

Groups in Sociology

The term **group** is an amorphous one and can refer to a wide variety of gatherings, from just two people (think about a “group project” in school when you partnered with another student), 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 rally is usually a one-time event, for instance, and belonging to a political party doesn’t imply interaction with others. 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 Starbucks—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**, and as an example all children born from approximately 1980–2000 are referred to as “Millennials.” 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.

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 remain a group, practicing emergency readiness, coordinating supplies for next time, or taking turns caring for neighbors who need extra help. Similarly, there may be many groups within a single category. Consider teachers, for example. Within this category, groups may exist like teachers’ unions, teachers who coach, or staff members who are involved with the PTA.

In sociology, a **group** is usually defined as a number of people who identify and interact with one another. This is a very broad definition, as it includes groups of all sizes, from dyads to whole societies. While an aggregate comprises merely a number of individuals, a group in sociology exhibits cohesiveness to a larger degree. Aspects that members in the group may share include: interests, values, ethnic/linguistic background, roles and kinship. One way of determining if a collection of people can be considered a group is if individuals who belong to that collection use the self-referent pronoun “we;” using “we” to refer to a collection of people often implies that the collection thinks of itself as a group. Examples of groups include: families, companies, circles of friends, clubs, local chapters of fraternities and sororities, and local religious congregations.

Collections of people that do not use the self-referent pronoun “we” but share certain characteristics (e.g., roles, social functions, etc.) are different from groups in that they usually do not regularly interact with each other nor share similar interests or values. Such collections are referred to as *categories* of people rather than groups; examples include: police, soldiers, millionaires, women, etc.

Individuals form groups for a variety of reasons. There are some rather obvious ones, like reproduction, protection, trade, protest, and food production. But social categorization of people into groups and categories also facilitates behavior and action.

Types of Groups

Primary and Secondary Groups



This family from the 1970s would be an example of a primary group.

In sociology we distinguish between two types of groups based upon their characteristics. A **Primary group** is typically a small social group whose members share close, personal, enduring relationships. These groups are marked by concern for one another, shared activities and culture, and long periods of time spent together. The goal of primary groups is actually the relationships themselves rather than achieving some other purpose. Families and close friends are examples of primary groups



A class of students is generally considered a secondary group.

Secondary groups are large groups whose relationships are impersonal and goal-oriented. Some secondary groups may last for many years, though most are short term. Such groups also begin and end with very little significance in the lives of the people involved. People in a secondary group interact on a less personal level than in a primary group. Rather than having as the goal the maintenance and development of the relationships themselves, these groups generally come together to accomplish a specific purpose. Since secondary groups are established to perform functions, people's roles are more interchangeable. Examples of secondary groups include: classmates in a college course, athletic teams, and co-workers.

The distinction between primary and secondary groups was originally proposed by Charles Horton Cooley. He labeled groups as "primary" because people often experience such groups early in their life and such groups play an important role in the development of personal identity. Secondary groups generally develop later in life and are much less likely to be influential on one's identity.

Group Dynamics

Building on the recognition of primary and secondary groups, sociologists often focus their studies on either group dynamics, group influence or a combination of these two areas of inquiry. In terms of group dynamics, sociologists have long explored the ways people act in

groups as a method for bridging individual and societal level forms of meaning making and activity. Drawing heavily on insights from Symbolic Interaction and Structural Functionalist theories, researchers explore the ways that groups are shaped by and in turn shape societal notions of "normal" and "deviant" as well as societal patterns of inequality. At the same time, researchers explore the ways that groups are formed, negotiated, and adjusted by the actions of individual beings interacting with one another on a newfound and/or regular basis. In so doing, studies of group dynamics shed light upon some ways groups reflect, reinforce, and/or shift the ongoing reciprocal relationship between self and society.

Group Influence

The primary reason sociologists study groups is because of their power over individuals. A large body of research suggests that group membership strongly shapes the everyday behavior of individuals. Following are some of the many ways groups shape individual level behavior.

