Thinking collectively: social policy, collective action and the common good.
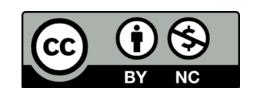
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Part 1. Collectivism

Collectivism is a set of ideas, principles and approaches that begin from the recognition of the collective aspects of social life. Where individualism views actions, decisions and policies from the perspective of independent, single actors, collectivism focuses on social groups, communities and the wider society.

In *Reclaiming Individualism*, I made a case for social and government action in order to protect and enhance the conditions of individuals.[1] The argument of that book was based on a distinctive analytical framework, outlining three discrete approaches to individualism: moral, methodological and substantive. Substantive individualism is based in the belief that all actions are the actions of individuals, and that every social or political action is taken by individual human beings. Methodological individualism reviews economic, social and political arguments as if they are based in the decisions of people one by one; the actions of groups are understood as a whole series of individual actions, added together. (This is the characteristic approach of economic theory.) The case for methodological individualism has been argued with some force, but whether it applies depends on circumstances; sometimes it works, sometimes it does not. The most compelling arguments for individualism are moral. As a moral position, individualism is built around the defence of each and every person: individuals have rights, and every person matters. There is a very strong case to emphasise the role of individualism in the protection of individual dignity, rights and the value of every human being.

In the consideration of collectivism, by contrast, the strongest arguments for a collective approach are substantive, and that is where this book begins. Substantive collectivism is the idea that we live, not as 'individuals', but as the members of social groups, like families, neighbourhoods and communities, and that many of our actions are done together with others in organisations, such as schools and businesses, and social institutions. People are what they are, and who they are, because they live and have relationships with other people. Families, households, communities, organisations and nations can all be treated as social units, which have interests, concerns and priorities that might be different from the individuals who make them up.

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[1] P Spicker, 2013, Reclaiming individualism, Bristol: Policy Press.

Methodological collectivism looks for explanations and patterns of behaviour not in the actions of individual human beings, but in the actions of groups - including classes, ethnic groups and societies taken as a whole. This is the characteristic approach of sociology; it also has an important pragmatic purpose in the development of public policy.

Moral collectivism begins from the premise that collective social groups - families, businesses, institutions, governments and countries - are moral agents; that they have rights and responsibilities, that groups as well as individuals can take moral action, and that the morality of their actions can sensibly be assessed in those terms. Collective groups bind people to each other in networks that govern their interactions with each other, mutual responsibility and social roles.

Collectivism is not a single idea, or a unified doctrine, any more than individualism is. These are perspectives, not ideologies. They lead to different interpretations of social, moral and political issues; they suggest various approaches to problems; they emphasise alternative values. They might well underpin some systems of belief, but they are not systems of belief in their own right. It makes more sense to see them as ways of thinking. This book begins from a dualist position: it is perfectly possible to be individualist in relation to some issues and collectivist about others. But collectivism is based on the perspective of groups of people, rather than individuals, and it is only from the perspective of the group that it can be adequately understood.

1. Substantive collectivism: collectivism in practice

Social behaviour

We are social animals; we live with other people. Everyone, or nearly everyone, is born into a family and soon enmeshed in a set of relationships. The vast majority of people are born into some kind of community, where people severally come repeatedly into contact with each other, have obligations and relationships to each other, recognise each other as belonging to distinct social groups, such as families, neighbourhoods or nationalities. Little or nothing about us is unaffected by other human beings - social contact is our natural state. Life is full of situations where we know there are codes, norms, rules and expectations of behaviour. The lines may get blurred at times, but the things that one does in a supermarket are not the ways that people behave in a school classroom; the way that a person behaves in a music concert is not how the very same person behaves at work. Our behaviour is 'socialised'. We may put the differences down to social behaviour, but in a sense all our behaviour is social: we do personal and private things, like sleeping, eating or dressing, in ways we have learned to do them.

The idea of the 'social' refers, in general terms, to the substantial range of norms, expectations, influences that people are subject to as part of the condition of living with and around other people. Watkins, a committed individualist, suggests that this is all subjective:

> "Whereas physical things can exist unperceived, social 'things' like laws, prices, prime ministers ... are created by personal attitudes. ... If social objects are formed by individual attitudes, an explanation of their formation must be an individualistic explanation."[2]

There is a case for saying that social phenomena are 'inter-subjective'[3] – that they are constructed from shared views and conventions, formed over time by groups of people. There is none for saying that they are 'created by personal attitudes', as if the money in your bank account or the laws about speeding will change if only you furrow your eyebrows and think about them differently. Social 'things' - societal facts - have an existence distinct from the mind-set of any individual.[4] Laws and prices are established by common convention and understanding, but they are not less meaningful for that - any more than other intangibles, like language, finance or history. Family relationships, banking, employment and education are not the product of individual imaginations; they are part of the fabric of everyday life.

