

Re-evaluating the Concept of Group: ICEN as an Alternative

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At the end of February 1972, out of a course on "ethnic folklore" came the question: What is a "group"? The concept of "group" is implicit in most studies of folklore, and central to many conceptual schemes used in analysis. The implicit assumption in most folkloristic studies is that the concept of "group" is assumed to be the basis for an analytical construct, designated by the same term. The notion folklorists operate upon is the assumption that there are "groups" and that these "groups" have folklore(s), thus accounting for the tendency to study the folklore of various "groups." Jan Brunvand's statement (in The Study of American Folklore)¹ that "the (first) test of a folk group is the existence of shared folklore" is exemplary.

If "group" is a major means of determining folklore, that is, folklore is "group" based, then "group" is a seminal concept for folkloristics. Yet, what does "group" mean to folklorists?

In his introduction to The Study of Folklore,² Alan Dundes states: "The term 'folk' can refer to any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is--it could be a common occupation, language, or religion--but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its own... Thus if a group were composed of lumberjacks or railroadmen, then the folklore would be lumberjack or railroadman folklore. If the group were composed of Jews or Negroes, then the folklorist could seek Jewish or Negro folklore." Yet Dundes, like other researchers, does not define "group"; and other investigators, like Dundes, are the determiners and delimiters of "groups" and their folklore.

Because "group" is used as an important cornerstone in folkloristic inquiry, an experiment was conducted among the folklore and mythology graduate students at U.C.L.A., which should, according to the kinds of arbitrarily established criteria employed by others, constitute a "group." We distributed a questionnaire to elicit information concerning the meanings that the word "group" might have to those questioned. In doing so, we assumed that this kind of experiment is representative (i.e., the practice and prerogative of the investigator in denoting a unit) and that comparable results would be obtained regardless of how one delimited the "group." We were also aware of the fact that the kinds of responses obtained in a survey such as this always depend upon who the informants are, and that the investigator always decides in advance the potential informants to investigate.

It was the purpose of our investigation to determine what the nature of the word "group" was from individuals' characterizations in response to a questionnaire. On the basis of responses to that questionnaire it was our purpose to determine whether "group" is meaningful as a term, and whether it can be utilized as the conceptual basis for an analytical construct.

Two basic questions were asked: 1) whether or not students perceive and conceive of a "group" identifiable as the folklore and mythology graduate students at U.C.L.A., and what the nature of that "group" is if the answer was affirmative; and 2) whether or not those students conceive of themselves and/or others as belonging to a "group" and why, and what they consider "belonging to the group" to constitute or involve.

A total of 29 out of 35 questionnaires was returned, 80.5%--a significant response. To avoid identification, no names were asked for and each questionnaire was given an identifying letter of the alphabet. Despite these "safeguards," however, complete anonymity was difficult to insure. As one student asked, "How many twenty-eight-year-old women who've been in folklore eleven quarters, taught Latin for four years, and work in the department are there?"

It appears, from our survey, that characterizations of "group" are dependent not only on individuals' conceptions of what the word "group" designates, but also on the individuals' conceptions of the nature of the unit so designated (the folklore and mythology students) and on the respondents' conceptions of the nature of the students currently enrolled in the program. Thus, although the experience of being a folklore graduate student was common to all students enrolled in the program, the experience was conceived in various ways among the students. Findings suggest that the word "group" is a familiar one, and that the word is meaningful to each person questioned. There were similarities between and among individuals' conceptions of the meaning of "group," as well as differences. By examining these similarities and differences we attempted to infer whether or not "group" is meaningful as a term which can be utilized to designate an analytical construct.

What we discovered was that "group," as a word appears to be as ambiguous as "story" and "song." Moreover, the respondents' characterizations of "group" suggest that individuals' conceptions of what a "group" is (what the word designates) vary so substantially that it is questionable whether "group" is ever or was ever useful as a term to be used in analysis.