Conformity



An example of the types of cards used in the Solomon Asch line experiments.

If you've ever done something in a group that you would not do if you were alone, it's likely that you experienced conformity; your attitudes, beliefs, and/or behaviors were influenced by other people.

Social Facilitation



People often perform their best when competing with others, like in races, as a result of social facilitation. This is just one illustration of the influence of groups on individuals.

Social facilitation is the tendency for people to be aroused into better performance on simple tasks (or tasks at which they are expert or that have become autonomous) when under the eye of others rather than while they are alone (i.e., the **audience effect**), or when competing against another (i.e., the **coactor effect**).

Social Loafing

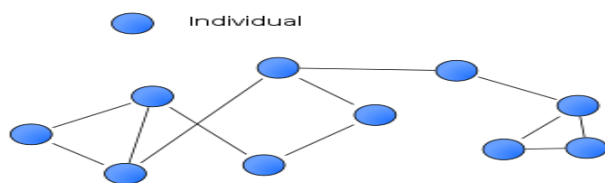
Social loafing refers to the phenomenon that can occur when people in a group make less of an effort to achieve a goal than they would working alone. As a result of social loafing, groups can sometimes generate less total output than the combined performance of their members working as individuals. Social loafing results from a lack of motivation when working in a group because individuals do not believe their specific contribution will be evaluated. As a result, they do not put in as much effort as they otherwise would.

Deindividuation

Deindividuation refers to the phenomenon of relinquishing one's sense of identity, self-awareness, or evaluation apprehension. This can happen as a result of becoming part of a group that fosters obedience to group norms rather than an individual's norms, such as an army or mob. Once this happens, individuals no longer think about themselves before they act and may, in fact, be unaware of their own actions.

Networks

A **social network** is a social structure between actors, either individuals or organizations. It indicates the ways in which they are connected through various social familiarities ranging from casual acquaintance to close familial bonds. The study of social networks is called both **social network analysis** and **social network theory**. Research in a number of academic fields has demonstrated that social networks operate on many levels, from families up to the level of nations, and play a critical role in determining the way problems are solved, organizations are run, and the degree to which individuals succeed in achieving their goals.



An example of a social network diagram

Social network theory views social relationships in terms of *nodes* and *ties*. Nodes are the individual actors within the networks, and ties are the relationships between the actors. There can be many kinds of ties between the nodes. In its most simple form, a social network is a map of all of the relevant ties between the nodes being studied. The network can also be used to determine the social capital of individual actors. These concepts are often displayed in a social network diagram, where nodes are the points and ties are the lines.

Social conflict is the struggle for agency or power in society. Social conflict occurs when two or more people oppose each other in social interaction, and each exerts social power with reciprocity in an effort to achieve incompatible goals but prevent the other from attaining their own. It is a social relationship in which action is intentionally oriented to carry out the actor's own will despite the resistance of others.^[1]

Managing Conflict

Group Discussion

No-one knows your organizations and members better than yourself. Try to have a conversation to resolve issues on your own. Remember these key pointers to create a neutral and calm environment to work through concerns:

1. Assure equal representation for all sides of an issue. Nothing feels worse than walking into a meeting when it's nine members versus one.
2. Give everyone space to talk and express their understanding of the situation. Invite an uninvolved person to help mediate the conversation, if needed.
3. Co-create a solution. It's OK to brainstorm possible solutions before the meeting, but remain open to what others will bring to the table.
4. Focus on behavior or root causes, not the person. If someone has taken steps to be a member of your organization they most likely want it to succeed.

Conflict Resolution

Have you tried to resolve a group conflict and it didn't work? Is the situation you're dealing with a bit more complicated? Utilize the free services provided by the Student Conduct and Conflict Resolution office on campus. They can provide a mediated conversation, group workshops and a variety of other services to make resolving your conflict easier.