Collectivism is sometimes conflated with 'holism', a view that everything we do is shaped by society.[5] For Agassi, 'collectivism or holism' is 'The doctrine that individual ends and decisions are created by social forces; thus they are constrained by social constraints and

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[2] J Watkins, 1953, Ideal types and historical explanation, in A Ryan (ed), The philosophy of social explanation, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1973.
[3] P Berger, T Luckmann, 1967, The social construction of reality, Anchor, New York.
[4] M Mandelbaum, 1955, Societal facts, British Journal of Sociology 6 305-17.
[5] J Watkins, 1957, Historical explanation in the social sciences, British Journal for the Philosophy of Science, 8(30) 104-117

subject to conformity with the good of society at large.'[6] Collectivism is much broader and looser than that, but holism is an important position in its own right. It has been described as the idea that 'macrosocial phenomena have primacy over individuals in explaining behaviour and cannot be redefined in terms of individual behaviour'.[7] Social constructs may 'supervene' on individual behaviour, shaping the circumstances in which those individuals operate; individuals have to adapt or adjust to those social circumstances.[8] Durkheim explained that language, obligations, moral rules, financial reality and so forth constrain individual choices:

> "these types of behaviour ... are endued with a compelling and coercive power by virtue of which, whether he wishes it or not, they impose themselves upon him. ... Even when in fact I can struggle free from these rules and successfully break them, it is never without being forced to fight against them. ... most of our ideas and tendencies are not developed by ourselves, but come to us from outside, they can only penetrate us by imposing themselves upon us."[9]

That does not mean - as some of the critics of this view would have it[10] - that no decision is individual, or that people have no agency or capacity to act for themselves. Pettit, for example, complains of Durkheim's holism that 'intentional agency is an illusion, at least in those areas where social-structural regularities rule.'[11] Durkheim does not say that: he says that countering social influences is difficult, which is not at all the same thing. There are two principles here, individual agency and social influence; there really should be no difficulty about accepting both of them at the same time. The philosopher Gilbert Ryle, writing about free will and determinism, argued that there was no inconsistency in holding that there are rules, even quite restrictive ones, at the same time as asserting that people have choices as to what to do with them – his examples include the game of chess, and the rules of English grammar.[12] Mathematics, too, has firm, rather inflexible rules (except, perhaps, in Australia[13]), but anyone who imagines that there is no scope in mathematics for creativity, originality or individuality hasn't grasped what's going on.[14] Society, whose rules are somewhat easier to bend or break, offers much greater scope for diversity.

Durkheim's work excited passionate opposition in its day.

> "It is true that this word 'constraint' ... is in danger of infuriating those who zealously

[6] J Agassi, 1975, Institutional Individualism, British Journal of Sociology 26(2) 144-155 p 145.

[7] R Sawyer, 2005, Social emergence, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p 48.

[8] R Sawyer, 2005 p 92

[9] E Durkheim, 1901, The Rules of Sociological Method, New York: Free Press, 1982 edition pp 51-52

[10] e.g. Agassi, 1975; J Watkins, 1953, Ideal types and historical explanation, in A Ryan (ed), The philosophy of social explanation, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1973; P Pettit, 1993, The Common Mind, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[11] Pettit, 1993, p 132.

[12] G Ryle, 1963, The Concept of Mind, Harmondsworth: Penguin, p 77.

[13] T Revell, 2017, Laws of mathematics don't apply here, says Australian PM, New Scientist, https://www.newscientist.com/article/2140747-laws-of-mathematics-dont-apply-here-says-australian-pm/, last obtained 28th September 2018

[14] G Hardy (1940) A mathematician's apology, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

uphold out-and-out individualism. Since they maintain that the individual is completely autonomous, it seems to them that he is diminished every time he is made aware that he is not dependent on himself alone."[15]

There are still individualists who argue that all social and group action must be interpreted in terms of the behaviour of individuals. The argument was forcefully made by Hayek[16] or Watkins.[17] Popper wrote that:

> "the 'behaviour' and the 'actions' of collectives, such as states or social groups, must be reduced to the behaviour and actions of human individuals ... we should never be satisfied with an explanation in terms of so-called 'collectives'."[18]

Popper's argument was more of a moral protest than an analysis of society. These writers were all working in the period shortly after a major European war, and they had strong reasons for holding people personally responsible for the outrages of that war. The circumstances of the same war, however, give the lie to the claim that everything is reducible to the level of the individual. My father and my grandparents had to escape from France, but it was France that was invaded, not my family. The countries of Europe are not just a bunch of individual human beings who happen to live in a geographical area. They are collective groups with definable legal, political and social characteristics. During my lifetime, the United Kingdom has engaged in a series of armed conflicts around the world, principally a reflection of a complex network of international agreements and alliances. A focus on individuals can do very little to explain what is happening.

