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Metaphysical Nature of Social Groups

The Significance of Abstract and Concrete for Identity and Persistence of Social Groups (The Complex Interplay between Abstract and Concrete)

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Abstract
In this paper, we consider the relative significance of concrete and abstract features for the identity and persistence of a group. The theoretical background for our analysis is the position according to which groups are realizations of structures. Our main argument is that the relative significance of the abstract features (structural organization of the group) with respect to the significance of concrete features (the group's members) can vary across different types of groups. The argumentation will be backed by introducing the examples in which we show that this difference in significance can affect the identity and persistence of the group.

Keywords
Social groups, structuralism, metaphysics of groups, abstract features, concrete features.

1 Introduction

Social groups are common in our lives and can play significant roles in them. For instance, awareness of belonging to a social group can significantly affect somebody's identity. Social groups are also very important for the functioning of human society and can be seen as

a kind of invention, akin to artifacts and technological innovations, that in many respects determine the character of contemporary society (Epstein 2019: 4899–900). If we try to imagine the economy, science, judicial system, or government without any kinds of social groups, we will quickly realize how important they are in organizing our lives. There is an astonishing diversity of social groups, such as: genders, races, committees, sports clubs, music groups, symphony orchestras, research teams, political parties, people with average incomes, groups on social networks, et cetera.

The great diversity, widespread presence, and indisputable significance of social groups in our lives, combined with the fact that no significant philosophical attention has been dedicated to social groups until recently (Uzquiano 2004, Effingham 2010, Ritchie 2015, Moltchanova 2019, Thomasson 2019), can represent a strong motive for a philosophical analysis. An additional impetus for philosophical analysis may also be that some philosophical problems formulated in a different context may also re-emerge in the context of social group analysis such as the problem of the persistence and identity of objects over time (for example see Faller 2021). Also, certain philosophical concepts, significant and developed in other contexts such as sets or fusions' figure in the debate about social groups.[1] This means that this debate may have a broader philosophical significance than it seems at first glance. Perhaps some solutions, as well as conceptual refinements and clarifications developed in this context, can be applied to other contexts.

Our methodological strategy is as follows. We have chosen the social group theory proposed by Ritchie (2013) as the starting point for the analysis. According to this theory, groups are realizations of

[1] Fusionism holds that a group is a fusion, or in other words, a whole which comes to existence when its members fuse. In other words: "*x* is a fusion at a time, *t*, of a class, S, *iff* (1) every member of *S* is a part of *x* at *t*, and (2) every part of *x* at *t* overlaps-at-*t* some member of *S*." (Sider 2001: 58) This view considers parthood of members of a particular group to be crucial for the definition of a group. Fusionism is defended by Theodore Sider, who thinks that fusion's identity relies on the mutual relation between the fusion and its parts. It should be noted that Sider introduces parthood as part of his temporal mereology, but since there is speculation that all physical objects could be seen as a group of events (Sider 2001: 75), this might qualify as a position in the field of group metaphysics.

structures. We consider that Ritchie has identified a necessary condition for the aggregate of people to be considered a group, and that is a certain structure that these people together realize. Although we start from the assumption that owning a realized structure is necessary for the existence of a group, we will reconsider whether this position is sufficient to incorporate all the significant factors for the identity and persistence of groups. Against this theoretical background, we will consider the problem of the significance of the concrete and the abstract in social groups with respect to the identity and persistence of groups. We will point out certain shortcomings of the structuralist view of groups. We will begin with section 2, where we will offer an overview of the different philosophical positions when it comes to the interpretation of social groups. The structuralist position, which we think comes the closest to properly describing social groups, will be presented in section 3 along with the dilemmas that arise from it. The potential significance of concrete members will be the main preoccupation in section 4, while in section 5 we will deal with the importance of structure and the problem of its flexibility. Section 6 will be reserved for classifying the types of groups with respect to the changeability of the abstract and concrete elements in it and for the further elaboration of the factors that influence the identity of groups. In the concluding section, we will summarize our main points and give some suggestions for further research.

