Characteristics and Significance of Groups

Introduction

All day long we interact first in one group and then in another. We live in a dwelling as part of a group, we learn in groups contained in the same classroom, we work in groups, we interact with friends in groups, and we spend much of our leisure time in groups. Our family life, our leisure time, our friendships, and our careers are all filled with groups. In fact, if a person from outer space conducted a study of the people of Earth, group membership would probably be the dominant characteristic noted. We are born into a group called the family, and we would not survive the first few minutes, the first few weeks, or even the first few years of our lives without membership in this group. It is within our family and peer groups that we are socialised into ways of behaving and thinking, educated, and taught to have certain perspectives on ourselves and our world. Our personal identity is derived from the way in which we are perceived and treated by other members of our groups. We learn, work, and play in groups. As humans we have an inherent social nature. Our life is filled with groups from the moment of our birth to the moment of our death. All these make groups one of the most important factors in our lives. In business, government, and the military there is great interest in improving the productivity of groups. There is great concern in

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our society with strengthening the family. Educators are striving to better understand how the classroom functions as a group. Drug abuse, delinquency and crime, and mental illness are all being treated through group procedures, and there is continued concern with making those procedures more effective. As the effectiveness of groups goes, our quality of life goes. The more effective our family, career, and educational groups, the higher the quality of our lives.

Definition of Groups

Not every collection of people can be considered a group. The Oxford English Dictionary defines group as a number of persons or things regarded as forming a unit on account of any kind of mutual or common relation or classified together on account of a common degree of similarity. There are three criteria suggested by this definition to call a group as a group:

a) Number of persons – more than one
b) Mutual or common relation
c) Similarity

Groups may be contrasted with aggregates. An aggregate is a collection of individuals who are present at the same time and place but do not form a unit or have a common degree of similarity. Individuals standing on a street corner, the members of an audience at a music programme are aggregates, not groups.

While the Oxford definition has captured the basic essence of a group, different social scientists have put forward their own views on what is a group with emphasis on the various aspects of a group. We can see some of the definitions below.
Interpersonal Interaction

A group may be defined as a collection of individuals who are interacting with one another. According to this definition, the individuals are not a group unless they are interacting with one another. Three psychologists who have defined group in this way are Bonner, Stogdill, and Homans. They stress that the primary defining characteristic of a group is interpersonal interaction. It is questionable that a group can exist without its members interacting with one another.

Perceptions of Membership

A group may be defined as a social unit consisting of two or more persons who perceive themselves as belonging to a group. According to this definition, the persons are not a group unless they perceive themselves to be part of a group. Two psychologists who have defined group in this way are Bales and Smith. They stress that the primary defining characteristic of a group, is that the members perceive themselves to be part of a group. It is questionable that a group could exist without its members being aware that they are members of a group.

Interdependency

Group may be defined as a collection of individuals who are interdependent. According to this definition, the individuals are not a group unless an event that affects one of them affects them all. Four psychologists who have defined group in this way are Cartright and Zander, Fiedler, and Lewin. These authors stress that the primary defining characteristic of a group is that the members are interdependent in some way. It is questionable that a group could exist without its members being interdependent.
Goals

Group may be defined as a collection of individuals who join together to achieve a goal. According to this definition, the individuals are not a group unless they are trying to achieve a mutual goal. Three psychologists who have defined group this way are Deutsch and Freeman.

They stress that the primary defining characteristic of a group is the craving of its members to achieve a mutual goal. It is questionable whether a group would exist unless there was a mutual goal that its members were trying to achieve.

Motivation

Group may be defined as a collection of individuals who are all trying to satisfy some personal need through their joint association. According to this definition, the individuals are not a group unless they are motivated by some personal reason to be part of a group. Two psychologists who have defined group in this way are Bass and Cattell. They stress that the primary defining characteristic of a group is that its members belong to the group in order to obtain needed rewards or to satisfy other personal needs. It is questionable that a group could exist without its member needs being satisfied by their membership.

Structured Relationships

A group may be defined as a collection of individuals whose interactions are structured by a set of roles and norms. According to this definition, the individuals are not a group unless their interactions are structured by a set of role definitions and norms. Two sets of psychologists who have defined group in this way are McDavid and Harari and Shel and Sherif.
They say that the primary defining characteristic of a group is that the interaction of its members is structured by role definitions and norms. It is doubtful whether a group could exist unless role definitions and norms structure the interaction of its members.

**Mutual Influence**

A group may be defined as a collection of individuals who influence each other. According to this definition, the individuals are not a group unless they are affecting and being affected by each other and therefore, the primary defining characteristic of a group is interpersonal influence. Shaw defined group in this way.

