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## **LESSON 12 PRIMARY CONCEPTS: SOCIAL GROUPS**

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## 12. SOCIAL GROUP: MEANING AND TYPES

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### 12.0 Objectives

By the end of this lesson, you will be able to understand and learn about:

- Meaning of Group
- Primary and Secondary Group
- In Group and Out Group
- Reference Group

### Introduction

Sociology is the study of social relations. It is primarily concerned with social groups. A man cannot be social by himself unless he has previously lived with others. Man's life is to an enormous extent a group life. The groups we belong to are not all of equal importance to us. Some groups tend to influence many aspects of our lives and bring us into personal and familiar association with others. According to Susan A. **Wheelman's** perspective: 'Groups are very real.... Groups influence our thoughts... and behavior even when we are alone .... Groups expand or limit our personal choices and even the contents of our minds... Forces that are so powerful cannot be ignored or denied'. Before we look at the nature and classification of groups, we should know how groups arise.

### 12.2 Formation of Group

First, we need to know why and how groups are formed. As a simple statement, groups are formed in order to satisfy human needs. Man's basic need is his survival, and the family is an illustration of such a group, which serves to meet this need, without the help of others the human infant would perish. Groups also provide many activities, which would not be possible by a lone individual. It takes twenty-two men to play football, and it takes many thousands to support a fair. We derive such satisfaction from groups that group affiliation itself becomes precious to us. We want to feel that we belong to certain groups and that these groups accept us. In this way, groups provide us with security and fellowship. However, formation of a group depends upon specific purpose.



## Meaning of Social Group

The term social group consists of two terms i.e. social and group. Ordinarily by social group we mean a collection of human beings. But the term social refers to social relationships or shared behaviours. E.S. Bogardus explain that the term “group refers to a number of units of anything in close proximity with one another”. Accordingly, it may refer to a group of trees, a group of houses, a group of horses etc. But in case of human beings as Maclver and Page says a group refers to “any collection of human beings who are brought into social relationships with one another”. Accordingly, a social group is a collection of interacting individuals who participate in similar activities and have a consciousness of joint interaction. There exists some degree of reciprocity and mutual awareness among the individuals.

A social group is an organised one. Besides having mutual interaction and reciprocity the members of a social group have similar goals. The members of a social group interact according to some established patterns. Definite relations exist among individuals which constitute a social group. In the truest sociological sense a group refers to a collection of individuals who are brought into social relationship with one another and organize themselves for the fulfilment of common aims.

But to have a complete understanding of the term social group it must be distinguished from the terms like social aggregates, social category, potential group or quasi group. A social aggregate is a mere collection of individuals who are in a particular place at a particular time but share no definite relations with one another e.g. passengers in a train. But a social category refers to a collection of individuals who have some common characteristics e.g. caste, sex, age and occupational groups.

A potential or quasi group consists of a group of individuals having some common characteristics who does not possess any recognizable structure. But a potential or quasi group became a social group when it becomes organized. A social group has an organizational aspect i.e. rules, regulations, rivals, structure etc. and a Psychological aspect i.e. awareness or consciousness of the members. Members of a social group linked together in a system of social relationships with one another and they interact with each other according to norms of the group. A social group is also dynamic in nature.

### Definitions

- i) According to **Ogburn and Nimkoff**, “Whenever two or more individuals come together and influence one another, they may be said to constitute a social group”.



- ii) According to **A.W. Green**, “A group is an aggregate of individuals which persists in time, which has one or more interests and activities in common which is organised”.
- iii) According to **Horton and Hunt**, “Groups are aggregates or categories of people who have a consciousness of membership and of interaction”.
- iv) According to **MacIver and Page** a social group is “any collection of human beings who are brought into human relationships with one another”.
- v) According to **Williams**, “A social group is a given aggregate people playing inter-related roles and recognized by themselves or others as a unit of interaction”.
- vi) According to **E.S. Bogardus**, “A social group may be thought of as a number of persons two or more, who have some common objects of attention that are stimulating to each other, who have common loyalty and participate in similar activities”.