Social groups

Thinking about society as a whole is not necessarily the best way to make sense of social life. A society is a collective, but it is made up of lots of smaller collectives. People live and relate to each other in groups. Groups, Brown writes,

> "are an inescapable part of human existence. Like them or not, they simply are not going to go away. People grow up in groups, sometimes called families; they work in groups, as engine crews, design teams or hunting parties; they learn in groups; they play in groups, in a multitude of team games; they make decisions in groups, whether these be government committees, village councils or courtroom juries; and of course, they also fight in groups, as street gangs, revolutionary cadres and national armies. In short, human beings are group beings."[19]

Social groups have three core characteristics. First, they have an identity - they are recognisable as a group. For many groups, even if individuals in the group change, some

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[15] Durkheim, 1901, p 52.

[16] F Hayek, 1948, Individualism and economic order, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

[17] J Watkins, 1957, Historical explanation in the social sciences, British Journal for the Philosophy of Science, 8(30) 104-117

[18] K Popper, 1945, The open society and its enemies, vol 2, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul pp 87, 91

[19] R Brown, 2000, Group processes, Oxford: Blackwell, p xv.

people leave or others join, the group will still be there. Groups can be formal or informal. We come into contact with formal groups all the time - schools, hospitals, supermarket chains, telephone companies, businesses, universities and so on. In this kind of organisation, it is relatively straightforward to recognise people in terms of their role or position in the group - an employee, an official, a teacher, and so on. The position of informal groups is less clear. Families have a clear identity: ad hoc groups of friends probably do not, and nor do people who happen to be doing similar things, like hospital patients in a waiting room, or audiences. Goffman argues that we can identify and recognise all kinds of informal collective or 'teams'.[20] We can tell the difference, he suggests, between people walking together on the street, and those who are just walking in the same direction; there are little clues, tells and elements of 'performance'.[21] These are part of everyday interaction - it is possible on the same basis to distinguish categories of individuals who are not part of a group, such as commuters and tourists. But being members of a social group implies something more than the fleeting indications that people happen to be doing something together. The main issue, Brown suggests, is that 'the participants appear to be interacting in terms of their group memberships rather than their distinctive personal characteristics'.[22] The process of interaction, exchange and mutual responsibility cements people into groups.

The second key thing to say about social groups is that people in the groups must have some kind of relationship to other group members. It is not enough to say that people have common characteristics, like gender or disability, or even a common identity - people often have many such identities. Nor is it enough to say that each member has a relationship with the group as a whole - customers, or people who donate to a charity, have that much. Identifying someone as a member of a group indicates the existence of a relationship with other members – possibly a direct personal relationship, possibly a link through a network of other relationships. The existence of a social group consists of network of relationships between people who participate in the group. People who live, work or learn together generally have that kind of connection. Saying that someone is a son or daughter, a pupil, a resident, a colleague or a citizen conveys both information about the relationship of that person to others, and usually some expectations about what people may do within the group. We can usually tell when we, or other people, are acting on behalf of an organisation - the situation is commonplace enough to hold few surprises. The same could be said of other, more informal groups - visiting a family, joining a book club, attending a church - but the position there is more ambiguous: we might talk about them as a group but relate to the group's members as individuals.

The family is a social group in these terms: families are defined by the members' relationship to each other. Family relationships take different forms in different societies: there are still societies with big, family-centred households on the Roman model, ruled by a paterfamilias, but legal structures that recognise that kind of arrangement are increasingly unusual. Nuclear families are firmly established - there is everywhere a complex structure of law around them, including arrangements for recognition of the family, obligations relating to children, rules governing divorce and succession. The relationships within families are varied and sometimes difficult to analyse; the rules governing family identification are often vague. For example, there is no obvious or consistent rule about whether or not a grandparent has any say in a family, particularly in societies where divorce has become commonplace; and it is common in many societies for children to be passed between different

[20] E Goffman, 1959, The presentation of self in everyday life, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1969.
[21] E Goffman, 1971, Relations in public, New York: Basic Books.
[22] Brown, 2000, p 9.

households or families when economic circumstances demand it.[23] The central point, for the purpose of this argument, is that we recognise the reality of family structures despite the ambiguities - a family can be engaged with, supported, asked to make decisions, and so on. People might say that someone is spending time with the family, that the family is going on holiday, that the family is having a celebration, and so on. These are not just figures of speech. There are good reasons for treating everyone in the family as individuals as well as family members, but families are not just a collection of individuals. The family is something real in our lives. (It's been observed that younger adults tend to deny this, at least until they start families of their own, or realise they have been landed with the responsibility for looking after an older relative. 'We are all individualists until we wake up.'[24]) Box 1.1 discusses one of the key elements in family relationships, the duties of care that family members owe to each other, and duties relating to the previous generation.

