Types of Social Groups: Primary, Secondary and Reference Groups

The study of social groups is a main focus of many sociologists. In this lesson, we define social groups and differentiate between several different types including primary, secondary, and reference groups.

Social Groups

Social groups are everywhere and are a basic part of human life; everywhere you look there seems to be groups of people! A main focus of sociology is the study of these social groups. A social group consists of two or more people who regularly interact and share a sense of unity and common identity. In other words, it's a group of people who see each other frequently and consider themselves a part of the group. Except in rare cases, we all typically belong to many different types of social groups. For example, you could be a member of a sports team, club, church group, college class, workplace, and more.

Primary Groups

No two groups are created equal. Each typically has its own purpose, culture, norms, etc. Sociologists differentiate between several different types of social groups. In this lesson, we'll discuss primary groups, secondary groups, and reference groups. Primary groups are those that are close-knit. They are typically small scale, include intimate relationships, and are usually long lasting. The members of primary groups feel a strong personal identity with the group.

The nuclear family is an example of a primary social group

The nuclear family, which consists of a pair of adults and their children, is a good example. Members of a nuclear family typically interact on a daily basis. For them, the family is an important source of identity and purpose. Love and affection bind the family members together, and their relationships are enduring. Even when members move away from each other, they are still a part of the family.

Although the nuclear family is considered the ideal primary group by some sociologists, it is not the only example. Many people are also a member of a group of close friends. This group is usually small, and the relationships are still close-knit and enduring, so it is also a primary group. The term 'primary' is used with these groups because they are the primary source of relationships and socialization. The relationships in our primary groups give us love, security, and companionship. We also learn values and norms from our family and friends that stay with us for most, if not all, of our lives.

Secondary Groups

Secondary groups are another type of social group. They have the opposite characteristics of primary groups. They can be small or large and are mostly impersonal and usually short term. These groups are typically found at work and school. An example of a secondary group is a committee organized to plan a holiday party at work. Members of the committee meet infrequently and for only a short period of time. Although group members may have some similar interests, the purpose of the group is about the task instead of the relationships. Sometimes, secondary groups become pretty informal, and the members get to know each other fairly well. Even so, their friendships exist in a limited context; they won't necessarily remain close beyond the holiday party.

Other common examples of secondary groups are class project groups, college classes, sports teams, work teams, and neighborhoods. All of these groups are only temporary - even if they last for a year - and the relationships within the group are fairly shallow and typically touch-and-go. Of course, there are times when we do meet people in secondary groups that become a part of one of our primary groups. This demonstrates that the distinction between primary and secondary groups isn't always absolute or concrete. You may meet your best friend at work or school in a secondary group, and he or she then becomes a member of your primary group.

A classroom project group is an example of a secondary social group

Reference Groups

The last type of group we'll discuss in this lesson is a reference group. Reference groups are groups that we look to for guidance in order to evaluate our behaviors and attitudes. They are basically generalized versions of role models. You may or may not belong to the group, but you use its standards of measurement as a frame of reference. For example, if a teenager wants to know if she is slim enough, she may use supermodels as a reference. Or, if a recent college graduate is unsure if an offered salary is fair, he may use the average starting salary of graduates from his school as a reference.

Frequently, people hope to be identified with their reference groups (especially if they aren't members of them), so they try to act like those they think typify these groups. If your reference group is a particular athletic team, you will dress, speak, and act quite differently than if your reference group is a local wine club. So, a reference group helps to shape not only a person's expectations and outlook but also appearance and style.

Lesson Summary

A social group consists of two or more people who regularly interact and consider themselves a part of the group. Sociologists differentiate between several different types of social groups.

Enduring primary groups are those that are close-knit and intimate and are typically small scale. Most of our primary groups consist of family and close friends. The nuclear family, which is a pair of adults and their children, is considered the ideal primary group. Secondary groups are those that are more impersonal and temporary. Most of our secondary groups are from work and school.