2 The philosophical analysis of social groups

There have been different attempts in the philosophical literature to offer a universal theory of groups that answers the question 'what are groups?' or, more precisely, 'what kind of entities are groups?'.[2]

[2] In addition to trying to offer a universal theory of groups that would encompass all existing types of groups, there are approaches that attempt to build a theoretical framework for groups without offering a single theory that they claim is universally applicable. One such approach is presented in Epstein (2019) who offered analytical means for determining the metaphysical nature of groups (so-called profiles), without proposing a single universal definition for all groups. We have chosen the first approach. Although there is a real chance that it is not possible to arrive at a single universal theory of groups, we believe that universal theories are the best starting point for analysis.

In order to answer these questions, different theoretical approaches can be used. Groups can be viewed as non-singular pluralities[3], fusions, aggregates[4], sets, *sui generis* entities, or realizations of structures. The question to which much attention has been paid in trying to figure out the nature of groups is whether groups can be reduced to some ontologically more primitive entities. With regard to this issue, we can distinguish two general points of view: group non-reductionism and group reductionism. Group non-reductionism implies that groups cannot be reduced to other ontological categories, while reductionism implies that groups should be identified with some ontologically more basic entities such as sets/fusions/aggregates of their members or with all of their members taken together.

In this research, we will not engage in the controversy between non-reductionism and reductionism for we believe that compelling arguments against reductionism have already been made (e.g. Uzquiano 2004, Ritchie 2013). We intend to tackle the question of what constitutes the metaphysical nature of groups, which has been left completely unresolved in the debate over reductionism and non-reductionism. As Nikk Effingham notes, setism, the theory he proposes, as well as rival approaches such as *sui generis* theory or fusionism, do not answer the question of what determines the properties of groups and thus leave the metaphysical structure of the groups completely unexplained. (Effingham 2010: 260–1) Accordingly, the question of the metaphysical nature and structure of the group would remain whether we accept some kind of reductionism or Uzquiano's *sui generis* theory.[5] If we accept that groups are sets, fusions, or ag-

[3] The view that groups are non-singular pluralities sees groups as nothing more than group-wise arranged individuals, which means that a group is, essentially, individuals that make the group when taken together.

[4] Theory of aggregates tells us that groups are aggregates. We can say that something is an aggregate *if and only if* their member-components (which are determined by plural constructions) are not identical to each other and two aggregates should be considered identical *if and only if* they have the same member-components.

[5] The theory proposed by Uzquaino (2004) opposes reductionism and claims that groups are *sui generis* entities that cannot be identified with any already known metaphysical category. Uzquiano's main focus is to argue against reductionism, but we do not receive additional information about the groups themselves except

gregates, we still have to answer the question of what distinguishes a group from other sets, fusions, or aggregates which are not groups, and if we accept that groups are *sui generis*, we still have to answer the question of what defines the metaphysical character of a group.

One proposal that tries to answer what constitutes the metaphysical nature of groups is the theory developed by Katherine Ritchie (2013, 2015, 2020). According to Ritchie, groups are realizations of a group structure, with structures being understood as "complexes/networks of relations that make available nodes/positions that might place additional requirements on their occupiers" (Ritchie 2020: 5). The structure is realized in the event that all the nodes or positions specified by it are occupied. Thus the identity of groups is not determined only by the set or aggregate of its members but by the particular positions members occupy and the relations between these positions. We should note that Ritchie (2015) differentiates between two types of groups: organized social groups such as courts, committees, and teams, and unorganized social groups like Blacks, women, and lesbians. The organized social groups are characterized by their organizational structure while unorganized groups are characterized by the apparently shared features of all members. In addition, organized groups, unlike unorganized groups, have collective intentionality which allows functional integration and cooperation. Also, membership in organized groups is on a voluntary basis. The understanding of a group as the realization of a group structure applies only to organized groups. In this research, we will consider only organized social groups that have a clearly defined structure because we intend to analyze the relationship between the structural and concrete properties of groups.

3 The structural account of groups and related dilemmas

Our opinion is that the proper understanding of the group's structure is an important and unavoidable aspect of the analysis of the group and its essence. As already mentioned, Katherine Ritchie was the first author to point out the importance of structural organiza-

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that they cannot be identified with sets, fusions, or aggregates and that the groups should be treated as a basic and irreducible ontological category.

tion for understanding groups and offer a positive thesis about the nature of groups' structures. With this in mind, we will explain her position in more detail with a special focus on additional dilemmas and questions that arise if we take it as a starting point.

