

1 THE PROBLEM OF COLLECTIVE INTENTIONAL ACTION:

2 The Case for the Categorized Collective

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4 ABSTRACT

5 The purpose of this paper is to make a case for the theory of a categorized collective and
6 to develop how it better explains the *Problem of Collective Intentional Action* as a condition of
7 moral responsibility. The paper first develops and critically analyzes a desideratum for the
8 theory of a categorized collective. This desideratum has a five-step structure: 1) describing the
9 nature of a valid collective; 2) defining the measure of collectivization; 3) quantifying the level
10 of obligation; 4) characterizing the categorized collective; and 5) developing and explaining the
11 accrual of responsibility within the collective. The desideratum's conclusion is that the strength
12 of a collective's intentionality as a condition of responsibility is best developed and explained by
13 the theory of a categorized collective. To test the theory, an argument against the theory is
14 explored in the paper. Specifically, the argument that a collective 'cannot act' intentionally in
15 the sense of an individual is explored. Finally, this argument against our theory of the
16 categorized collective is refuted. By using our theory of a categorized collective, we find that a
17 collective 'can act' intentionally because the theory posits that intentionality rests in the
18 categorized collective's decision-making structure, self-interests, and behaviors. While the

19 paper's case for this theory does not answer all of the potential problems of intentionality as a
20 condition of collective responsibility, it does provide a framework for fully exploring collective
21 moral responsibility with respect to intentional action.

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24 I. Introduction

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The basic problem with explanations of collective responsibility is that they tend to over

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generalize what constitutes a collective. This over generalization muddles the issue of how a

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collective can accrue responsibility based on the six conditions of collective responsibility.¹ For

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instance, it seems clear that highly organized nations and corporations have the ability to act in a

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complex intentional manner. However, does this acting represent the *intentional actions* of the

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collective or the actions of a powerful individual operating within the rules structure of the

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collective?² In either case how do we measure responsibility and apply it to moral actions? Do

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we measure responsibility based on the collective or individuals' intentional actions?³ Do we

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then measure the individuals' responsibility for collective intentional actions from a Normative,

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Functionalist, Structuralist, or Rational Choice Perspectives?⁴ Do we apply the responsibility to

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¹ J. Angelo Corlett, *Responsibility and Punishment* (Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Press, 2001), p. 17 and p. 89. "I am morally and (should be) legally responsible for some act, omission or attempt to the extent that I am (1) guilty of committing a wrong doing (2) intentionally, (3) knowingly, (4) and voluntarily, and that I am (5) 'at fault' in doing so" [Numbers by editor]. The author adds a sixth condition of responsibility that applies to collectives as opposed to individual. Collective responsibility requires that a "causal connection must exist between the faulty aspect of its conduct and the outcome."

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² J. Angelo Corlett, *Responsibility and Punishment*, pp. 98-99.

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³ J. Angelo Corlett, *Responsibility and Punishment*, p. 99.

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⁴ Michael Hechter, *Principles of Group Solidarity*, (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 15-39. In Chapter II of this book, Hechter discusses in detail four competing perspectives of group solidarity. The basic underlying contention of the first three of these competing perspectives is, "that in all societies individuals' actions are decisively affected by the groups to which they belong" [p 15]. Given this contention, Hechter points out, that in each of the first three perspectives the individuals' responsibility for a collective intentional action is implied by the individuals' obligations to the group, i.e., "obligation implies a contribution without a corresponding recompense or quid pro quo" [p 17]. The individuals' obligations to the group can be measure by their contributions being either extensive or non-extensive obligations. Extensiveness (versus non-extensiveness) is the "group's capacity to induce its members to honor [their] obligations" [p 17]. When the extensiveness of the obligations is great the implied responsibility for a collective intentional action increases.

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35 the collective as a whole (and all of the individuals in the group) or proportion out the
36 responsibility? These are just some of the problems facing any theory of collective
37 responsibility. In this paper, I will argue for a theory of a categorized collective as a method of
38 determining how collectives accrue responsibility in terms of intentional actions.