"What is a group?" was invariably responded to in quantitative terms, that is, it was said to designate a number of people. The minimum number was at least two, yet no maximum was set. The multiple conceptions of "group" have only this common notion of two or more people in a common place at a common time. Thus, respondents described what these people are doing in that common physical territory at a common time, or what they have in common which makes it possible, desirable and/or necessary to conceive of them collectively, with the understanding that time and/or territory may be either perceivable, conceivable or both. Hence, the meaning of the word "group" evolved from the perceivable distinction of a collectivity from an individual, and therefore, the concept of two or more is always implicit in characterizations of what "group" means. Beyond that, what "group" is conceived to mean or to designate is unpredictable. Several common elements were basic to the characterizations of the "group" by the folklore and mythology graduate students: time, territory, experience, participation, interaction and communication, but without statistically significant frequency.

What are the implications of this arbitrary and ambiguous usage of the term "group" to folkloristic research? Every folklorist distinguishes "groups," but it is always the investigator who labels the "group," that is, gives it a name which implicitly characterizes its nature. In doing so, the investigator assumes a priori that there is great consistency in the behavior of all people which he labels, or others label, in that particular way. What this assumption suggests is that the folklore known by one member of a designated "group" is obviously known by others who are also conceived to be members of that "group," because if they have the same labels they must have the same folklore. Therefore, the behavior of any one individual is considered to be as representative of the "group" as the behavior of any other individual. Thus, in fieldwork, the

investigator can presumably select any individual whom he conceives to be a member of a given "group," assured that whatever folklore is elicited is representative or typical of whatever is conceived to be the "group's folklore."

That this is the common assumption among folklorists can be easily illustrated. For example, in J. Barre Toelken's, "The 'Pretty Language' of Yellowman: Genre, Mode, and Texture in Navaho Coyote Narratives,"³ the "group" is explicitly referred to as "the Navaho." Toelken infers the existence of this "group" and its very nature from a "single culturally reliable informant," whose folklore he conceives to be representative of all Navaho. Daniel Growley's unpublished study, "Bahamian Folktales Illustrating the Artist as Communicator,"⁴ is based on his conception of a single "group," a "relatively small population of 100,000, most of them a true folk;" yet these "folk" inhabit a string of 21 islands stretching from Florida southeast to Haiti.

With the exception of Toelken, who clearly states what he is doing, folklorists tend to generalize from a few select informants as to the homogeneous nature of both the "group" and the folklore of that "group:" yet they rarely explain how or why the "group" can be considered to be a collective, or how and why the folklore of one member of that "group" can be said to be "representative."

For the most part the populations in folkloristic studies are not described in terms of number, but rather in spatial terms. The geographical limits are not necessarily physical or political boundaries, but are arbitrarily assigned to delimit the "group." Americo Paredes, in "Tributaries to the Mainstream: the Ethnic Groups,"⁵ states that the Mexican-American "group" is a "representative ethnic group" for they are not outsiders to the average American (culture) yet their culture is substantially different from that of the majority and covers a wide geographical area.

A common distinction is the one made between European and American folklore. Christiansen's European Folklore in America,⁶ presupposes two distinct "groups;" yet the boundary is only implicitly made, i.e., the "New World" versus the "Old World." Antithetical to this large nationalistic conception of "group" are the other notions of "group" as "isolated," "small," or "local." Lynwood Montell's Saga of Coe Ridge⁷ deals with a small community which Montell conceives to be a "group" by virtue of the fact that it is geographically and culturally isolated, "a scar on the cultural landscape of an otherwise homogeneous white society." Space may also be delineated conceptually. Richard Dorson's "occupational groups" and the distinctions between urban and rural in "Is There A Folk In The City?"⁸ are based on cognitive criteria, the nature of which is never stipulated.

Other "groups" have been designated based on a variety of equally arbitrary and subjective criteria, as in the cases, for instance, of Alan Dundes', "A Study of Ethnic Slurs: the Jew and the Polack in the U.S.,"⁹ Norine Dresser's study on homosexuals, and the bulk of ethnic or immigrant "group" studies.¹⁰ In these kinds of studies, distinctions are based not so much on perceptible physical distinctions of time and territory, as on cognitive distinctions made by the investigator.