Communication

Communication is defined as the process of understanding and sharing meaning.

Every communication involves (at least) one sender, a message and a recipient. This may sound simple, but communication is actually a very complex subject.

The transmission of the message from sender to recipient can be affected by a huge range of things. These include our emotions, the cultural situation, the medium used to communicate, and even our location. The complexity is why good communication skills are considered so desirable by employers around the world: accurate, effective and unambiguous communication is actually extremely hard.

The first key word in this definition is process. A process is a dynamic activity that is hard to describe because it changes (Pearson & Nelson, 2000). Imagine you are alone in your kitchen thinking. Someone you know (say, your mother) enters the kitchen and you talk briefly. What has changed? Now, imagine that your mother is joined by someone else, someone you haven't met before—and this stranger listens intently as you speak, almost as if you were giving a speech. What has changed? Your perspective might change, and you might watch your words more closely. The feedback or response from your mother and the stranger (who are, in essence, your audience) may cause you to reevaluate what you are saying. When we interact, all these factors—and many more—influence the process of communication.

The second key word is understanding: "To understand is to perceive, to interpret, and to relate our perception and interpretation to what we already know." (McLean, 2003) If a friend tells you a story about falling off a bike, what image comes to mind? Now your friend points out the window and you see a motorcycle lying on the ground. Understanding the words and the concepts or objects they refer to is an important part of the communication process.

Next comes the word sharing. Sharing means doing something together with one or more people. You may share a joint activity, as when you share in compiling a report; or you may benefit jointly

from a resource, as when you and several coworkers share a pizza. In communication, sharing occurs when you convey thoughts, feelings, ideas, or insights to others. You can also share with yourself (a process called intrapersonal communication) when you bring ideas to consciousness, ponder how you feel about something, or figure out the solution to a problem and have a classic “Aha!” moment when something becomes clear.

Finally, meaning is what we share through communication. The word “bike” represents both a bicycle and a short name for a motorcycle. By looking at the context the word is used in and by asking questions, we can discover the shared meaning of the word and understand the message.

Eight Essential Components of Communication

In order to better understand the communication process, we can break it down into a series of eight essential components:

1. Source
2. Message
3. Channel
4. Receiver
5. Feedback
6. Environment
7. Context
8. Interference

Each of these eight components serves an integral function in the overall process. Let’s explore them one by one.

Source

The source imagines, creates, and sends the message. In a public speaking situation, the source is the person giving the speech. He or she conveys the message by sharing new information with the audience. The speaker also conveys a message through his or her tone of voice, body language, and choice of clothing. The speaker begins by first determining the message—what to say and how to say it. The second step involves encoding the message by choosing just the right order or the perfect words to convey the intended meaning. The third step is to present or send the information to the receiver or audience. Finally, by watching for the audience’s reaction, the source perceives how well they received the message and responds with clarification or supporting information.

Message

“The message is the stimulus or meaning produced by the source for the receiver or audience.” (McLean, 2005) When you plan to give a speech or write a report, your message may seem to be only the words you choose that will convey your meaning. But that is just the beginning. The words are brought together with grammar and organization. You may choose to save your most important point for last. The message also consists of the way you say it—in a speech, with your tone of voice, your body language, and your appearance—and in a report, with your writing style, punctuation, and the headings and formatting you choose. In addition, part of the message may be the environment or context you present it in and the noise that might make your message hard to hear or see.

Imagine, for example, that you are addressing a large audience of sales reps and are aware there is a World Series game tonight. Your audience might have a hard time settling down, but you may choose to open with, “I understand there is an important game tonight.” In this way, by expressing verbally something that most people in your audience are aware of and interested in, you might grasp and focus their attention.