### Nature of Social Group

The concept of group is different from other related concepts. We would here differentiate it from aggregate and social category. Aggregates are simply collection of people who are in the same place at the same time, but share no definite connection with one another. For example, all college females who wear glasses are an aggregate, as are all males over six feet tall. To use **Erving Goffman's** phrase, aggregates are gatherings of people in unfocused interaction with one another. Of course, within aggregates various kinds of group relationships may usually be found. However, unlike members of a group, the individuals who make up an aggregate neither interact with one another nor take one another into account.

Another is social category, which is a statistical grouping—people classified together on the basis of a particular characteristic they share, such as having the same level of income or beings in the same occupation. Social categories are quite frequently and regularly employed in sociological research. For instance, if we are interested in caste relations in India, we might need to analyse difference in average earning between lower castes and upper castes, regarding them as two distinct statistical categories.

To sum up, therefore, social group consists of individuals who interact with each other on a regular basis. Further, members of a group expect a certain type of behaviour from one another. Also groups differ in size, ranging from intimate associations, like a family to large collectivities such as a sports club.



## Characteristics of Social Group

The Most Important Characteristics of Social Group is listed below:

**i) Given number of Individual:**

A social group consists of a given number of individuals. Without a number of individuals no social group can be formed. Two or more than that individual are necessary to form a group. This number may vary. These individuals belong to the group as members of the group and are considered as unit of the group.

**ii) Reciprocal Relations:**

There exist reciprocal relations among the members of a social group. These reciprocal relations among the members are the basis or foundation of social group without which social group cannot be formed. The members must interact or inter-related with each other.

**iii) Common Goals:**

It is another important characteristic of a social group. The aims, objectives and ideals of the members are common. For the fulfillment of these common goals social groups are formed. Here individual interests are sacrificed for group interests.

**iv) Sense of unity and solidarity:**

Members of a social group are always tied by a sense of unity and bond of solidarity, common goals and mutual relations strengthens this bond of unity and solidarity. This creates loyalty and sympathy among the members of social group.

**v) A strong sense of awe-feeling:**

Members of a social group are characterized by a strong sense of awe-feeling. This we- feeling fosters co-operation among members. Because of this we- feeling the members identify themselves with the group and consider others as outsiders.

**vi) Group Norms:**

Every social group has its own, regulations and norms which the members are supposed to follow. With the help of these rules and norms the group exercises control over it's members. These norms may be written or unwritten. Any violation of group norms is followed by punishment. The group norms maintain unity and integrity in the group.

**vii) Similar Behaviour:**

Members of a social group show similar behaviour. As the interests, ideals and values of a group are common hence its members behave in a similar manner. This similar behaviour helps in the achievement of common goals.

**viii) Awareness:**

Members of a social group are aware about the membership which distinguishes them from others. This is perhaps due to 'the consciousness of kind' as opined by Giddings.

**ix) Group Control:**

Social group exercises some sort of control over its members and over their activities. This control may be direct or indirect. Of course group exercises control only over non-conformists or deviants.

**x) Permanent or Temporal**

Social groups may be permanent or temporary in nature. There are permanent groups like family and temporary groups like crowd, mob etc.

**xi) Mobility**

Social groups are dynamic in nature. It is not static. It responds to different changes. The nature of change may be slow or rapid but it is bound to occur. Social groups have established patterns.

## Classification of Social Groups

All groups are not alike. One can see differences among various groups based on size, nature, objective and lifespan. Some groups like family, are small in size others like a political party, may be very big. Groups may be divided into primary, secondary, in-groups, out-groups membership, non-membership, formal, informal, etc. On the basis of individual's orientation in relation to a group, the concept of reference-group has also taken shape in sociology. Sociologists have made an elaborate exercise to classify the groups. Some of the major classifications adopted by sociologists are given below:

### 6.5.1 Primary and Secondary Groups

In the classification of human groups, one of the broadest and most fundamental distinctions is that between small and intimate groups on the one hand, and large and impersonal groups, on the other. The origin of primary and secondary group conceptualisation can be traced back to the work of Charles H. Cooley (1909).

