Chapter 1

Peer Groups in a Cultural Context

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Introduction

This book is concerned with children's experiences of peer groups, and the implications of those experiences for children's development. The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers two definitions of the word "peer," namely, "a person of the same standing or rank as the person in question" and "a person of the same age-group or social set as the person in question." According to Ladd (2005), psychologists typically emphasize the age dimension, referring "to people who are born around the same time as agemates or peers" (p. 2). Yet, like many anthropologists (Konner, 1975), Ladd also draws out the extrafamilial quality of peers: they are non-family members of similar age to the person in question, and (potentially at least) of similar standing or rank. Children's peers are conceptualized in a parallel fashion for the purposes of this book, in other words as other children who are of similar age to the child under scrutiny and potentially also of similar standing or rank, and who are not members of the same family. The interest is in children's experiences of the groups to which they belong together with one or more peers, and the groups containing two or more peers who they witness as outsiders. The developmental consequences of these experiences are analyzed with a view to informing both research and practice. Thus, the book is intended to address the research interests of psychologists and educationalists, as well as the practical concerns of teachers, parents, counselors, and policy makers. It is also intended to inform theoretical development.

While one of the book's goals is to be theory informing, the starting point is emphatically not a position of theoretical neutrality. On the contrary, facts about the status of peer groups in children's lives demand a perspective that is broadly sociocultural. This does not necessarily mean sociocultural in the specific sense developed by Vygotsky (e.g., 1962, 1978) and his numerous followers, and no doubt familiar to many readers. Rather, it means merely a perspective on peer groups that recognizes the broader cultural and historical contexts in which these groups are embedded. This perspective is consistent with Vygotsky but more general, and the present chapter starts by showing why it is necessary and what it implies. In particular, a sociocultural perspective on peer groups imposes constraints upon how developmental influences should be theorized, and the chapter's central section spells these constraints out. Having specified what amounts to a theoretical framework for taking matters forward, the chapter concludes with an overview of the material that follows. Key constructs like "groups," "children," and "development" are defined, and the structure and contents of subsequent chapters are summarized. The manner in which the book serves practical and research goals is outlined.

Cultural Dependency

I can perhaps best explain why a sociocultural perspective is needed through sketching two scenarios, both involving one day in the life of a 9-year-old girl. The first girl lives in the small village in Scotland (United Kingdom) where I myself resided for more than 20 years. This girl rises at about 7:30 a.m., has breakfast with her family, gets washed and dressed, and shortly before 9:00 a.m. is driven by her mother to the village primary school, which is located about one mile from her home. At school, she is placed in a class with 24 other children of similar age, but most of the morning's activity takes place with a subset of her classmates. After registration, she sits down with her "math set" (six children of similar mathematical ability), for instruction in mathematics. This involves cycles of teacher instruction directed at the whole set, followed by individual problem solving in workbooks while the teacher focuses on a different set. Mid-morning, the class breaks for playtime, and the girl goes outside to relax in the playground with her three closest friends (all girls). The second half of the morning is mostly occupied with language instruction (primarily reading and writing) in further ability-defined sets. The composition of the girl's language set differs slightly from the composition of her math set, although once more the session is structured around teacher instruction directed at the whole set followed by individual study. Shortly after midday, the class breaks once more, and the girl rejoins her close friends to eat lunch and play outside. The afternoon's teaching is mainly devoted to an ongoing project on the Roman Empire, and in contrast to the morning involves teacher instruction directed at the whole class plus follow-up exercises, which the children address collaboratively in small, mixed-ability groups. School finishes around 3:00 p.m., whereupon the girl is taken home by car, has her tea, and in the early evening is driven to Brownies, where she finds many girls from her school (from her own class and from one age band above and one age band below). The girl's day ends with television and mid-evening bedtime.