Channel

“The channel is the way in which a message or messages travel between source and receiver.” (McLean, 2005) For example, think of your television. How many channels do you have on your television? Each channel takes up some space, even in a digital world, in the cable or in the signal that brings the message of each channel to your home. Television combines an audio signal you hear with a visual signal you see. Together they convey the message to the receiver or audience. Turn off the volume on your television. Can you still understand what is happening? Many times you can, because the body language conveys part of the message of the show. Now turn up the volume but turn around so that you cannot see the television. You can still hear the dialogue and follow the story line.

Similarly, when you speak or write, you are using a channel to convey your message. Spoken channels include face-to-face conversations, speeches, telephone conversations and voice mail messages, radio, public address systems, and voice over Internet protocol (VoIP). Written channels include letters, memorandums, purchase orders, invoices, newspaper and magazine articles, blogs, e-mail, text messages, tweets, and so forth.

Receiver

“The receiver receives the message from the source, analyzing and interpreting the message in ways both intended and unintended by the source.” (McLean, 2005) To better understand this component, think of a receiver on a football team. The quarterback throws the football (message) to a receiver, who must see and interpret where to catch the ball. The quarterback may intend for the receiver to “catch” his message in one way, but the receiver may see things differently and miss the football (the intended meaning) altogether.

As a receiver you listen, see, touch, smell, and/or taste to receive a message. Your audience “sizes you up,” much as you might check them out long before you take the stage or open your mouth. The nonverbal responses of your listeners can serve as clues on how to adjust your opening. By imagining yourself in their place, you anticipate what you would look for if you were them. Just as a quarterback plans where the receiver will be in order to place the ball correctly, you too can recognize the interaction between source and receiver in a business communication context. All of this happens at the same time, illustrating why and how communication is always changing.

Feedback

When you respond to the source, intentionally or unintentionally, you are giving feedback. Feedback is composed of messages the receiver sends back to the source. Verbal or nonverbal, all these feedback signals allow the source to see how well, how accurately (or how poorly and inaccurately) the message was received. Feedback also provides an opportunity for the receiver or audience to ask for clarification, to agree or disagree, or to indicate that the source could make the message more interesting. As the amount of feedback increases, the accuracy of communication also increases (Leavitt & Mueller, 1951).

For example, suppose you are a sales manager participating in a conference call with four sales reps. As the source, you want to tell the reps to take advantage of the fact that it is World Series season to close sales on baseball-related sports gear. You state your message, but you hear no replies from your listeners. You might assume that this means they understood and agreed with you, but later in the month you might be disappointed to find that very few sales were made. If you followed up your message with a request for feedback (“Does this make sense? Do any of you have any questions?”) you might have an opportunity to clarify your message, and to find out whether any of the sales reps believed your suggestion would not work with their customers.

Environment

“The environment is the atmosphere, physical and psychological, where you send and receive messages.” (McLean, 2005) The environment can include the tables, chairs, lighting, and sound equipment that are in the room. The room itself is an example of the environment. The environment can also include factors like formal dress, that may indicate whether a discussion is open and caring or more professional and formal. People may be more likely to have an intimate conversation when they are physically close to each other, and less likely when they can only see each other from across the room. In that case, they may text each other, itself an intimate form of communication. The choice to text is influenced by the environment. As a speaker, your environment will impact and play a role in your speech. It’s always a good idea to go check out where you’ll be speaking before the day of the actual presentation.

Context

“The context of the communication interaction involves the setting, scene, and expectations of the individuals involved.” (McLean, 2005) A professional communication context may involve business suits (environmental cues) that directly or indirectly influence expectations of language and behavior among the participants.

A presentation or discussion does not take place as an isolated event. When you came to class, you came from somewhere. So did the person seated next to you, as did the instructor. The degree to which the environment is formal or informal depends on the contextual expectations for communication held by the participants. The person sitting next to you may be used to informal communication with instructors, but this particular instructor may be used to verbal and nonverbal displays of respect in the academic environment. You may be used to formal interactions with instructors as well, and find your classmate’s question of “Hey Teacher, do we have homework today?” as rude and inconsiderate when they see it as normal. The nonverbal response from the instructor will certainly give you a clue about how they perceive the interaction, both the word choices and how they were said.