Box 1.1: The caring relationship

People in a range of circumstances - old age, disability and illness among them - need personal care: such care may include help with personal hygiene, getting out of bed, dressing, cooking, cleaning, household management, and much else besides. After the foundation of the welfare state, it was often supposed that the social services - organised personal services provided by local government or voluntary sector – were responsible for social care. A landmark study of learning disability showed that the reality is very different: families carried the bulk of the responsibility, and hours of activity and engagement on a daily basis, and the services provided by statutory authorities offered only a limited supplement to the things that family carers were doing (for example, assistance with bathing - a 'social bath' - once a week.).[25] Statutory services have had to learn to plan around the network of care that is provided by families, friends and neighbours.

As increasing numbers of people have come to be served in their own homes, rather than in residential or long-stay nursing care, the relative emphasis on 'informal' care has grown. Care in practice is based more on personal relationships than on formal organisations. Often the person who helps is a spouse; it may be a son or daughter, but because care is highly gendered, it is more likely to be a daughter, or even a daughter-in-law. Within families, the responsibility is liable to fall on any adult who is at hand, but it is not confined to independent adults; much of the care given to older people is given by other older people, and in some families, young children have to act as the principal carers for chronically sick or disabled parents.

The caring relationship is not one-sided. The basis of informal care is 'reciprocal', though the reciprocity can be highly generalised, and if returns are made, they are not usually made at the same time, or even to the same people, as the gift. People look after older people because the older people once looked after them, because the older people looked after their own elders, and because they hope to be looked after by the next generation in their turn. (Pensions, too often dismissed by right-wing individualists as a confidence trick, are based on the same principle.) But there is direct reciprocity, too: studies of the caring relationship have emphasised what older people give to families, for example through finance, child care and emotional support.[26]

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[23] H Rodman, 1971, Lower class families, Oxford University Press.
[24] P G Wodehouse, 1918, Piccadilly Jim, London: Everyman Books, p 85.
[25] M Bayley, 1972, Mental handicap and community care, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
[26] H Qureshi, A Walker, 1989, The caring relationship: elderly people and their families,

At first sight, the core of informal care is interpersonal; it has little to do with collectivism. It may be one-sided (though it should not be assumed to be). Nevertheless, informal care in families meets the criteria for being understood collectively: identity, relationships within the group and a capacity for collective action. Its collective nature is reinforced when dealing with other collective organisations, such as health care, personal services and commercial providers.

The third property of groups is a collective capacity for action. The form of group action that is most easy to recognise is the action taken by organisations. Collective organisations are pervasive. If, in the course of the last few days, you have switched on any electric equipment, drunk water from a tap or a bottle, taken medicine, spoken on a telephone, studied for a course of education, heard the news or used the services of a bank, you have most probably experienced contact with a collective organisation, because it is only through collective organisations that most of these things are possible. Some organisations are institutions, like schools and universities; they are part of the social framework. Some are businesses. There are businesses which are owned and run by one person, but while they are more numerous, they are not as prevalent as businesses of another kind - businesses that are corporate. Examples are banks, electricity and gas suppliers, all the main supermarkets and clothing chains, and key internet suppliers such as Microsoft, Apple, Amazon or Google. If your mailbox is anything like mine, a goodly proportion of any mail you will have received in the last month, either electronically or on paper, will have come from organisations - a firm selling goods, a university, local government, the tax authority. Letters which appear to come from human beings have not necessarily been written by them, if they have been written on behalf of an organisation. We are so used to encountering and interacting with collective entities on these terms that we take what they do for granted. Collective organisation is a fact of life.

In the 'new institutional economics', organisations are treated as 'groups of individuals bound by a common purpose to achieve objectives.'[27] List and Spiekermann, who are not otherwise unsympathetic to organisational perspectives, concede a great deal to reductive individualism:

> "Methodological individualists are right to remind us that the social world is ultimately the result of many individuals interacting with one another and that any theory that fails to accept this basic premise rests on mysterious metaphysical assumptions."[28]

It is not so. Organisations are not just 'the results of many individuals interacting with another'. If we try to be reductive, to interpret the actions as the actions of the individuals who populate them - what Watkins calls a 'rock-bottom' explanation[29] - we will fail, because organisations work to their own principles, rules and processes. The National Trust, the Church of England, Barclays Bank and the Walt Disney Company all have an existence distinct from their founders or the people who populate them. In formal legal terms, they are

Basingstoke: Macmillan

[27] D North, 1992, Institutions and economic theory, The American Economist 36(1) 3-6

[28] C List, K Spiekermann, 2013, Methodological individualism and holism in political science: a reconciliation. American Political Science Review, 107 (4). pp. 629-643.

[29] J Watkins, 1957, Historical explanation in the social sciences, British Journal for the Philosophy of Science, 8(30) 104-117

persons: they can make decisions, buy and sell things, employ people take action. Many institutions of the type have no human owners - some businesses own themselves, others are owned by other corporations. Most of the organisations we deal with are not like 'individuals' at all. There is nothing especially 'mysterious' or 'metaphysical' about the idea that groups and organisations exist, or that they have established ways of doing things. Some of the arrangements we live with depend altogether on collective institutions and organisations, and while we can learn something about them from the conduct of individuals within them,[30] many of our interactions with organisations (such as a contract, a communication, a transaction or a financial decision) are not intelligible in terms of the interaction of individuals. In a world where routine interactions with and between organisations are increasingly moderated through standardised electronic communication, individuality does not always come into it.

