

Groups and Organizations

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we will examine the role of groups, and take a close look at group dynamics. “Would you jump off a cliff just because your friends are doing it?” You may think about this age-old question differently after reading this section about groups and conformity. Specifically, this lesson will cover:



BEFORE YOU START

In the last Challenge, we explored the components and functions of culture. In this Challenge, we will be looking instead at society. It can be a bit tricky to understand the sociological difference between society and culture! One way to think about the relationship between society and culture is to consider the characteristics of a phone. The phone itself is like society, and the apps on the phone are like culture. Society and social institutions are like the physical phone and its accessories (battery, case, headphones, charging port, etc). The phone has a tangible structure, just as society has specific structures and institutions. Social institutions are society’s hardware.

Culture is like the software and apps on a phone. Apps and software are instructions on the phone that are intangible, just as intangible culture provides the rules and input that make society function. These are the pieces that make the phone recognizable as yours, as opposed to any other person’s phone that happens to be the same model. Just as the culture of a group describes its beliefs, practices, and guidelines for living, so too does the software on the phone impact how you use it and what you can do with it. And just as phone operating systems go through updates or changes, culture can also evolve over time.

1. Defining Groups

Most of us feel comfortable using the word “group” without giving it much thought. Often, we might mean very different things when we use the word group. We might say that a group of kids all saw the dog, or it could mean 250 students in a lecture hall, or four siblings playing on a front lawn. In everyday conversation, there isn’t a clear distinguishing use. So how can we more precisely focus the meaning for sociological purposes?

The term **group** is amorphous and can refer to a wide variety of sets of people, from just two people (such as spouses or siblings) to a club, a regular gathering of friends, or people who work together or share a hobby. In short, the term refers to any collection of at least two people who interact with some frequency and who share a sense that their identity is somehow aligned with the group.

Of course, every time people are gathered it is not necessarily a group. A concert is usually a one-time event, for instance, so sociologically the people attending a concert are not a group—but the band performing

probably is! Belonging to a political party doesn't imply interaction with others, so being a party member doesn't imply group membership either, but if you are on a political party's local organizing committee then that committee is likely a group. People who exist in the same place at the same time but who do not interact or share a sense of identity—such as a bunch of people standing in line at the grocery—are considered an **aggregate**, or a crowd.

Another example of a nongroup is people who share similar characteristics but are not tied to one another in any way. These people are considered a **category**.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Generations are an example of a category. Millennials are Americans born from approximately 1980-2000. Why are Millennials a category and not a group? Because while some of them may share a sense of identity, they do not, as a whole, interact frequently with each other. There are just too many of them to be a group.

Interestingly, people within an aggregate or category can become a group. During disasters, people in a neighborhood (an aggregate) who did not know each other might become friendly and depend on each other at the local shelter. After the disaster ends and the people go back to simply living near each other, the feeling of cohesiveness may last since they have all shared an experience. They might become a group, practicing emergency readiness, coordinating supplies for next time, or taking turns caring for neighbors who need extra help. Or they might resume their former state of low interaction with one another, and cease to be a group.

There may also be many groups within a single category. Consider teachers, for example. Within the category of teachers, groups may exist like teachers' unions, or staff members who are involved with the PTA, or teachers who have participated in Teach For America. People can create more specific groups within a larger category.



TERMS TO KNOW

Group

Any collection of at least two people who interact with some frequency and who share a sense that their identity is somehow aligned with the group.

Aggregate

A crowd of people who just happen to exist in the same place at the same time but who share no meaningful interaction or sense of identity, such as people in line at the grocery.

Category

People who share similar characteristics but are not tied to one another in any way, such as members of the same generation, or people of the same gender.

2. Primary Groups

Groups are a basic part of society and social life, and of particular interest to sociological study. People belong to many social groups of all different levels at the same time. As we've seen, a group is simply a collection of two or more people who regularly interact with each other for some purpose, but we all have more than one such relationship in the social networks of our lives.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Couples, family, friends, business associates, coworkers, or lifestyle groups like book clubs, sports teams, or church committees, are all social groups that may be a part of an individual's

regular interactions.