Her main point can be summed up in the thesis that groups are realizations of a group structure. In order for a group's structure to be realized, its nodes (which Ritchie also calls 'places') need to be occupied by concrete members. The nodes or places are defined through all of their functional relations with other nodes in the group. These functional relations that connect nodes are called edges.[6] The structure of a group is a network formed by all the nodes and the edges that connect them. Take, for example, a team in a 4×100 metres relay race in athletics. We can see that the node 'sprinter number 1' is functionally related to the node 'sprinter number 2' by the *giving-the-relay-baton-to* relation. On the other hand, 'sprinter number 2' is functionally related to the node 'sprinter number 1' by the *receiving-the-relay-baton-from* relation. The node 'sprinter number 2' is functionally related to the node 'sprinter number 3' by the *giving-the-relay-baton-to* relation, and 'sprinter number 3' is related to 'sprinter number 2' by the *receiving-the-relay-baton-from* relation. Following this structural organization, 'sprinter number 3' is related to 'sprinter number 4' by *giving-the-relay-baton-to* relation, and 'sprinter number 4' is related to 'sprinter number 3' by *receiving-the-relay-baton-from* relation. But, due to the group's structure, the node 'sprinter number 4' lacks the *giving-the-relay-baton-to* relation, in a similar manner that 'sprinter number 1' lacks the *receiving-the-relay-baton-from* relation.

[6] There are three possible ways of seeing a group as a structural realisation in accordance with different relations between different nodes in different types of groups (Ritchie 2013: 269). The connections between nodes can rely on more or less stronger (heavy) edges, with cases where the relation between nodes is firmer should be considered as heavily weighted edges, while looser and more flexible relations should be viewed as lightly weighted edges. Another view is that there is no difference in the strength of edges, but only nodes and edges and different kinds of relations between nodes. According to this view, groups could be seen as a realisation of a class of structures where all structures are similar but slightly different. The third position is that the reference of a term 'group' is vague, but that all groups are realisations of a structure with nodes and edges, albeit structures could be different with respect to kinds of relations between the nodes.

The node is considered to be occupied when some particular position, which is defined by some functional role in the group, is captured by one person. Nodes could be various things, from positions in sports (shooting guard in basketball, goalkeeper in association football) to roles in musical bands (singer, guitarist, keyboardist, drummer). For example, if we have a musical group, we consider that a person who plays the guitar is a member of the band which occupies the node 'guitarist'. We should mention that one member can occupy more than one node in the same group. This means that one member could simultaneously occupy multiple nodes, such as 'guitarist' and 'singer', in the case that they are both a singer and a guitarist in a musical band. Also, there can be more than one position defined by the same role—for example, if we have two or more solo guitars in a musical band or a goalkeeper and their substitute in a football team.

Functional relations in a particular group could be hierarchical or non-hierarchical. For example, some battalions in a particular army hold functional relations that are hierarchical. So, the node labeled 'Captain' is hierarchically lower with respect to the node labeled 'Major', just as both 'Captain' and 'Major' are hierarchically lower than the node labeled 'Lieutenant Colonel'. However, if we take the example of a musical group, the relations between the nodes defined by the different instruments that members play are not hierarchical—the guitarist is not hierarchically superior to the keyboardist and *vice versa*.

Ritchie postulates that there are certain features that groups share; she sees these features as criteria that need to be satisfied in order for something to be called a group. The first criterion she emphasizes is *Members–Times*, which tells us that the group can vary members over time without its identity being endangered. Just as this criterion tells us about the condition that a certain group can have different members at different times, the second criterion, known as *Members–Worlds*, tells us that a group can have different members in different possible worlds. *Existence–Times* tells us that a group does not have to exist at all times, which allows for a certain group to come into existence and cease to exist at any given time. Similarly, *Existence–Worlds* postulates that, if a particular group exists in one given world, it does not have to exist in all worlds. The fifth condition, which

Ritchie calls *Space*, implies that groups can have spatial extensions, which means that they can be located in space. The final criterion called *Coincidence* observes that groups that share the same extensions can be different from one another, in the sense that we can have two non-identical groups realized by the same members. Ritchie points out that the rival positions regarding the nature of groups cannot meet all the specified criteria while her position can.