39 **II. Critical analysis**

40 The desiderata for the theory of a categorized collective that better explains the *Problem*
41 *of Collective Intentional Action* as a condition of responsibility is as follows. First, it is essential
42 to the theory of a categorized collective that it describes the nature of a valid collective; since if
43 no valid collective exists, there cannot be a categorized collective. Second, it is important to
44 have a characterization of the measure of collectivization of a categorized collective. Third, it is
45 crucial to quantify the level of obligation or dependency the individuals have to a collective.
46 Fourth, it is central to define of what characterizes a categorized collective. Finally, the idea of
47 how categorized collectives accrue responsibility will be developed and how this better explains
48 the *Problem of Collective Intentional Action* as a condition of responsibility.

49 **A. Nature of a valid collective**

50 How can we describe the nature of a valid group or collective?⁵ For purposes of this
51 paper, a group becomes a valid collective when it fulfills all of the following four conditions of
52 collective union: 1) there is cohesion⁶; 2) there is capability to act via a decision-making

22 ⁵ For purposes of this paper I use ‘collective’ to mean ‘valid collective’ (as opposed to ‘random collective’)
23 when dealing with the nature and types of ‘collectives’ in our desiderata and ‘categorical collective’ when
24 dealing with all other cases.

25 ⁶ *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, Fifth Edition, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), CD-ROM
26 Version 2.0. It defines cohesion as “The action or condition of sticking together or cohering; a tendency to
27 remain united.” Additionally, cohere is defined as 1) “Coincide, to come together in agreement”; and 2) “Be
28 consistent, be congruous in substance, tenor, or general effect.”

53 structure; 3) there are homogeneous and/or dominant self-interests; and 4) there is a behavioral
54 pattern.⁷ By way of the conditions of collective union and responsibility, we make a distinction
55 between ‘mere groups’ or ‘random collectives’ such as aggregates, crowds, and riots and valid
56 collectives. The main distinction is that ‘random collectives’ or aggregates lack the intrinsic
57 decision-making structure to be capable of acting in a responsible or intentional manner.⁸ The
58 interactive relatedness of the conditions is also important to note. By this, it is meant that each
59 condition, to an extent, shares a symbiotic relationship within the collective as a whole.

60 *1. Cohesion*

61 Cohesion, the glue of interdependence of a collective, must be present for a valid
62 collective to exist. A collective has both an internal and external cohesion. Internal cohesion is
63 the intrinsic solidity, unity, or dependence of the collective. This means a collective must have a
64 congruous set of ideas, principles, rights, laws, rules, or regulations that maintain the collective
65 together as a coherent whole. They are intrinsic to the individuals of the collective and to the
66 cohesiveness of the collective. Their intrinsic character means that this cohesiveness expresses
67 itself in some collectives as only amorphous and general notions, impressions, or feelings within
68 the individuals of the collective. External cohesion is the extrinsic coincidences that formed the
69 internal cohesion of the collective. The extrinsic coincidences are the causes that formed the
70 collective. These coincidences may be geographic, environmental, climatic, defensive, or geo-

30 ⁷ J. Angelo Corlett, *Responsibility and Punishment*, p. 93. It is not clear whether interdependence is an
31 important criterion in Corlett’s analysis of collective responsibility. Do not attribute “cohesion” to his theory.
32 We mainly draw on his writing for criterion 2-3, in particular collective behavior. “A collective behavior is a
33 doing or behavior which is the result of a collective, though not the result of its intentions.” Although,
34 throughout the chapter there is a sense that interdependence and cohesion are required to have valid collective.
35 However, that a group of individuals has cohesion, in any sense, it is clear that it is more than a ‘mere group’.

36 ⁸ J. Angelo Corlett, *Responsibility and Punishment*, p. 93 and pp. 94-95. If an agent, whether it be a group or
37 individual, cannot act intentionally; then it cannot fulfill the main sufficient condition of responsibility.

