

Prologue

a cowardice of curs • a kindle of kittens • a murder of crows • an aurora of polar bears • a brace of ducks • a charm of finches • a scare of ghosts • a knot of toads • a wake of buzzards • a gaggle of geese • a hover of trout • an army of ants • a crash of rhinoceroses • an ostentation of peacocks • a sleuth of bears • a leap of leopards • a clowder of cats • a quiver of cobras • a romp of otters • a huddle of penguins • a wedge of geese • a drove of sheep • a shrewdness of apes • a squabble of seagulls • a bevy of roebucks • a prickle of hedgehogs • an exaltation of larks • a route of wolves

One of the oddities of the English language is that there are so many different collective nouns that all mean “group”—but each word is specific to the particular things *in* that group. Collective nouns were originally either terms of *venery* (from the sport of hunting) or terms of *husbandry* (having to do with farming or livestock).^{*} Whatever you may think of hunting as a social sport, in the fifteenth century it was socially acceptable—generating a delightful language, full of words indicating collections of beasts or birds.^{**}

Collective nouns remain a vibrant linguistic force today. They are still being created, and now these new collective nouns imaginatively extend to groups of *people*: an eloquence of lawyers, an illusion of

^{*}Medieval collective nouns are found in Shakespeare. The most important record of such nouns is known as the *Book of St. Albans*, “A Treatyse Pertheynyge to Hawkyng, Huntynge and Coote Armiris,” published in 1486. To illustrate how specific the collective nouns from hunting were: a *gaggle* (a flock of geese when not flying), a *skein* (geese in flight), and a *wedge* (denoting geese in flight and in formation); ducks on the water are a *paddling*, but when they take flight, they are a *team*; a *sounder* of wild swine, but a *dryft* of tame swine. Wolves were commonly said to go about in *routes* or *routs*, with a “route of wolves” being 12 or more (jury-ish).

^{**}If you are interested in delving into this topic, I urge you to get a copy of James Lipton’s *An Exaltation of Larks*; also, *A Crash of Rhinoceroses: A Dictionary of Collective Nouns* by Rex Collins.

x Peer Groups

painters, a rascal of boys, a circus of clowns, a stack of librarians, a geek of engineers, a pan of reviewers, a blarney of bartenders, a babble of linguists, a yard of gardeners, a clergy of priests, a discord of experts, or a shrivel of critics.

This book explores the customs, oddities, rituals, symbols, language, and behaviors of a GROUP OF PEERS.

If you are now (or have dedicated plans to be) a hermit, isolate, or lone dweller-on-mountain-tops, read no further.

This book has nothing for you.

❖ THE GROUPS THAT MATTER MOST (PEERS)

*For the strength of the pack is the wolf and the strength of the wolf
is the pack.*

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

peer n. 1. a person who is the equal of another in abilities, qualifications, age, background, responsibilities, or social status 2. a person of the same legal status, privilege, or rights as another

The first thing to know about behavior in peer groups is that we are talking about *us*, not just about others. This point is important to establish, right at the beginning. We are talking about other people, sure, but we are talking (a whole lot) about *us*. You are a member of at least one—and probably several—peer groups: clans, cliques, clubs, or choirs; teams, travelers, taskers, or tribes.

Our experiences in peer groups may be rewarding or hurtful (or a confusing combination of both). One project team member described the euphoric culture of his experience in a group:

We even walked differently than anybody else. We felt we were way out there, ahead of the whole world.¹

In fact, when we work on projects with others, we are members of peer *work groups* that tend to develop unique cultures, in which the work of one is considered to be the work of all:

And if he's too big for one man to handle, we'd get down together, and we'd catch him by the tail and hold him right tight to keep him from jumpin' on that fella, then they say, "Hora sí." And down we go. Then we got him. That's teamwork. (African American cowboy from Texas, age 90, reflecting on how it once was with cowboys and cows.)²

