

Social Groups and Influence

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will explore how different types of groups can have influence over its members, as well as on those who are not members. Groups of two people have different dynamics from groups of three, which are both more similar than groups of a hundred. We will look at how group dynamics affect decision-making for individuals. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. In-groups and Out-groups

One of the ways that groups can be powerful is through inclusion, and its inverse, exclusion. The feeling that we belong in an elite or select group is a heady one, while the feeling of not being allowed in, or of being in competition with a group, can be motivating in a different way. Sociologist William Sumner (1840-1910) developed the concepts of in-group and out-group to explain this phenomenon (1906). In short, an **in-group** is the group that an individual feels she belongs to, and which she believes to be an integral part of who she is. An **out-group**, conversely, is a group someone doesn't belong to. Often we may feel disdain or competition in relationship to an out-group. Sports teams, unions, and sororities are examples of in-groups and out-groups. People may belong to, or be an outsider to, any of these. Primary and secondary groups consist of both in-groups and out-groups.

While group affiliations can be neutral or even positive, such as the case of a team sport, the concept of in-groups and out-groups can also explain some negative human behavior, such as bullying, snobbishness, and on the more extreme end, racism and xenophobia. By defining others as “not like us” and/or inferior, in-groups can end up practicing ethnocentrism, racism, sexism, ageism, and heterosexism—manners of judging others negatively based on their culture, race, sex, age, or sexuality.

Often, in-groups can form within a secondary group. For instance, a workplace can have cliques of people, from senior executives who play golf together, to engineers who collaborate on code together, to young singles who socialize after hours. While these in-groups might show favoritism and affinity for other in-group members, the overall organization may be unable or unwilling to acknowledge it. Therefore, it pays to be wary of the politics of in-groups, since members may exclude others as a means of gaining status within the group.



Relationship Building: Why Employers Care

Effective supervisors strive to create a positive working climate with high employee morale. In-groups and out-groups have a strong effect on an office environment, and therefore, supervisors strive to hire those who will positively contribute to this environment. Having strong relationship building skills will

enable you to effectively navigate in-group and out-group affiliations, making you an asset to a professional team.



TERMS TO KNOW

In-group

A group that an individual feels she belongs to, and which she believes to be an integral part of who she is.

Out-group

A group someone does not belong to, where they define themselves in opposition to the members of that group.

2. Reference Groups

A **reference group** is a group that people compare themselves to: it provides a standard of measurement. In U.S. society, peer groups are common reference groups. Kids and adults pay attention to what their peers wear, what music they like, what they do with their free time, and they compare themselves to what they see. Most people have more than one reference group, so a middle school boy might look not just at his classmates but also at his older brother's friends and see a different set of norms. And he might observe the antics of his favorite athletes for yet another set of behaviors.

Some other examples of reference groups can be one's classmates, coworkers, community members, extended family, celebrities, and even fictional people. Often, reference groups convey competing messages. For instance, on television and in movies, young adults often have wonderful apartments and cars and active social lives and never seem to go to work, in a way that is unrealistic for real young adults. At all ages, we use reference groups to help guide our behavior and show us social norms.



THINK ABOUT IT

How important is it to surround yourself with positive reference groups? You may not recognize a reference group, but it still influences the way you act. Identifying your reference groups can help you understand the source of the social identities you aspire to or want to distance yourself from. Positive reference groups build healthy relationship skills which you can carry into other groups and other areas of your life.

Make a list of all of the different groups in your social world. Then label each group, making sure you have at least one example of a primary group, secondary group, in-group, out-group, and a reference group. Now write the instrumental and expressive functions of each group next to the group. Finally, after looking at this list and the functions of each group, which are most important to you? Why?



TERM TO KNOW

Reference Group

A group that people compare themselves to, providing a standard of measurement.

3. Small Groups

Now that we have learned about different types of groups, let's examine **group dynamics** or the ways in which groups operate, and the impact these groups have on individual members.

A small group is typically one where the collection of people is small enough that all members of the group know each other and share simultaneous interaction, such as a nuclear family, a dyad, or a triad. Georg Simmel (1858-1915) wrote extensively about the difference between a **dyad**, or two-member group, and a **triad**, which is a three-member group (1902). In the former, if one person withdraws, the group can no longer exist. The intensity is high but stability is low because the dyad is dependent upon both people being committed to the group of two. We can think of a divorce, which effectively ends the "group" of the married couple, or of two best friends never speaking again. In a triad, however, the dynamic is quite different. Intensity is lower but stability is higher because if one person withdraws, the group lives on, albeit now as a dyad. A triad has a different set of relationships. If there are three in the group, two-against-one dynamics can develop, and there exists the potential for a majority opinion on any issue.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Consider also a dyad (couple) that becomes a triad (new baby). We can often see a lessening of the intensity in the relationship between parents as attention is diverted to a newborn who requires a lot of time and care. Similarly, when parents see their children off to college or adulthood and experience an "empty nest," the parental dyad might feel like a new group with the intensity of a group of two resurfacing and stability decreasing now that children are no longer living in the home.