One solution to the profusion of definitions is to combine them all into one definition. A small group may be defined as two or more individuals who:

a) pursue common goals

b) are interdependent

c) interact with each other

d) share norms concerning matters of common interest and participate in a system of interlocking roles

e) influence each other

f) find the group rewarding and

g) define themselves and are defined by others as belonging to the group

Not all these characteristics are equally important and although it is impossible to gain consensus among social scientists as to which characteristics are most important we can arrive at a definition of group for the purpose of group work as follows.
A group is two or more individuals in face to face interaction, each aware of positive interdependence as they strive to achieve mutual goals, each aware of his or her membership in the group, and each aware of the others who belong to the group.

**Types of Groups**

All of us are simultaneously members of various types of groups. We are members of the family, members of friendship groups, members of work organisations and members of fan club or a religious group. Sociologists have attempted to classify/differentiate the various types of groups as follows:

**Voluntary and Involuntary Groups**

Voluntary groups are those we join through our own choice and effort. We may join a political party or a particular occupation. In contrast involuntary groups are those that we are forced to join or those that we are automatically members of without choice. For example, everyone is without a choice, automatically a member of sex, age and racial groups.

**Open and Closed Groups**

An open group is one in which virtually anyone can become a member. For instance, all can join the Hrithik Roshan fan club. A closed group, however, is much more difficult to join. Some exclusive clubs restrict membership so that all cannot join. Only a few elites manage to get memberships in such clubs. Similarly the mafia (underworld) is a closed group.

**Vertical and Horizontal Groups**

A vertical group consists of members from all walks of life, while a horizontal group consists predominantly of
members from one social class. Occupational groups – of doctors or electricians for instance – are composed largely of members from the same social class. On the other hand religious groups may have members from all classes.

**Primary and Secondary Groups**

Primary group is one where members develop close, personal, intimate and enduring relationships. Family, neighbours and work associates are examples of such groups. Members know one another well, greatly influence each other and feel closely related. On the other hand, in secondary groups individuals act towards one another in rather impersonal, superficial and utilitarian ways.

**Natural and Formed Groups**

Natural groups consist of members who come together in a spontaneous fashion on the basis of naturally occurring events, interpersonal attraction or the mutually perceived needs of members. Family, peer groups and street gangs are examples of natural groups. On the other hand formed group consists of members who come together through some outside influence or intervention. These are groups that are formed for a particular purpose. Therapy groups, encounter groups, committees and teams are examples of formed groups.

The type of group that we discussed last – formed group – is of great interest to group work as the groups that we come across in group work predominantly belong to this type of groups.

**Factors of Group Formation**

We can identify four major factors that influence our decision to join and remain in a wide variety of groups:
attraction to members of the group; the activities, goals, or the task of the group; affiliating with the people in the group; and meeting needs or goals lying outside the group.

Attraction to members of the group grows out of proximity and frequency of interaction. (Consider your own experience of friendship groups that are largely determined by who is available for interaction: your neighbours, classmates, roommates, and so on.) However, we must remember that proximity creates only the potential for attraction; other factors usually come into play when actually establishing a relationship. The power of similarity, especially attitudinal similarity, appears to be as strong in group formation as in interpersonal attraction.

The task of a group, as experienced in its activities and goals is often an important reason for joining. You join a photography club because you enjoy taking pictures and discussing that activity with others. You join a protest group against higher tuition fees because you cannot afford to pay more. In these examples, you are gaining rewards directly through group membership.

The application of social exchange theory to group formation predicts that we join and remain in groups when the rewards for doing so outweigh the costs, thus yielding profits.

The third general factor of group formation is our desire to affiliate with the people in that group. We satisfy our need for affiliation through interacting with people, just as we meet our need for achievement through the activities and goals of the group. Whether we affiliate for social comparison, or to reduce anxiety, or to satisfy an innate craving, it is clear that the group is a powerful forum for meeting our basic social needs and a strong influence on our behaviour.
Group membership may help us meet needs that lie outside the group – thus, group membership may be a stepping stone to achieve an external goal, rather than a source of direct satisfaction. A college professor may regularly attend meetings of a professional association to enhance the probability of promotion. A candidate for political office may join a host of community organisations to enhance his or her chances for election.

When we consider attraction to a group, we must also consider the characteristics of the group itself. Several attributes of groups generally make them more attractive to prospective members and thus contribute to group formation.

- The more prestige a group can offer a member, the more attractive the group. Members who have positions of higher authority and prestige are usually most attracted to remain in the group.

- Co-operative relationships and joint rewards heighten the attractiveness of a group, whereas individual striving and competition detract from it.