#### Primary Group

In his book *Social Organisation*, Cooley used the term primary group to refer to small associations of people connected by ties of emotional feelings. The family is an example of a primary group. Cooley explained that by primary groups I mean those characterised by intimate face-to-face association and cooperation. They



are primary in several senses, but chiefly in that they are fundamental in forming the social nature and ideals of the nature. The result of the intimate association, psychologically, is a certain fusion of individuality in a common hold.'

➤ Cooley specified five basic characteristics of primary groups:

- Face-to-face association
- The unspecialised character of association
- Relative permanence
- Limited size and limited membership, and
- Intimacy among the members.

Primary groups are generally small and intimate as in family and peer groups where individuals have direct contact. Members of the primary group interact and have concern for each other, Charles H. Cooley believes that membership in primary group is the essential link between the individual and society. It is these links that create the cooperation that characterises societies. In pre-industrial societies, almost all social life took place in the context of primary groups such as kinship network as in a village.

## Secondary Group

Secondary groups are just the opposite of primary group, Impersonal; formal and indirect relationships exist among the members of secondary groups. The relationship among the members of club, professional group, political party or trade unions come under the category of secondary groups. These relationships are based on mutual interest. The basis of these relationships is located in utility or common interests.

A secondary group is one where a number of people meet regularly, but their relationships are mainly impersonal. Individuals in secondary groups do not have intimate contact with each other, and normally come together for specific practical purpose only. A committee or club is a good example of a secondary group. Of course, in actual social situations, the distinction between primary and secondary groups is not clear-cut. People who regularly attend committee meetings together, for example, might become very friendly and spend time with one another informally.

Secondary groups are usually formal groups where special roles are required of members and where total personalities of individuals may not be brought into play. In such groups, goals are more specific and organisations more





structured than in primary groups; also there is lesser intimacy and personal interaction than in primary groups. Secondary groups are generally regulated by a set of formal rules; there is a formal authority set up with designated power and sharp division of labour. Within the orbit of secondary groups, it may also be possible to form primary groups. For example, in a football team, two players may develop an intimate friendship. The focus of their interaction may widen to include their entire selves. Thus, secondary group has following characteristics:

- Formal relationships
- Lack of intimacy, and
- Unlimited size.

In short, the primary group is a personal group and the secondary group an impersonal one; we have personal relations with members of the primary group and impersonal relations with members of secondary group. The relations, we have with members of our primary 'groups are 'personal' and 'intrinsic'; while those we have in our secondary groups are 'categorical' and 'extrinsic'. In the primary group, in other words, we evaluate people intrinsically in terms of their personal characteristics, whereas in the secondary group, we evaluate them extrinsically in terms of the social categories, or statuses, they occupy. There is a 'we feeling' related with primary group and 'they feeling' related with secondary group.

### 6.5.2 In-Group and Out-Group

In Folkways, William Graham Sumner (1906) described social groups in two ways: In-group and out-group. In-group and out-group are found in all societies. 'In-group' are 'we-group.' as against the contrasting 'out-group' are 'they-group' or 'others-group.' These groups have become a regular feature of modern sociological literature. For any individual 'in-group' is the group to which he belongs whereas 'out-group' is one to which other than 'him' belong. In-groups and out-groups are of no specific size and may indeed be highly variable. The groups with which the individual identifies himself are his in-groups: family, tribe, sex, college, or occupation by virtue of one's awareness of likeness or consciousness of kind. Thus, in-group is a circle of people to which he or she belongs. In-group conveys a feeling of 'we', a sense of unity. The groups with which the individual identifies himself are his in-groups. An in-group acquires its consciousness of being from the exclusion of some persons as well as from the inclusion of other persons. An in-group may be as small as a family or as large as a society itself. The out-group, then, is simply everybody who is not in the family or not in the in-group, as the case may be.

