. Thus, research must begin where aggregates of individuals with a variety of values come into contact with each other for the first time within a situation which is conducive to the formation of friendships and primary groups. A recent research on the borderlines of this problem seems worth reporting here.[21] The study we have in mind does not quite solve this problem nor does it pretend to, but it is an interesting step in this direction.

The problem for this study occurred as a by-product of another assignment. The author, Joseph A. Precker, had been asked to determine which criteria the students and the faculty of Bard College considered fundamental for the proper evaluation of a student's overall educational achievement at the college. The 242 students and 42 faculty members (the entire college population) offered some 1,300 criteria which they considered important, following which three judges condensed these into 39 categories. Everybody was then asked once more to rank the new list of 39 categories according to their individual judgments of the relative importance of each of the criteria. At the same time, each student was asked (1) to name the three students he would most like to keep in touch with after graduation and (2) to name the member of the faculty whom he would most like to have as faculty adviser. By means of a coefficient of rank-order correlation the author compared the evaluation rankings of each chooser with the rankings of the three students he chose and similarly, for each chooser

21. Precker (1952). It is curious that so little work has been done on this problem of the mutual attraction of similar values. Other than the present study which is on the borderline of the problem, and the Merton and Lipset studies which attack it directly, we know of no other work in this area. Yet, in *Social Organization* (1909), C. H. Cooley cites one of two prevalent notions about the effects of the new communications media: ". . . If there are in the civilized world a few like-minded people it is comparatively easy for them to get together in spirit and encourage one another in their peculiarity." And Cooley further remarks that "modern conditions . . . tend to make life rational and free, rather than local and accidental." The new voluntary associations of the gesellschaft society which would be based on mutual interest rather than propinquity also aroused considerable attention some years ago; for references see Shils (1951). Giddings (1896) concept of "consciousness-of kind" is obviously related, too—though its use refers now to the consequences and now to the antecedents of interaction. Obviously the two uses must be distinguished and only the latter is in point here. But despite all this, no empirical research has been done.

and the faculty member he chose. He found that students tended to select associates—both as post-college friends and as faculty advisers—whose values (as reflected in these educational criteria for the evaluation of students) resembled their own. Furthermore, Precker is able to indicate that, among peers, the greatest similarity of values tended to occur in those cases where friendship choices on the sociometric questionnaire were *mutual* rather than unilateral.

Of course, it is not easy to interpret these data definitively. On the one hand, we can say simply that this case appears no different than some of the previous ones we have seen, that is, that interaction leads to friendship which leads both to shared values and to a desire to continue the friendship. Precker himself offers data which would support this conclusion.[22] On the other hand, however, this argument which derives from mutual friendship choices cannot explain why those whose choices were not reciprocated should have selected individuals whose values resembled their own. It does seem, therefore, that a seeking-out process, based on "value homophily" is at work here, and in all probability, was at work in the initial formation of the mutual friendships. The conditions under which shared values are operative in friendship formation, as compared with other possible factors—such as propinquity or interdependence—would seem to warrant intensive research.[23]

---

22. He finds that the evaluational criteria ranked by seniors correspond more closely to the rankings of their actual advisers (regardless of the adviser they chose on the sociometric questionnaire) than did the rankings of freshmen with their actual advisers.

23. Empirical beginnings, and some debate, on this matter can be found in Lundberg and Beazley (1948), Lundberg, Hertzler and Dickson (1949) and Maisonneuve (1952). These studies compare the relative importance of propinquity with various dimensions of "status homophily," as friendship determinants in a small college, a large university and a French boarding school, respectively. Also see the review of Homans (1950) by Rogers (1952) which represents the stand of the sociometrists—who emphasize the role of choice in human relations and invoke the somewhat mystical concept of "tele"—as opposed to the "interactionists" who tend much more to emphasize proximity. And see, too, the Merton *et al.* (forthcoming) and Lipset, Trow and Coleman (1955) studies. Of course, this is not an either-or situation. It demands the specification of conditions under which one or another of these several factors is more likely to be operative.

Interdependent Individuals Demand Conformity of Each Other

The instrumental value—the "benefits"—of conformity tells us that individuals will generally *desire* to adhere to the opinions, attitudes and habits of those with whom they are motivated to interact. The "social reality" aspect of group life tells us that individuals influence each other's perceptions, so that an individual's way of "*seeing*" things, may be limited to a large degree, by the extent of his social ties. Now, there is an aspect of interpersonal relations—the last one we shall discuss here—which is, in a sense, the obverse of these two, and it, too, contributes a "reason" for believing that interacting individuals will be homogeneous in their thinking and behaving. It is that groups *require* conformity of their members.

Some of the reasons why group members demand conformity of each other are worth looking into. First of all, individuals do not like to find their associates departing from a traditional way of "seeing" something. It is a very discomfiting experience for individuals to discover that one of their number proposes to "see" something in a new way. Consider, for example, the consequences of believing that witches do not exist, in the context of a witch-hunting Puritan community.

Secondly, groups like to preserve their identities, and one of the chief ways a group can make its boundary lines clear is by the requirement of uniform behavior on the parts of its members.

