

CHAPTER 7

Social Groups

CHAPTER OUTLINE

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"No man is an island," wrote the poet John Donne several centuries ago. He was acknowledging one of our most distinctive characteristics: the fact that we are social animals whose behavior and personalities are shaped by the groups to which we belong. Throughout life, most of our daily activities are performed in the company of others. Whether our purpose is working, playing, raising a family, learning, worshiping, or simply relaxing, we usually pursue it in groups, even if the group is as small as two or three people. Our need for human contacts is not merely a practical one; it is a deep psychological need as well. If people are deprived of the company of others for prolonged periods, mental breakdown is the usual result. Even the Geneva Convention, an international agreement that regulates the treatment of prisoners of war, recognizes this need. It regards solitary confinement for more than thirty days as a cruel and barbarous form of torture.

In its strictest sense, a *group* is a collection of people interacting together in an orderly way on the basis of shared expectations about one another's behavior. As a result of this interaction, members feel a common sense of "belonging." They distinguish members from nonmembers and expect certain kinds of behavior from one another that they would not necessarily expect from outsiders. A group differs from an *aggregate*, a collection of people who happen to be in the same place at the same time, such as the passengers in a bus or a crowd in a street. People in an aggregate do not interact to any significant extent and do not feel any shared sense of belonging. A group also differs from a *category*, a number of people who may never have met one another but who share similar characteristics, such as age, race, or sex. Although sociologists sometimes do use the word "group" loosely to refer to aggregates and categories, in this chapter we shall use the term only in its stricter sense.

As a result of the interaction that takes place among its members, a group develops an internal structure. Every group has its own boundaries, norms, values, and interrelated statuses and roles, such as those of leader, follower, joker, or scapegoat. In some groups this structure is rigid and explicit: members may hold official positions, and values and norms may be embodied in written objectives and rules. In other groups the structure may be much more flexible: values and norms may be vague and shifting, and statuses and roles may be subject to negotiation and change.

People form groups for a purpose, generally one that the members cannot achieve satisfactorily through individual effort. The purpose of a group may be an explicit one, such as raising money for charity or waging war against an enemy, or it may be less clearly defined, such as having a good time. The fact that the members of a group share common goals means that they tend to be generally similar to one another in ways that are relevant to the group's purpose. If the goals of the group are political, the members tend to share similar political opinions. If the goals are leisure activities, the members tend to be of similar age and social class and to have common leisure interests. The more the members interact within the group, the more they are influenced by its norms and values and the more similar they are likely to become.

Primary and Secondary Groups

There are two basic types of social groups: primary and secondary.

A *primary group* consists of a small number of people who interact over a relatively long period on a direct, intimate basis. The relationships among the members have emotional depth, and the group tends to endure over time. Primary groups are always small because large numbers of people cannot interact in a highly personal, face-to-face manner. Large groups therefore tend to break down into smaller, more intimate cliques. Typical primary groups include the family, the gang, or a college peer group.

A *secondary group* consists of a number of people who interact on a relatively temporary, anonymous, and impersonal basis. The members come together for some specific, practical purpose, such as making a committee decision or attending a convention. There is limited face-to-face contact, and members relate to one another only in terms of specific roles, such as division manager, supervisor, and employee. Secondary groups can be either small or large. Any newly formed small group is a secondary group at first, although it may become a primary group if its members eventually come to know one another well and begin to inter-