Small groups generally have strong internal cohesiveness and a sense of connection. The challenge, however, is for small groups to achieve large goals. They can struggle to be heard or to be a force for change if they are pushing against larger groups. In short, they are easier to ignore. It is difficult to define exactly when a small group becomes a large group. Perhaps it occurs when there are too many people to join in a simultaneous discussion. Or perhaps a group joins with other groups as part of a movement that unites them. These larger groups may share geographic space, such as a fraternity or sorority on the same campus, or they might be spread out around the globe. The larger the group, the more attention it can garner, and the more pressure members can exert in the pursuit of goals the group wishes to achieve. At the same time, the larger the group becomes, the more the risk grows for division and lack of cohesion.



TERMS TO KNOW

Group Dynamics

The ways in which a group operates.

Dyad

A group of two individuals, such as a couple or a pair of best friends. The intensity is high but the stability is low.

Triad

A group of three individuals, such as three siblings or roommates. Relative to a dyad, the intensity is lower and the stability is higher.

4. Group Conformity

Sociologists study human behavior and social groups, but how do humans behave within these various groups? What social dynamics are at work within them? Most individuals see themselves as their own person, as unique, and as relatively uninfluenced by outside forces. In the ongoing "nature versus nurture" debate, sociologists tend toward the nurture explanatory framework and thus examine the forces around us that

shape our behavior. A difficult concept, then, is **conformity**, which refers to the extent to which an individual complies with group norms or expectations.

Most people will agree that we like to fit in, to some degree. Likewise, when we want to stand out, we want to choose how we stand out and for what reasons. Since societal norms change over time, what was once non-conformist (i.e., tattoos, piercings, leather jackets, and even blue jeans) are now normal. What was conformist (i.e., smoking cigarettes) is no longer an acceptable social norm in many places. Formal norms have relegated smoking to remote areas, whereas smoking on airplanes, in restaurants, and even in college classrooms was permissible until the 1980s and 1990s in some places.

As you might recall, we use reference groups to assess and understand how to act, to dress, and to behave. Not surprisingly, young people are particularly aware of who conforms and who does not. A high school boy whose mother makes him wear ironed button-down shirts might protest that he will look stupid—because everyone else wears T-shirts. Another high school boy might like wearing those shirts as a way of standing out.

Psychologist Solomon Asch (1907-1996) conducted experiments that illustrated how great the pressure to conform is, specifically within a small group. After reading about his work in the following feature, ask yourself what you would do in Asch's experiment. Would you speak up? What would help you speak up and what would discourage it?

IN CONTEXT

In 1951, psychologist Solomon Asch sat a small group of about eight people around a table. Only one of the people sitting there was the true experimental subject; the rest were associates of the experimenter. However, the subject was led to believe that the others were all, like him, people brought in for an experiment in visual judgments. The group was shown two cards, the first card with a single vertical line, and the second card with three vertical lines differing in length. The experimenter polled the group and asked each participant one at a time which line on the second card matched up with the line on the first card.

However, this was not really a test of visual judgment. Rather, it was Asch's study on the pressures of conformity. He was curious to see what the effect of multiple wrong answers would be on the subject, who presumably was able to tell which lines matched. In order to test this, Asch had each planted respondent answer in a specific way. The subject was seated in such a way that he had to hear almost everyone else's answers before it was his turn. Sometimes the non-subject members would unanimously choose an answer that was clearly wrong.

So what was the conclusion? Asch found that thirty-seven out of fifty test subjects responded with an "obviously erroneous" answer at least once. When faced with a unanimous wrong answer from the rest of the group, on average, the subject conformed to the wrong answer. Asch revised the study and repeated it, wherein the subject still heard the staged wrong answers, but was allowed to write down his answer rather than speak it aloud. In this version, the number of examples of conformity—giving an incorrect answer so as not to contradict the group—fell by two thirds. He also found that group size had an impact on how much pressure the subject felt to conform.

The results showed that speaking up when only one other person gave an erroneous answer was far more common than when five or six people defended the incorrect position. Finally, Asch

discovered that people were far more likely to give the correct answer in the face of near-unanimous consent if they had a single ally. If even one person in the group also dissented, the subject conformed only a quarter as often. Clearly, it was easier to be a minority of two than a minority of one.

[Watch a clip from the experiment here.](#)

Asch concluded that there are two main causes for conformity: people want to be liked by the group or they believe the group is better informed than they are. He found his study results disturbing. To him, they revealed that intelligent, well-educated people would, with very little coaxing, go along with an untruth. He believed this result highlighted real problems with the education system and values in our society.



THINK ABOUT IT

Imagine you are in Asch's study. Would you find it difficult to give the correct answer in that scenario? Why or why not? How would you change the study now to improve it?



Relationship Building: Skill in Action

There is an obvious correlation between being a part of a group and relationship building. Let's look at an example of a woman named Fiona. Throughout her life, Fiona has belonged to various groups such as her family, her group of friends, her athletic clubs, and her place of worship. Through these experiences, she has learned how to relate to others, how to have effective conversations, and how to participate as a productive member of a group. She can then apply these skills in the workplace when working with her colleagues.



TERM TO KNOW

Conformity

The extent to which an individual complies with group norms or expectations.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about the dynamics of **in-groups and out-groups**, of **small groups** like dyads and triads, and of **reference groups**. You saw how these groups can interact and overlap with each other, and how they influence the behavior of individuals, particularly through the **conformity experiments** of Solomon Asch.

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