If groups have a recognised identity, and are bound together by a series of relationships, they can form relationships externally with other people, and with other groups. One business can own another; businesses can make contracts with governments. A married couple can make a joint claim for benefits from a government agency. A family can move house, a local community can arrange a ceilidh, a business can buy and sell goods, a country can go to war. An industrial dispute is another instance of collective action: laws in the UK, which restrict the activities of trades unions, limit their authority collectively to call strikes, even though the individuals who have joined the unions still have the right individually to withdraw their labour. Collective action in social policy is generally action by a social group, and collective action takes place within the framework of the group's structure.

Some of the literature on social policy takes a romanticised view of collective action; it offers stirring examples of people banding together to take control or form a movement.[31] The main subject matter of this book is much more pedestrian. Social groups are part of our everyday life - the actions of businesses, communal organisations, schools, charities or government are examples. To understand their role more clearly, we need to understand the besetting ordinariness of it all.

Collective action

How can a group take action? There is no collective mind; decisions must be taken in some way by the people who make it up. There is a class of collective action that consists of the joint action of individuals, but which falls short of action by a group. People can reasonably be said to behave collectively, Isaacs argues, when they share objectives - going for a walk, singing together, applauding, painting a house.[32] She refers to a class of 'goal-oriented' collectives - people who share a goal and take action to do it. French refers to 'random' collectives - people who happen to find themselves in the same place at the same time, a bus queue or a mob - and other 'aggregate' collectives, people who share some feature that happens to bring them together for common action.[33] But collectives of this sort, in their

[30] S Robbins, T Judge, ,2013, Organizational Behavior, Boston: Pearson
[31] e.g. S Alinsky, 1989, Rules for radicals, New York: Random House; P Beresford, 2016, All our welfare, Bristol: Policy Press.
[32] T Isaacs, 2011, Moral responsibility in collective contexts, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p 25.
[33] P French, Collective and corporate responsibility, New York: Columbia University Press, pp 12-13.

nature, are temporary and ephemeral; as they develop an identity and a structure of relationships, they develop the structure and the nature of a social group.

It is easiest to recognise group action when it is formalised. Within organisations, there are usually established procedures by which decisions can be made and recognised. Every corporate organisation, French argues, has 'rules of recognition', which make it possible to distinguish which things have been decided by the corporation, and which have not. The internal structure of decision making calls for a corporate structure, procedural rules, and policies.[34] Formal decisions are typically made by committees or boards; there are often elaborate structures of authority, to ensure that no-one acts on behalf of the organisation without having clearly delegated authority to do so. (Governments work in the same way - more of that later.) The structures of authority can be subverted - Niskanen points to the problems of capture by a self-interested bureaucracy[35] - but it cannot be assumed either an organisation is controlled by individuals, or even that continuing authority rests with human beings. In some cases - for example, some religious foundations and charitable trusts, and arguably in the operation of the judiciary - the key decisions rest in policies made and decisions taken by people who are now dead.

Organisations are complex, and sometimes, as with human beings, not all the decisions they come to are clear or explicit;[36] but there are rules, and conventions, and it is usually possible to recognise when a group decision has been taken. The situation has to be interpreted in its context; we recognise group decisions through the 'normative import' we attach to them.[37] There are many types of corporate organisation. Some are autocratic; some are bureaucratic; some are political fora, where issues have to be negotiated and bargained over; some are simply disorganised. (I used to work in a university where financial incompetence and mismanagement had made it possible for a determined group of scientists surreptitiously to build one of the best departments in its field in the world: 'The university did not realise that we were overspending by ten times.'[38]) Then there are organisations which bring together other organisations: consortia (where distinct organisations collaborate), confederations (where each sub-unit is self-determining, federations where decision-making is divided between upper and lower tiers) and multi-level governance. Group action, List and Pettit suggest, is 'performative'; decisions depend on the way that organisations are made up and what they do.[39]

The role of individuals within these structures is limited and constrained. There is a literature on 'organisational behaviour' in management, dedicated to understanding the way that people behave in organisational settings;[40] it draws attention to such issues as motivation, team work, and ethical conduct. For the purposes of this book, the area of most direct interest is the collective framework, rather than interpersonal differences – the question of how collective action is even possible.

Part of the answer to that question relates to social norms. Most of us do not sit at work wondering minute by minute or hour by hour why we are there and what we are supposed to do. We might well be distracted by our own concerns, but we do not preoccupy

[34] P French, 1984, Collective and corporate responsibility, New York: Columbia University Press, chapters 3-4.

