

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Person-to-Group Ties

In the fall of 2007, Alex Rodriguez, a star baseball player for the New York Yankees, opted to exercise an option in his contract to become a “free agent.” This allowed him to negotiate a new contract with any team prepared to bid for his services. He had two years left on his contract with the Yankees, so he did not need to do this. His stated reasons for opting out were uncertainty about the direction of the Yankee organization (which was undergoing management changes at the time) and concerns that some other players on the team whose contracts had expired might not be re-signed. The message he conveyed was that these other players were valuable and important teammates to him. The media and many fans wondered, however, why Rodriguez had not simply waited another ten days or so before declaring free agency, because the results of Yankee negotiations with the other players would have been known by then. Nathan Lawler, the eight-year-old grandson of one of the authors, insightfully captured the sentiment of most Yankee fans when he said, after seeing an ESPN report on these developments, “I don’t think A-Rod cares what team he plays on.” Less generous interpretations from fans were that he was “greedy,” “only out for himself,” and a glaring example of what was wrong with professional sports.

Fans and the general public interpreted Rodriguez’s actions and statements as indicating that “being a Yankee” was not of significant value to him. He was treating his ties to the Yankees as purely transactional, that is, as purely a matter

of getting the best individual deal. The response of the Yankee organization was quite negative. Representing the ownership family, Hank Steinbrenner said: "If you don't want to be a Yankee . . . we don't want you, that's the bottom line." "If we are going to make you rich and we're going to give you the privilege of being a Yankee, you've got to show us you want to be here" (Curry, Jack, and Tyler Kepner. 2007. "For Rodriguez and Yankees, It's all but over." *New York Times*, October 29, 2007). The Yankee organization made it clear that it wanted players who intrinsically valued "being a Yankee" and thus saw the affiliation as something special, something self-defining and identity-affirming. In broader conceptual terms, they expected players to form a relational tie to the organization, that is, a person-to-group tie of intrinsic or expressive value. Such ties have a significant emotional and affective component. From the Yankee organization's standpoint, what may begin as a transactional tie, formed contractually when a player joins the team, has to become a relational tie by the time of contract renegotiation. Alex Rodriguez's behavior did not convey such a relational tie, and the Yankee organization balked.

Interestingly, a contrasting message came from Wall Street, one that supported and encouraged Alex Rodriguez's transactional approach to his association with the Yankees. A subsequent article in the *New York Times* (Belson, Ken. 2007. "Rodriguez not greedy by standard of Wall St." October 30, 2007) suggested that, by Wall Street standards, Alex Rodriguez's vigorous quest for a higher salary was not only appropriate but even laudable. The article quoted James Melcher, founder and chief executive of Balestra Capital, a hedge fund in New York: "Not only do I have no problem with it, I'm cheering him on." Similarly, Daniel Alpert of Westwood Capital in New York was quoted in the *Times* article as saying: "There's nothing coldblooded about it. He's pricing himself to what the market will bear. This isn't charity." Underlying this Wall Street view is the notion that only transactional ties make sense for both employees and employers in the modern world. Whereas fans and the Yankee organization emphasized the importance of relational person-to-group ties, in which a player (employee) accords value to membership itself, the Wall Street reaction emphasized the transactional and instrumental ties of the marketplace.¹

Negotiating an employment contract is inherently a transactional matter, and Rodriguez's behavior reflected this. Yet, over time, a group or organizational affiliation may take on intrinsic value, and this example conveys the sensitivity of organizations to the sort of commitments to them made by members or

employees. Employees who credibly show such commitment may reap local benefits or rewards that compensate for the costs of not pursuing their market wage or salary, and employers that operate with a purely transactional perspective on employees may generate weaker and more fragile ties between employees and the organization, making it easy for employees to leave when they have a better financial offer. The importance of relational ties is likely to vary with the organization and its management; person-to-firm relations on Wall Street, for instance, reputedly approach the transactional extreme.