71 political in character. They are extrinsic to the individuals of the collective, yet they provide the
72 impetus to form the individuals into a collective.

73 2. *Decision-making structure*

74 A decision-making structure⁹ must be part of a valid collective. By this, we mean that the
75 collective has a decision-making structure for fulfilling the conditions of moral responsibility.¹⁰
76 There are three aspects to the characterization of the decision-making structure of a collective: 1)
77 its internal cohesion; 2) the homogeneousness and dominance of its self-interests; and 3) the
78 manifest pattern of behavior. The first characteristic is internal cohesion, the laws, rules, and
79 regulations. This creates the method the decision-making structure the collective uses to act.
80 The second characteristic is that the homogeneous and/or dominant self-interest creates the
81 internalized psychological directives under which the collective acts. The last characteristic is
82 that the manifest pattern of behavior creates practices under which the decision-making structure
83 of the collective acts. It is the characterization of each of these three aspects that helps us
84 determine the decision-making structure of the collective. The determination of the decision-
85 making structure denotes the organizational frameworks of the collective. There are four
86 organizational frameworks: structural, human resource, political, and symbolic.¹¹

39 ⁹ Kathy Schwalbe, *Information Technology Project Management*, (Canada: Thomson Learning, 2002), Second
40 Edition, pp. 33-35. Decision-making structures “can be viewed as having four different [frameworks]:
41 structural, human resource, political, and symbolic.” In the structural framework the focuses is on what brings
42 the groups and individuals making up the group into coordination. A human resource framework “focuses on
43 producing harmony between the needs of the [group] and the needs of the people.” Political frameworks
44 assume that the group is composed of competing coalitions of “varied individuals and interest groups” striving
45 to control the scarce resources of the group. In a symbolic framework the group is concerned not with what
46 actually happens but with what the actions mean.

47 ¹⁰ J. Angelo Corlett, *Responsibility and Punishment*, p. 89. In the citation, the author adds a sixth condition of
48 responsibility that applies to collectives as opposed to individual. Collective responsibility requires that a
49 “causal connection must exist between the faulty aspect of its conduct and the outcome.”

50 ¹¹ Kathy Schwalbe, *Information Technology Project Management*, pp. 33-35.

87 *3. Homogeneous and/or dominant self-interests*

88 Valid collectives have a set of homogeneous and/or dominant self-interests. The set of
89 homogeneous and/or dominant self-interests of the collective is the will, goals, ideas, and beliefs
90 of the individual members in the collective. We must make a necessary distinction here between
91 internal cohesion, the solidity and unity of the collective, and the self-interests of the collective.
92 Internal cohesion is the rules and principles that maintain the collective and the obligations of the
93 individuals to the collective. The will and beliefs that make up the collective self-interest is an
94 internalized psychological framework that is dominant within the individual members of the
95 collective. Self-interest operates in a horizontal manner within a collective, i.e., the individual
96 members of the collective interact, intermingle, and interrelate with each other provoking a
97 cultural or socially acceptable sense of collective directed self-interest within each individual's
98 internalized psychological framework. This constant horizontal interaction creates, over time,
99 the set of uniform or homogeneous and prevailing or dominant self-interest in the various
100 individuals of the collective. The longer that the members of a collective interact together the
101 greater homogeneousness and dominance of the self-interest becomes.

102 *4. Pattern of behavior*

103 Finally, a valid collective has a pattern of behavior. This pattern of behavior of the
104 collective manifests itself through the complex interaction of the internal and external cohesion
105 acting in collaboration with the decision-making structure and homogeneous self-interest of the
106 collective. Taken in collaboration, unison, or blending, they form an observable pattern of
107 actions, reactions, interactions, or behaviors that are characteristic to the collective. They
108 become apparent in the responses made by the collective to the situations and stimulus of

109 world's political, biological, and economic environment. The pattern of behavior of a collective
110 is the product of its interaction and reaction with the environment.