[35] W Niskanen, 1971, Bureaucracy and representative government, Chicago: Aldine.

[36] See e.g. M Lipsky, 1980, Street level bureaucracy, London: Sage.

[37] J Gonzalez de Prado Salas, J Zamora-Bonilla, 2015, Collective actors without collective minds, Philosophy of the Social Sciences, 45(1) 3-25.

[38] New Scientist, 15th February 1992, p.22.

[39] C List, P Pettit, 2011, Group agency, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[40] S Robbins, T Judge, 2013, Organizational Behavior, Boston: Pearson.

ourselves exclusively with them - we could not do any work if we did. The nature of the work is set in terms of the circumstances we are working in. For a new employee, it can all be a little bewildering; after a little time, we do not even think about it. Participating in an organisation depends on the process of socialisation: we learn what to do and how to behave, and what we learn becomes our habit and practice. List and Spiekermann suggest that social constructs, such as employment, may supervene on individuals, shaping the circumstances in which those individuals operate.[41]

Socialisation, however, is only a partial explanation. The clue to much of what is happening in a firm rests in that innocent word, 'employee'. The work of employees within an organisation requires them to act as part of that organisation. Employees do not do everything a human being might do - on the contrary, we expect people to fulfil the role they are supposed to fill, and it can be disturbing when they do things that are outside that role (such as propositioning colleagues, or demanding personal sweeteners to do their job). When people work within an organisation, their activity is defined not by their individual human characteristics, but by their roles. Whenever people work in an organisation, they occupy a role, sometimes several roles. The work of a police officer, a social worker, an IT manager or a social security clerk is based in the roles they occupy. To understand what the person is doing, we need to know about the role that person has, and within organisations that role is constructed from the perspective either of the organisation, or from some external organisation such as a professional body. In economics, there is a theoretical literature which tries to explain the 'principal-agent' problem, which includes the (apparent) conundrum of why the employees in a firm should ever do what that the firm wants them to do, rather than pursuing their own interests.[42] This imagines there is a problem where there may be none. People act, for the most part, in line with the roles they occupy and the norms associated with them.

The roles that people have in formal organisations tend to be rather more closely specified than those in informal groups: they depend in part on a defined range of tasks but also, crucially, on authorisation. A person acting in such roles represents the organisation. In the examples of group action given before - shopping, education, using services, buying commodities - any interaction with a person is with a person who occupies an organisational role. This also says something important about how groups decide. The members of boards, trusts, committees or charities, no less than employees, are identifiable, and act, in terms of their roles; they have the authority to act, a definable set of activities that can be undertaken in those roles, and very often a set of rules about when and how decisions can be authorised. Board members, judges, legislators or voluntary committees all have power to make decisions, but they have to do it in a prescribed way, or it has no effect. People who work in occupational or professional roles may well be exercising their own judgment, but that does not mean that they are operating as individuals. The choices, preferences, quirks and foibles of individuals are only directly relevant if they fall in the scope of those roles - managers, functionaries and officials who fail to recognise the distinction between personal and organisational decisions are legitimately open to criticism.

Sociologists have interpreted the issue of 'roles' very broadly, typically in terms of norms and expectations of behaviour[43] - possibly a 'performance'.[44] Once it is accepted that

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[41] List, Spiekermann, 2013.

[42] The Economist, 2017, Coase's theory of the firm, July 27th.
https://www.economist.com/news/economics-brief/21725542-if-markets-are-so-good-directing-resources-why-do-companies-exist-first-our, last obtained 28th September 2018

[43] R Dahrendorf, 1973, Homo sociologicus, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

[44] E Goffman, 1959, The presentation of self in everyday life, Penguin

there is such a thing as a group, that the group has an identity and a capacity to act, the group can act to bring certain things about, usually by directing or authorising people who occupy specific roles to do what is required. Box 1.2 focuses on 'voluntary' organisations, which develop to make it possible for people together to achieve a range of social objectives, usually without a conventional profit motive; the sector operates through an extensive and complex framework of rules, norms and expectations. There are many other types of group activity. An electricity company can send a bill to a consumer. A church can distribute charity to people in the surrounding area. A school can write to parents about the way their child is behaving. These statements are sometimes picked apart by determined individualists, but they have a clear meaning; we experience, and recognise, such actions as the actions of a collective entity.

Box 1.2: The voluntary sector

The voluntary sector is sometimes called the 'third sector', to distinguish it from the state on one hand and commercial enterprise on the other.[45] At other times, voluntary and other independent services are characterised in terms of 'civil society', as distinct from the state and the individual, or perhaps the state and the family.[46] Lyons defines the third sector as consisting of private organisations

> '1. that are formed and sustained by groups of people (members) acting voluntarily and without seeking personal profit to provide benefits for themselves or others
> 2. that are democratically controlled and
> 3. where any material benefit gained by a member is proportionate to their use of an organisation.'[47]

This is not always true; much of the third sector is not unpaid, some third sector organisations are there for mutual benefit, and many third sector groups are self-perpetuating oligarchies rather than democratically controlled bodies. It is not clear, either, that the sector has to be non-profit making. If the defining element of the third sector is that it does not take profits, then charity trading, co-operatives and community businesses are not part of the third sector.