The contrasting responses to Rodriguez's actions may reflect larger, global changes in the sort of ties people develop to their work organizations. Player-team ties certainly appear to be more transactional and less relational today than thirty years ago. Similarly, prevailing employee-employer contracts are more transactional today than in the past, primarily because of the demise of the standard employment contract of the midtwentieth century, which assumed continuous, lifetime employment with the same organization and linear careers that could be accomplished internally within a given firm. The response of the Yankee organization may reflect an outdated, anachronistic conception of person-to-group ties, whereas the Wall Street response may capture appropriate practical wisdom for the twenty-first century. This raises an important and timely question: if, as many analysts suggest, the world is becoming more transactional and market-oriented, what role do person-to-group ties play?

This volume argues that there are fundamental social conditions under which transactional, purely instrumental ties to a group tend to become relational and expressive. We reframe the transactional-relational issue as a problem of social commitment and conceive this problem as bearing on the classic Hobbesian question: how is social order possible? Social commitments are construed here as distinct from purely instrumental or transactional ones in that they are non-instrumental and infused with emotion or affect. They entail person-to-group ties with an emotional or affective component and have the capacity to generate group-oriented cooperation and collaboration more effectively and efficiently than transactional ties alone.

PERSON-TO-PERSON TIES AND PERSON-TO-GROUP TIES

People develop social commitments or ties to other people with whom they interact as well as to the small groups, organizations, and communities that constitute the larger context for their social interactions. This implies two fundamental

types of social ties: those between people, or person-to-person (P-P) ties, and those between people and their social units, or person-to-group (P-G) ties. We may come to enjoy and value either or both of these ties as ends in themselves, rendering those ties relational. If we value person-to-group ties in themselves, we orient our behavior to the expectations and interests of the group; if we value ties to particular people in themselves, we orient our behavior to the expectations and interests of those people. Relational ties can involve both person-to-person and person-to-group ties.²

Person-to-person and person-to-group ties are likely to be interconnected, but there is not necessarily a one-to-one correspondence between them. Moreover, the valence of these ties can differ. People may be strongly committed to a group without necessarily being strongly committed to its members, and vice versa (see Prentice, Miller, and Lightdale 1994). For example, a baseball player may have strong ties to his team, such as the Yankees, but weak ties to fellow players; or he may have strong ties to many fellow team players but weak ties to the team or larger organization. The main point is that people may be attached to their group but not to the individuals in it, or they may be attached to individuals in their group but not to their group. Person-to-group ties may be harder to establish or sustain in the diverse, globalizing world of the twenty-first century as traditional group ties loosen and become more fluid and as interpersonal ties become more transitory and based on less frequent face-to-face interaction. Yet it is precisely these sorts of conditions that also make person-to-group ties a more important source of commitment and social order.

The contrast between person-to-person and person-to-group ties is implicit in classic theories of sociology that deal with how social orders come about and are maintained. George Herbert Mead (1934) differentiated interactions with specific others from interactions with a generalized other, characterizing the latter as involving the society or community. Taking the role of a generalized other tends to foster different behaviors than taking the role of specific others in a social situation because the generalized other represents the normative framework and moral fabric of the larger community as a whole. Talcott Parsons (1951) portrayed person-to-person relations and person-to-group relations as two analytically independent dimensions of social order at the macro or societal level. While he argued that social order is based on both the ties among people and their common ties to a larger social unit, Parsons emphasized the person-to-group dimension. The theorizing of Mead and Parsons implies that the person-to-group dimension is especially important to the binding together of large,

dispersed populations of people who lack direct ties to one other. Direct ties to the larger unit make direct ties to other members less important as a source of order and stability.³ The next section treats several examples from routine aspects of daily life that illustrate the distinctive roles of person-to-person and person-to-group ties, as well as how they may be interconnected.

Some Everyday Examples

In this section, we compare the social ties in a hair salon, morning coffee shop, or residential neighborhood, beginning with the hair salon.