However, peer group experiences may be infuriating, as evidenced by this juror's description of the fifth day of deliberations:

I screamed that I couldn't believe this was happening, that we were possibly going to be a hung jury when in my mind the case was so obvious. Everything was there, DNA evidence, witness testimony. There was no room for interpretation. I was angry. There were words of profanity that came out of my mouth.³

Peer groups can hurt us even when we are *not* members of them. Our experiences of being excluded, for example, are painful—as one 14-year-old African American teen poignantly pointed out,

They said I couldn't be in the group because I was too ugly and I wasn't german [*sic*] which made me not good enough to be in the group. I was really hurt and I thought I was ugly and I wished I looked german [*sic*]. I thought I was the ugliest person alive.⁴

We are embedded in groups, from the moment we are born: families, sports teams, classes, task groups, special interest groups, support groups, neighborhoods, clubs, churches, friendship circles, faculty, orchestras, choirs, committees, sibling groups, scout troops, professional groups, living groups, and lost-on-an-island-together groups, to name only a few. Some groups are voluntary (clubs), while others are involuntary (juries); some are a bit of both (biological families or chosen families; military troops); some groups may have existed before we joined them (cliques), while we choose to organize other groups ourselves (hot groups). Some groups seem to cripple our thoughts (cults), while others help us move beyond our personal best (super-teams). Which groups, however, are considered *peer* groups?

❖ DEFINING AND DISTINGUISHING PEER GROUPS

Members of peer groups perceive that they are like one another, in one or more salient ways. Here, the term *peer groups* draws on the definition of “peer” offered at the outset of this prologue and, furthermore, suggests a working framework for distinguishing *peer groups* from many other groups in our lives:

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

That is, there may be a “sliding scale” when it comes to measuring enacted *equality* in various peer groups.*

*Some “peers,” it turns out, may seem to be more equal than others.

Are all small groups, then, essentially peer groups, as long as the members have something in common? As this book will describe throughout, having “something in common” with others is qualitatively different from being with other people who share the perception that each of them is an equal, in some important way. For example, the people in many small, spontaneous groups all have something in common: eating in a small restaurant, folks on an elevator, locals waiting for a bus, students attending a university, or fans of a sports team (but these are not peer groups). Some groups are distinguished by hierarchy, privilege, power, or status, such that even the members do not consider themselves to be equal (so these are not peer groups, either). Consider, for example, the president of a country and government cabinet members, a military commander and soldiers, a coach and team members. Subtract the members who have extraordinary power, however, and the remaining members, when engaged in their shared goal, might be peers. When a losing sports team is dressed down by the coach and the coaching staff in the locker room after a game, only the players are group peers (both players and coaching staff realize this). A family that includes parents, grandparents, brothers, and sisters is a group worth studying—but some family members have more power, control, knowledge, and privilege than others. Within that family, however, only the siblings, generally, can be considered a peer group, as conceptualized in this book.

It follows that when members of a small group enjoy different status, power, privilege, decision-making rights, tenure, pay, opportunities, or rewards—particularly at multiple levels—they might not, in a useful sense, be peers (even if someone has labeled them a “team”). Players on a sports team can usefully be studied as a peer group, even though some are rookies and others veterans. The team owner, manager, and coaches, however, have such vastly different powers and decision-making privileges, and so are not peers of the players. Members of a cross-functional work team that includes both supervisors and line workers are, generally, not peers for our thinking here, nor are hospital surgical teams in which there may be surgeons, various certification levels of nurses, medical students, or interns. Performing members of the Rolling Stones, Wu-Tang Clan, or Alabama may be part of a small peer group, but when they meet with their agents,

One of the first useful tasks of peer group scholarship, consequently, would be to operationalize* “peer group” for the population of interest to be studied, and then to acknowledge the peer member differences that may make a difference within that group.

business managers, stage crew, and road drivers, the “sameness” of power, pay, status, and responsibility are significant and threaten any image of member-perceived equality.