The popular notion of "ethnicity" also involves cognitive discrimination on the part of the investigator. The "group" is usually conceived and labelled as an "ethnic group" by the researcher and any individual identified as a member of that "group" is conceived to be a representative reservoir of the "ethnic group's folklore." "Ethnic groups" are considered to be organic clusters that are homogeneous, cohesive wholes because collectivities of individuals are labelled in

ways. Thus, Linda Degh, in her essay, "Approaches to Folklore Research Among Immigrant Groups,"¹¹ characterizes the ethnic groups as interacting with, and having effects upon each other, yet Richard Dorson states that these "groups...never penetrate each other's folklore," that "the strong force of ethnic separatism keeps the in-group folklores apart."¹² Robert Klymasz in "An Introduction to the Ukrainian-Canadian Folksong Cycle" conceives the "group" which he labels "Ukrainian-Canadian" as a social unit which is a cross between the old country Ukrainians and the New World Canadians.¹³

What they are all saying or implying then is that there is an identifiable "group" behavior because people are assigned common labels, that any individual in that "group" behaves in the same way as any other individual in that "group," and that, in fact, individual behavior is "group" behavior.

"Group" can be used as an analytical term and serve as a theoretical construct only if there is consensus between and among investigators' conceptions of what "group" designates. Examination of folkloristic studies illuminates the fact that all folklorists do not conceive or use "group" in the same way. There is no consensus of individual's conceptions of "group," beyond that of two or more people usually conceived to be in a common place at a common time.

We can never assume that everyone who reads, writes, or hears the word "group" will take it to denote the same phenomenon or even what the investigator conceives it to mean, beyond two or more people in a delimitable space during a common time. And since the word "group" has been "defined" on the basis of a variety of criteria, it is now so imprecise and ambiguous that it seems to be of little value in analytically oriented studies of folklore.

What is suggested by folklore studies is that folklore is individually determined and based, not "group" determined and based. Moreover, the individual's folklore is determined by the nature of his interactions and experiences. This suggests that folklore can be most profitably studied in terms of interactional, communicative and experiential networks--ICEN's, as we shall call them.¹⁴ ICEN is based on a behavioral model in which people are conceived to interact and communicate on a first-hand, face-to-face basis. ICEN's involve dynamic human relationships which constitute the bases of experience. ICEN's are multi-dimensional, and are not imposed by an investigator but evolve from the behavior of those individuals participating in the networks.

ICEN is a construct that can be utilized to distinguish two or more people who are encoding, transmitting, and decoding messages between and among one another, from those who are not doing so. The difference between those who are and those who are not can be perceived, and the perception is significant enough to enable one to articulate the contrast. Those encoding, transmitting and decoding messages are the interactors/communicators; the action is the interaction/communication; the people, their actions and the output of their relationships with each other, are all aspects of ICEN.

To exemplify the insights that such a construct has the potential to provide, let us consider Richard Dorson's study of James D. Suggs. In American Negro Folklore,¹⁵ Dorson gives us "The History of James Douglas Suggs." Suggs was born of "mixed ancestry" in 1887 in Mississippi and died in 1955 in Michigan. In 1907 he travelled from New Mexico to South Dakota in a minstrel show; from 1908-09 he played professional baseball. He worked as a brakeman for three years, and also

on bridge construction. He worked for a white planter as a cook and nurse. He fought in France in World War I. He worked on a dredge boat, was a short order cook, and worked for a big oil man in Arkansas. He worked in a St. Louis foundry and by 1940 was running a rooming house in Chicago. Dorson recorded him in 1952 in Calvin County, Michigan. He describes Suggs and his repertoire of tales and songs as representative of a "group," that is, he "mirrors the ample folk traditions of the Southern Negro."

It should be obvious to anyone that Suggs cannot be representative of a "Southern Negro group," unless all individuals labelled "Southern Negro" are known to have had experiences comparable to those of Suggs. Rather, his repertoire of tales and songs represents his own unique experiences, his interactions with men of every race, and participation in a multiplicity of occupations. The individual and his repertoire must be understood in terms of the interaction(s) and experience(s) he has had.

The networks of interactions and communications, the ICENs, can be conceived of as complexes of relationships, or sets of relationships between and among people. That is, although the focus is on the individual and his experiences, folklore based on common experiences of individuals can be studied analytically through this notion of complexes of relationships, or ICENs.