Assume that you frequent a particular hair salon and a particular stylist. Your relationship with that particular hairdresser developed gradually through “trial and error” or repeated visits. The first time you had your hair cut at this salon, you may have been pleased with the work, so you went back. You got to know the hair stylist and the other staff in the hair salon. You developed feelings toward your own hairdresser and also toward the hair salon as a whole, based on how salon staff treated you when you made an appointment, on the appearance or “feel” of the salon, and so forth. Your tie to the particular person (the hair stylist) is likely to have developed prior to your tie or commitment to the social unit (the hair salon). This raises interesting questions: Under what conditions would you develop a commitment not only to your hairdresser but also to the salon? If your preferred hair stylist were to move to another salon in the area, would you stay with the salon or move to the other salon with your stylist? These questions boil down to an issue of whether the person-to-person social commitment is stronger for the customer than the person-to-group commitment. This issue can be generalized to organizations in which people work; to ties that clients develop to particular employees—such as a broker in a financial firm—or to the larger employer; to the communities or local neighborhoods where they live; and to their national identities or affiliations.

Next, take the example of a coffee shop that you frequent each morning, as do some other “regulars.” You have all chosen this coffee shop based on its convenience, its ambience, the quality of the coffee, the friendliness of the staff, and so forth. Even in large cities where many options are available, one often finds the same people having coffee at the same place, morning after morning. Regardless of the specific basis for your repeated morning presence (the coffee, convenience, ambience), a minimal social commitment to the place itself brings you in contact with other regulars. You recognize and come to acknowledge each other, and some of you strike up conversations and form relationships.

The presence of regulars further enhances the feelings of comfort and ease among those of you who are at the coffee shop day after day. In this example, the tie to the group (the coffee shop) precedes and helps to foster person-to-person relationships among the regular customers. Moreover, while these relationships may entail rather minimal ties or commitments, they need not be deep to have important effects on patrons' behavior and loyalty. Person-to-group ties, however shallow and minimal, can foster a sense of community in places where anonymity, depersonalization, and the privatization of lives prevail.

Finally, take the example of moving to a new neighborhood. Both relations to particular neighbors and to the neighborhood are likely to develop in tandem. You do not move into the neighborhood because of a particular neighbor—as you might go to a particular hair salon because of a hair stylist—but neither does your commitment to the neighborhood develop prior to your ties to your neighbors, as with the coffee shop. You certainly choose a neighborhood when you buy a house, but your ties to the neighborhood and especially your ties to particular neighbors tend to form after your move. You may develop strong social ties to particular neighbors before your ties to the neighborhood develop, or you may become more closely tied to your neighborhood than to your neighbors. This has important consequences for how you relate to others and to the neighborhood—for example, in your willingness to give time, effort, or other valued benefits to the neighborhood as such. The neighborhood case is similar to that of new employees entering an organization: differences in the ties to coworkers and the organization can be quite important.

A comparison of these examples suggests that the interrelationships of person-to-person and person-to-group ties are complex and vary significantly. In the case of the hair salon, the person-to-person tie fosters the person-to-group tie. The former occurs within the latter, and the group (the hair salon) makes possible the valued person-to-person tie. In the coffee shop, the person-to-group tie generates person-to-person ties by bringing people who do not know each other together in the first place. In the neighborhood case, the person-to-person and person-to-group ties do not form in any particular sequence or causal order. Either could emanate from the other, or both could emerge simultaneously. Our theory of social commitments emphasizes the role of person-to-group ties without necessarily presuming a particular causal order vis-à-vis person-to-person ties. The theory of social commitments indicates how and when social interactions generate person-to-group ties *de novo*, but also how and when they make salient and activate an already existing person-to-group tie.

The hair salon, coffee shop, and neighborhood examples also illustrate the subtlety and pervasiveness of micro social orders, that is, relatively stable and smooth ongoing patterns of behavior and interaction at the local level. People can anticipate what is likely to happen in each situation, their expectations are generally confirmed, and the confirmation of their expectations further solidifies the micro order. A key reason for this is simply that each situation is experienced repeatedly by a given person with at least some of the same others. If the same people interact repeatedly, chances are that they will develop standard, stable, and predictable ways of dealing with each other (Homans 1950; Collins 2004) and also standard, predictable ways of dealing with the overarching social unit. We treat micro-level social orders as involving repeated interaction between two or more people in which they (1) orient their behavior to others or to the group; (2) experience emotions, both positive or negative; (3) perceive a social unit (group); and (4) develop affective sentiments about other members and the social unit in the course of repeated interaction (see Lawler, Thye, and Yoon 2008). These four dimensions can be applied to most everyday situations. They also can be extended to social order at the macro level.