The second 9-year-old girl lives in the remote village in the Gambia (West Africa) that I was privileged to visit during 2005. This girl's day begins at dawn, whereupon she rises, gets dressed, and helps to dress three younger members of the household (aged 2, 3, and 5 years) while her mother feeds the baby. Her mother then prepares breakfast, which the girl eats in a large family group that includes her father, her mother, her father's other wives, and her siblings and half-siblings. After breakfast, the adults go to work in the fields, taking the baby with them, and the 7- and 9-year-old boys set off on foot for the village school. The girl is left with the 2-, 3-, and 5-year-old children, who accompany her as she fetches water from the village well for washing up, and carries out other household chores. At the well, she chats with other girls of similar age, who are also accompanied by younger siblings and half-siblings. Once the chores have been completed, the girl has time for playing at home with the younger children before one of her father's wives returns to prepare lunch. Lunch is eaten with the full family group, and as far as the girl is concerned, the morning routine is more or less repeated from after lunch until supper. On the other hand, the 7- and 9-year-old boys do not return to school, but play soccer (and similar games) with other village boys. The family group reconvenes for supper, which is followed by music and dancing with other families from the village. With no electricity or gas, the village is poorly illuminated, so bedtime comes early.

There are many similarities between the two scenarios. For instance, both girls live in family units, receive care from their mothers, eat meals at similar times, and engage in alternating cycles of work and play. However, there are also many differences, including the one that is crucial for this book: involvement in peer groups. Construed as non-family members of similar age (and possibly similar standing and rank), it is clear that peers play a significant role in the Scottish girl's life, for she spends a great deal of time in groups that include her peers. Her school class is one such group, as are her math set, her language set, and the mixed-ability group in which she is studying the Roman Empire. Further peer groups are the friends with whom she spends school playtime and the lunch break, and the Brownies whom she meets in the evening. It is possible therefore that peer groups make an important contribution to her development. By contrast, the Gambian girl spends very little time in peer groups. She meets peers when fetching water from the village well, and during the evening's music and dancing. However, most of her day is spent with individuals of lower age, standing and rank (younger siblings and half-siblings) or higher age, standing and rank (parents, other adults in the family group, and other adults from the village). Thus, her development into an adult member of her society must take place largely independently of peer groups.

The contrast between the Scottish and Gambian scenarios over peer group experiences should not be regarded as a categorical statement about the two cultures, let alone about other cultures. Within Scotland, the extent of peer group experiences is influenced by geographical location, that is, urban, suburban, village, or truly rural. In the sparsely populated highland and island regions, school classes (and therefore also within-class subgroups) normally contain widely divergent age groups (Wilson, 2003). Location is undoubtedly also relevant in the Gambia, as of course is gender. The older boys in the scenario have more extensive peer group experiences than the female protagonist, by virtue both of attending school and of playing games in the village. Anthropological studies in Kenya (Whiting & Whiting, 1991), New Guinea (Herdt, 1987), and Nigeria (Ottenberg, 1988) indicate that gender differences over peer group experiences are typical in traditional societies. One reason is thought to be the role of peer groups in patriarchal cultures in "weaning" boys from the feminine culture of the household, especially when entry into the more formal of these peer groups is often associated with demanding initiation rites. Nevertheless, despite within-culture variation, the cross-cultural differences over peer group experiences that are highlighted in the two scenarios do seem to be valid *on average*. Crucial evidence has emerged from Whiting and Edwards' (1988) study of children aged 2 to 10 years from 12 communities located in India, Japan, Kenya, Liberia, Mexico, the Philippines, and the United States, but research has been conducted in other countries too (reviewed in Edwards, 1992). The general message is that while most children throughout Europe, and indeed North America and Australasia, have extensive experiences of peer groups, the limited experiences mapped here for a 9-year-old girl from the Gambia occur in other parts of Africa, and in many countries in Asia and South America.

Discussions of why peer group experiences are pervasive across some cultures and marginal across others have focused on schooling (Edwards, 1992; Rogoff, 2003). All cultures that provide schooling (and nowadays most do, to some degree) aspire to organize this around classes that are comprised of peer groups. This is not to say that the aspiration is always realized. As noted already in relation to Scotland, low population density is one factor that precludes this. Nevertheless, schooling is characteristically structured to approximate as closely as possible to the peer group target. Moreover, when schooling is organized around peer groups, other facilities follow. These include preschool institutions, such as nurseries, playgroups, and toddler groups, and formal out-of-school provision, such as sports associations (soccer, swimming), youth movements (Brownies, Scouts), and classes for the performing arts (dance, drama). Because informal relations like friendships are often forged in school and related contexts, these too will typically be peer based. The implication therefore is that in cultures where schooling is universal, most children will have extensive experiences of peer groups. In cultures where schooling is not universal, some children will have limited experiences. Insofar as gender often predicts access to schooling in such cultures, for reasons of patriarchy as discussed above, the influence of schooling is typically to perpetuate asymmetries over peer group experiences that already exist, while no doubt changing their form.