111 **B. The measure of collectivization**

112 A collective has a defined measure of collectivization. Within each of the four conditions
113 of collective union of a valid collective, there is an associated measure of collectivization; its
114 quantification determines the measure of collectivization. We determine the quantification of
115 each condition of collective union by objectively analyzing the potency of the collectivization in
116 each condition. For instance, to analyze objectively the decision-making structure of a collective
117 one would need to measure the strength of its organizational framework. As noted earlier, there
118 are four organizational frameworks (in order of strength): *structural, human resource, political,*
119 *and symbolic.*¹² A *political framework* assumes that a collective is composed of competing
120 coalitions of “varied individuals and interest groups”¹³ striving to control the scarce resources of
121 the collective. The competing coalitions within the collective would point to a low measure of
122 collectivization. As such, our quantification would give the collective a low measure of
123 collectivization. By analyzing the other conditions of collective union, we obtain a combined
124 measure of collectivization.

125 **C. The level of obligation**

126 Additionally, we quantify the level of obligation the individuals have to a categorized
127 collective. In terms of measuring the level of obligation, we analyze the potency of the
128 dependence of the individual members within the collective. The extensiveness of the obligation

53 ¹² Kathy Schwalbe, *Information Technology Project Management*, pp. 33-35.

54 ¹³ Kathy Schwalbe, *Information Technology Project Management*, pp. 34.

129 the individuals have to the collective shapes their dependence to the collective¹⁴. Hechter posits
130 four factors that shape dependence and extensiveness: 1) *The supply of close substitutes*; 2) *Lack*
131 *of information about alternatives*; 3) *Costs of moving*; and 4) *The strength of personal ties*.¹⁵ By
132 examining '*The supply of close substitutes*' we find that as the number of alternative collectives
133 grows, the ability of each collective to enforce dependence decreases.¹⁶ The decreased
134 dependence is a low measure of collectivization. However, the factors are interrelated in a
135 symbiotic fashion. Therefore when measuring the level of obligation to determine the measure
136 of collectivization, the interrelation of all four factors becomes evident. This type of analysis
137 reveals the level of obligation or dependency within the collective.

138 **D. Categorized collectives**

139 When investigating real-world collectives, four types of categorized collectives' surface:
140 confederations, governmental, corporate and partnerships. In each categorized collective,
141 objective strengths or weaknesses exist in the conditions of collective union. The cohesion, more
142 than any of other three conditions of collective union, significantly characterizes category of a
143 collective. However, each condition of collective union has a function in characterizing the type
144 of collective. Additionally, the level of obligation or dependency within the collective adds a

56 ¹⁴ Michael Hechter, *Principles of Group Solidarity*, p. 45-46. "To the degree that members face a high cost of
57 exit, they are dependent on that group. As exit costs approach prohibitive levels, dependence on the group
58 increases; ultimately, members may become beholden to it for their survival...when the costs of exit decrease,
59 member's dependence on the group diminishes."

60 ¹⁵ Michael Hechter, *Principles of Group Solidarity*, pp. 46-48. He points out that if these factors create
61 dependence, then governmental "and legal arrangements have decisive implications in generating them." In my
62 analysis, cohesion means the intrinsic solidity, unity, or dependence of the collective and the extrinsic
63 coincidences are the causes that formed the collective. It is similar to Hechter's four factors of dependency in
64 terms of the implications in generating dependence.

65 ¹⁶ Michael Hechter, *Principles of Group Solidarity*, p. 46.

145 fundamental robustness to a categorized collective. The generalized version of each type of
146 collective is next separately considered.¹⁷

147 *1. Confederations*

148 Confederations are groupings of collectives which are mainly comprised of governmental
149 collectives. As such, external cohesion is the condition of collective union that initially defines
150 this type of categorized collectives. While confederations have a decision-making structure, it is
151 the weak political framework type with competing coalitions of “varied individuals and interest
152 groups.”¹⁸ When and if they act, it is usually for the self-interest of the strongest member of the
153 collective. Therefore, the self-interests and behavior patterns conditions of collective union are
154 weak. The level of obligations is also of the weakest variety since the members may move easily
155 and at little cost.