THE PROBLEM OF SOCIAL ORDER AND PERSON-TO-GROUP TIES

Thomas Hobbes's (1651/1985) analysis of the problem of social order implicitly involved both person-to-person and person-to-group ties. His fundamental argument was that because the human species is prone to avarice, force, aggression, and malfeasance, people are highly vulnerable to each other. The social world in a hypothetical "state of nature" without person-to-group ties was conceived as precarious, dangerous, and anarchic. Without the external constraint of (sovereign) authority, the ties among people in a population (person-to-person ties) would descend into a "war of all against all." For Hobbes, facing a war of all against all, the human species is saved by its instinct for self-preservation and capacity for reason. These qualities lead individuals to rationally form ongoing human associations and communities that, in our terms, create strong person-to-group ties in the form of social contracts wherein people accept group constraints in exchange for individual protection and safety. These associations are contractual and transactional in form. In sum, the source of the problem was at the person-to-person level, but it could not be solved there. Contractual person-to-group ties were necessary to reduce chaos and disorder at the person-to-person level.⁴

Contractual solutions to the problem of social order have important appeal, in part because transactional ties are integral to the daily experience of most people and in part because implicit contracts are often as important and binding as explicit ones (see Hechter 1987; Coleman 1990). In a modern version of the Hobbesian contractual solution, Michael Hechter (1987) offers a theory of solidarity indicating that the more dependent people are on a group for goods they cannot produce alone or in other combinations, the more extensive are their obligations to that group. People accept and comply with norms defining their obligations to the extent that they receive individual benefits from the collective or joint goods produced by the group. Hechter's theory emphasizes person-to-group ties and conceives of these as purely transactional. People tie themselves to and remain in a group only insofar as it provides them with individual benefits better than could be obtained elsewhere (either from acting alone or in other groups). Rational-choice principles—such as profit maximization—shape and govern contractual ties.

There also are notable noncontractual, nonrational solutions to the problem of order, offered by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966), Randall Collins (1981, 2004), Thomas Scheff (1990), Philip Selznick (1992), Dennis Wrong (1994), and others. These have an implicit or explicit institutional theme, indicating that standard ways of doing things become taken for granted, assumed, and normative. Here repetition of a practice or pattern of interaction occurs for its own sake, because “this is what people do in this situation.” In short, it is expected. From an institutional framework, social order emerges from and is manifest in patterns and practices that are sustained and reproduced in social interaction (Collins 1981). Clubs, neighborhoods, professional associations, corporations, communities, and nations all reveal regular patterns of human interaction that reflect local or larger institutional practices and ties, formal or informal, and the social interactions within them. In fact, Wrong (1994, 5) boils down the problem of social order to “the predictability of human conduct on the basis of common, stable expectations.” This is a micro translation of the larger social order, which posits consistency and convergence between the micro and macro social realms of human experience (see also Collins 1975, 1981).⁵

Macro and micro realms, however, may be divergent or unconnected as well as convergent. Social order should be especially resilient when the local micro processes activate, translate, and reproduce macro structural patterns and cultural beliefs (see Lawler, Ridgeway, and Markovsky 1993; Berger, Ridgeway, and Zelditch 2002). In turn, such orders are weakened if there is a

disjuncture or lack of connection between the micro and macro realms. Anyone who has worked in a highly decentralized organization has probably seen up close the disconnect and disjuncture between the macro organization (the corporation or company) and the local unit (the division, department, or work team). If there is a disconnect or divergence between micro and macro conditions, one would expect this to be manifest in the relationship that people have to the local micro group versus the larger macro group.