This book focuses on children who are members of societies where schooling is mandatory for all of the relevant age group, and therefore extensive peer group experiences are taken for granted. This is not to say that these experiences map precisely onto the Scottish scenario. On the contrary, there is, as we shall see, considerable variation within and between cultures in the form that the experiences take. However, the variation is in form not extent, for the extent of peer group experiences where schooling is mandatory can be assumed to be constant and substantial. Being constant as well as substantial, it is easy to forget that the experiences result from specific cultural practices, especially schooling, when (as here) focusing only on societies where schooling is mandatory. It is, in other words, easy to overlook Mueller and Tingley's (1989) point that peer associations are best understood as recent products of cultural evolution rather than as ancient outcomes of biological evolution. Nevertheless, overlooking the point would be a serious error, for, as signaled already, the sociocultural perspective that is necessitated carries important implications for theoretical analysis. These implications also apply to other "recent products of cultural evolution" such as television and the Internet, although not necessarily to the bonds forged between mothers and infants; after all, these bonds (no matter how culturally overlaid) do have foundations in evolutionary biology. Thus, it is important to spell out the implications of cultural dependency, and this is what the next section attempts to do. A theoretical framework is developed that acknowledges the cultural dependency of children's peer group experiences. The framework is extended and embellished as the book progresses.

Theoretical Framework

The fact that peer group experiences result from recent (and non-universal) cultural developments does not render them inconsequential in the cultures where they occur. On the contrary, just as many have argued in relation to television and the Internet, they could have profound implications for children's development. It is indeed possible that, as Ladd (2005) suggests, "peers make a significant and enduring contribution to children's socialization and development" (p. 11), so long as this claim is not taken as asserting a cross-cultural universal. Nevertheless, because peer group experiences are culturally dependent, any implications that they do have in cultures where they are pervasive are unlikely to be specific to peer groups. Equally, the mechanisms by which implications are realized are unlikely to apply only in peer group contexts. Specialized functions and specialized mechanisms usually depend on biological evolution, and the evolution of relevance is cultural.

The implications of cultural evolution need to be emphasized, for specialized contributions have frequently been proposed in the context of children's peer groups. They are implicit in mass media portrayals, where there is a tendency to treat peer groups in a uniquely negative light. In particular, peer groups are frequently depicted as having unrivaled capacities for leading children astray by undoing the "good work" that families and teachers achieve. Beyond this, specialized contributions have been proposed in the research literature, including from some extremely influential theorists. The present section begins by outlining two examples, with a view not to criticize but rather to developing an alternative approach that respects the cultural dimension. The approach is then contrasted with a further model that shares the present sociocultural perspective.

Piaget and Sullivan

The two theorists to be considered are the Swiss developmental psychologist (or, as he would have preferred, "genetic epistemologist") Jean

Piaget, and Piaget's American contemporary Harry Stack Sullivan. Discussing one of his earliest studies with school-age children, Piaget (1926) noted that children's speech to peers is considerably less "egocentric" than their speech to adults, egocentric speech being speech that is not adapted to what the listener has just said. Piaget suggested that the difference stems from contrasting power relations. Because adults are more powerful than children, children assimilate adult opinions unthinkingly, and therefore see no reason to engage with these opinions conversationally. By contrast, the more equal relations with peers motivate children to coordinate the opinions that peers express with their own views, compare the two sets of opinions, and when differences are detected comment accordingly. A few years later, Piaget (1932) suggested that coordination and comparison between existing views and alternatives are necessary conditions for cognitive development, and, in line with his earlier discussion of egocentrism, proposed that collaborative activity with peers is uniquely structured to support such coordination and comparison. He further claimed (in translation from French) that "if, then, we had to choose from among the totality of existing educational systems those which would best correspond with our psychological results, we would turn our methods in the direction of what has been called 'group work' and 'self-government' " (Piaget, 1932, p. 412).