- The degree of positive interaction among members directly affects attractiveness since it increases the range of personal and social needs being met.

- The size of the group affects its attraction. Smaller groups generally offer more possibility for interaction, for sharing similarities, and for meeting individual needs, and therefore tend to be more attractive.

- Positive relations with other groups may add to the prestige of the group and make it more attractive.
Nothing succeeds like success. Groups that are perceived as meeting their goals effectively usually appear to be more attractive.

**Plausible Hypothesis about Group Formation**

From the various factors influencing group formation the following hypothesis can be confidently stated.

1) People join groups in order to satisfy some individual need.

2) Proximity, contact and interaction provide an opportunity for individuals to discover the need satisfactions that can be attained through affiliation with others.

3) Interpersonal attraction is a positive function of physical attractiveness, attitude similarity, personality similarity, economic similarity, racial similarity, perceived ability of the other person (his or her success or failure) and need compatibility.

4) An individual will join a group if he or she finds the activities of the group attractive or rewarding.

5) An individual will join a group if he or she values the goals of the group.

6) There exists a need for affiliation which renders group membership rewarding.

7) An individual will join a group if he or she perceives it to be instrumental in satisfying needs outside the group.

8) Group development follows a consistent pattern, which may be characterized as orientation-evaluation-control.
Theories Underlying Group Work Practice

From knowledge about small groups accumulated over the years in laboratory and natural settings, investigators of group phenomena began to develop comprehensive theories to explain group functioning. An enormous variety of these theories exist. This section examines five of the most important theories: systems theory, psychodynamic theory, learning theory, field theory and social exchange theory. An understanding of these theories is important to place in the appropriate context the group processes and human behaviour in groups experienced by you when you do group work.

Systems Theory

Systems theory attempts to understand the group as a system of interacting elements. It is probably the most widely used and broadly applied theory of group functioning. According to this theory, groups are social systems with several interdependent members attempting to maintain order and a stable equilibrium while they function as a unified whole. Groups are constantly facing changing demands in their quest to attain goals and to maintain a stable equilibrium. Groups must mobilize their resources and act to meet changing demands if they are to survive. According to Parsons, Bales and Shils (1953), there are four major functional tasks for systems such as a group: 1) integration – ensuring that members of groups fit together; 2) adaptation – ensuring that groups change to cope with the demands of their environment; 3) pattern maintenance – ensuring that groups define and sustain their basic purposes, identities and procedures; and 4) goal attainment – ensuring that groups pursue and accomplish their tasks. Groups must accomplish these four functional tasks to remain in equilibrium. The
likelihood that a group will survive depends on the demands of the environment, the extent to which members identify with group goals, and the degree to which members believe goals are attainable. By overcoming obstacles and successfully handling the functional tasks confronting them, groups strive to remain in a state of equilibrium.

This theory also states that groups are in constant interaction with their environments. They occupy an ecological niche. Homans suggests that groups have an internal system and an external system. The external system represents a group’s way of handling the adaptive problems that result from its relationship with its social and physical environment. The internal system consists of the patterns of activities, interactions, and norms occurring within the group as it attempts to function.

Concepts derived from the various views of systems theory that are particularly relevant for group workers include the following:

- The existence of properties of the group as a whole that arise from the interactions of individual group members.
- The powerful effects of group forces on member’s behaviour.
- The struggle of groups to maintain themselves as entities when confronted with conflicts.
- The awareness that groups must relate to an external environment as well as attend to their internal functioning.
- The idea that groups are in a constant state of becoming, developing, and changing, which influence their equilibrium and continued existence.
The notion that groups have a developmental life cycle.

**Psychodynamic Theory**

Psychodynamic theory has had an important influence on group work practice. In his work *Group Psychology and the Analysis of Ego*, Freud (1922) set forth his theoretical formulations about groups and their influence on human behaviour. According to psychodynamic theory, group members act out in the group unresolved conflicts from early life experiences. In many ways, the group becomes a re-enactment of the family situation. Freud describes the group leader as the all-powerful father figure who reigns supreme over group members. Group members identify with the group leader as the ‘ego-ideal’. Members form transference reactions to the group leader and to each other on the basis of their early life experiences. Thus, the interactions that occur in the group reflect the personality structures and defense mechanisms that members began to develop early in life.