156 *2. Governmental*

157 Like confederation collectives, governmental collectives are initially defined by external
158 cohesion, most often the geographic and environmental characteristics. Over time, a
159 governmental collective may develop a solid sense of internal cohesion, homogeneous and/or
160 dominant self-interests, and patterns of behavior, if it has a strong decision-making structure.
161 Decision-making structures of governmental collectives are either a structural framework or a
162 symbolic framework. The level of obligations is of the strongest variety since a member’s costs
163 of moving is typically high and the supply of substitutes is low.

67 ¹⁷ This paper does not attempt to layout a definitive or comprehensive listing of categorized collectives. We only
68 seek to draw a general sense of the process of defining categorized collectives that can be used to determine the
69 accrual of moral responsibility.

70 ¹⁸ Kathy Schwalbe, *Information Technology Project Management*, pp. 34.

164 3. *Corporate*

165 Internal cohesion, the congruous set of ideas, principles, rights, laws, rules, or
166 regulations, describes the corporate collective. Corporate collective have a strong sense of
167 solidity and unity. They exhibit weak senses of homogeneous and/or dominant self-interest in
168 terms of the individual members of the collective. The behavior patterns are typically strong and
169 focused. For decision-making structures, corporate collectives may have any of the four
170 organizational frameworks, although they tend to have mainly structural and human resource
171 frameworks. In terms of the level of obligations, corporate collectives are of the weak variety
172 since the four factors that shape dependence have a low level of extensiveness.

173 4. *Partnerships*

174 The partnership collective is the most varied of the categorized collectives. Their internal
175 cohesion, as with corporate collectives, tends to describe the partnership collective. For
176 decision-making structures, partnership collectives tend to have mainly human resource and
177 symbolic frameworks. For the most part, partnership collectives exhibit strong sense of self-
178 interest and patterns of behavior. The level of obligations of a partnership collective tends to be
179 medium variety mainly because of the strength of personal ties within the collective.

180 **E. How collectives accrue moral responsibility**

181 Categorized collectives accrue responsibility based on whether they are 1) a valid
182 collective, 2) their measure of collectivization within the conditions of collective union, 3) the
183 level of obligation of the categorized collective, and 4) the type of categorized collective. The
184 examination of the four aspects of a particular categorized collective allows us to arrive at an

185 objective level of responsibility of the collective. In particular, a strong measure of
186 collectivization, with a requisite decision-making structure, characterizes collectives with high
187 objective levels of responsibility. It makes sense that intentionality, in terms of the conditions of
188 responsibility, exists in a collective that has an objective level of responsibility, i.e., the existence
189 of intentionality means that a categorized collective can and does act intentionally in a
190 responsible sense.

191 **III. Argument against intentionality**

192 Next we explore the argument that a collective ‘can not act’ intentionally in the same
193 sense as an individual acts intentionally.¹⁹ Moreover, if they cannot act as an individual acts,
194 then intentionality in a true sense cannot exist in a collective. When we look an individual,²⁰ it
195 seems clear that they can act intentionally in the truest sense because there is an intrinsic unity.
196 However, when looking at a collective we see constituents, interest groups, and individuals
197 united in some manner. Does this collective act as a cohesive whole in the individual’s united
198 sense, or act in the self-interest of one individual like the leader? In the case of a highly
199 structured corporation, the leader clearly directs the collective. This direction resides in the rules
200 structure of the collective; however, the individual leader can and does intentionally direct the
201 actions of the collective within the decision-making structure. These actions and their outcome

73 ¹⁹ J. Angelo Corlett, *Responsibility and Punishment*, p. 90 & p. 95. This paper does not deal with the separate
74 issue of assigning punishment to a collective, but only with defining collective responsibility. As such, we will
75 not deal with the issue of primary agent versus secondary agent. I only note here that the distinction between
76 primary and secondary agency in terms of intentional acting exists and is a real problem. For if you accept this
77 distinction, then in *no* real sense can a collective act intentionally as an individual does. However if there is a
78 distinction, then it should be used in determining punishment and whether the extent of punishment of a
79 collective and its members is as a whole or individually. Nevertheless, there should be *no* distinction of agency
80 when determining the responsibility of a collective.

