THE PROBLEM OF COLLECTIVE INTENTIONAL ACTION:

The Case for the Categorized Collective

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to make a case for the theory of a categorized collective and to develop how it better explains the *Problem of Collective Intentional Action* as a condition of moral responsibility. The paper first develops and critically analyzes a desideratum for the theory of a categorized collective. This desideratum has a five-step structure: 1) describing the nature of a valid collective; 2) defining the measure of collectivization; 3) quantifying the level of obligation; 4) characterizing the categorized collective; and 5) developing and explaining the accrual of responsibility within the collective. The desideratum’s conclusion is that the strength of a collective’s intentionality as a condition of responsibility is best developed and explained by the theory of a categorized collective. To test the theory, an argument against the theory is explored in the paper. Specifically, the argument that a collective ‘cannot act’ intentionally in the sense of an individual is explored. Finally, this argument against our theory of the categorized collective is refuted. By using our theory of a categorized collective, we find that a collective ‘can act’ intentionally because the theory posits that intentionality rests in the categorized collective’s decision-making structure, self-interests, and behaviors. While the
paper’s case for this theory does not answer all of the potential problems of intentionality as a condition of collective responsibility, it does provide a framework for fully exploring collective moral responsibility with respect to intentional action.
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I. Introduction

The basic problem with explanations of collective responsibility is that they tend to overgeneralize what constitutes a collective. This overgeneralization muddles the issue of how a collective can accrue responsibility based on the six conditions of collective responsibility.¹ For instance, it seems clear that highly organized nations and corporations have the ability to act in a complex intentional manner. However, does this acting represent the intentional actions of the collective or the actions of a powerful individual operating within the rules structure of the collective?² In either case how do we measure responsibility and apply it to moral actions? Do we measure responsibility based on the collective or individuals’ intentional actions?³ Do we then measure the individuals’ responsibility for collective intentional actions from a Normative, Functionalist, Structuralist, or Rational Choice Perspectives?⁴ Do we apply the responsibility to...

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.”


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

II. Critical analysis

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

A. Nature of a valid collective

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

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

6 New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, Fifth Edition, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), CD-ROM Version 2.0. It defines cohesion as “The action or condition of sticking together or cohering; a tendency to remain united.” Additionally, cohere is defined as 1) “Coincide, to come together in agreement”; and 2) “Be consistent, be congruous in substance, tenor, or general effect.”
structure; 3) there are homogeneous and/or dominant self-interests; and 4) there is a behavioral pattern. By way of the conditions of collective union and responsibility, we make a distinction between ‘mere groups’ or ‘random collectives’ such as aggregates, crowds, and riots and valid collectives. The main distinction is that ‘random collectives’ or aggregates lack the intrinsic decision-making structure to be capable of acting in a responsible or intentional manner. The interactive relatedness of the conditions is also important to note. By this, it is meant that each condition, to an extent, shares a symbiotic relationship within the collective as a whole.

1. Cohesion

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

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

8 J. Angelo Corlett, *Responsibility and Punishment*, p. 93 and pp. 94-95. If an agent, whether it be a group or individual, cannot act intentionally; then it cannot fulfill the main sufficient condition of responsibility.
political in character. They are extrinsic to the individuals of the collective, yet they provide the
impetus to form the individuals into a collective.

2. Decision-making structure

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

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

¹⁰ J. Angelo Corlett, *Responsibility and Punishment*, p. 89. In the citation, 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.”

3. Homogeneous and/or dominant self-interests

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

4. Pattern of behavior

Finally, a valid collective has a pattern of behavior. This pattern of behavior of the collective manifests itself through the complex interaction of the internal and external cohesion acting in collaboration with the decision-making structure and homogeneous self-interest of the collective. Taken in collaboration, unison, or blending, they form an observable pattern of actions, reactions, interactions, or behaviors that are characteristic to the collective. They become apparent in the responses made by the collective to the situations and stimulus of
world’s political, biological, and economic environment. The pattern of behavior of a collective is the product of its interaction and reaction with the environment.

B. The measure of collectivization

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

C. The level of obligation

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

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13 Kathy Schwalbe, *Information Technology Project Management*, pp. 34.
the individuals have to the collective shapes their dependence to the collective. Hechter posits four factors that shape dependence and extensiveness: 1) The supply of close substitutes; 2) Lack of information about alternatives; 3) Costs of moving; and 4) The strength of personal ties. By examining ‘The supply of close substitutes’ we find that as the number of alternative collectives grows, the ability of each collective to enforce dependence decreases. The decreased dependence is a low measure of collectivization. However, the factors are interrelated in a symbiotic fashion. Therefore when measuring the level of obligation to determine the measure of collectivization, the interrelation of all four factors becomes evident. This type of analysis reveals the level of obligation or dependency within the collective.

D. Categorized collectives

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

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

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

fundamental robustness to a categorized collective. The generalized version of each type of collective is next separately considered.\textsuperscript{17}

1. Confederations

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

2. Governmental

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

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

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{18} Kathy Schwalbe, \textit{Information Technology Project Management}, pp. 34.}
3. Corporate

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

4. Partnerships

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

E. How collectives accrue moral responsibility

Categorized collectives accrue responsibility based on whether they are 1) a valid collective, 2) their measure of collectivization within the conditions of collective union, 3) the level of obligation of the categorized collective, and 4) the type of categorized collective. The examination of the four aspects of a particular categorized collective allows us to arrive at an
objective level of responsibility of the collective. In particular, a strong measure of
collectivization, with a requisite decision-making structure, characterizes collectives with high
objective levels of responsibility. It makes sense that intentionality, in terms of the conditions of
responsibility, exists in a collective that has an objective level of responsibility, i.e., the existence
of intentionality means that a categorized collective can and does act intentionally in a
responsible sense.

III. Argument against intentionality

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

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

20 We assume that an individual is considered in possession of their full mental faculties.
may be solely the intentional actions of an individual and not the collective. Therefore can we
ascibe moral responsibility to the collective? We cannot.  

IV. Rebuttal to argument against intentionality

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

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

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

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

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

VI. Conclusion

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