According to Ritchie's view, groups are concrete objects with a certain structure. Groups start to exist when the group's structure is realized—that is, when each node has an occupant. This means that, in the event that we have designed the structure of the group but do not yet have members who will implement it, we cannot consider the group to exist. On the other hand, if we have gathered a bunch of people who do not realize any structure, we cannot consider that we have formed a group. Since the realization of a structure is something that is a necessary condition for a group to exist, it is not hard to notice that groups, in addition to their needed concrete instances, also manifest abstract features. The abstract features of the group rest on its structure: nodes and edges that are realized by concrete persons but are not themselves concrete. So, groups are concrete objects with abstract properties. Both concrete members (who will realize the structure) and an abstract structure are individually necessary but not sufficient for the existence of the group. Only when we have both the structure and the specific members who implement it will a sufficient condition for the existence of the group be met.

This position seems to imply that the abstract structure is much more important for the identity of a group and thus for the conditions of the group's persistence than the specific members. It states that groups can change members over time or have different members in some other possible world while still retaining their identity. The first dilemma is whether there can be a group that has some members that are necessary for the identity and persistence of the group in all times and all possible worlds: the *Dilemma of the importance of the concrete*. Another dilemma related to the significance of abstract features for the identity of the group would be whether and to what extent the structure of a group is flexible: the *Dilemma of the structure flexibility*. This dilemma can generate various questions from whether it is possible to add, subtract, or functionally redefine

at least one node in a group's structure while retaining the group's identity to the question of whether it is possible to imagine groups that have a completely flexible and changeable structure and base their identity on specific members.

In the remainder of this paper, we will try to tackle the dilemmas we formulated. The consideration of these dilemmas aims to answer the question of whether the proposed conception of a group as the realization of the group's structure is sufficient to reflect all the relevant metaphysical features of groups and, in case it is not, to identify additional factors relevant to understanding the nature of groups.

4 Dilemma of the importance of the concrete

In this section, we will consider the claim that all groups have changeable members and that the changeability of members is one of the defining properties of a group. Since this is a universal claim, the easiest way to show that it is not true is to find a counterexample. We will present an example we believe shows that the concrete occupant of the node can be necessary for the group's identity and persistence. The fact that groups can have irreplaceable members has already been pointed out by Brian Epstein in the context of Ritchie's critique:[7]

> Some types of groups, for instance, have their members essentially. Such groups do not persist through changes of members. Such a group may be organized, with roles, structures, and the rest—but there are no substitutions. For kinds of groups like these, a minimal criterion of identity is much weaker: two groups of this kind that have different members at any time or world are different groups. (Epstein 2019: 4904)

To elaborate on the significance of this point for the structuralist account of groups, we will further consider it using an example. Imagine a group that we will call *Jimmy Jones and his daughters,*[8] where Jimmy Jones is the father of Jane, Linda, and Susan, and all of them are members of the given group. Jimmy occupies an important node

[7] We thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing our attention to this point.

[8] Thanks to the anonymous reviewer for suggesting us this example.

in the group, and if he, in the unfortunate case of his death, is no longer a part of the group, he cannot be replaced and the group will cease to exist. So the significance of Jimmy Jones as a member is not identical to the significance of Jane, Linda, and Susan for the group's persistence. This means that this particular group must include Jimmy Jones in all of the times and worlds in which it exists. If we suppose that the group *Jimmy Jones and his daughters* includes all of the mentioned members at a time t_1 and Linda is (by death) no longer a part of the group at t_2, the group would still be seen as *Jimmy Jones and his daughters*. The same holds for the case in which a new member called Julie (by birth) joins the group at t_3. However, if Jimmy Jones were to leave the group (by death) at t_4, the group would no longer exist, since the condition that the particular node needs to be occupied by the concrete occupant (Jimmy Jones) is no longer fulfilled. *Jimmy Jones and his daughters* no longer exists as a group, even though Jane, Susan, and Julie never left their nodes. In this case, Jimmy Jones was the necessary occupant of the node, and Jane, Linda, Susan, and Julie were contingent occupants of the group's structural nodes. The same applies to possible worlds, so if Jimmy is a member of the group in w_1, he has to be its member in w_2 and w_3 as well as in any given w_n. This means that if Jimmy is not the member of *Jimmy Jones and his daughters* in w_4, the group is no longer *Jimmy Jones and his daughters*, but some other group (perhaps *Jimmy Jones' daughters*), since Jimmy was the necessary concrete member of the group. The structure of the group does not have to be dramatically altered for the group to cease to exist if it depends on a concrete occupant, like in this case. Consequently, we can argue that this particular group does not fulfill two of Ritchie's criteria for something to be considered a group (*Members–Times* and *Members–Worlds*), and yet it could be considered as a legitimate group.