81 ²⁰ We assume that an individual is considered in possession of their full mental faculties.

202 may be solely the intentional actions of an individual and not the collective. Therefore can we
203 ascribe moral responsibility to the collective? We cannot.²¹

204 **IV. Rebuttal to argument against intentionality**

205 A categorized collective ‘can act’ intentionally and this intentionality rests in decision-
206 making structure, self-interests and behaviors of the collective. The categorized collective helps
207 identify the strength of this intentionality in terms of moral responsibility. In the above case, the
208 members of a collective are morally responsible for the actions of their leader, even if the leader
209 acted individually. When we examine a categorized collective of any kind, if the categorized
210 collective has an objective level of responsibility, then the collective is responsible. Even if the
211 actions are only the intentional actions of one member, such as the leader. In particular, the level
212 of obligation, which is part of our analysis of the objective level of responsibility, describes the
213 extensiveness and dependency between the individual members of a collective (including the
214 leader) and the collective. The obligation the individuals have to their collective shapes their
215 dependence to the collective²² not the obligations of the leaders to the individuals (or vice
216 versus). Dependence is a symbiotic relationship²³ since when one accepts an obligation one also
217 accepts responsibility.

83 ²¹ J. Angelo Corlett, *Responsibility and Punishment*, p. 95. A reminder, this paper will not deal with the issue of
84 primary agent versus secondary agent in terms of responsibility. Although from the standpoint of legal
85 responsibility the collective can act, even if the action is solely directed by the leader; and can be punished as a
86 collective.

87 ²² Michael Hechter, *Principles of Group Solidarity*, p. 45-46. “To the degree that members face a high cost of
88 exit, they are dependent on that group. As exit costs approach prohibitive levels, dependence on the group
89 increases; ultimately, members may become beholden to it for their survival...when the costs of exit decrease,
90 member’s dependence on the group diminishes.”

91 ²³ Obligation is a robust and a symbiotic relationship. There is a real sense that when you as an individual
92 become obligated to a collective you must share in both the good and bad of the collective. It is not a one-way
93 street.

218 **V. Summary**

219 We summarize this paper as follows: First, we developed and critically analyzed a
220 desideratum for the theory of a categorized collective that better explains the *Problem of*
221 *Collective Intentional Action* as a condition of responsibility. Our desideratum for the theory of
222 a categorized collective included five steps: 1) describing the nature of a valid collective; 2)
223 defining the measure of collectivization; 3) quantifying the level of obligation; 4) characterizing
224 the categorized collective; and 5) developing and explaining the accrual of responsibility within
225 the collective. Next, we explored an argument against our theory of the categorized collective.
226 Specifically, looking at the argument that a collective ‘cannot act’ intentionally in the sense of an
227 individual. Finally, we refuted this argument against our theory, i.e., a collective ‘can act’
228 intentionally and this intentionality rests in the decision-making structure, self-interests and
229 behaviors of the collective and that our theory of the categorized collective helps identify the
230 strength of this intentionality.

231 **VI. Conclusion**

232 In conclusion, the central problem facing any theory of collective responsibility is
233 whether a collective can accrue a sufficient measure of intentionality to satisfy the conditions of
234 moral responsibility. By constructing a theory of the categorized collective, a methodology is
235 found for determining and describing the strength of a collective’s intentionality. While this
236 theory does not answer all of the potential problems of intentionality as a condition of collective
237 responsibility, it does provide a framework to explore collective responsibility in a full sense
238 without resorting to clever distinctions.