The group leader uses transference and counter transference reactions to help members work through unresolved conflicts by exploring past behaviour patterns and linking these patterns to current behaviours. The group leader might, for example, interpret the behaviour of two group members who are struggling for the leader’s attention as unresolved sibling rivalry. When interpretations made by the group worker are timed appropriately, members gain insight into their own behaviour. According to the psychodynamic theory, insight is the essential ingredient in modifying and changing behaviour patterns inside and outside the group.
More recent conceptions of psychodynamic group treatment have adapted and modified classical psychodynamic theory to include a greater emphasis on the here-and-now experiences of group interaction. This is useful in ensuring that members deal with issues of immediate concern to them. From an analysis of the immediate behaviour patterns in the microcosm of the group, the leader can help members reconstruct unresolved childhood conflicts and have corrective emotional experiences. Through direct, mutual interpersonal communications, members build interpersonal skills, adaptive capacities, and ego-strength, as well as gain insight into their behaviour. The cohesiveness of the group encourages members to reveal intimate details about their personal lives and to describe and act out their conflicts in a safe and supportive environment.

**Learning Theory**

The primary focus of learning theory is on the behaviour of individuals rather than on the behaviour of groups. Thus, learning theory has generally ignored the importance of group dynamics. However, learning theory has had an important influence on current methods of group work practice. The emphasis on clear and specific goal setting, contracting, the influence of the environment on the group and its members, step-by-step treatment planning, measurable treatment outcomes and evaluation can be traced to the influence of learning theory.

According to social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), the behaviour of group members can be explained by one of three methods of learning. In the classical approach to learning theory, behaviour becomes associated with a stimulus. For example, a worker responds by making a negative verbal comment each
time a member turns and speaks to another member while the worker or other group members are speaking. After several times, the mere stimulus of the member’s turning, without speaking, will be enough to cue the worker to respond with a negative verbal comment. Another theory of learning is called operant conditioning. In this paradigm, the behaviours of the group members and the worker are governed by the consequences of their actions. Thus, if member A acts in a certain way and member B reacts positively, member A is likely to continue the behaviour. In the group, the worker might use praise to increase member-to-member communications and negative verbal comments to decrease member-to-leader communications. To help a member with a problem he or she has experienced in the outside environment, such as being overweight, the group leader might ask the member to develop a plan that specifies self-imposed rewards for behaviour that decreases caloric intake and self-imposed sanctions for behaviour that increases caloric intake.

Bandura (1977) has developed a third learning paradigm called social learning theory. According to Bandura, most learning takes place through observation and vicarious reinforcement or punishment. For example, when a group member is praised for a certain behaviour, that group member and other group members reproduce the behaviour later, hoping to receive similar praise. When a group member who performs a certain behaviour is ignored or punished by social sanctions, other group members learn not to behave in that manner because such behaviour results in a negative outcome.

**Field Theory**

Kurt Lewin conducted numerous experiments on the forces that account for behaviour in small groups.
According to Lewin's field theory, 'a group has a life space, it occupies a position relative to other objects in space, it is oriented towards goals, it locomotes in pursuit of these goals, and it may encounter barriers in the process of locomotion. The unique contribution of field theory is that it views the group as a gestalt, that is, an evolving entity of opposing forces that act to hold members in the group and to move the group along in its quest for goal achievement. In developing field theory, Lewin introduced several concepts to aid in understanding the forces at work in group. Among these are: 1) roles, which refer to status, rights, and duties of group members; 2) norms, which are rules governing the behaviour of group members; 3) power, which is the ability of members to influence one another; 4) cohesion, which is the amount of attraction the members of the group feel for one another and for the group; 5) consensus, which is the degree of agreement regarding goals and other group phenomena; and 6) valence, which is the potency of goals and objects in the life space of groups.

Relying on one principle of this theory that suggests individuals will not change their behaviour unless they see their behaviour and attitudes as others see them, the t-group experience attempts to provide participants with extensive feedback about their own behaviour. Members are confronted with the effects of their own behaviour on other group members and on the group worker. Role plays, simulations, and other experiential program activities are often used to illustrate how group processes develop and how they affect members.

Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory focuses on the behaviour of individual group members. The theory has its origin in animal psychology, economic analysis and game theory.
Social exchange theorists suggest that when people interact in groups, each attempts to behave in a way that will maximize rewards and minimize punishments. Group members initiate interactions because the social exchanges provide them with something of value, such as approval. According to social exchange theorists, because nothing is gained ordinarily unless something is given in return, there is an exchange implied in all human relationships.

In social exchange theory, group behaviour is analyzed by observing how individual members seek rewards while dealing with the sustained social interaction occurring in a group. For an individual in a group, the decision to express a given behaviour is based on a comparison of the rewards and punishments that are expected to be derived from the behaviour. Group members act to increase positive consequences and decrease negative consequences. Social exchange theory also focuses on the way members influence one another during social interactions. The result of any social exchange is based on the amount of social power and the amount of social dependence in a particular interaction.