Perhaps someone could argue that Jimmy Jones and his daughters are not a group at all—that is, that the daughters may represent a group, and that Jimmy Jones just holds a relation to them as their father. However, in the opinion of the authors, such an objection is counterintuitive since it is clear that the relations "to be the father of", as well as the relations "to be the daughter of Jimmy Jones", can provide minimal structural properties to this group, which allows us to consider it as an integrated whole. Provided that we accept the

above example as an example of a genuine group, we must accept that it is not true that all groups can change all of their members across time and possible worlds. We have constructed an example where only one member is necessary, as this was enough to emphasize the point, but of course, it is possible to imagine examples where some larger number or perhaps all members are necessary.

An additional feature of our group is that it is a group of an informal type. This means that it is not a part of a broader organization or structure, tied to any institution, in which case it would be a group of a formal type. Formal groups are usually subjected to certain rules that the organization/structure to which they belong or the institution with which they are affiliated prescribes in advance, which implies that their members, in general, have a lower degree of freedom in determining the important features of the group. In our example, Jimmy's irreplaceability is guaranteed by his biological/sociological role as a father. In other examples of informal groups, we could find an irreplaceable member who, due to the consensus of the group, is assigned an irreplaceable role. To see that such examples are not uncommon, nor are they related only to informal groups, it is important to point out that examples of irreplaceable members could be found also in formal groups.

Some countries, such as the United Kingdom, define their governments in accordance with their prime ministers. So, the current government (ministry) in the UK is known as the *Second Johnson Ministry*. The significance that Boris Johnson, or any other particular prime minister, has for the UK governments (every ministry is a different group) is reflected in the fact that he is irreplaceable for that particular ministry (hence the naming of the governments). This means that the particular node (head of the *Second Johnson Ministry*) needs to be occupied by the concrete occupant (Boris Johnson) in order for this type of group to persist. So, if the person that occupies that node is no longer prime minister, a new government will be formed—that is, their government will cease to exist, just like the *Second May Ministry*, headed by Theresa May, ceased to exist when she resigned, and Johnson became the head of the newly formed group known as *First Johnson Ministry*. Since the node of the prime minister and the person occupying that node is the only irreplaceable aspect, the group can persist even with major changes in its membership.

Thus, the *Second Johnson Ministry* persists until this day, although a large number of government members left the ministry after the 2020 British cabinet reshuffle in the aftermath of Brexit.

Now, we will sum up what we can learn from the presented examples:

(1) We have learned that groups can have irreplaceable members and that the replaceability of membership is not a universal characteristic of groups. This means that it is not possible for all groups to change their members across possible worlds and different times and still retain their identity. There exist groups that have a member or members as their constitutive and irreplaceable part or parts.

(2) There is no difference between formal and informal groups concerning the feature of the irreplaceability of members. This means that the irreplaceability of members is not a feature restricted to certain types of groups. It is clear that the formality/informality of a group does not play a key role in determining whether a group should have this feature.

(3) Features that cannot be described as structural could be defining for some groups. We should note that the feature of having an irreplaceable member is not a part of the structural organization of a group. This feature requires that one part of a structural organization—i.e., a specific node or nodes—must be occupied by some particular person or persons; it concerns the structure in a certain respect, but it is not structural itself.

5 Dilemma of the structure flexibility

Let us now consider another example where Earl, Kevin, and John want to form a music group of a somewhat unusual type—let's just call it *Earl, Kevin, and John*. A mutual agreement is made which says that all of them are necessary members of the band and that if any of the members leave or someone else joins the band it would no longer be the same band. Since they do not want any of the group's members to have a crucial role in the band, they agree that their band should not only be without a frontman but that none of them should

have a fixed role in the group. Since every one of them is good at playing all of the instruments that are needed for the music group, the agreement which they make is that, before every rehearsal, using some random methodology (for example, drawing a paper with an instrument name on it from a hat), they will decide which instrument each one of them will play during that rehearsal. Also, because every one of them is multitalented as a musician, they can play more than one instrument; in fact, they can play more than three instruments. Because of that, they decide that the instruments that are played during the rehearsals should be different from one rehearsal to the next one. So, this means that Earl can play the guitar at one rehearsal and drums at the other, and John can play keyboards at one rehearsal and bass guitar at the other and so on, as well as that some rehearsals would feature members playing instruments like guitars, keyboards and drums, and the others might feature instruments like harmonica, saxophone, and violin or a mixture of the given instruments in any given arrangement.