Sociologist Charles Horton Cooley (1864-1929) suggested that groups can broadly be divided into two categories: **primary groups** and secondary groups (1909). According to Cooley, primary groups play the most critical role in our lives. The primary group is usually fairly small and is made up of individuals who generally engage face-to-face in long-term, emotionally significant ways. These interactions occurring within the primary group and which serve emotional needs are called **expressive functions**, which differ from pragmatic functions.

The best example of a primary group is the family, but small, tight-knit groups of friends or collaborators can also be primary groups. These groups are characterized by what sociologists call strong ties. You're bound together by loyalty and emotional connection—you can't go out and replace your brother in the same way that you can replace a coworker. Primary groups are the very first form of human group contact and interaction, which is why they are called primary. You first experience the family, and then friends. Primary groups often provide your ideas of right or wrong, your attitudes, and behaviors, your worldview and outlook. You have been improving your **relationship building skills** your entire life by engaging in your primary group. These groups usually lay the foundation for how we build relationships with others in our personal and professional lives.



BIG IDEA

A person's political views, personal morals, and religious opinions are often shaped by their very first primary group contact.



TERMS TO KNOW

Primary Group

A smaller social group whose members share intimate, lasting personal connections.

Expressive Functions

Interactions and behaviors between members within the primary group, which serve emotional needs.

3. Secondary Groups

Secondary groups are larger, more impersonal collections of people who join together for a purpose or goal, or are time-limited. These are people that you don't know as well as the people in your primary groups, but to whom you still feel connected. Secondary groups are characterized by what sociologists call weak ties, meaning you have little emotional connection and personal knowledge of the other people in the group beyond the feeling of group affinity. These groups serve an **instrumental function** rather than an expressive one, meaning that their role is more pragmatic and goal- or task-oriented than emotional. One's fellow students or coworkers can be examples of a secondary group.

The following represent secondary groups—people you see occasionally, whose faces are familiar to you, but you don't really know that much about them.

- A group of people you play soccer with once a month
- A class for a lecture that you have
- People who work at your company}}

You're still united in a way, because you share a group affinity, but in the event that the unifying circumstance

is dissolved—soccer league or class ends, change of job, etc.—that secondary group also dissolves. By engaging with members of your secondary group, such as your coworkers, to tackle projects, overcome obstacles, and meet goals, you are strengthening your **relationship building skills**.

Neither primary nor secondary groups are bound by strict definitions or set limits. In fact, people can move from one group to another. A graduate seminar, for example, can start as a secondary group focused on the class at hand, but as the students work together throughout their program, they may find common interests and strong ties that transform them into a more durable primary group.



Relationship Building: Why Employers Care

In the professional world, colleagues depend on each other on a daily basis. For instance, police officers work together to solve a crime. Engineers work together to develop structures and designs. In almost every organization, projects are reviewed by colleagues and supervisors through the development process. By having strong working relationships with your coworkers, you can be more efficient and avoid obstacles.



TERMS TO KNOW

Secondary Group

A larger and more impersonal social group that joins together for a specific purpose or goal.

Instrumental Function

Interactions within a group that is goal- or task-oriented.



WATCH

Primary and secondary groups form the building blocks of society, particularly when we think about nuclear families and extended families. In the following video, you will learn more about how simple family structures grow and combine into more complex groups and communities, and eventually into entire societies.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about **defining groups** and the distinction between primary and secondary groups, and how these groupings overlap and intersect in our lives. You learned that **primary groups**, like families, feature enduring and emotional bonds, while **secondary groups**, like coworkers, tend to be larger and more impersonal.

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REFERENCES

Cooley, C.H. (1909) *Social organization*. Charles Scribner's Sons.

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A crowd of people who just happen to exist in the same place at the same time but who share no meaningful interaction or sense of identity, such as people in line at the grocery.

Category

People who share similar characteristics but are not tied to one another in any way, such as members of the same generation, or people of the same gender.

Expressive Functions

Interactions and behaviors between members within the primary group, which serve emotional needs.

Group

Any collection of at least two people who interact with some frequency and who share a sense that their identity is somehow aligned with the group.

Instrumental Function

Interactions within a group that is goal- or task-oriented.

Primary Group

A smaller social group whose members share intimate, lasting personal connections.

Secondary Group

A larger and more impersonal social group that joins together for a specific purpose or goal.