As a psychoanalyst, Sullivan was primarily interested in the development of personality, in contrast to Piaget's emphasis upon cognition. However, like Piaget, he believed that peer groups have a crucial role to play for school-age children. In his classic book *The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry* (Sullivan, 1953), he spelled the role out, suggesting that it changes subtly across the "juvenile" and "preadolescence" eras. The juvenile era begins when children start school and continues for between three and five years. During this era, children learn to subordinate to non-family authority figures such as teachers, and also to accommodate to what they notice about their peers. Specifically, children compare their own characteristics with those displayed by peers, and conclude either that their own characteristics are superior (competitive accommodation) or that their peers' characteristics are worth emulating (compromise accommodation). For instance, writing about competitive accommodation, Sullivan comments that "when the juvenile acquires a pattern of relating himself to someone else which works and is approved, he simply knows that what he is doing is right" (Sullivan, 1953, p. 234). The preadolescence era starts around 8½ to 10 years of age when, according to Sullivan, children first acquire same-sex "chums." With chums, children engage in forms of interaction that require sensitivity to other people's feelings, forms of interaction that Sullivan styled as "collaborative." As with juvenile accommodation, collaboration with chums was regarded as crucial for the development of personality, with Sullivan claiming that "validation of personal worth requires a type of relationship, which I call collaboration, by which I mean clearly formulated adjustments of one's behaviour to the expressed needs of the other person in the pursuit of increasingly identical—that is, more and more nearly mutual—satisfactions" (Sullivan, 1953, p. 246).

Neither Piaget nor Sullivan believed that peer groups provide the only context for children's development. At least half of Sullivan's 1953 book is devoted to the critical role that the family plays in the pre-juvenile era, a role that is construed in more or less standard psychoanalytic terms. Piaget had little to say about social influences on preschool children, but he recognized substantial developmental change during the first years of life, and it would be inconsistent with his theoretical model as a whole (see also Piaget, 1985) to attribute this change purely to maturation. Nevertheless, as Youniss (1980) was among the first to point out, both Piaget and Sullivan identified aspects of development, occurring from middle childhood onwards, for which they believed peer groups to be essential. Indeed, both identified what were referred to earlier as specialized *functions* for peer groups, in their case promoting aspects of cognition and personality that emerge in middle childhood, and what were referred to as specialized *mechanisms*, for them triggering processes of social comparison that were regarded as central for stimulating growth. Enough has been said already to demonstrate that Piaget and Sullivan were profoundly mistaken in both respects. Because peer group experiences are consequences of recent cultural history, predominantly schooling, they cannot play roles that are specialized to peer groups per se. The functions, if any, which they support must be capable of being supported in other contexts, and the mechanisms by which support is given must be capable of being triggered in other contexts.

Taking a sociocultural perspective on children's peer groups, it is easy to dismiss Piaget and Sullivan's work as anachronistic. Nevertheless, despite its limitations, the work raises one issue of contemporary relevance. This is the reason why both theorists are revisited in subsequent chapters, with Piaget in particular playing a central role. The key issue stems from the fact that social comparison is highlighted in both Piaget's and Sullivan's work as the trigger for growth. For Piaget, it was comparison between own and others' opinions; for Sullivan, it was comparison between own and others' characteristics. However, as Piaget recognized, comparison is the kind of mechanism that seems to require symmetric power relations, and symmetry appears to be more likely in peer relations than in relations with adults. Thus, even though social comparison cannot be specialized to peer groups in any a priori sense, it may occur more often in peer group contexts in practice simply because the conditions on which it depends are more frequent in such contexts. As a result, it would be entirely consistent with a sociocultural perspective to hypothesize that the mechanisms by which peer groups influence development differ in some respects from the mechanisms that operate in other social contexts (e.g., in response to siblings, teachers, television, and the Internet), even though the mechanisms could in principle be activated in those contexts.

Indeed, de facto as opposed to a priori restrictions seem to be precisely what Michael Tomasello and his colleagues have been proposing to account for what they call "cultural learning" (e.g., Tomasello, 1999; Tomasello, Kruger, & Ratner, 1993). Tomasello and colleagues believe that imitation (where children reproduce another's actions) and instruction (where children are scaffolded into another's understanding) are the main mechanisms of social influence in asymmetric settings, such as adult–child interaction. Mechanisms that resemble Piagetian coordination and comparison are thought to predominate in symmetric settings, such as peer groups. However, there is no sense of impermeable barriers, such that imitation and instruction are impossible in peer groups, and coordination and comparison are inconceivable beyond these groups.