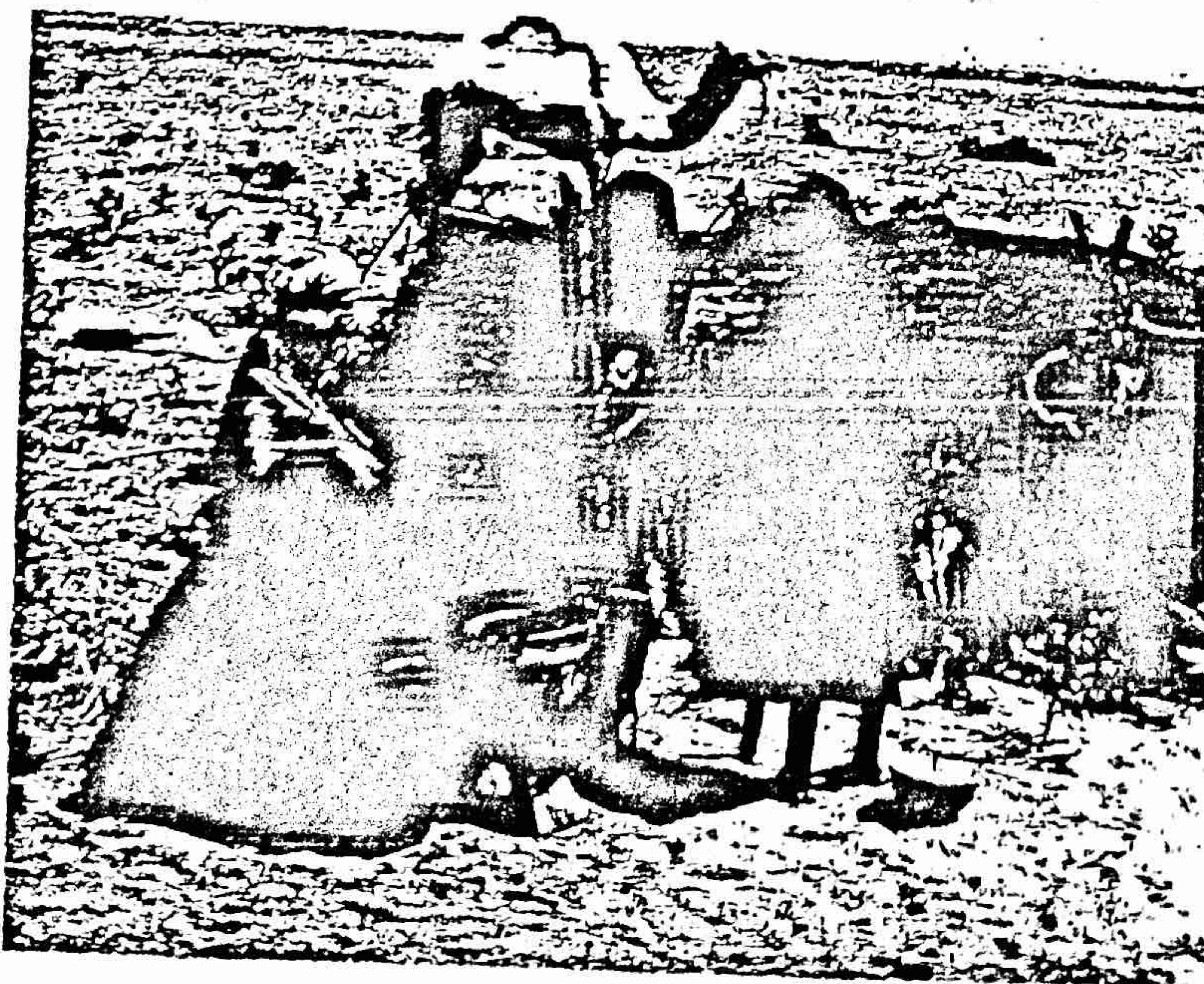
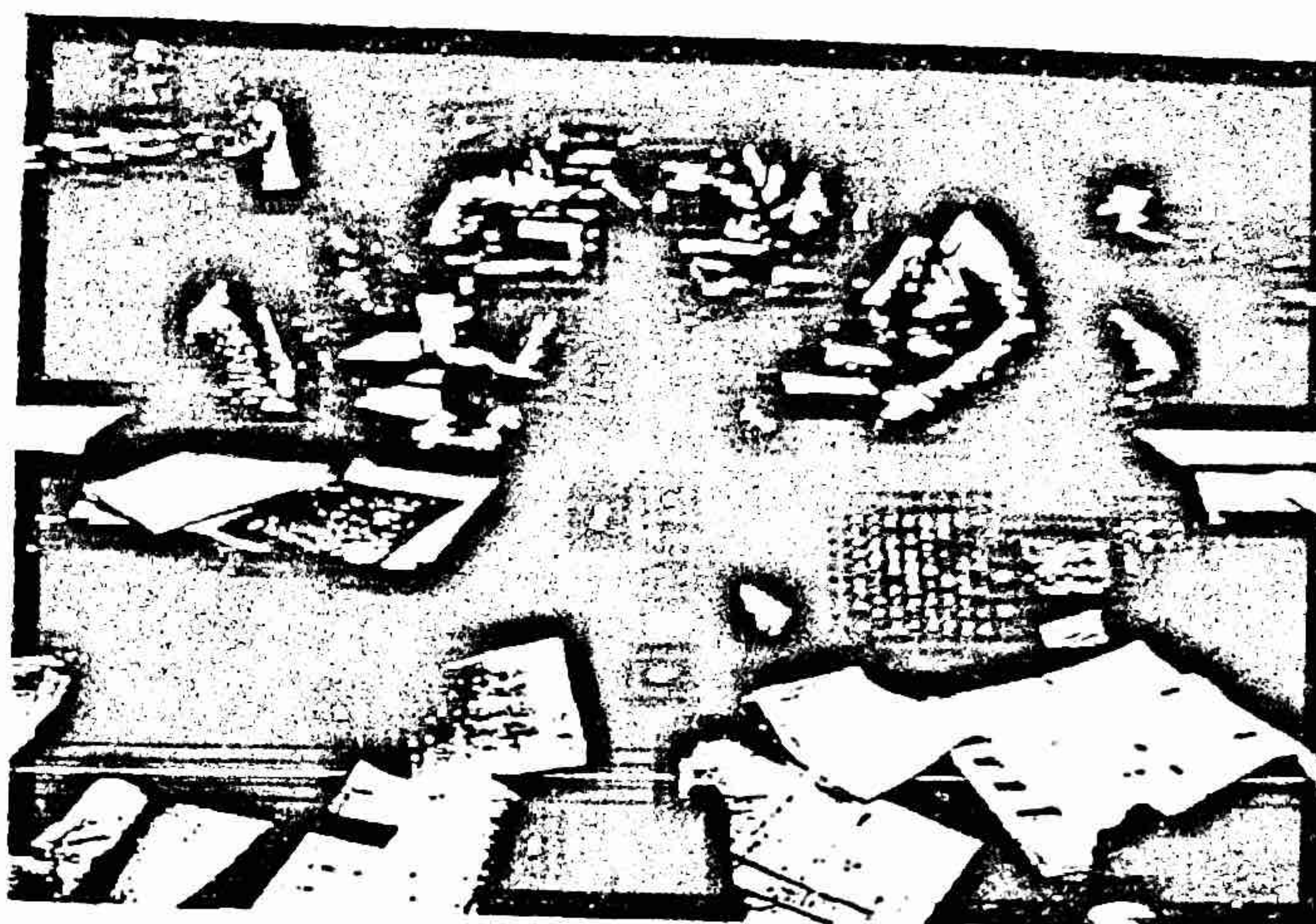