Guided group interaction and positive peer culture are two specialized group work methods that rely heavily on principles from social exchange theory. They are frequently used with delinquent adolescents in residential and institutional settings. In both approaches, structured groups are used to confront, challenge, and eliminate antisocial peer group norms and to replace them with pro-social norms through guided peer-group interaction.

The importance of groups for humans has led a number of social scientists to perceive groups as the salvation or the bane of our species. To some social scientists
groups are the basis for everything that is good in our lives. For other social scientists groups are destructive influences on our lives. Both views are oversimplified. Groups can have constructive or destructive effects depending on how they are used.

**Benefits of Groups**

1) Under most conditions, the productivity of groups is higher than the productivity of individuals working alone. You may have seen this happening in most companies and even in small-scale industries where more numbers of a particular product is made by a group effort rather than an individual effort. You would have also seen this in games involving teams where the chance of hitting a goal is high when they work towards it as a team rather than as individual players.

2) Groups make more effective decisions and solve problems more effectively than individuals working alone. This is the reason why we have committees in organisations. It has been proved by social scientists and management experts that better decisions are arrived at by a group of persons working at the problem rather than an individual who is trying to solve the problem on his/her own. When problems are discussed in groups there is greater clarification of the problem. Similarly, a variety of solutions are suggested by group members out of which a good solution emerges.

3) It is through group memberships that we learn the values of altruism, kindness, consideration for others, responsibility and so forth. We are born in a primary group called family, which ingrains in us a wide range of human values. We learn to be kind to each other in the family. In our friendship groups
we learn to be considerate to others and in our workplace we learn to be responsible. Thus, all the groups we are in teach us a variety of human values.

4) The quality of emotional life in terms of friendship, love, excitement, joy, fulfillment and achievement is greater for members of groups than for individuals acting alone. A person who does not have any relationship with others will not be able to experience most of the emotions. Family provides the experience of love while friendship groups provide excitement. The office where we work may provide us with fulfillment and also a sense of achievement.

5) The quality of everyday life is greater in groups because of the advantages of specialization and division of labour. Our material standard of living, for example – our housing, food, clothing, transportation, entertainment etc. – would not be possible without the help of others and unless we interact with them.

6) Conflicts are managed more productively in groups. Without group standards, social values and laws, civilization would be impossible. Groups normally establish standards or norms for its members to function effectively. Without these norms, which generally reflect societal norms, there would be confusion. Group norms exert considerable influence over individuals and keep them under control.

7) A person’s identity, self-esteem and social competencies are shaped by the groups to which he/she belongs. If you are asked a question, 'who are you?', you will immediately say 'I am a student', which means you are part of the students group.
which provides you with an identity. Similarly, you may say you are the son/daughter of a certain person or the friend of a certain person or a manager in a particular organisation. Thus, being a member of different kinds of groups provide you with identity. Groups also help develop the self-esteem of its members by being very supportive. Friendship groups in particular provide you with a lot of emotional support and understanding that builds up your self-esteem. You can experiment with different kinds of behaviour in a friendship group without the threat of rejection.

8) Without co-operation, social organisation and groups of various kinds, human beings would not survive. Humans have a basic social nature and our survival and evolution are the results of the effectiveness of our groups.

While groups provide a lot of benefits, social scientists have also pointed out aspects of groups that are not very constructive.

One of the important points they have mentioned is that, people in groups are more likely to take greater risks than they would alone. Groups tend to take more extreme positions and indulge in more extreme behaviour than individuals. In large groups individuals can become anonymous and therefore, feel freer to engage in rowdy, shocking and illegal behaviour. When one member engages in impulsive and antisocial behaviour, others may do likewise. Another negative aspect of groups pointed out is that groups often influence their members to conform. The identity of the individual can be threatened if conformity is too extreme. Social scientists also point out that sometimes group affiliations become so strong that group members treat non-members and other groups in impersonal
ways. Intense grouping behaviour leads to several conflicts in the society.

However, a correct understanding of groups and its proper application will help us reap the immense benefits from using groups. Experiments conducted by social scientists have proved time and again the strengths of using groups for the development of the individual and society. That is the reason why an understanding of groups is crucial to the practice of group work. In the context of group work, groups contribute immensely to the personality development of individuals.