Finally, reference groups are those that we look to for guidance when evaluating our own behaviors and attitudes. They act as a role model to which we can compare ourselves.

Social Conformity Definition: Normative vs. Informational

Social conformity and obedience are two very powerful phenomenons in human behavior and sociology. In this lesson, we discuss the two types of social conformity and differentiate between conformity and obedience. We also discuss two famous experiments by Solomon Asch and Stanley Milgram.

Social Conformity

Imagine you've volunteered for a study. You arrive and sit at the end of a row that has four other participants. The presenter gives you two cards: one has one line, and the other has three lines. You are asked to compare the length of the one line with the other three to determine which is the same length as the original line. The other participants give their answers, one by one. They unanimously give an answer that is clearly wrong. When it's your turn, do you change your answer to match theirs, or do you stick with the answer you know is correct?

This scenario is actually part of a famous experiment conducted by Solomon Asch in 1951. The purpose was to study social conformity, which is a type of social influence that results in a change of behavior or belief in order to fit in with a group. Asch wanted to see how often people conform and why. In his experiment, the person at the end of the row was actually the only participant; the other people in the room were actually confederates, or actors, and were purposefully giving the incorrect answer to some of the questions. Asch measured the number of times each participant conformed to the obviously incorrect answer. Approximately 25% of the participants conformed most of the time, and an additional 50% of the participants conformed at least once. That means that only 25% never conformed.

This study is well known and demonstrates the power of social influence. When the participants were asked why they went along with the clearly incorrect answer, most of them said that they had just gone along with the group in fear of being ridiculed. Some of them even said they believed that the group's answer was correct and that they must have been missing something. These answers represent the two types of social conformity: normative and informational.

Normative Conformity

Normative conformity is conformity that occurs because of the desire to be liked and accepted. Most people probably think of peer pressure amongst teens when they think of normative conformity, and for good reason. Most teens and pre-teens are particularly vulnerable to influence because they long to be accepted by their peers. I'm sure when you were a teenager you heard the phrase, 'If all of your friends jumped off a bridge, would you do it, too?' Peer pressure is certainly a good example of normative conformity, but it happens to adults, too.

For example, have you ever attended a performance that was, at best, mediocre? Maybe it was a play you saw, and you thought it was just okay. However, at the end of the play, several people around you may have stood while clapping. It wouldn't take very long for every person in the auditorium, including you, to participate in the standing ovation. Even though you didn't think the performance was necessarily deserving of the praise, you joined in rather than remaining seated, so you wouldn't stand out like a sore thumb. Standing ovations, peer pressure, fashion trends, body image, and following traditions are just a few examples of normative conformity.

Informational Conformity

The other type of conformity is informational conformity, which is conformity that occurs because of the desire to be correct. In Asch's experiment, some of the participants stated that they believed they must be wrong since no one else agreed with them. They changed their answer so that they would be 'right.' Informational conformity is so named because we believe that it gives us information that we did not previously have. For example, imagine you walk into a food court at a mall. There are three stalls open, yet the entire crowd is seated and eating in front of only one of them. Would you, as the newcomer, assume that that particular stall has the best food because everyone else is eating there?

Informational conformity typically comes from the thought of, 'They must know something I don't know.' In many situations, we are unsure of how to act or what to say. So, another example of informational conformity is when we travel to other countries. Typically, we're unsure of how to act and rely on our observations of others to point us in the right direction. When we change our behavior based on the actions of the locals, we are demonstrating informational conformity.

Obedience

Neither normative conformity nor informational conformity should be confused with obedience. Where conformity is a response to a group, obedience is a response to authority. It is following orders from an authority figure without question. A famous obedience study was conducted at Yale in 1963 by Stanley Milgram, who wanted to see how much participants would be willing to hurt other people when given direct orders by an authority figure.