Third, and most important perhaps, is the fact that groups, like individuals, have goals; and group goals often cannot be achieved without consensus. That is to say, uniformity of opinion may be a *pre-requisite* for group action. In this connection, Festinger observes that "pressures toward uniformity" of opinion or attitude among group members "may arise because such uniformity is desirable or necessary in order for the group to move toward some goal."[24] Clearly, if individuals cannot agree on "what should come next," they cannot take collective action.[25]

---

24. He calls this "group locomotion." In Festinger (1950).
25. All this presupposes that an individual is motivated to retain his asso-

To this point, we have indicated a series of "reasons" which can be located in the literature of theory and research in the social sciences to account for the primarily social character of ostensibly individual opinions, attitudes and actions. We began, first of all, by pointing to the "benefits" for the individual of conformity to the opinions of others in terms of the satisfactions that come with acceptance and achievement of desired status. Next, we spoke about the manner in which groups function as providers of standards and meanings for their members, and consequently the dependence of an individual on those about him for the definition of "social reality." In the course of our discussion we looked, too, at some fundamentals in the process of norm formation, and we saw how interaction among individuals operates to produce shared standards of judgment, opinions, and ways of behaving.[26] We suggested, in the following section, that interaction is not the only way to explain why members of groups typically possess shared ways of thinking and acting, for initial attractions based on similarity of values may often *precede* regular interaction. And, finally, we indicated some of the reasons why groups are likely to insist on uniformity of opinion.

Thus, we have tried to make clear, primarily from the literature of small group research, why we are convinced that studying the relatively small groups of people to which an individual is attached, is a major key to understanding the content and the dynamics of individual opinions and actions. This is an appropriate point to hoist some warning signals for

---

ciation with this group. Such motivation may be a purely voluntary matter or may, perhaps, be a consequence of the need for solidarity in a dangerous environment, or of the need to attain some goal which requires collective action. It should be clear, furthermore, that we are more concerned here with the "automatic" controls implicit in the aspects of group life we have been discussing than in coercion or any other "special" measures which groups may take to enforce conformity. Thus, in everyday life, individuals do not depart from group norms because they do not want to surrender the "benefits" of conformity (acceptance, friendship, leadership, attainment of private goals, etc.); because they do not like to threaten their own mental security by permitting themselves to "see" what others do not see; and the like. This is what we mean by "automatic." On this point, see Homans (1950) on "social control."

26. Of course, the *processes* of interpersonal influence and communication have barely been hinted at up to this point. Much more of this subject can be found in Chapter V below on "Interpersonal Networks."

the reader, particularly relating to the oversimplifications we are employing.

Some Hasty Qualifications

We sometimes talk as if people belong to only one group; or we may imply, at other times, that only the groups to which an individual *belongs* influence his opinions, though we are fully aware that the study of "reference" groups is a primary focus of current research; and at still other times, we may talk as if we had established beyond doubt that individuals take their standards only from small groups of others with whom they are personally acquainted and never from people whom they don't know personally or from mass media. Sometimes, too, we talk as if no other structure except the informal group exists in the world and as if no mechanisms of control or sanctions other than interpersonal influence and ostracism were operative. Very often, we sound as if all standards, judgments, values and ideas which govern an individual's thinking and acting *originate* within the small groups in which they are "anchored" (maintained and enforced).[27] For all these, we plead over-simplification.

And let it be noted, again, that we are aware of the sometimes misleading connotations of the word "group." It is the role that *other people* play in the communications process in which we are interested, and the use of the word "group" is often simply a shorthand device to connote the significant "others" with whom an individual associates. Which kinds of "others" are significant, is a problem we shall attempt to tackle

---

27. It is well worth noting here that reference group theory and research and small group theory and research have not yet been conceptually integrated. Merton and Kitt's (1950) analysis of the implications of data from *The American Soldier* for reference group theory suggests many points at which a knowledge of the small membership groups of the respondent is basic to the reference group concept. Some of the questions we raise at this point can be found in Merton and Kitt, e.g., do individuals relate themselves only to others whom they know personally or also to impersonal status categories such as, say, 'all draft-exempt war workers,' or 'high society.' If the latter is the case as well, then, our present interest immediately directs us to inquire into the mechanisms by which one establishes 'contact' with such anonymous others. Opinion leader research can make a major contribution at this point.

from time to time, although not in a systematic way. For it still will not serve us well to tangle either with precise definitions of different kinds of groups or with complex speculations concerning the actual interplay of groups in the lives of actual individuals. Let us suggest only that at this point in our knowledge, precise definitions, learned speculations, or "answers" of any kind are all considerably less helpful than the kinds of questions which we have seen—and which we shall continue to see—emerge at every turn, for questions will point the way to empirical research.

Finally, a word about "conformity." Our discussion of the consequences of deviation and the "benefits" of conformity, etc., is on the level of agreement or divergence of opinion among intimately interacting individuals. Obviously, this is quite a different level from the one on which current political discussions concerning conformity and orthodoxy in American thought are taking place. The only implication in this text for the latter discussion is the following: A non-conformist on the level of the larger society is likely to be in close touch with another, like-minded non-conformist with whom he conforms.

Now that we have explained ourselves, we shall conclude this chapter. In closing, however, we should reiterate that we have *not* been trying to establish simply that individuals in primary group interaction develop norms governing their interaction. That is a well-established proposition, which the studies reported here certainly support. What we *have* been trying to say is that even an individual's seemingly personal opinions and attitudes may be by-products of interpersonal relations. The evidence strongly suggests that opinions and attitudes often are maintained, sometimes generated, sometimes merely enforced, in conjunction with others. In short, we have attempted to marshal evidence for our contention that the individual expression of opinions and attitudes is not strictly an individual affair.