In the given example, the group is one in which there is not a single fixed abstract feature, except that it is a music band. The important thing to note is that the nodes are changeable and, because of this, the very structure of the group varies from rehearsal to rehearsal. On the other hand, the role of concrete objects that occupy the changing nodes is crucial for the group, since the group members agreed that they will be the only members of the group and that if any member left the group, the group would no longer exist. One might argue that the changing nodes, as well as the shifting occupants, imply that we are not talking about the same group from rehearsal to rehearsal.

According to the understanding of groups as realizations of the structures, as offered by Ritchie, the example we have given should, most naturally, suggest that every time the group is structurally reorganized—i.e., when it changes the structure—we are dealing with a new group. We believe that Ritchie is obliged to either accept that, in examples like this, we deal with a different group every time the structure changes (which is counterintuitive) or, if she accepts that it is the same group, she must acknowledge that the analysis she offered is insufficient to explain the identity of the group. If, like Ritchie, we define a group as the realization of a structure and insist

that specific members are changeable, it is clear that the bearer of the identity of the group is a structure. The thesis that specific members can change over time and across possible worlds is a significant part of her position. However, if the structure also changes, then what is the identity of the group based on? Ritchie explicitly states that a group can survive structural changes, but does not explain what exactly secures the group's identity through that change. Although a bit unusual, we consider *Earl, Kevin and John* as a genuine group, which could persist through the multiple structural changes, since the constitutive idea of this group was that it should be a music group that has Earl, Kevin, and John as its members with no fixed roles in the band and this idea is not affected by changing the nodes and shifting the occupants. If we were to accept this example as an example of a genuine group, then it represents a challenge for Ritchie's position.

Even though both *Jimmy Jones and his daughters* and the *Earl, Kevin and John* emphasize the importance of the concrete members of a group and also provide counterexamples for *Members–Times* and *Members–Worlds*, only the second example shows that a structure of a group can vary in the sense that it could be loosely defined. This is exemplified by the fact that Earl, Kevin, and John can create many (but, of course, a finite number of) structures on the basis of which their group can be realized (while still retaining the same identity as a group). This kind of group does not have a fixed structure, because the nodes, as well as relations between them, vary from rehearsal to rehearsal. Therefore, the role of abstract features—i.e., a particular structure—in this group is minimalized.

The examples of groups with changing structures do not have to be as extraordinary as the one above. The idea was just to show that, sometimes, there can even be a situation in which a group's structure is changeable in a somewhat radical sense. Having said this, we can easily find a case of a group with a gradually changing structure. One simple case would be a committee that changes the positions (nodes) that exist within it. Take, for example, a Business Development Committee of a certain company that, in addition to general members, has three positions, which are chair, vice-chair, and secretary. All of the mentioned positions are meant to be held for two years and only for one term. The decisions, even the ones concerning the structural organization of the committee itself, are made by a

majority vote. Now, let us assume that, with time, after a couple of terms have passed and different people have held different positions, the committee decides that it does not need a vice-chair. It is certain that we would still consider this committee as the same committee, even though it does not have a vice-chair. The same applies to the position of the secretary of the group, which the members of the committee also decided to abolish. This means that the committee persists even when some of the nodes that constitute its structure are subtracted. Imagine now that the members decide that they need a new position in the committee, such as a lawyer, an accountant, or a spokesman, in order for the committee to function properly, so additional nodes are added to the structure. This newly structured committee could decide that the function of the chair is no longer needed and abolish the position of a chairman. We introduced the scenario of a gradual change of a committee's structure, but we could also imagine that the committee decides to suddenly redefine its organization and make radical changes to the structure. They could, in only one session, abolish all of the existing positions and introduce completely new ones. In both sudden and gradual cases, the changing of the positions (nodes) within this group means that the structure of the group changes while the group retains its identity. The same applies to the members (nodes' occupants) since their change also does not affect the group. The case with the committee members tells us that nodes, as abstract elements, are just as changeable in certain groups as their concrete elements are. We consider that these examples—maybe a bit less radical with respect to *Earl, Kevin, and John*—endanger Ritchie's position, for it is not clear what can provide the criteria for the stability of a group's identity across time and possible worlds.