Figure 7.1 A primary group consists of a small number of people who interact in direct and intimate ways, usually over a long period of time. In traditional societies virtually all social life took place in the context of primary groups. These women, members of a small community on the edge of the Sahara desert, form a primary group. They know one another well and interact together as full persons, not in terms of specific roles. Although in modern societies we still spend a good deal of time in primary groups, much of our social life takes place in less intimate settings.

Figure 7.2 A secondary group contains a number of people who have few emotional ties to one another. The members usually meet together for some practical purpose, and they interact with one another in terms of specific roles rather than as full persons. Secondary groups, such as these employees of a large organization, are characteristic of modern societies.



act on a more intimate basis. A college seminar group, for example, may start out as a secondary group, but after a while it may become a primary group, or smaller primary groups may develop within it. All large groups, however, are secondary groups. These groups, which are often called "associations," include organizations such as business corporations, large factories, government departments, political parties, and religious movements. Large secondary groups always contain smaller primary groups within them. Colleges and army camps, for example, are secondary groups, but they may contain hundreds of primary groups.

In traditional, preindustrial societies almost all social life took place in the context of primary groups, such as the kinship network or the small village. In modern industrialized societies, dense urban populations and the spread of large associations have made social life much more anonymous. Many of our daily interactions involve secondary relationships with people we encounter in limited and specific roles and may never meet again. As we saw in Chapter 4 ("Society"), the growth of secondary groups and the multiplication of secondary relationships is one of the outstanding features of modern societies.

Small Groups

A *small group* is one that contains few enough members for the participants to relate to one another as individuals. Whether a small group is pri-

mary or secondary depends on the nature of the relationships among its members. A gathering of old friends is a primary group; a number of previously unacquainted people trapped in an elevator for half an hour is a small secondary group.