Group socialization theory

The preceding discussion implies a theoretical framework that rests upon three broad assumptions: (a) experiences of peer groups may have significant implications for children's development, but of course only in cultures where these experiences occur; (b) the developmental implications of peer group experiences are unlikely to be unique to peer groups, even in cultures where such experiences are common; and (c) the mechanisms by which peer groups influence development may differ from those that operate in other contexts, but only as a matter of practice and not of necessity. This is the framework that I shall adopt throughout the book, but before moving forward, I need to compare the approach with an alternative solution to the problems with which the chapter is grappling. This is the "group socialization theory" that has been developed by Judith Rich Harris (1995, 1998, 2000).

Harris surveys much of the cross-cultural research that was covered in the preceding section, and draws similar conclusions about the cultural dependency of peer group experiences. She realizes that, as a result, the roles of peer groups cannot be specialized at the levels of either functions or mechanisms. However, she regards peer groups as particular instances of extrafamilial groups in general, and believes that specialization is detectable across the broader category. Thus, group socialization theory rests on three assumptions that are rather different from the ones outlined above: (a) experiences of extrafamilial groups are universally significant for children's development, and in some cultures these groups may be predominantly peer groups; (b) the developmental implications of extrafamilial groups are unique to these groups, although not necessarily to peer groups in particular; and (c) the mechanisms by which extrafamilial groups influence development are unique as a matter of principle as well as practice.

Group socialization theory was developed because Harris was uncomfortable with attempts to explain individual differences in personality purely with reference to the interplay between genetic factors and the family environment. She was content with current thinking that attributes about 50% of personality to genetic influences, but was not persuaded that the family can account for the remainder. In her view, the associations reported in the literature between family practices and developmental outcomes are too weak and/or subject to a multiplicity of explanations, despite decades of detailed exploration (see also Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Familial factors that can be regarded as "uncontaminated" by genetic influences, such as children's birth order, have proved to be of limited relevance. Rejecting the family as a significant contributor to personality, Harris turned to the extrafamilial group, which she defined as an association with at least three members. In Harris's opinion, dyads do not constitute groups. She concluded that the norms, which groups evolve, operate as powerful influences on group behavior, via mechanisms that include within-group favoritism, or pressure to conform to within-group norms. Group influence is initially restricted to the group itself but subsequently, when circumstances permit, it can also have effects in other contexts. Harris points out that if family values are consistent with norms held within extrafamilial groups, which can be assumed sometimes to be the case, then the consequence of group socialization may be personality characteristics that are consistent with family practices. However, causality lies with the extrafamilial group, and not with the family.

Unsurprisingly, given its apparent marginalization of the family, surely one of modern society's most sacred of cows, group socialization theory has been repeatedly and roundly criticized (see, e.g., Vandell, 2000). The criticisms address a wide range of issues, including, but not restricted to, what is claimed about the family. For instance, Harris has been accused of holding an unconventionally broad and sometimes inconsistent conception of personality. She certainly includes language, for some of her most critical evidence (such as the fact that migrant children soon speak like their peers and not like their parents) comes from studies of language development. Harris (2000) acknowledges her breadth, but not her inconsistency. Harris has also been accused of selectivity in her use of research when minimizing family influences, and of jumping to conclusions before relevant work (longitudinal studies that control for genetic influences) has been conducted. Moreover, she is inconsistent here too, writing sometimes as if the family has no influence whatsoever, and at other times as if its impact, while real, is merely insufficient to account for the 50% of personality that is supposedly not determined by genes. In any event, Harris never explains how a firm line can be drawn between family and extrafamilial influences. After all, parents have significant, indirect effects upon children's peer group experiences through their choice of schools, neighborhoods, and who to invite to their homes.

All of the above criticisms may be valid, but they are not particularly relevant in the present context. As detailed later, this book covers all aspects of children's development, and it is immaterial how much is referred to as "personality." Moreover, since the book is concerned exclusively with the impact of peer groups, it can remain neutral about whether extrafamilial groups account for all or only some of the variance that is not explained by genetics. Indeed, considering that research estimating the genetic contribution to development has, to date, been conducted only in Western societies (and when, as we have seen, Western societies adopt specific, and non-universal, practices as regards one social structure at least, namely peer groups), it is unclear whether sufficient account has been taken of variation in the environment to warrant conclusions like "personality = 50% genes + 50% environment." With this in mind, neutrality about the proportion of the environmental component that comes from the family, the peer group, and so on may be the most prudent line to take. As for the fact that families exert indirect influences on peer group experiences, this would be more of a problem had families been the focus of the present book. With an emphasis upon peer groups, family factors can be ignored simply because they are indirect.