**Influence of Groups on Personality Development**

a) The formation of proper attitudes that are crucial to personality of an individual takes place through groups. It is the attitude that guides every action of human-beings. Groups provide opportunities for individuals to expose themselves to a variety of situations that shape their attitudes.

b) Groups also change the levels of aspiration that individuals have. It is well known that individuals reach higher goals if their aspiration level is also high. Individuals constantly check their aspiration level with those of others in the group and change it if theirs is at a lower level. For instance, candidates aspiring for civil services join IAS study circles where they meet other IAS aspirants and get inspired by their hard work and perseverance. Thus, they are able to set higher goals for themselves after joining the group than when they would have acted individually.

c) Individual patterns of living, working and life pursuits also determine one’s personality. These patterns
could also be modified by participation in groups. Individual’s hobbies are greatly influenced by groups. Similarly in work life, how a person manages time and how he/she responds to stress would be greatly influenced by the group he/she is in. Groups also influence one’s mission in life. We see a lot of individuals who join groups to serve society in different ways. Whether an individual becomes self-serving and materialistic or altruistic may greatly depend on the group he/she belongs to.

d) Groups help individuals gain a perception of one’s self and his/her role in society. The constant feedback an individual gets from other group members helps build the self-image of one’s self. One can understand the type of personality he/she has with the help of groups. Individuals can also determine what their role is based on the feedback given by others.

e) Groups provide immense psychological support and help individuals express both positively and negatively. One of the key determinants of personality development is the psychological support required by the individual by which he/she can experiment with behaviour as well as express his/her ideas, opinion and feelings freely without the threat of rejection. Groups provide ample opportunities for this leading to personality development.

Types of Group Work Groups

Groups for the purpose of group work are generally classified into two types: treatment and task groups. They are classified according to their primary purpose.
Treatment Groups

Five primary purposes of treatment groups are: support, education, growth, therapy and socialisation.

Support Groups

Support groups can be distinguished from other groups using supportive intervention strategies by their primary goals: to foster mutual aid, to help members cope with stressful life events, and to revitalize and enhance members’ coping abilities so that they can effectively adapt to and cope with future stressful life events. Examples of support groups include the following:

- A group of children meeting at school to discuss the effects of deaths in their families on their lives.
- A group of people diagnosed with cancer, and their families, discussing the effects of the disease and how to cope with it.
- A group of recently discharged psychiatric patients discussing their adjustment to community living.

Leadership of support groups is characterized by a facilitative approach that emphasizes helping members share their collective experiences in coping with a stressful event. The group worker helps members share their experiences and empathically respond to each other. Simply recounting events, ventilating feelings, and reflecting on efforts to cope can promote self-understanding and help overcome loneliness, isolation and despair. A major role of the worker is to facilitate hope in the future and motivate members to improve coping skills through self-help and mutual aid. Strong emotional bonds often develop quickly in support groups because of member's shared experiences. Emotional bonding may also occur because members are
stigmatized by the larger community and find comfort and power in their association with each other.

**Educational Groups**

The primary purpose of educational groups is to help members learn new information and skills. Educational groups are used in a variety of settings, including treatment agencies, schools, nursing homes, correctional institutions and hospitals. Examples of educational groups include the following:

- A group of women in slums who want to know about reproductive and child health.
- A group of parents who are going to adopt children.
- A group of NGO leaders who want to be more effective.

All educational groups are aimed at increasing members' information or skills. Most groups routinely involve presentations of information and knowledge by experts. They also often include opportunities for group discussion to foster learning. When leading educational groups, workers concentrate on both the individual learner and the group as a whole as vehicles for learning, reinforcement, and discussion. Also, workers consider each members' knowledge of the subject matter and level of skills and experience so that members derive at most benefit from the learning process.

**Growth Groups**

Growth-oriented groups offer opportunities for members to become aware of, expand, and change their thoughts, feelings, and behaviour regarding themselves and others. The group is used as a vehicle to develop members' capabilities to the fullest. Growth groups focus
on promoting socio-emotional health rather than remediating socio-emotional illness. Examples of growth groups include the following:

- A group for newly married couples
- A value clarification group for youth
- A consciousness raising group for Rotary club members

Growth groups generally stress self-improvement and the potential of human beings to live a full and rewarding life, especially through improved relationship with others. They provide a supportive atmosphere in which individuals can gain insights, experiment with new behaviours, get feedback and grow as human beings. The bond in growth groups stem from members’ commitment to help one another develop and maximize their potentials. When composing growth groups, workers often select members who have diverse backgrounds and the potential to enrich and broaden each others’ experiences. Communication in growth groups is members centered and highly interactive.