Participants in the study were told that they were to take on the role of 'teacher,' and that another person out of sight was to be the 'student.' The teacher's job was to quiz the student and deliver an electrical shock at increasing voltages to the student for every wrong answer given. The experimenter was an intimidating authority figure dressed in a lab coat that issued orders any time the teacher would hesitate to deliver the shock via the controls in front of him. While the participants believed that they were delivering real shocks to the students, the students were actually confederates in the experiment and were only pretending to be shocked.

Long story short, 26 of the 40 participants in the study delivered the maximum shock, which should have been lethal. Only 14 stopped before reaching the highest level. Most of the participants became extremely upset and angry at the experimenter, sweating, trembling, crying, etc. Yet, they continued to be obedient and followed orders all the way to the end. So, why did they do that? Milgrim concluded from his study that people obey either out of fear or out of a desire to appear cooperative, even when acting against their own morals.

This experiment played a huge part in our understanding of the powerful nature of obedience and how it is different from conformity. With conformity, individuals choose to change their behavior because of their need for acceptance or because they're not sure what to do. With obedience, individuals feel they must exhibit a certain behavior because of orders from an authority figure.

Lesson Summary

In summary, social conformity is a type of social influence that results in a change of behavior or belief in order to fit in with a group. The two types of social conformity are normative conformity and informational conformity. Normative conformity occurs because of the desire to be liked and accepted. Peer pressure is a classic example of normative conformity. On the other hand, informational conformity occurs because of the desire to be correct. It typically happens because we assume that others know something that we don't. Social conformity is different from obedience, although they are both very powerful. Where social conformity is a response to a group, obedience is a response to authority. People typically obey commands out of fear or out of a desire to appear cooperative.

Groupthink: Definition & Examples

Some groups are quick to make decisions to maintain cohesion, but this can be a critical mistake to make. This lesson explains the concept of groupthink using the Challenger explosion as an example.

Have I Experienced Groupthink?

Have you ever been in a group where you felt that you had to go along with the majority even though you did not agree with the decision? Maybe you feel apprehensive about expressing opposition for fear of looking unsupportive. Perhaps you have had a leader or dominant team member who always tried to control contributions of other members, making it difficult to get a word in edgewise, so you just give up. If so, you may have had firsthand experience with the phenomenon known as groupthink. This lesson will explain the concept of groupthink and describe one of the most famous examples of groupthink - the Challenger Space Shuttle disaster.

Groupthink Explained

Groupthink occurs when a group makes faulty or ineffective decisions for the sake of reaching a consensus. Groupthink stifles individual creativity and independent thinking in group members. Common sense, the desire to present and debate alternatives, and the confidence to express an unpopular opinion are sacrificed for group cohesion, which can significantly hinder the decision-

making and problem-solving abilities of a group. Groups affected by groupthink will disregard realistic alternatives and typically choose more illogical approaches in an effort to maintain harmony within the group. As a result, the outcomes of decisions shaped by groupthink have a low probability of success.

A group is more vulnerable to groupthink when the group is composed of members with similar backgrounds, is highly cohesive, has no clear rules or defined processes for decision making, has an outspoken leader, or is isolated from outsiders. However, there are some preventative measures that can be taken to reduce the chances of groupthink, including:

- Define rules and processes for decision making and uphold them.
- Encourage full participation of every group member.
- Divide group members up into smaller brainstorming groups before sharing ideas with the larger group.
- Support debate and productive conflict in the group.
- Make it a priority to examine all alternatives before making a decision.
- Invite outside experts in to share their perspectives and insights with the group.
- Ask leaders to hold their opinions or ideas until after the group has had a chance to express their opinion.
- Have a designated evaluator or 'devil's advocate' in the group to challenge ideas and decisions.

Lesson Summary

Let's review. Groupthink occurs when a group makes faulty or ineffective decisions for the sake of reaching a consensus. Groups affected by groupthink will disregard realistic alternatives and typically choose more illogical approaches in an effort to maintain harmony within the group. As a result, the outcomes of decisions shaped by groupthink have a low probability of success. However, there are some preventative measures that can be taken to reduce the chances of groupthink.