What is relevant here is the question of whether Harris's model suggests an alternative approach to the book's major aims than the one that is envisaged, and up to a point that does not seem to be the case. I am presuming that when children have extensive experiences of peer groups, these experiences may have implications for their development. Harris believes that experiences of extrafamilial groups are universally significant for children's development, and in some cultures these groups may predominantly be peer groups. Thus insofar as the focus is only on peer groups, as in this book, the expectations here are equivalent. I am presuming that the developmental implications of peer group experiences are unlikely to be unique to peer groups. Harris agrees insofar as she believes that what applies with peer groups will also apply with extrafamilial groups in general. I am vague about how far the non-uniqueness spreads, while Harris sets clear boundaries. However, when the focus is limited to peer groups, this will be relevant only in the sense of signaling which alternative influences to watch out for and/or to control in research designs. On the other hand, I am open to a range of developmental mechanisms, constrained only by what is plausible when the individuals are similar in age, standing, or rank. Harris insists that the mechanisms are normative. I am happy to concede that, like social comparison as discussed above, normative influences are more likely under equivalence of age, standing, or rank. In situations of asymmetry, power, rather than norms, is often sufficient to dictate behavior! Nevertheless, for every social psychological study documenting normative influences, there seems to be another study on the same topic indicating so-called "informational influences," which include the exchanging and comparison of opinions, the use of reasoned argument, and the comparison and resolution of differences (for a review see Van Avermaet, 2001). Interestingly, social comparison has featured prominently among the mechanisms used to explain such influences (Suls & Wheeler, 2000), although seldom with reference to Piaget or Sullivan. In general then, the social psychological evidence points against influences that are purely normative.

Once the normative requirement is relaxed, another tenet of group socialization theory becomes contestable. This is the differentiation of groups from dyads, for while it seems odd to think about dyads holding norms, informational influences (as sketched above) seem as applicable to dyads as they do to larger groups. As it happens, Harris provides no research evidence to document the value of the group–dyad distinction, and admits (Harris, 1995) that it may sound like splitting hairs. Furthermore, making the distinction results in decisions that, on the face of it, seem arbitrary. For instance, chapter 5 in the present book discusses research which indicates that girls frequently organize themselves into dyads in precisely the same contexts as those in which boys typically organize themselves into larger groups. Thus, if dyads are excluded from the concept of groups, analyses of peer group influences on girls' development would have to adopt a different frame of reference from the one adopted for boys. This may be warranted, but it seems undesirable to preclude other possibilities a priori. To avoid doing this, groups are conceptualized from now onwards as associations between *two or more* persons. Any differences between dyads and larger groups (or, for that matter, triads and foursomes, or small and large groups) will emerge as data permit. Given Harris's interest in social psychological evidence, it is noteworthy that Brown (1988) also defines groups as associations of two or more individuals in a book that focuses exclusively on such evidence.

Overall then, group socialization theory is a bold and interesting attempt to take a sociocultural perspective upon non-family influences on children's development. Nevertheless, because the present concern is purely with peer groups while group socialization theory's remit is broader, relatively few of its tenets turn out to be relevant. This includes the controversial claims about the relative importance of families compared with extrafamilial groups, along with the emphasis upon the broad concept of "extrafamilial group" as the unit of analysis. What is significant in the present context is group socialization theory's insistence that norms provide the mechanisms by which groups have their effects, and for connected reasons, that dyads should not be counted as groups. As noted, neither proposal is firmly grounded in evidence. Therefore, the strategy here is to be less restrictive at this stage, while being open to modification as research is forthcoming. Accordingly, the theoretical framework that the present book adopts presumes that: (a) children's experiences of peer groups (including dyads) have the potential to influence their development; (b) the aspects of development that peer groups can influence are also potentially influenced by other social experiences, and these alternative influences need to be considered when evaluating research; and (c) the mechanisms by which peer groups have their effects could be informational (including perhaps social comparison in the sense of Piaget and/or Sullivan) as well as normative.