A university faculty of tenured English professors may be the peer group that we choose to study, but it would be useful, for example, to acknowledge at the outset that some of the faculty may be “associate professors,” others “full professors,” whereas some faculty may hold an “endowed chair.” These English professors are paid differently, but may share voting privileges, departmental or professional service obligations, teaching responsibilities, and scholarly goals. Consequently, if we study such a group, we acknowledge, first, the differences; subsequently, we focus on the specific peer qualities that make these groups and their members appropriate for understanding the communication processes of peer groups.

❖ PREMISE BINDING EVERY PEER GROUP

The glue-like premise of a peer group is primarily member *sameness*—sameness in some way that is important to the members of that particular group. *How this sameness is evaluated by the peer members of a group may not be apparent to outsiders.* Furthermore, perceived member sameness may change over time and across situations.

Real-world *peer groups* are different, in significant ways, from the more-frequently studied problem-solving task groups (in organizations) or even laboratory or experimental groups (comprising college students earning course credits). *Peer groups* may have goals that are social (friendship), rather than task (generating ideas or competing against other teams), or both (monthly book clubs). Success may be measured by members’ enjoyment or support of one another over time, rather than by their tendency to tackle a problem quickly. Membership may be short term (“We’ve got to find a way out!”) or long term (“One for all and all for one!”). Real-world peer groups are naturally occurring—rather than artificially assembled—and, as a result, they are embedded in communities, surrounded by other groups, and their members have multigroup loyalties.

*“Operationalize,” here, refers to the careful process by which we set specific boundaries on what is included or excluded for a specific term, construct, or population of interest. If we want to ask people about the top three rules for being a good friend, for example, we need to give each person we ask the *same* definition of “friend,” so that everyone is answering from a similar perspective. If we want to study high school *cliques*, at the outset, we need to create a working definition we will use that makes it clear what observable characteristics we require for a group of adolescents to be considered a “clique,” as opposed to a loose group of friends. Which high school groups will we count as a clique, and, furthermore, on what basis?

❖ EMBEDDEDNESS OF PEER GROUPS
ACROSS THE LIFE SPAN

Peer relationships are worth more of our attention today because for many people multiple peer groups consume more of their lives than such groups did in earlier times. Children will spend considerable time with similar-age peers throughout childhood and adolescence; they are immersed in a world of peer groups.⁵ The social structure of childhood peer groups is complex and demanding, requiring children to develop communication skills to successfully enter a new peer group, maintain coordinated play, coordinate competing goals with others, process novel social information, and respond appropriately to diverse situations. A child's inability to succeed with peer groups is a source of anguish and stress for some children and teens (as well as their families and teachers).⁶ In fact, school days are anxiety ridden and lonely for those children and adolescents who are frequently rejected by peer groups.⁷

I think that they excluded me because they just judge people by the outside, but those people are wrong. You should get to know people more.*

The successes (or hurts) of our childhood peer group experiences are stored in our memories and, consequently, are available to affect our behaviors, perceptions, and expectations of other people when we join new peer groups:

Today everybody's going to Mary Ann's party in the group. I'm sort of the one that gets left behind. I'm not invited to the party so I won't do anything on the weekend. Anywhere the whole group goes, I don't. . . . I'm just the person that gets left back. Maybe they don't realize that I get left, that I'm there, but it happens all the time. (sixth-grade female student)⁸

Studying the various communication subcultures and outcomes of peer groups in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood is an important endeavor, in part because it illuminates the powerful influence on our satisfactions, anxieties, and behavior choices. This perspective is missing from a more limited study of the problem-solving or task groups that are typically embedded in organizations.

*Words of an Asian American adolescent female (SunWolf & Leets, 2003, p. 355).

❖ OVERVIEW

Peer groups construct their boundaries, socialize members, create identity, engage in tasks, resolve conflicts, enact rituals, adopt symbols, exclude outsiders, and even disband through *communication*. The talk and the symbols of peer groups help these groups create and recreate themselves across time and across tasks. Consequently, this book takes a communication focus concerning the study of peer groups.