Let us now offer some insights regarding the above examples:

(1) The structure of a group can in some cases be flexible. The flexibility of a structure itself can have various forms. In the examples above, we mentioned the possibility of the perpetual redefining (*Earl, Kevin, and John*), as well as gradual and sudden changes (*committee*), of a group's structure. One important thing to note at this point is that different kinds of groups can endure quite different changes in a structure and remain the same group.

(2) The groups with a changeable structure may or may not have irreplaceable members. The matter of the irreplaceability of members is, in principle, independent from the matter of the structure's changeability. In the example of *Earl, Kevin, and John,* the identity of the group is based on specific members, while the structure is subjected to constant redefining. The idea behind this example is not to claim that there must be a trade-off between the importance of individual members and the importance of structure for the identity of a group, but only to show one possible way to organize the group with respect to the changeability of members and structure. This example shows that, in some cases, the identity of a group with a variable structure can be based on specific members, but this is not necessarily the case as we can see in the *committee* example, where we have a committee that allows both the structure and members to change.

(3) The changeability of a structure is not reserved only for informal types of groups. The examples we constructed feature both informal (*Earl, Kevin, and John*) and formal (*committee*) groups with changing structures. It is generally expected that formal groups have a more rigid structural organization than informal ones, which may be true, but there is no necessary connection between formality/informality and flexibility. Clearly, it is possible to imagine an informal group that is structurally very rigid as well as a formal group that has a higher level of flexibility than its informal counterparts. The range of flexibility is not dictated by the formal/informal categorization of a group.

6 The changing significance of the abstract and concrete in social groups

In the two previous sections, we saw that the specific individuals occupying a node can in some cases have essential significance for the group's identity. Also, the structure itself could be susceptible to changes without affecting the group's essence. When we say that a property is essential for a group, it means that it cannot be changed, and in the event that it changes, we would conclude that the group would cease to exist. In order to understand the nature of a par-

ticular group—that is, what its essential properties are—we in fact need to understand what changes that group can or cannot endure. The conditions of the persistence of a group are directly connected to the question: what is its essence? Those conditions determine the relative significance of concrete features in comparison to the abstract features of the group. For some groups, the structure is more important than its members, and for some, the members are more important than the structure. This varies from group to group. The types of groups, regarding the difference in importance of abstract and concrete features for the persistence of the group, are:

G1 in which (some of) the nodes are essential and there are no essential members;

G2 in which (some of) the members are essential and there are no essential nodes;

G3 in which both (some of) the nodes and (some of) the members are essential; and

G4 in which there are no essential nodes nor members.

One of the most important things we want to underline is that different groups can endure different changes and still keep their identity. We concede that the identity of a group, in the given time t_1 and world w_1, is determined by both its concrete and abstract properties, and the thing that makes up the group is the combination of structure and the concrete members that realize that structure. But this provides only a static picture of the group's arrangement without any insight into the changeability of the group's properties. If we observe a given group g_1 in a specific time instance t_1 in a world w_1, it can have structure s_1 and a particular set of members M_1, but, if the group is observed in a different time instance—t_n in a world w_1 or some different world w_n—it could have some other structure s_n, as well as a different set of members M_n. The above-specified types (*G1–4*) should capture the changes that different groups can endure. This dynamic perspective, which shows that groups are changeable, raises the additional question of what determines the type of group (*G1–4*), i.e., what changes are allowed in it. It is clear that the structure

does not determine what changes are allowed, because the structure itself is changeable, just like the members. We believe that our analysis indicates that the definition of a group as a realization of the structure is insufficient to reflect all the significant factors that may affect the identity of the group.