In this volume, we theorize how and when person-to-group ties forge connections and resolve disjuncture between local micro conditions and more distant macro conditions. These also are conditions under which people transform rationally based contractual ties into noncontractual relational ties. This chapter concludes with an overview of the theoretical argument.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE ARGUMENT

The main line of argument is that person-to-group ties are produced and reproduced through recurrent social interactions between those who share a group affiliation. Local, immediate person-to-person ties give rise to or activate existing person-to-group ties that essentially define and interpret the overarching similarities among people who share the group affiliations, even if they do not or never will interact with many of them. For example, national and ethnic identities may be contingent in part on social interactions with only a few others who share that identity, but in a context that makes the identity salient and valued. Moreover, person-to-group ties are likely to be infused with emotion and affect for one very simple reason: when people interact with others, they tend to experience mild, everyday feelings, and under some conditions people associate these feelings with a shared group affiliation or membership. This emotional or affective component is a distinctive feature of our theory, and it enables us to explain how and when person-to-group ties transcend transactional beginnings and become relational and expressive.

Our theorizing of person-to-group ties interweaves three basic themes regarding individual emotions, repeated interactions, and joint tasks or activities. The first theme is that emotion and affect play a role in person-to-group ties or social commitments. Emotion and affect ostensibly give commitments considerable resilience and strength, in part because of their visceral, gut-level quality. Further, emotion-based commitment is strong because emotions typically are associated with meanings and identities created and reproduced in local micro situations—that is, in interaction with other people. Emotion and

affect also are important because they are subject to only limited social controls from above. Organizations, communities, and nations may exercise control over what people see and do in public settings, but they have decidedly less control over what people feel and how they interpret and use their feelings in their local, immediate interactions. Larger social units also cannot fully control the inferences that people make about their ties to larger social units such as their work organization, community, or nation.

The second theme is that repetitive social interaction with the same others has enormous social impact. It is almost a truism to say that people who repeatedly or recurrently interact adjust their behaviors, cognitions, and feelings to one another in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. While people significantly influence one another in the process, these interactions are also a potential source of independence from larger social units, whether these are voluntary associations, work organizations, or nations. A central component of our theoretical argument is that micro-level social interactions are prime engines for emotion and affect. It is therefore noteworthy that the major social transformations associated with globalization free large numbers of people to interact (or attempt to interact) with a very wide range of other people in different places around the world. The question for us is to explain how and when people's everyday emotions lead to enduring affective sentiments about their groups, organizations, communities, or nations, which can be construed as a form of voluntary, noncontractual constraint on individual action.

The third theme is that joint activity is fundamental to understanding the emotional aspects of social interactions and social commitments. Social interactions tend to have an instrumental basis because joint activities involve some sort of implicit or explicit exchange or transfer of benefits by each party to the other—for example, reciprocity. We develop the argument that these interactions, even if purely instrumental, produce emotions that transform the instrumental tie into an expressive tie. Thus, there is a common, underlying emotional or affective process that explains how people form and maintain social commitments across different types of social units, from small groups to work organizations to communities to nations. Our theory integrates the implied rational, instrumental foundation of exchanges between people and between people and organizations with the nonrational emotional or affective experiences of people involved in social interaction and exchange.

In sum, we aim to understand how people develop and sustain person-to-group social commitments. What exogenous structural or cultural conditions

enhance the opportunity for or possibility of such ties? What endogenous interaction processes lead to the actualization of strong or weak person-to-group ties or commitments? At the heart of our theory are endogenous emotional and affective mechanisms that promote and sustain person-to-group ties that are valued in themselves. This is essentially a social process that is common to groups of virtually any type or size, from small work groups to nation-states. Thus, we adopt a “generalizing strategy” that has the merit of yielding relatively simple, parsimonious, broadly applicable principles. Such principles can help us understand in general terms how people themselves create order in the context of apparent chaos and, in the process, strengthen overarching commonalities across vastly different populations. These principles also help to analyze and frame how organizational policies may overcome the fragmentation and internal conflicts endemic to large, complex, multinational, and decentralized organizations.