Social Loafing & Social Facilitation: Definition and Effects of Groups

Do you prefer to work in a group or by yourself? Why? Working in a group certainly has a number of advantages and disadvantages. In this lesson, we discuss three phenomena that can occur as a result of working in groups: groupthink, social loafing, and social facilitation.

Groupthink

A negative consequence that can occur as a result of working in a group is groupthink, which is when a group makes faulty or ineffective decisions for the sake of reaching a consensus. In other words, group members are so focused on avoiding conflict and maintaining harmony that they reach a consensus without even considering alternatives.

For example, imagine you're with a group of colleagues, and you've decided to have lunch together. One person suggests a Chinese restaurant, and everyone agrees, so you all head to the restaurant together. You don't actually like Chinese food and just agreed to go to avoid conflict. It turns out that no one else likes Chinese food, either - they all agreed to go for the same reason you did! Although this is a simple example, there are times that groupthink results in disaster. We'll discuss groupthink more in-depth in another lesson.

Social Loafing

Another negative effect of groups is social loafing, which is the tendency for people to exert less effort to achieve a goal when they are in a group. This goes against the adage that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. I'm sure you can think about school groups that you've been a part of that demonstrate social loafing. Certain members of the group would sit back and watch while other members did the majority of the work.

A well-known study on social loafing involved a simple rope-pulling experiment. The participants were asked to pull on a rope much like you would in a game of tug-of-war. First the participants tugged on a rope by themselves, then in a group. The study showed that the participants tended to exert less effort when pulling the rope in a group than when they were asked to pull the rope by themselves.

Social loafing is quite common and can be found in many situations. Why? Research shows that individuals often feel like their contributions don't matter, and therefore, they decrease their effort and contributions. Voting in the U.S. is a good example. Most citizens agree that voting is important. However, every year, a very small percentage of Americans participate in voting and elections. One vote can feel insignificant in such a massive population, so people may not think it is worth it to vote. The high number of people that feel this way is one of the reasons voting turnout is so low.

Two other common reasons given for social loafing are the 'sucker effect' and the 'free-rider effect.' The sucker effect refers to the tendency of people to try and avoid feeling like a 'sucker' by waiting to see how much effort others will put into a group first. These are people who often feel that the other group members will leave them to do all the work. The school group that we discussed earlier is a good example of this. If all the group members try to avoid being the sucker, then each person's effort will be significantly diminished.

The free-rider effect refers to the tendency of people to reduce their efforts when they believe that it will not affect the final performance of the group whatsoever. Another well-known social loafing study showed that people tend to clap and cheer much quieter when in a group. The majority of an audience claps loud enough to cover the lack of effort.

An example of the free-rider effect is that people clap and cheer more quietly when in a group

Fortunately, not all group work leads to social loafing. It is typically absent when the group's task is personally meaningful or challenging or when the members of the group value each other. A group of close-knit friends who are working together are unlikely to experience social loafing because they wouldn't want to let each other down.

Social Facilitation

Social facilitation is another phenomenon that results from working in groups but can be positive or negative. It is the tendency of the presence of others to affect how well we perform a task. Have you ever messed up typing when someone was looking over your shoulder or performed better when singing karaoke with a group instead of by yourself?

Research has shown that the presence of others typically enhances performance on simple or well-learned tasks but impairs performance on complex or difficult tasks. For example, the first study on social facilitation, conducted by Norman Triplett, found that cyclists had faster times when cycling in groups rather than cycling alone. The theory is that the presence of the other cyclists presented a challenge that resulted in an increase in adrenaline and energy.

In contrast, another study found that the presence of others has a negative effect on complex cognitive skills. Joseph Pessin asked people to memorize a list of nonsense words that were all seven syllables long. He found that participants took longer to memorize the list in front of others and also made more mistakes. Because the task was not simple or well-practiced, the presence of others acted as a hindrance to performance.

Social Groups: Dyad and Triad & In-Groups and Out-Groups

How big are your social groups? How do you decide who to include in those groups? In this lesson, we discuss how group size can affect group dynamics and relationships. We also discuss group membership and differentiate between in-groups and out-groups.

