SOCIAL GROUPS
(PRIMARY, SECONDARY AND TERTIARY)

Introduction

The word group literally means persons or things belonging or classed together or forming a whole. In social science, it is used to denote human beings who are always involved in several forms of interaction. Man is a social animal who never lives in isolation. Hence the group found in a human society is called social group as distinct from groups found among other animals. A social group is not merely a simple collection or aggregate of individuals but one which exhibits some degree of social cohesion. It, therefore, is any collection of human beings who are brought into social relationships having some degree of reciprocity and some measure of mutual awareness between those related. It is a plurality of persons who have a common identity, at least some feeling of unity, certain common goals and shared norms and who recognize themselves as a distinct social unit. The essence of the social group is not physical closeness but a consciousness of interaction. Groups are among the most stable and enduring of social units which are important both to their members and to the society at large. Regular and predictable behaviour of the group form the foundation upon which society rests. The distribution of the population in social groups and the size, number and characteristics of such groups, are important features of the structure of society.

Definition

According to MacIver, “By group, we mean any collection of human beings who are brought into social relationship with one another”.

According to Bottomore, “A social group is an aggregate of individuals in which (i) definite relations exist between the individuals comprising it, and (ii) each individual is conscious of the group itself and its symbols”.

Social groups are different from social classes but similar to social categories as members are aware that they share something in common and are in interaction with one another. There is a “we” feeling among the members which help them to develop a sense of collectivism. A feeling of unity brings the members close to one another. With common needs and ends, their behaviour becomes common. Certain norms and rules of
behaviour help the group to remain organised and the members are expected to respect these norms. Specific styles of interaction and language and symbols help members to communicate. Discipline within the group is strictly maintained and those who neglect group discipline are punished. The members of a group are reciprocally related to each other. Every human being is a member of one or more than one group like family, peer group, a club and neighbourhood, etc. where interaction takes place. Sometimes they have common objects and sometimes they participate in similar activities. Group activities always follow some rules and norms shared by every member. Members of a group are aware of their activities and they share a common consciousness of their joint interaction. Sometimes the purpose for which a group was formed also gets changed and new changes are brought into the group to allow flexibility. The size of a group also changes due to circumstances. When a group is formed for specific purposes, it becomes an association.

**Classification of social groups**

A society is made up of various types of groups which are similar or different from each other. Classification of these groups can be done on the basis of-

i. Social interaction
ii. Degree of quality of interaction
iii. Degree of intimacy of contact
iv. Range of group interests
v. Duration of interest
vi. Degree of organisation
vii. Size

Groups range from highly developed organisations as the modern factory to a largely unorganised temporary crowd and permanent class. 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. Cooley’s classification of groups into primary, secondary and tertiary on the basis of the degree of intimacy of contact is one of the most widely utilized concepts of sociological groups (Cooley 1909).
1. Primary group: The primary group is the nucleus of all social organisations. It is a small group in which a small number of persons come into direct contact with one another. They meet face to face for mutual help, companionship and discussion of common questions. In the words of C.H. Cooley, “By primary I mean those characterised by intimate face-to-face association and co-operation. These are primary in several senses but chiefly in that they are fundamental in framing the social nature and ideals of the individual”. He goes on to say that the development of this common group identity lead the members of the primary group to naturally identify themselves as "we or us."

The essential characteristics of a primary group are intimate feelings and close identification. Intimacy of relationship depends upon the following factors-

i. Physical proximity: In order that relations of the people may be close, it is necessary that their contacts also should be close. Seeing and talking with each other makes exchange of ideas and opinions easy.

ii. Small size: Relationship can become intimate only in a small size. In small groups members can know one another personally and develop a group character and intimacy more quickly.

iii. Stability: To promote intimacy of relationships, the primary group should be stable to some extent.

iv. Similarity of background: Each member in a primary group should have something to give and take.

v. Limited self-interest: Though members join the group with the motive of satisfying their own interest, yet they should sub-ordinate their interests to the central interests of the group. They must come together in a spirit to participate co-operatively. The common interest should predominate in their minds.

vi. Intensity of shared interests: In a primary group the common interest is shared by every member and by being shared by all, the interest acquires a new significance and a new valuation.

2. Secondary group: A secondary group is one which is large in size where human contacts become superficial and undefined. The relations of the members are limited in scope and arrived at by trial and error and in terms of self-interest
calculations of the members. A member exerts only indirect influence over the other. He knows personally only a very few of the other members and functions as one among almost countless members. His co-operation with his fellow workers is indirect and very seldom comes face-to-face with them. He communicates with them by such indirect means as the written word.

According to Ogburn, “The groups which provide experience lacking in intimacy are called secondary groups”.

According to Davis. “Secondary groups can be roughly defined as the opposite of everything already said about primary group”.

The main characteristics of secondary groups are-

i. Formal and impersonal relations: The relations of members do not exercise influence over others. There is no face-to-face interaction and the relations are casual.

ii. Large in size: Secondary groups may be spread all over the world.

iii. Option of membership: The membership of secondary groups is not compulsory.

iv. Active and inactive members: Due to absence of intimate relations, some members become inactive while others are active.

v. Indirect relations: The members are scattered throughout the length and breadth of the country or the world and therefore communicate with each other by indirect means.

vi. Formal rules: A secondary group is regulated by formal rules set by a formal authority where a clear cut division of labour is made.

vii. Status of individuals: In a secondary group, the status of the members depends upon their roles.

viii. Goal-oriented: The main purpose of a secondary group is to fulfil a specific function.

3. Tertiary group: Any group accepted as model or guide for shaping one’s attitude, behaviour and evaluations is called a tertiary group or reference group. For members of a particular group another group is a tertiary group if any of the following circumstances prevail-

i. When members of the first group aspire membership in the second group, the second group becomes the tertiary group.
ii. When members of the first group strive to be like members of the second group.

iii. When the members of the first group derive some satisfaction from being unlike the members of the second group in some respect and even strive to maintain the difference between themselves and the members of the second group.

iv. When, without necessarily striving to be like or unlike or to belong to the second group, the members of the first group appraise their own group or themselves by using the second group or its members as a standard for comparison.

Difference between primary group and secondary group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl No</th>
<th>Criterion</th>
<th>Primary group</th>
<th>Secondary group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Size</td>
<td>Small in size and area</td>
<td>Large &amp; widespread</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Co-operation</td>
<td>Direct</td>
<td>Indirect</td>
</tr>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Type of structure</td>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>Formal</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>Persists over time</td>
<td>Short-lived</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Operation</td>
<td>Rural area</td>
<td>Urban area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Interests</td>
<td>Diffused</td>
<td>Specific</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>Direct, personal, intimate</td>
<td>Impersonal, goal-directed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Emotional Intensity</td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Less strong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Scope</td>
<td>Entire individual personality</td>
<td>Only partial individual personality important.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>important</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Particularism/Universalism</td>
<td>Each individual important</td>
<td>Membership opens to all.</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td>Very informal.</td>
<td>Formal with rules to explain how and when interaction takes place.</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>Aims</td>
<td>To enjoy one another’s company</td>
<td>Members may have little in common beyond the reason for the group’s existence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Rules &amp; Regulations</td>
<td>Rules are understood and very flexible. Punishments for breaking them are also flexible.</td>
<td>Rules are formalized and punishments are similar for all members.</td>
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</table>
Conclusion:

Groups are units of society and every human being is a member of one or more than one group. In order to understand a particular society, it is therefore necessary to study the behaviour of the groups present in it. Their behaviour is a reflection of the structure of the society they live in. The degree of closeness and the frequency with which they interact among themselves will determine the type of group they belong to.