

Reference Groups

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the topic of reference groups, through the definition and discussion of:

1. Reference Groups

1. REFERENCE GROUPS

Reference groups are social groups that fall into two categories:

- Social groups with which people identify
- Social groups to which people aspire to belong

Reference groups guide and shape people's behavior by influencing them to consider what the people within the reference group would think about that behavior.



THINK ABOUT IT

Suppose that you're a religious person, in a marriage that isn't working, and you're considering getting a divorce. Do you think you'd take into account how your religion and religious community--your church--would view your decision to get a divorce? Being a religious person, you might ask yourself, "What are they going to think?", and then use this input to evaluate your own thoughts and feelings.

Whenever you ask yourself about 'they,' as in what 'they' might think, you're asking yourself this question about a reference group. The "they" in this query is the reference group.



BRAINSTORM

In the example above the reference group would be your religion. What other reference groups might you have? What about your family? Would you consider how your family is going to react to you getting a divorce? Would your family accept or reject your reasoning? Would they support your view on why the marriage needs to end? What about your friends or your peer group as a reference group? How will they view you and your reasoning? Will they support you?

The important point is that in society, people are not making decisions in isolation. As the divorce example illustrates, many reference groups are involved in the thought process. People use ideas, expectations, and norms of others to help make sense of their own lives and to guide their decision making. So far, though, the divorce example has only taken consideration of the groups to which you currently belong--your family, your

religious group, your friends, or even your children.

There are also reference groups that you use to which you don't belong. These are reference groups to which you aspire to belong in the future, groups whose opinions you value.

IN CONTEXT

Suppose you just graduated from college and you decide to take a year off before pursuing your career. If you consider the reference group of your future employers, you may decide that taking a year off isn't such a good idea, because those people may negatively view such a gap on your resume.

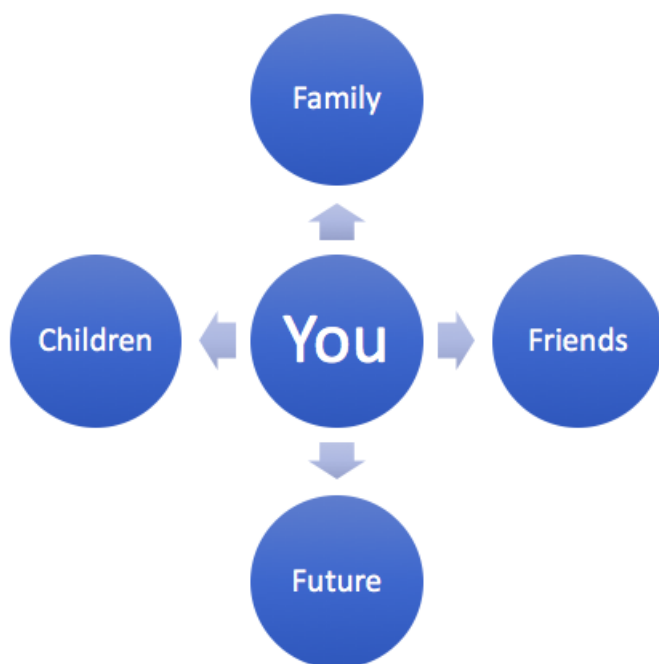
In this manner, that reference group may influence your behavior now, because you take into consideration that those future employers might think you lack conviction or ambition, relative to someone who didn't take a year off and instead immediately pursued a career. You would be using that reference group to help you think through your current situation even though you don't belong to it now, because you may hope to be in that group in the future.



BRAINSTORM

Can you think of an instance in your academic career when you might use academic professionals as your reference group? What types of information might be relevant to your reference group in your personal statement? For example, your SAT scores? Your field-related jobs or internships? What would your reference group consider to be valuable contributions?

The diagram below shows you in the middle surrounded by several hypothetical reference groups to which you might belong, whose opinions you value--your family, friends, future goals, and even children if you have them.



Many parents say that maintaining their honor and merit in the eyes of their children is very important to them; if this is the case for you, then your children are going to be a primary reference group for you.



BRAINSTORM

What reference groups do you feel that you use in your life to help you think? Write down a list of reference groups that you use in your day-to-day life.



TERM TO KNOW

Reference Groups

A social group with which people identify and to which they refer when evaluating themselves and their behavior.



SUMMARY

Today you learned about **reference groups**.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



TERMS TO KNOW

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