

# GROUP DYNAMICS

## 6. The Sociology of Georg Simmel

### 6.1. Introduction

Georg Simmel was a German sociologist, philosopher, and critic. Simmel was one of the first generation of German sociologists: his neo-Kantian approach laid the foundations for sociological anti-positivism, asking 'What is society?' in a direct allusion to Kant's question 'What is nature?', presenting pioneering analyses of social individuality and fragmentation. For Simmel, culture referred to the cultivation of individuals through the agency of external forms which have been objectified in the course of history. Simmel discussed social and cultural phenomena in terms of forms and contents with a transient relationship; form becoming content, and vice versa, dependent on the context. In this sense he was a forerunner to structuralist styles of reasoning in the social sciences. With his work on the metropolis, Simmel was a precursor of urban sociology, symbolic interactionism and social network analysis.

An acquaintance of Max Weber, Simmel wrote on the topic of personal character in a manner reminiscent of the sociological ideal type. He broadly rejected academic standards, however, philosophically covering topics such as emotion and romantic love. Both Simmel and Weber's nonpositivist theory would inform the eclectic critical theory of the Frankfurt School.

Simmel studied philosophy and history at the University of Berlin. In 1881 he received his doctorate for his thesis on Kant's philosophy of matter, a part of which was subsequently published as "The Nature of Matter According to Kant's Physical Monadology". He became a *Privatdozent* at the University of Berlin in 1885, officially lecturing in philosophy but also in ethics, logic, pessimism, art, psychology and sociology. His lectures were not only popular inside the university, but attracted the intellectual elite of Berlin as well. Although his applications for vacant chairs at German universities were supported by Max Weber, Simmel remained an academic outsider. Only in 1901 was he elevated to the rank of extraordinary professor. At that time he was well known throughout Europe and America and was seen as a man of great eminence. He was well known for his many articles that appeared in magazines and newspapers.

Simmel had a hard time gaining acceptance in the academic community despite the support of well-known associates, such as Max Weber, Rainer Maria Rilke, Stefan George and Edmund Husserl. Partly he was seen as a Jew during an era of anti-Semitism, but also simply because his articles were written for a general audience rather than academic sociologists. This led to dismissive judgments from other professionals. Simmel nevertheless continued his intellectual and academic work, taking part in artistic circles as well as being a cofounder of the German Society for Sociology, together with Ferdinand Tönnies and Max Weber. This life at the meeting point of university and society, arts and philosophy was possible because he had been the heir to a fortune from his appointed guardian. In 1914, Simmel received an ordinary professorship with chair, at the then German University of Strassburg, but did not feel at home there. Because of the outbreak of World War I, all academic activities and lectures were halted as lecture halls were converted to military hospitals. In 1915 he applied, without success, for a chair at the University of Heidelberg.

## **6.2. Simmel on the Metropolis**

One of Simmel's most notable essays is *The Metropolis and Mental Life* from 1903, which was originally given as one of a series of lectures on all aspects of city life by experts in various fields, ranging from science and religion to art. The series was conducted alongside the Dresden cities exhibition of 1903. Simmel was originally asked to lecture on the role of intellectual (or scholarly) life in the big city, but he effectively reversed the topic in order to analyze the effects of the big city on the mind of the individual. As a result, when the lectures were published as essays in a book, to fill the gap, the series editor had to supply an essay on the original topic himself.

The *Metropolis and Mental Life* was not particularly well received during Simmel's lifetime. The organizers of the exhibition over-emphasized its negative comments about city life, because Simmel also pointed out positive transformations. During the twenties the essay was influential on the thinking of Robert E. Park and other American sociologists at the University of Chicago who collectively became known as the "Chicago School". It gained wider circulation in the 1950s when it was translated into English and published as part of Kurt Wolff's edited collection, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. It now appears regularly on the reading lists of courses in urban studies and architecture history. However, it is important to note that the notion of the blasé is actually not the central or final point of the essay, but is part of a description of a sequence of states in an irreversible transformation of

the mind. In other words, Simmel does not quite say that the big city has an overall negative effect on the mind or the self, even as he suggests that it undergoes permanent changes. It is perhaps this ambiguity that gave the essay a lasting place in the discourse on the metropolis.

The deepest problems of modern life flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society, against the weight of the historical heritage and the external culture and technique of life. The antagonism represents the most modern form of the conflict which primitive man must carry on with nature for his own bodily existence. The eighteenth century may have called for liberation from all the ties which grew up historically in politics, in religion, in morality and in economics in order to permit the original natural virtue of man, which is equal in everyone, to develop without inhibition; the nineteenth century may have sought to promote, in addition to man's freedom, his individuality (which is connected with the division of labor) and his achievements which make him unique and indispensable but which at the same time make him so much the more dependent on the complementary activity of others; Nietzsche may have seen the relentless struggle of the individual as the prerequisite for his full development, while socialism found the same thing in the suppression of all competition, but in each of these the same fundamental motive was at work, namely the resistance of the individual to being levelled, swallowed up in the social-technological mechanism.

### **6.3. Foundations of Simmel's Theory**

#### **Levels of Concern**

There are four basic levels of concern in Simmel's work. First are his assumptions about the psychological workings of social life. Second is his interest in the sociological workings of interpersonal relationships. Third is his work on the structure of and changes in the social and cultural "spirit" of his times. He also adopted the principle of emergence, which is the idea that higher levels emerge from the lower levels. Finally, he dealt with his views in the nature and inevitable fate of humanity. His most microscopic work dealt with forms and the interaction that takes place with different types of people. The forms include subordination, super-ordination, exchange, conflict and sociability.