**Therapy Groups**

Therapy groups help members change their behaviour, cope with personal problems or rehabilitate themselves after physical, psychological or social trauma. Examples of therapy groups include the following:

- A psychotherapy group for outpatients at a community mental health centre.
- A group sponsored by an NGO for people who want to stop smoking.
- A group for children who are first time offenders.
In therapy groups, members come together to solve their problems. The group leader is often viewed as an expert, an authority figure and a change agent. Members’ problems are assessed and treatment goals are developed with the help of the worker. Although the group has a common purpose, each member may have a different problem with different symptoms. Therefore, to achieve individual goals, the worker often focuses on one member at a time. The level of member’s self-disclosure is usually quite high.

**Socialisation Groups**

Socialisation groups help members learn social skills and socially accepted behaviour patterns so that they can function effectively in the community. Socialisation groups frequently use program activities such as games, role plays or outings to help members accomplish individual goals. Examples of socialisation groups include the following:

- A youth group in Nehru Yuvak Kendra
- A social club for outpatients of a psychiatry centre
- A group for children from poor and disadvantaged neighbourhoods

There are at least three common forms of socialisation groups: social skills groups, governance groups and recreation groups. Some social skills groups such as assertiveness training groups are formed for adults who wish to improve their existing skills. Social skills groups can be particularly useful for individuals who are unable or unwilling to communicate effectively and for those who have difficulty engaging in satisfying social relationships. Young children, shy adolescents and mildly retarded adults are examples of people who can benefit from such groups. Program activities can help
draw out these types of group members by helping them form meaningful relationships and learn social skills. Governance groups are often found in residential settings such as nursing homes, psychiatric hospitals, correctional facilities and residential treatment centres. The purpose of these groups is to involve residents in the daily governance of the institution. Through their participation in the governance process, members learn advocacy, communication, conflict resolution and empowerment skills. They also learn to share with others, take responsibility for their actions, and participate in decision making processes. Recreational groups are particularly important for working with children, adolescents and older adults in neighbourhood centres. They can help members learn community values and accepted forms of behaviour, develop interpersonal skills and feel a sense of belonging. In addition recreational groups help members develop confidence in their ability to function as apart of a group and to function in other social situations.

**Task Groups**

Task groups are common in most agencies and organisations. They are used to find solutions to organisational problems, to generate new ideas and to make decisions. Task groups can have three primary purposes: meeting client needs, meeting organisational needs and meeting community needs.

**Teams**

Team members coordinate their efforts and work together on behalf of a particular client group. Example of teams include the following:

- A group of workers in charge of a particular department in a company
A group of professionals who work in psychiatric hospitals

The functioning of the team is the responsibility of the team leader. Team leaders are often appointed by an administrator in the organisation. The team leader is a facilitator and coordinator for the group and is accountable to the organisation for the actions of the team. The team leader is responsible for conducting meetings, motivating team members, coordinating individual efforts and ensuring team functioning. Members are bonded by a team spirit that assists them in their work as a group rather than being a collection of individuals representing different concerns and professional agendas.

**Committees**

The most common type of task group is the committee. A committee is made up of people who are appointed or elected to the group. Their task is to accomplish a task delegated to the committee from a higher authority. Examples of committees include the following:

- A group of students in charge of a rural camp for the college
- A group of employees assigned the task of studying and recommending changes in the agency’s personnel policies.

Although members are expected to share their personal views during deliberations, the level of self-disclosure in committees is low. Most committees tend to follow a standard set of procedures. It is useful for each meeting to have an agenda so that committee members can follow the activity of the group and know what to expect during the rest of the meeting. The chairperson is responsible for seeing that the agenda and the formalized procedures are carried out.
**Social Action Groups**

Social action groups empower members to engage in collective action and planned change efforts to alter some aspect of the social or physical environment. Social action groups serve the common good of both members and non-members. Examples of social action groups include the following:

- A tenant’s group seeking support for a playground in their housing complex.
- A group of women in poor neighbourhoods working to improve water supply in their locality.

A worker involved in a social action group can assume one of many leadership roles, depending on the nature of the change effort and the needs of the group. A worker assumes an enabler role to help the group acquire information or resources, determine priorities and procedures and plan a strategy for action. The bond that holds members of action groups together is a shared perception of injustice, inequity, and a need for a change in the current social structure. Communication patterns vary with the circumstances of the group. The worker helps the group develop open communication patterns so that all members have a chance to become involved. The worker also helps the group establish communication links with its environment.