The difficulty of defining the sector is partly because of blurred boundaries - there are social enterprises that are set up as private companies, charities that operate in the public sector, private firms that take advantage of rules for social enterprise. But is also a reflection of the diversity of the sector, which has been called 'a loose and baggy monster'.[48] The National Council of Voluntary Organisations reckons that there are more than 165,000 such organisations in the UK[49] - that is about one organisation for every 400 people. The four largest categories of organisation were social service providers, cultural and recreational organisations, religious bodies and grant-making foundations; together these account for about half the numbers of organisations. Others are concerned with a wide-range of activities

[45] W Seibel, H Anheier (eds) 1990, The third sector, Berlin: de Gruyter.
[46] A Evers, J-L Laville, 2004, Defining the third sector in Europe, in The Third Sector in Europe, Cheltenham: Elgar.
[47] M Lyons, 2001, Third sector, Sydney: Allen and Unwin
[48] J Kendall, M Knapp, 1996, The voluntary sector in the UK, Manchester, Manchester University Press.
[49] National Council of Voluntary Organisations, 2016, UK Civil Society Almanac 2016, https://data.ncvo.org.uk/a/almanac16/size-and-scope/, last obtained 28th September 2018

- among them, education, housing, environment, law, playgroups and so on.

When people form voluntary associations, they come together to achieve some kind of social or public end. (Some associations are not, of course, actively formed by anyone who is alive currently: they may have been in existence for decades, even centuries.) For most of the last 400 years, the rules for charities in the UK required them to fit one of four categories: the relief of poverty, advancement of education, the advancement of religion, or benefit to the community. Those rules precluded certain types of activity from being considered as charities - political associations, membership groups like sports clubs or campaigns - but many of those restrictions were lifted by reform of the law a little over ten years ago, and the primary test now is that there should be some public benefit. (The change of focus has sometimes proved challenging for institutions previously approved for the advancement of religion or education.)

The history of social policy in most countries does not begin with government, but with a range of voluntary, charitable and religious organisations, and regulation of how they do things goes a long way back. It is 1200 years since the council of Aachen, when the Church expressed concern about the lax practices of independent charities, and decided it may need to intervene in order to guarantee standards.[50] Seven hundred years later, during the Reformation, similar criticisms were being levied at the Church in its turn.[51] That prompted either the formation of a new sort of religious organisation, or the intervention of civic authorities. The nineteenth century was a period where independent, mutualist and solidaristic organisations proliferated.[52] It was also a period during which a whole range of new states were established, Belgium, Germany and Italy amongst them, to be followed in the 20th century by Norway, Finland, Poland and many more. Those governments started to think that they ought to have a role, too. In historical terms, the modern state is a relatively new phenomenon. Government, in the terms we understand it now, came late to the party.

Society

The idea of a 'society' has been treated with some scepticism in economic and political theory. Some individualists have argued that the term is empty,[53] and conservatives suspect it is being used to smuggle in assumptions about the way people ought to behave.[54] When people talk about 'the individual versus society', it seems to imply that the individual has some kind of immediate personal relationship to a conglomerate of Everyone Else. 'Holism' is sometimes understood the same way.[55] That is not helpful. 'Society' has a much more

[50] J Brodman, 2009, Charity and religion in medieval Europe (Catholic University of America Press, 2009).

[51] F Salter (ed), 1926, Some early tracts on poor relief, London: Methuen; T Fehler, 1999, Poor relief and protestantism, Aldershot: Ashgate.

[52] P Baldwin, 1990, The politics of social solidarity, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

[53] J Bentham, 1789, An introduction to the principles of morals and legislation, Oxford: Blackwell 1960.

[54] e.g. M Oakeshott, 1975, On human conduct, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

[55] A Bouvier, 2011, Individualism, Collective Agency and the 'Micro-Macro Relation', in I Jarvie, J Zamora-Bonnilla (eds) The SAGE Handbook of the Philosophy of Social Sciences, New York: Sage.

complex, and more definite, meaning. To understand it, we need to understand about social networks.