## **Dialectical Thinking**

A dialectical approach is multicausal, multidirectional, integrates facts and value, rejects the idea that there are hard and fast dividing lines between social phenomena, focuses on social relations, looks not only at the present but also at the past and future, and is deeply concerned with both conflicts and contradictions. Simmel's sociology was concerned with relationships especially interaction and was known as a methodological relationist. His principle was that everything interacts in some way with everything else. Overall he was mostly interested in dualisms, conflicts, and contradictions in whatever realm of the social world he happened to be working on.

## **Individual Consciousness**

Simmel focused on forms of association and paid little attention to individual consciousness. Simmel believed in the creative consciousness and this belief can be found in diverse forms of interaction, the ability of actors to create social structures and the disastrous effects those structures had on the creativity of individuals. Simmel also believed that social and cultural structures come to have a life of their own.

## **Sociability**

Simmel refers to all the forms of association by which a mere sum of separate individuals are made into a society, which he describes as a, higher unity, composed of individuals. He was especially fascinated, it seems, by the impulse to sociability in man, which he described as associations through which the solitariness of the individuals is resolved into togetherness, a union with others, a process he describes by which, the impulse to sociability distils, as it were, out of the realities of social life the pure essence of association, and through which a unity is made, which he also refers to as, the free-playing, interacting interdependence of individuals.

He defines sociability as, the play-form of association, driven by, amicability, breeding, cordiality and attractiveness of all kinds. In order for this free association to occur, he says, the personalities must not emphasize themselves too individually with too much abandon and aggressiveness. He also describes, this world of sociability a democracy of equals without friction, so long as people blend together in a spirit of fun and affection to, bring about among themselves a pure interaction free of any disturbing material accent. As so many social interactions are not

entirely of this sweet character, one has to conclude that Simmel is describing a somewhat idealized view of the best types of human interaction, and by no means the most typical or average type.

The same can be said of Simmel when he says that, the vitality of real individuals, in their sensitivities and attractions, in the fullness of their impulses and convictions is but a symbol of life, as it shows itself in the flow of a lightly amusing play, or when he adds a symbolic play, in whose aesthetic charm all the finest and most highly sublimated dynamics of social existence and its riches are gathered. Again, one has to conclude that he is describing human interactions at their idealized best and not the more typical ones, which tend to fall a long way short of his descriptions.

## **6.4. Social Geometry**

### **Dyad and Triad**

A dyad is a two person group whereas a triad is a three person group. In a dyad a person is able to retain their individuality. There is no other person to shift the balance of the group thereby allowing those within the dyad to maintain their individuality. In the triad group there is a possibility of a dyad forming within the triad thereby threatening the remaining individual's independence and causing them to become the subordinate of the group. This seems to be an essential part of society which becomes a structure. Unfortunately as the group (structure) becomes increasingly greater the individual becomes separated and grows more alone, isolated and segmented. Simmel's view was somewhat ambiguous with respect to group size. On one hand he believed that the bigger the group the better for the individual. In a larger group it would be harder to exert control on individual, but on the other hand with a large group there is a possibility of the individual becoming distant and impersonal. Therefore in an effort for the individual to cope with the larger group they must become a part of a smaller group such as the family.

### **Distance**

The value of something is determined by the distance from its actor. In "The Stranger", Simmel discusses how if a person is too close to the actor they are not considered a stranger, but if they are too far they would no longer be a part of a group. The particular distance from a group allows a person to have objective

relationships with different group members. Once again Simmel's concept of distance comes into play. Simmel identifies a stranger as a person that is far away and close at the same time.

The Stranger is close to us, insofar as we feel between him and ourselves common features of a national, social, occupational, or generally human, nature. He is far from us, insofar as these common features extend beyond him or us, and connect us only because they connect a great many people. A stranger is far enough away that he is unknown but close enough that it is possible to get to know him. In a society there must be a stranger. If everyone is known then there is no person that is able to bring something new to everybody.

The stranger bears a certain objectivity that makes him a valuable member to the individual and society. People let down their inhibitions around him and confess openly without any fear. This is because there is a belief that the Stranger is not connected to anyone significant and therefore does not pose a threat to the confessor's life. More generally, Simmel observes that because of their peculiar position in the group, strangers often carry out special tasks that the other members of the group are either incapable or unwilling to carry out. For example, especially in pre-modern societies, most strangers made a living from trade, which was often viewed as an unpleasant activity by "native" members of those societies. In some societies, they were also employed as arbitrators and judges, because they were expected to treat rival factions in society with an impartial attitude.

Objectivity may also be defined as freedom: the objective individual is bound by no commitments which could prejudice his perception, understanding, and evaluation of the given. On one hand the stranger's opinion does not really matter because of his lack of connection to society, but on the other the stranger's opinion does matter because of his lack of connection to society. He holds a certain objectivity that allows him to be unbiased and decide freely without fear. He is simply able to see, think, and decide without being influenced by the opinion of others.

## **6.5. Simmel on Secrecy**

In small groups, secrets are less needed because everyone seems to be more similar. In larger groups secrets are needed because everyone is so different. In a secret society the society is held together by the need to maintain the secret, which also causes tension because without the secret the society does not exist. Even in

marriage secrecy must exist. In revealing all, marriage becomes dull and boring and loses all excitement. Simmel saw a general thread in the importance of secrets and the strategic use of ignorance: To be social beings who are able to cope successfully with their social environment, people need clearly defined realms of unknowns for themselves. Furthermore, sharing a common secret allows for there to be a strong "we feeling." The modern world depends on honesty and therefore a lie can be considered more devastating than it ever has been before. Money allows there to be a level of secrecy that has never been attainable before it allows for invisible transactions, because now money is such an integral part of human values and beliefs. It is therefore possible to buy silence.