In contrast, an out-group is a circle of people to which individual feels no sense of belonging. Out-groups convey a feeling of 'they' or 'those others'. For example, a tiller of the soil in India views his landlord as 'out-group'. It follows that out-group is defined by the individual with relation to the in-group, usually expressed in the contrast between 'we' and 'they' or 'other.' An in-group is simply the 'we group', an





out-group, the 'they-group'. The in-group includes ourselves and anybody we happen to mean when we use the pronoun 'we'. The out-group, by subtraction, includes everybody else or, as we may somewhat paradoxically say, everybody who is excluded when we use the word 'we'.

In-group attitudes, as we have seen, usually contain some element of sympathy and always a sense of attachment to the members of the group. Out-group attitudes are always marked by a sense of difference and frequently, though not always, by some degree of antagonism. The latter varies from the mild antipathy of, say, fraternity members towards the 'unorganised' college students to such powerful aversions as those engendered by the culturally imposed higher caste-lower caste line in a theoretically democratic society.

Every social group is an in-group for its members—the concept applies equally to the smallest clique and the largest aggregation of men so long as they are aware of their identity. Systematic study requires that we distinguish between the broad types of grouping that permeate the social structure. One such type is the primary group; the intimate face-to-face collectivity. A contrasting type is the large-scale association, the great impersonal organisation of man. These two types, to which we devote the remainder of this chapter, are found in all complex societies, though their concrete manifestations assume a variety of forms.

### 6.5.3 Gemeinschaft and Gesselschaft

Somewhat similar to the concepts of primary and secondary groups are the concepts of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*. These are German terms and used to represent community and society or association respectively. These concepts were developed by German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1887) to differentiate between urban and rural life or community living and living in the mass society. The concept '*gemeinschaft*' is closer to the concept of community. According to Tönnies, it refers to "social relationships whatever function characterised by relative smallness, cohesion, long duration and emotional intensity'. It is characterised by a sense of solidarity and a common identity. There is a strong emphasis on shared values and sentiments, a 'we-feeling'. Horace Miner (in *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 3, 1968) described it as referring to a 'community of feeling' (a kind of associative unity of ideas and emotions) and notes that it derives from likeness and shared life experience. People frequently interact with one another and tend to establish deep and long-term relationships. Social control in *gemeinschaft* is maintained through informal means such as moral persuasion, gossip, and even gestures.

By contrast, '*gesellschaft*' is an ideal type characteristic of modern urban life. It is often conceptualised as a corporate or mass society—a society based on relations or roles and consisting of associational groups. It is characterised by individualism, mobility, impersonality, the pursuit of self-interest and an emphasis on progress rather than tradition. Shared values and total personal involvement become



secondary. Tonnies (1987) writes: "Everybody is by himself and isolated, and there exists a condition of tension against all others." Gesellschaft, in short, is the logic of the market place, where relationships are contractual, impersonal and temporary. There is little sense of commonality and social relationships often grow out of immediate tasks, such as purchasing a product.

Largely, as a result of industrialisation, urbanisation, technological revolution, division of labour and population growth, the gesellschaft has replaced the society of tradition with the society of contract. In this society, neither personal attachment nor traditional rights and duties are important. The relationships between men are determined by bargaining and defined in written agreement.

In the end, it may be noted that there is a great deal of similarity between the typologies of C.H. Cooley (primary and secondary groups), Ferdinand Tonnies (gemeinschaft and gesellschaft), Emile Durkheim (mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity) and Robert Redfield (folk and urban continuum). The regular rediscovery, restatement and reiteration of the same dichotomy of social types suggest that the distinction being made is very fundamental.