Peer Groups and Children's Development

As noted, the purpose of the theoretical framework is to inform an analysis of children's experiences of peer groups, and the implications of those experiences for children's development. This analysis occupies the remainder of the book. As signaled already, the focus of the analysis is children's experiences in societies that require them to attend school. It is, in fact, also restricted to school-age children within those societies, that is, the age group from 5 or 6 years through to mid- to late teens. It is perhaps a little unnatural to refer to the upper end of the age range as "children," but a generic term is needed and "children" is preferred. When only the upper age group is of interest, alternative terms like "adolescents" are used. Normally, children are described in terms of age groups, but implementing this strategy has involved an element of guesswork. In many of the relevant research reports, samples are presented with reference only to school stage, for example Kindergarten, Grade 4, Year 9, Key Stage 3, High School. This is not very helpful to an international readership that may be unfamiliar with the conventions of specific school systems. Therefore, I have "translated" as accurately as possible into age levels, for example North American Grade 1 = 6-year-olds. For this reason, references to age groups should be treated as approximations.

The concept of "peer groups" should be clear from what has preceded, but essentially the term is used to designate associations between two or more children, who are not members of the same family but who are of similar age and (potentially) of similar standing or rank. The degree to which age, standing, and rank can vary while remaining "similar" is being kept deliberately vague. The emphasis upon "potential" similarities in standing and rank is intended to highlight the fact that children's peer groups do not involve predetermined differences in status, even though, as is discussed later, differences typically emerge. As regards "development," the book adopts a broad perspective, addressing social, personal, and academic development. Because the concern is with development rather than learning, little attention is paid to memorization of specific pieces of information, for instance a friend's telephone number, one's own blood group, or the capital of Peru. Rather, the emphasis is upon the social, personal, and cognitive structures that allow information to be integrated and, through this, to guide behavior.

Overview of contents

The analysis of children's experiences starts in chapter 2 with a discussion of the structural properties of classrooms. The Scottish scenario with which the present chapter began depicted a two-tier peer group structure, the whole class and its constituent subgroups. The latter included a math set, a language set, and a mixed-ability project group. Chapter 2 considers whether two-tier structures are universal properties of classrooms, or whether there is variation. It also discusses how tiers are organized, for instance what are their characteristic sizes and how children are assigned to them. Random assignment from the available set of peers is possible, but the Scottish scenario suggested selectivity in accordance with ability for certain subjects. Key questions discussed in chapter 2 relate to the extent of selectivity, and how much it is founded on ability.

With a clear sense of how classrooms are structured, chapter 3 considers the teaching and learning activities that the structures support. The emphasis is not, however, upon teaching and learning from the perspective of teachers. Rather, it is upon what the activities imply for how children experience their peers. There can be little doubt that children see teaching activities as something that their teacher wants them to engage with, whether or not they are inclined to comply. However, the teacher–pupil axis is not what this book is about. The focus is children's experiences of peer groups, and unless children have a strong sense of their classmates as members of their community, classrooms will be *constituted from* peer groups but will not necessarily be *experienced as* peer groups. Having drawn conclusions about the manner in which peers are in fact experienced in classrooms, the next issue to consider is the implications of these experiences. Do they, for instance, facilitate mastery of the curriculum? Moreover, are they always facilitative or only under certain conditions? These questions are discussed in chapter 4.

The focus of chapters 2–4 is on classrooms and the formal purposes of teaching and learning for which classrooms are constituted. This is not to say that the chapters are restricted to classrooms. Other peer groups that are created for formal purposes are referred to throughout. As signaled earlier, such groups include sports associations, youth movements, and extracurricular classes when school-age children are involved. However, it will not prove possible to say very much about these groups, simply because they are under-researched, and when research exists it seldom adopts a peer group perspective. Nevertheless, while chapters 2–4 occasionally move away from the classroom context, they concentrate exclusively on formal (i.e., institutionalized) functions. Classrooms are treated purely as contexts for teaching and learning, and sports associations are treated purely as contexts for coaching and performance. When such settings are analyzed as peer groups, this is manifestly a limitation. In her major exposition of group socialization theory, Harris (1998) remarks at one point that "To children in school, the most important people in the classroom are the other children" (p. 241). When she wrote this, Harris was not thinking about teaching and learning. She was concerned with the informal relations that children forge with each other while engaged in formal tuition. She was suggesting that these relations are significant.