"Towards a Definition of Folklore in Context," by Dan Ben-Amos suggests this inevitable direction for folkloristic research: "to define folklore, it is necessary to examine the phenomena as they exist...folklore is not an aggregate of things, but a process--a communicative process, to be exact." Unfortunately the notion of "group" is tenacious, and although Ben-Amos is moving in the direction of a dynamic model of communication, his definition of folklore as "artistic communication in small groups" points the way backward to a static, mechanistic, homogeneous model in which "...the participants in the small group situation have to belong to the same reference group, one composed of people of the same age, or of the same profession, local, religious, or ethnic affiliation."¹⁶

What we are proposing is analysis based on individual's interactions and communications and experiences...

He drew a circle that shut me out,
Heretic, rebel, a thing to fout,
But Love and I had the wit to win
We create ICEN and let people in...

Notes

**This paper was presented at the American Folklore Society meetings in Austin, Texas, November, 1972. Much discussion was generated both at the meetings, and afterwards, and it was decided to publish this initial paper. However, it should be noted that this particular paper was written to be presented orally. Also, this is only part of a more extensive and elaborate treatment of this and similar conceptual problems in folklore studies being undertaken by Beth Blumenreich. "Those are My Shoes; It must Be Me/ I Don't Care if Dr. _____ Is In the Next Room/That Sounded Good; What Are you Going to Call it?/ Every Eunuch Is An Event," by Bari Lynn Polonsky, Kathie O'Heilly, and Bruce Guliano is an unpublished work

also dealing with these problems and with the notion, nature, and probability of utilizing ICEN in folklore research.

1. Jan Harold Brunvand, The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1968).
2. Alan Dundes, The Study of Folklore, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965).
3. J. Barre Toelken, "The 'Pretty Language' of Yellowman: Genre, Mode, and Texture in Navaho Coyote Narratives," Genre 2 (1969): 211-235.
4. Daniel Crowley, "Bahamian Folktales Illustrating The Artist as Communicator," (unpublished manuscript).
5. Americo Paredes, "Tributaries to the Mainstream: The Ethnic Groups," in Tristram P. Coffin, Our Living Traditions: An Introduction to American Folklore (New York: Basic Books, 1968), pp. 70-80.
6. Reidar Th. Christiansen, European Folklore in America (Oslo: Scandanavian University Books, Studia Norvegica No. 12, 1962).
7. Lynwood Montell, The Saga of Coe Ridge: A Study in Oral History (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1970).
8. Richard Dorson, "Is There a Folk in the City?" in The Urban Experience and Folk Tradition, ed. Americo Paredes and Ellen J. Stekert (Austin: University of Texas Press for the American Folklore Society, 1971), pp. 21-52.
9. Alan Dundes, "A Study of Ethnic Slurs: The Jew and the Polack in the U.S." Journal of American Folklore 84 (1971): 186-203.
10. Morine Dresser, "The Boys in the Band is not Another Musical: Male Homosexuals and Their Folklore," presented at the American Folklore Society meetings in Austin, Texas, November, 1972.
11. Linda Degh, "Approaches to Folklore Research Among Immigrant Groups," Journal of American Folklore 79 (1966): 551-556.
12. Dorson, "Is There a Folk," p. 48.
13. In Part I of The Ukrainian Winter Folksong Cycle (Ottawa: The National Museum of Canada, Bulletin No. 236, Folklore Series No. 9, 1970), pp. 8-13.
14. "ICEN" is an acronym representing "Interactional, Communicational, Experientail Networks." The concept was developed in conversations with Robert A. Georges, Folklore and Mythology Group, U.C.L.A. There are no words to adequately express our appreciation to Georges--agape.
15. Richard M. Dorson, "The History of James Douglas Suggs," in American Negro Folktales (Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett-Premier Books, 1956), pp. 59-64.
16. Dan Ben-Amos, "Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context," in Toward New Perspectives in Folklore, ed. Americo Paredes and Richard Bauman (Austin, University of Texas Press for the American Folklore Society, 1971), pp. 12-13.