This book offers a broad spectrum of theories, research findings, concepts, and predictions about what happens (or what does not happen) in groups of peers. It then uses those conceptual lenses to explore some of the peer group processes in early childhood ("Peer Groups in Childhood: Learning the Rules of Peer Play," Chapter 2), adolescence ("Peer Groups in Adolescence: The Power of Rejection," Chapter 3), neighborhoods ("Peer Groups in Neighborhoods: Hoodies, Homies, and Gansta Girls," Chapter 4), work ("Peer Groups That Super-Task: Hot Groups," Chapter 5), and community ("Peer Groups as Decision Makers: Juries," Chapter 6).

What's in it for me? (And what's not?) In short, this book offers the possibility of a bit more pleasure, a bit less pain in the (unavoidable) time you will spend with myriad future peer groups; more understanding, less confusion about what goes right and what goes wrong. If you are also someone who thinks about group processes, there's this added value: a whole lot of intriguing (empty) spaces are revealed (dots no one has connected, yet), that would benefit from your mindful attention. Select research findings are highlighted that involve various peer groups throughout—although no attempt is made here to review all of the research in these areas. This is not a comprehensive handbook, but rather a thinking guide to display some intriguing peer-paths.

The purpose here is to alter your consciousness about what is possible concerning the peer groups that impact your life—and, in doing so, perhaps to stimulate new thinking about your own behaviors and reactions in such groups; new understandings about the norms, rules, and dynamics of your peer groups; and, finally, to suggest additional avenues for research or theory-building.

Furthermore, all of the concepts and theories you may be familiar with from studying problem-solving groups, meetings, and input-throughput-output groups can be applied to *peer groups*, which may increase understanding of both. The groups you know best from your own life may cast new light on concepts you learned from studying groups with which you may have no personal experiences.

Peer groups attempts to function as both a window and a door: designed to let you *see* processes and consequences that may have been

invisible to you, and, at the same time, allow you to *enter* and behave differently, with different results. This book is designed to showcase existing knowledge about several specific peer groups, as well as to offer theoretical perspectives that could serve as springboards for further inquiry into all small group communication processes.

Throughout, this book intends to challenge your current ideas about what does happen and what *can* happen in peer groups. This book flows from a profound belief that our satisfactions with and contributions to the multiple peer groups in our social worlds can be vastly enhanced.

Peer groups matter most because they are pervasive and because they impact our lives in multiple ways, throughout our life spans.

We will never be without them.

Critical Thinking About Peer Groups

- If, as argued here, the first useful task of peer group scholarship might be to “operationalize” what you mean by *peer group* for a specific group you are interested in understanding, consider the following groups and determine in what ways they do (or do not) meet this book’s definition of peer groups: a Little League baseball team, a Girl Scout troop, a cardiac surgical team, members of a local university fraternity, and a group of tourists on a bus trip through the Amazon.
- Generate a list of several groups of people who may have something in common, yet who you believe would not usefully be considered “peer groups” as used here.
- If the second useful task for studying a specific peer group is to acknowledge at the outset the “peer member differences” that may make a difference within that group under various circumstances, consider with others what might be significant differences between the members of a certain peer group. First, agree with others about several groups that everyone believes are “peer” groups; second, consider, together, the differences that might exist between the members that might emerge under certain circumstances. How could they “make a difference?”
- Expand this critical thinking from hypotheticals to *your* real world. Consider several peer groups in your life and focus on (a) the ways you believe members consider themselves all to be equals, and (b) specific member differences that exist within each group of peers.
- Consider a peer group you are a member of and another one that you do not belong to, but admire. What forms of communication do each of these groups regularly use to construct identity, perform tasks, resolve conflict, communicate norms, regulate conduct, and create shared group culture?