#### 6.6.4 Reference Group

Sociologists use the term 'reference group' for such groups that Individuals use as a standard for evaluating themselves and their own behaviour. These are the groups to which we psychologically identify With to which we may and may not belong but we may aspire to belong. People do not actually have to be members of the group to which they refer. **Mustafa Sherif (1953)** defined reference groups as "those groups to which the individual relates himself as a part or to which he aspires to relate himself psychologically'. This definition points clearly to the importance of defining the groups with which an individual identifies, whether or not he belongs to them. These are the groups whose values, standards and beliefs guide the person in carrying out his actions and in evaluating himself.

It is not uncommon to orient ourselves to more than one reference group at a time. One's Family members, teachers, neighbourhood and co-workers shape different aspects of our self-evaluation. In addition, certain reference group attachments change during the life cycle. We shift reference groups as we take on different statuses during our lives. A reference group may be an actual group, a collectivity or an aggregate, a person or personification of an abstraction.

The term 'reference group' was coined by **Herbert Hyman** in Archives of Psychology (1942) to refer to the group against which individual evaluates his or her own situation or conduct. Hyman distinguished between a membership group to which people actually belong, and a reference group which is used as a basis for comparison and evaluation. A reference group may or may not be a membership group. Later on, **Robert Merton and Alice Kitt (1950)** refined the concept and provided a functionalist formulation of it. Their work was stimulated



by Samuel Stouffer's *The American Soldier* (1949) in which the concept of relative deprivation was developed. **Merton and Kitt** point out that feeling of deprivation were less related to the actual degree of hardship they experienced, than to the living standards of the group to which they compared themselves. Thus, relative deprivation is a special case of comparative reference group behaviour. Merton later distinguished reference groups and interaction groups (in *Social Theory and Social Structure*, 1957).

The originator of this concept, Hyman found in his study of social class that people thought of as their status could not be predicted solely from such factors as income or level of education. To a certain extent, an individual's self-evaluation of status depended on the group used as a framework for judgement. In many cases, people model their behaviour after groups to which they do not belong.

Quite often, an individual is torn between the demands of a membership group to which he belongs but with which he does not identify and the motivational dictates of a reference group of which he is not a member. Social psychologists have termed this position as marginality. A familiar example is that of a principal of a private college who is officially a member of the management group but who identifies with the teachers on the college floor. This is a classic dilemma of the marginal man (principal) who seeks to join a reference group to which he is excluded and in doing so, he is rejected by the group to which he already belongs.

## Types

Sociologists have identified two types of reference groups as described below:

(i) Positive reference groups (ii) Negative reference group

(i) Positive Reference Group

These are the ones we want to be accepted by. Thus, if we want to be a film actor, we might carefully observe and imitate the behaviour of film actors. These are the groups, collectivities or persons that provide the person with a guide to action by explicitly setting norms and espousing values.

(ii) Negative reference groups

These groups we do not want to be identified with, also serve as sources of self-evaluation. A person might, for example, to avoid resembling members of a particular religious group or a circus group. A group rejected by or in opposition to ego's own group, it is 'the enemy' or the negative group.



## Importance and Function

The concept of reference group is important for understanding socialisation, conformity, and how people perceive and evaluate themselves, especially in relation to the self. Reference groups perform three basic functions:

- They serve a normative function by setting and enforcing standards of conduct and belief. T. Newcomb (1953) writes: "The significant thing about a reference group is, in fact, that its norms provide frames of reference which actually influence the attitude and behaviour of a person."
- They also perform a comparison function by serving as a standard against which people can measure themselves and others.
- They serve not only as sources of current evaluation but also as sources of aspiration and goal attainment (as a means of anticipatory socialisation). A person who chooses to become a professor or a lawyer begins to identify with that group and becomes socialised to have certain goals and expectations.

## Conclusion

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.

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