Social Group Sizes

Social groups come in all shapes and sizes. You may have a small family and a close group of friends, but I'm sure you know others who have a large family and a wide group of friends. In a previous lesson, we discussed the distinction between several types of social groups and how the type of group can determine group dynamics and relationships. However, the size of the group also has a significant effect on these aspects of a group.

Social Group: Dyad

The most basic, fundamental type of social group that consists of only two people is called a dyad. The relationship between the two people can be linked through romantic interest, family relation, work, school, and so on. As you likely know from personal experience, these relationships can be emotionally intense but also unstable and sometimes only temporary. In a dyad, both members of the group must cooperate to make it work. If just one fails to cooperate, the group will fall apart.

Social Group: Triad

If you add another person to a dyad, it becomes a triad. A triad is a social group that consists of three people. This seemingly simple addition of just one person significantly affects the group interactions and dynamics. The relationships in a triad can still be fairly intense, but the group is typically more stable than a dyad. If two people in a triad have a dispute, the third member of the group can act as mediator and help reach a compromise. If push comes to shove, one person can leave a triad, and a group would still exist, unlike the one person who would remain after the breaking of a dyad.

Another group characteristic that is strikingly different between dyads and triads is the allocation of responsibility. Imagine you work in an office with only one other person. You bring a sandwich to work and put it in the fridge. Later, when you go to eat your sandwich, half of it is missing. Because there is only one other person in the office, you immediately deduce the culprit. However, if you add just one more person to this scenario, you could not automatically know which of the two office mates ate your sandwich. By changing the dyad to a triad, the lines of responsibility are blurred.

Larger Social Groups

As a group's size increases beyond three members, there are a number of trends that emerge. The intimacy and loyalty of the members decrease as the group grows larger. Because the relationships are less intimate, group members feel less obligation and responsibility. The contribution of each member in a large group is less than it would be in a small group. A larger group is also less likely to reach a consensus because of the plethora of ideas and opinions. On the positive side, large groups do have more stability because the group exists even with the loss of several members.

In-Groups And Out-Groups

Regardless of the size of our groups, we have boundaries and membership criteria that distinguish members from nonmembers. These can be physical boundaries and criteria, such as demographic location or common physical characteristics. They can also be implied boundaries and criteria, such as personality and personal tastes.

All groups, however, tend to maintain the physical or implied boundaries and membership criteria by developing a strong distinction between 'we' and 'they.' The individuals that are included in 'we' form what is known as the in-group. The in-group is any group that one belongs to or identifies with. Likewise, the individuals that are included in 'they' form the out-group, which is any group that one does not belong to or identify with.

Favoritism And Derogation

In-groups and out-groups have no specific size limits. An in-group may be as small as a dyad or as large as the world. The out-group, then, is simply everyone who is not in that dyad or is outside the world. People tend to think of the in-group as being special or unique. The tendency to favor an in-group is called in-group favoritism or in-group bias. On the other hand, people tend to think of the out-group as less worthy or commonplace and may even feel hostile against the members of the out-group. The tendency to feel threatened by or hostile against the out-group is called out-group derogation.

Lesson Summary

In summary, a social group's size has a significant impact on its members' interactions and relationships. A dyad is a social group that consists of two people and is considered the most basic and fundamental social group. A triad consists of three people and is considered more stable than a dyad because the third group member can act as mediator during conflict. As a group's size continues to grow, stability increases, but one-on-one relationships deteriorate, and loyalty and individual contributions decrease.

Regardless of a group's size, all of us have ways of differentiating members of the group from nonmembers. Any group that you belong to or identify with is your in-group. Anyone outside of your in-group is considered to be part of the out-group. In-group favoritism is the tendency of people to favor their in-group and think that it is special and unique. Likewise, out-group derogation is the tendency of people to feel threatened by the out-group and think of it as less worthy or commonplace.