People live in a complex, inter-related set of groups and networks - families, neighbourhoods, communities, political communities among them. The social networks that people participate in are based in interaction, but there is more to it than interaction alone, because interaction does not imply the persistence of relationships or the continuity of networks. The word that is most often used in Europe for this sort of persistence is 'solidarity'. That term is commonly misunderstood in Britain, where it is assumed to be about sentiment and fellow-feeling. The idea of solidarity is not about feelings, but about relationships, and more specifically about obligations. In Catholic social teaching, it stands for the mutual obligations that each person has to others: it embraces the responsibility that family members have to each other, the obligations that people have in small groups and communities, and the broader obligations that people have to others.[56] Solidarity implies a relationship based on interdependence, exchange or mutual obligation. The position of an individual is not, then, set in opposition to a gigantic, anonymous aggregate thing called 'society'. Every person is part of a series of networks of relationships - relationships of family, friendship, community, identity, and so on - expanding outwards gradually until the links are recognisably part of a wider society. Those networks are shaped by, and shape, the pattern of relationships that make up the society; and social behaviour, in turn, is formed within the framework of those relationships.

A society is more than a social group, but it can be understood in similar terms. It has an identity, it has relationships between its members, and in so far as it shares space with a country, territory or state, it has the capacity for collective action. It is possible to identify, in the broader picture, a range of inter-related networks that are definable at the level of a country or a nation. There are some elements that whole countries share, and which they do not necessarily share when borders are crossed: those elements include common arrangements for government, formal arrangements for finance and law, and the absence of barriers (such as travel or currency exchange) that may exist in relations with other countries. That does not mean either that there cannot be closer or more restricted relationships - a society is made up of them - or that a society defines the limits of such relationships. There may well be other networks, both formal and informal, which go across national boundaries - relationships such as family, culture and trading relations.

This describes the framework in which social relationships are set, but the idea of a society refers to more than the framework. The starting point for this chapter was a consideration of the ways in which people live with each other. If society is understood as a group, it is a group of rather a special kind. A society sets the terms on which other groups are formed and relate to each other. It is not just a set of relationships; it is also the process through which those relationships are expressed. In some cases, social rules can be made explicitly and directly through a process of law and government. In other cases, people interacting in groups or in personal relationships will express the things they are doing in social terms – for example, in attempts to bring up children or to enforce moral rules. In others again, supervenience 'emerges'– it is the product of many people doing inter-related things in inter-related ways.[57] The rules of the game are social and collective.

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[56] N Coote, 1989, Catholic social teaching, Social Policy and Administration 23(2) 150-160.
[57] R Sawyer, 2005, Social emergence, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Collectivism: some initial reflections on policy

It does not follow, because so much is done collectively, that we can only respond to people in collective terms. If we want to deal with people as they are, however, we need to recognise that they do live in families, neighbourhoods and communities, and that they do have relationships with schools, businesses, public organisations and so on. One of the basic tasks of developing a social policy is to determine the focus of policy - identifying who and what policies should be dealing with.[58] Some policies are directed to individuals; some are directed towards categories of individuals, such as older people; but many are not. The focus may well fall on families, households, groups, organisations, agencies, communities and regions. Collectivism is implicit in the kind of focus that is adopted in different studies: policies relating to organisations, corporate businesses, charities, or governments must, in its very nature, accept to some degree the collective nature of the activity.

There are evidently many policies which are formed in terms of a collective reality - the structure of international relations, national defence, constitutional law. Stereotyping, prejudice and conflicts between ethnic groups and communities are often conceived in terms of group relations and can meaningfully be addressed at that level.[59] Policies can be directed at collective units - families, schools, hospitals, neighbourhoods, communities, organisations and businesses - rather than individuals or categories of people (categories such as women, poorer people or older people). Groups and organisations are central to the way things are done, socially, economically, politically and practically. This is not about the distinction between public provision and private enterprise - private enterprise can be collective, too. There are systems where people could provide services individually or in groups. There are places where water is sold in bottles, and others where it is routed from reservoirs through pipes. There are individual systems of transport, and mass urban transit. There are personal tutors for children, but most schools educate children in groups. (The collective organisation of education is generally taken for granted in developed societies. There are alternative models for 'home schooling' which allow for an individuated response, but they are the exception rather than the norm.) It is reasonable to debate which options are best, but it makes little sense to assume that individualised choices are always superior. It all depends on what we want to achieve and what can be done in practice.

Collective action by groups is part of the everyday interactions of ordinary lives. It does not follow that policy must be arranged in terms of group action: policies might still be directed at individuals, or inanimate objects, or the climate, or anything else. But it would be a strange set of policies that never did or said anything relating to social groups such as families, businesses, social institutions, schools and hospitals, towns, regions and so on. On occasion, the assumptions of neo-liberal politics are expressed so strongly in individualist terms that their proponents seem to forget that there are collective options. Discussions about taxation are taken be about personal taxation, although much income and wealth is corporate; policies to increase savings are assumed to be about people's individual bank accounts, rather than savings and stockholding by firms (a key issue in macroeconomics); policies for obesity are liable to be diverted into discussions of diet, despite abundant evidence that both the causes and the consequences of obesity are social. Part of the purpose of this book is to consider reasons for looking at policies in other terms.

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[58] See P Spicker, 2014, Social policy: theory and practice, Bristol, Policy Press, ch 4.
[59] Brown, 2000, ch 8.