Over half a century ago the German sociologist Georg Simmel suggested that the interaction within small groups would prove to be an important subject for sociological research. His suggestion was largely neglected until after World War II, when Robert Bales and his associates began an influential series of studies of small-group processes (Bales, 1950, 1970; Homans, 1950; Hare et al., 1965; Hollander, 1964; T. Mills, 1967). Most of these studies took place in a laboratory setting, in which groups of volunteers were given some task to work on while researchers observed the interaction that took place. Although there is some question whether it is valid to apply the findings of these studies to "real life" situations, this research has illuminated many aspects of small-group interaction (Hare, 1976; McGrath 1978; Shaw, 1981).

The Effects of Size

The single most important feature of small groups is probably their size, for this characteristic determines the kinds of interaction that can take place among the members. The smaller the group is, the more personal and intense the interaction can become.

The smallest possible group is a *dyad*, a group containing two people. A dyad differs from all

other groups in that its members have to take account of each other. If one member ignores the conversation of the other or begins daydreaming, the interaction is disrupted, and if one member withdraws from the group, it simply ceases to exist. If another member is added, forming a *triad*, a group containing three people, the situation alters significantly. Any one member can ignore the conversation of the others without destroying the interaction in the group. Two members can form a coalition against one, so any individual can become subject to group pressure. As more members are added, the nature of the interaction continues to change. People can take sides in discussions, and more than one coalition can be formed. In a group of up to about seven people, all the members can take part in the same conversation, but beyond that point it becomes progressively more likely that smaller groups will form, with several conversations taking place at the same time.

If the group becomes larger than about ten or twelve people, it is virtually impossible for them to take part in the same conversation unless one member takes the role of leader and regulates the interaction so that everyone has a chance to contribute. In groups of this size, the style of conversation changes because people can no longer tailor their speech to meet the expectations of specific people. As a result, their language becomes more formal: members no longer "talk" to the group; they "address" it, with a grammar and vocabulary unlike that used in ordinary conversation. The interaction is now markedly different from that in our original dyad.

Sudden changes in group size tend to be disruptive, particularly if there is a rapid increase in the number of new members. This disruption is partly caused by the fact that interaction grows more difficult as the group becomes larger, but another factor is that members often resist the assimilation of newcomers. The presence of new members threatens the norms of interaction that the group has already developed, and old members are uncomfortable until new norms have evolved.

Leadership

One element is always present in groups: leadership. A *leader* is someone who, largely by virtue of certain personality characteristics, is consistently able to influence the behavior of others. Groups have leaders even if the leaders do not hold formal

positions of authority (and even if the group is determined *not* to have a leader).

Research has indicated that there are two distinct types of leadership in small groups (Bales, 1953; Slater, 1955). *Instrumental leadership* is the kind necessary to organize a group in pursuit of its goals. An instrumental leader proposes courses of action and influences the members to follow them. *Expressive leadership* is the kind necessary to create harmony and solidarity among group members. An expressive leader is concerned about keeping morale high and minimizing conflicts. The expressive leader is well liked by the group. When a newly formed group is asked to choose a leader, it usually gives both roles to the same person, because individuals who are well liked also tend to dominate group activities. Leaders generally do not fill both roles for long, however, because people who direct group activities tend to lose popularity. In one experiment on small groups, Philip Slater (1955) found that most members gave top rating to the same person for both expressive and instrumental leadership at the first meeting, but by the end of the fourth meeting, only 8 percent of the members still considered the leader likable. In such cases, the original leader may retain the instrumental role, but another group member emerges to assume the expressive role.

Do leaders have distinctive characteristics that are not shared by their followers? While there are certainly no hard and fast rules, it seems that leaders are likely to be taller than the average group member, to be judged better-looking than other members, to have a higher IQ, and to be more sociable, talkative, determined, and self-confident. In addition, leaders also tend to be more liberal in outlook, even in conservative groups (Stouffer, 1955; Stogdill, 1974; Crosbie, 1975). But personality characteristics alone cannot tell us who is likely to be a good leader, because different conditions require different leadership qualities. The kind of leadership required in a military battle or the aftermath of an earthquake may call for different qualities, and different people, than the kind of leadership required at a corporation board meeting or a political convention.

Style of leadership may be one of three basic kinds: *authoritarian*, in which the leader simply gives orders; *democratic*, in which the leader attempts to win a consensus on a course of action; and *laissez-faire*, in which the leader is easygoing and makes little attempt to direct or organize the group. In the United States, at least, the leaders