It is possible that the answer to the question of what determines the type of group is not unambiguous, considering that there is a great diversity of both formal and informal groups with evidently different organizations.[9] However, given the examples we have considered, one potentially significant factor stands out, which can determine the type of group together with its essential and unchangeable properties. That factor is the consensus of the founders, members, or, in general, the people who decide on the organization of a certain group. There is a difference in the way consensus affects both the formation and changeability of a group, depending on whether the group is formal or informal. The effect of consensus on the group's organization and change seems to be more direct and, therefore, much more visible in informal groups than in formal ones.

In informal groups, organizational rules are established and could be changed due to consensus among the group members themselves. Since there is no higher structure to which the group is attached, the members of such groups make their own decisions about organizational issues. Such is the case with the group from the *Earl, Kevin, and John* example where the members established the group's organizational rules and could at any moment decide to change the decision regarding the admission of new members. The problem for informal groups arises when there is a lack of consensus—when members cannot agree on the organizational rules which they want to implement, and if the consensus is not reached, this could even lead to the disintegration of such groups. In the absence of consensus, the group may either break up if no general agreement can be reached, or certain members may choose to simply leave the group if their opinion differs from that of the rest of the group.[10]

[9] When we talk about an organization or organizational rules of a group, we refer to the structure and potential irreplaceability of certain members of the group, i.e. all the features that significantly affect the identity of the group.

[10] The question of how important the consensus really is and whether indi-

On the other hand, formal groups depend on higher structures, which usually limit the scope of the group's changeability. Higher structures, to which formal groups are attached usually are: (1) certain institutions, which form a group for a specific purpose, such as governments, companies, and universities; (2) higher-order (with respect to the group) associations which include and/or regulate different groups, such as sports leagues and professional associations. So in the *committee* case, it is not impossible to imagine that some higher structure, such as the company's administration, decides to make changes within the committee, regardless of members' consensus. In the example of the committee, as we devised it, the members of the committee could themselves decide on the organization by voting. However, it is easy to imagine an example of a committee in which its members would not be given the freedom to decide on the organizational characteristics of the committee itself, but such decisions would be dealt with exclusively by the company that founded it. The role of consensus in the formation and change of formal groups is related to higher structures that decide the fate of these groups. The initial consensus that led to the formation of higher structures set the rules by which groups subordinate to them were formed. Only by a consensual change in higher structures can the groups subordinate to them change organizationally.

One of the factors that also limits the organization of a group is the function or goal for which a group is founded. It is clear that the organization of a group itself must be adapted to the function a group is founded for. The structure must be subordinated to the goal behind the establishment of a group. The selection of group members

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vidual members leaving the group affects its identity could be very relevant for the group's persistence. That is, whether the consensus can be considered important enough that its violation by one member can lead to the cessation of the group's existence. It seems that consensus of all members can indeed sometimes be a decisive factor. Although it is the case for most groups that they can and do continue to exist without a certain person as its member, it appears there are exceptions resulting from a breach of the original consensus between the members of a group. For example, breaking consensus in groups like *Earl, Kevin, and John* does result in the cessation of the group's existence, since all three members are essential for the group and the identity of the group hinges on their mutual agreement that they are the only and necessary members of the group. If one of them leaves the group, it could be redefined, but it would no longer be the same group.

must be subordinate to the functional nodes required in the group. So, for example, a music group cannot be founded without musicians, i.e., without nodes that are defined by musical roles, nor can a group such as a committee have a 'lawyer' as its node if none of its members has a law degree.

7 Conclusion

In this research, we aimed to critically examine the view that groups can be understood as realizations of structure. We found that this view is not sufficient to reflect all relevant factors influencing the identity, persistence and changeability of groups. Our analysis suggests that a dynamic aspect needs to be taken into account when considering groups. When it comes to the immutability of the defining aspects (structure and concrete members), we have found that there are four different types of groups. We also drew attention to the need to consider the question of what determines a type of group —i.e., what are its immutable properties? During the research, we singled out two factors that affect the type of group: the consensus of the relevant persons and the function for which the group was founded. However, we are aware that there are probably additional factors that should be identified in future research, as well as that it is necessary to further elaborate and deepen the analysis of the two isolated factors. One of the important points of this research that we want to underline is the fact that there is a great diversity among groups in terms of the flexibility of their structural and concrete aspects. We hope that we managed to draw attention to the importance of the changing significance of abstract and concrete features for the group and that we have provided new insight into the potentials of structuralism.

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