Chapter 5 discusses informal relations in classrooms, and by implication in other peer groups that are constructed for formal purposes. It shows how these relations have traditionally been characterized in terms of friendship and status. Located in formal settings like classrooms, friendships amount to informal subgroups that may or may not be related to the formal subgroups (math sets and so on) that can also occur. Status depends on the relative popularity of children in the eyes of their peers, when considered across the setting as a whole. Status is, in other words, an informal dimension of the overarching formal structure. The book is concerned with school-age members of societies that require children to attend schools. Therefore, insofar as friendship and status are characteristics of classrooms (among other settings), they can be assumed to be universal aspects of experience as far as the target age group is concerned. However, this does not necessarily mean that all children have identical experiences. On the contrary, some children have many friends and experience friendship directly, while others have few or no friends and experience friendship as observers of others. Some children are popular, while others witness the popularity of others. Chapter 6 considers why children differ, and whether the differences are stable across time and place. Does friendlessness in school predict friendlessness in other contexts, and are friendless 5-year-olds typically friendless five or ten years later?

In considering stability across time and place, chapter 6 broadens the discussion to some extent from the formal, predominantly classroom, contexts considered in the early part of the book. Thus, by chapter 7, a picture of children's peer group experiences will have been painted that is as comprehensive as current research permits. Chapter 7 begins an analysis of the implications of this picture for children's development, focusing on social and personal growth. A substantial literature is surveyed that links negative experiences of friendship and status with, on the one hand, aggression, criminality, and substance abuse, and, on the other, anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. However, once the circumstances are probed by which experiences of status and friendship have these troubling effects, an intriguing possibility emerges. Rather than being separate from the formal structures within which status and friendship are embedded, the developmental consequences may be partially dependent on those structures. In other words, they could result in part from the fact that status (by definition) and friendship (in practice) are informal dimensions of classrooms and other formal settings, and these settings have the peer group structure sketched in chapters 2–4.

Chapter 8 addresses the cognitive aspects of development, particularly those relating to academic achievement. In this respect, it revisits issues discussed in chapters 3 and 4 but with a new twist. It shows that the informal dimensions of friendship and status influence children's classroom attainment. Thus, whether or not education relies on direct learning from peers in the sense introduced in chapter 4, children's experiences of peer groups do have relevance for their performance in schools. Harris (1998) may have overstated the case when she suggested that, as far as children are concerned, other children are the most important people in classrooms. However, she was certainly correct to indicate that by virtue of informal experiences, other children are relevant. The book concludes in chapter 9 with a discussion of the implications of the material covered in earlier chapters for research and practice. One key point from chapter 8 is that teachers should recognize and work with the peer groups that comprise their classrooms because, whether they like this or not, these groups influence their effectiveness. Chapter 9 offers suggestions about what this means in practical terms.

An interdisciplinary perspective

Chapters 2–4 present material that addresses classic educational concerns. Research is summarized that informs debates around optimal class size, mixed-versus single-ability teaching, and the role of talk in instructional practice. Scholars located in university faculties of education are responsible for most of this research. The material presented in chapters 5 and 6 relates to venerable issues in the psychological analysis of social and personal development. For instance, studies of friendship and status date back more than a century. Here, investigators based in academic departments of psychology have conducted virtually all of the reported research. The separation between chapters 2–4 on the one hand and chapters 5 and 6 on the other means that contemporary educationalists and psychologists will have little difficulty locating the material that reflects their respective traditions. For instance, all of the empirical research that is included on the notorious class size debate appears in chapter 2.

The separation between educational and psychological material should assist readers in reviewing specific topics, but it will be disappointing if it leads educationalists to stop reading midway through the book or encourages psychologists to jump to chapter 5. If this happens, neither group will obtain a complete picture of the issues that concern them, for these issues are much more interwoven than commonly assumed. As signaled already, the message from chapter 8 is that psychological material on peer group experiences is needed to address the central educational issue of academic performance. Of equal importance is the fact that the psychologically informed message from chapter 8 implies a perspective on class size, ability-based teaching, and instructional talk that could not emerge from educational research alone. This perspective is developed in chapter 9. On the other hand, one message from chapter 7 is that educational research is relevant to deciphering the inherently psychological problem of social and personal development. Developing this theme, chapter 9 argues that, without an educational dimension, attempts to assist children experiencing social and emotional difficulties are unlikely to achieve more than partial success. In short, resolving dilemmas of educational practice requires psychological research into peer group experiences, and interpreting psychological research requires understanding of how peer groups are used in schools. So the book's broadest message is that an interdisciplinary perspective is needed to study the nature and consequences of children's peer group experiences in the depth that the topic deserves. It is hoped that the chapters to follow make a contribution to the large body of work which, adopting that perspective, remains to be done.