**Group Logistics**

**Group Composition**

Whether a group should have a homogeneous membership (members from similar age-groups, sex and socio-economic background) or a heterogeneous one depends on the group’s goals. In general, for a specific target population with given needs, a group
composed entirely of members of that population is more appropriate than a heterogeneous group. Consider a group composed entirely of elderly people. It can focus exclusively on the specific problems that characterize their developmental period, such as loneliness, isolation, lack of meaning, rejection, deterioration of the body, and so forth. This similarity of the members can lead to a great degree of cohesion, which in turn allows for an open and intense exploration of their life crises. Members can express feelings that have been kept private, and their life circumstances can give them a bond with one another. Similarly self-help groups for women also benefit greatly from the homogeneity of the composition of their group. They are able to pursue the common goal of credit management or self-development in a united fashion.

Sometimes a microcosm of the outside social structure is desired, and in that case a heterogeneous group is best. Personal-growth groups and certain therapy groups tend to be heterogeneous. Members can experiment with new behaviour and develop interpersonal skills with the help of feedback from a rich variety of people in an environment that represents everyday reality.

**Group Size**

What is a desirable size for a group? The answer depends on several factors: age of clients, experience of the leader, type of group, and problems to be explored. For instance, a group composed of elementary school children might be kept to 4 to 6, whereas a group of adolescents might be made up of 8 to 12 people. For a weekly ongoing group of adults, about 10 to 12 people with one leader may be ideal. A group of this size is big enough to give ample opportunity for interaction and small enough for everyone to be involved and to feel a sense of “group.”
Characteristics and Significance of Groups

Frequency and Duration of Meetings

How often should a group meet? For how long? Should a group meet twice weekly for 1-hour sessions? Or is 1 ½ to 2 hours once a week preferable? With children and adolescents it may be better to meet more frequently and for a shorter period to suit their attention span. If the group is taking place in a school setting, the meeting times can correspond to regularly scheduled class periods. For groups of college students or relatively well functioning adults, a 2-hour weekly session might be preferable. This 2-hour period is long enough to allow some intensive work yet not so long that fatigue sets in. You can choose any frequency and duration that suit your style of leadership and the type of people in your group. For an in-patient group in a mental health centre, it is desirable to meet on a daily basis for 45 minutes. Because of the members’ psychological impairment, it may not be realistic to hold their attention for a longer period.

Length of a Group

What should be the duration of a group, and is it wise to set a termination date? For most groups a termination date should be announced at the outset, so that members will have a clear idea of the time limits under which they are working. Groups in educational institutions typically run for about 15 weeks. It is long enough for trust to develop and for work toward behavioural changes to take place, but it is not so long that the group seems to be dragging on interminably. A major value of this type of time-limited group is that members are motivated to realize that they do not have forever to attain their personal goals. At different points in this 15-week group, members are challenged to review their progress, both individually and as a group. If they are dissatisfied with their own participation or with the
direction the group is taking, they have the responsibility to do something to change the situation.

Some groups composed of the same members meet for years. Such a time structure allows them to work through issues in some depth and to offer support and challenge in making life changes. These ongoing groups do have the potential for fostering dependency, and thus it is important that both the leader and members evaluate the impact of the group on the clients’ daily living.

**Place for Group Meetings**

Where should the group hold its meetings? Many places will do, but privacy is essential. Members must be assured that they will not be overheard by people in adjoining rooms. Groups often fail because of their physical setting. If they are held in a day hall or ward full of distractions, productive group work will not occur. You would require a room that is not cluttered up with chairs and tables and that allows for a comfortable seating arrangement. Members must be able to sit in a circle. This arrangement lets all the participants see one another and allows enough freedom of movement that members can spontaneously make physical contact.

**Open Versus Closed Groups**

*Open groups* are characterized by changing membership. As certain members are ready to leave, new members are admitted, and the group continues. *Closed groups* typically have some time limitation, with the group meeting for a predetermined number of sessions. Generally, members are expected to remain in the group until it ends, and new members are not added.

There are some advantages to open groups that incorporate new members as others leave, one of which is an increased opportunity for members to interact with
a greater variety of people. A potential disadvantage of open groups is that rapid changing of members can result in a lack of cohesion, particularly if too many clients leave or too many new ones are introduced at once. Therefore, it will be better to bring in new members one at a time as and when opening occurs.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter we discussed how we are part of groups most of the time in our lives and the benefits offered by groups and its influence on personality development. We looked at various definitions of groups and consolidated them into one definition that captures the essential characteristics of groups.

We discussed the various types of groups such as voluntary and involuntary groups, open and closed groups, vertical and horizontal groups, primary and secondary groups and formed and natural groups. After this we went on to discuss why people are attracted to groups. This was followed by the significance of groups with regard to the benefits individuals get from groups. At the end we saw how groups contribute to personality development.

**References**


Toseland, Ronald W. (2001), *An Introduction to Group Work Practice*, Allyn and Bacon, USA.