Context is all about what people expect from each other, and we often create those expectations out of environmental cues. Traditional gatherings like weddings or quinceañeras are often formal events. There is a time for quiet social greetings, a time for silence as the bride walks down the aisle, or the father may have the first dance with his daughter as she is transformed from a girl to womanhood in the eyes of her community. In either celebration there may come a time for rambunctious celebration and dancing. You may be called upon to give a toast, and the wedding or quinceañera context will influence your presentation, timing, and effectiveness.

In a business meeting, who speaks first? That probably has some relation to the position and role each person has outside the meeting. Context plays a very important role in communication, particularly across cultures.

Interference

Interference, also called noise, can come from any source. “Interference is anything that blocks or changes the source’s intended meaning of the message.”(McLean, 2005) For example, if you drove a car to work or school, chances are you were surrounded by noise. Car horns, billboards, or perhaps the radio in your car interrupted your thoughts, or your conversation with a passenger.

Psychological noise is what happens when your thoughts occupy your attention while you are hearing, or reading, a message. Imagine that it is 4:45 p.m. and your boss, who is at a meeting in another city, e-mails you asking for last month’s sales figures, an analysis of current sales projections, and the sales figures from the same month for the past five years. You may open the e-mail, start to read, and think, “Great—no problem—I have those figures and that analysis right here in my computer.” You fire off a reply with last month’s sales figures and the current projections attached. Then, at five o’clock, you turn off your computer and go home. The next morning, your boss calls on the phone to tell you he was inconvenienced because you neglected to include the sales figures from the previous years. What was the problem? Interference: by thinking about how you wanted to respond to your boss’s message, you prevented yourself from reading attentively enough to understand the whole message.

Interference can come from other sources, too. Perhaps you are hungry, and your attention to your current situation interferes with your ability to listen. Maybe the office is hot and stuffy. If you were a member of an audience listening to an executive speech, how could this impact your ability to listen and participate?

Noise interferes with normal encoding and decoding of the message carried by the channel between source and receiver. Not all noise is bad, but noise interferes with the communication process. For example, your cell phone ringtone may be a welcome noise to you, but it may interrupt the communication process in class and bother your classmates.

Two Models of Communication

Researchers have observed that when communication takes place, the source and the receiver may send messages at the same time, often overlapping. You, as the speaker, will often play both roles, as source and receiver. You'll focus on the communication and the reception of your messages to the audience. The audience will respond in the form of feedback that will give you important clues. While there are many models of communication, here we will focus on two that offer perspectives and lessons for business communicators.

Rather than looking at the source sending a message and someone receiving it as two distinct acts, researchers often view communication as a transactional process (Figure 1.3 “Transactional Model of Communication”), with actions often happening at the same time. The distinction between source and receiver is blurred in conversational turn-taking, for example, where both participants play both roles simultaneously.

Figure 1.3 Transactional Model of Communication



Researchers have also examined the idea that we all construct our own interpretations of the message. As the State Department quote at the beginning of this chapter indicates, what I said and what you heard may be different. In the constructivist model (Figure 1.4 “Constructivist Model of Communication”), we focus on the negotiated meaning, or common ground, when trying to describe communication (Pearce & Cronen, 1980),

Imagine that you are visiting Atlanta, Georgia, and go to a restaurant for dinner. When asked if you want a “Coke,” you may reply, “sure.” The waiter may then ask you again, “what kind?” and you may reply, “Coke is fine.” The waiter then may ask a third time, “what kind of soft drink would you like?” The misunderstanding in this example is that in Atlanta, the home of the Coca-Cola Company, most soft drinks are generically referred to as “Coke.” When you order a soft

drink, you need to specify what type, even if you wish to order a beverage that is not a cola or not even made by the Coca-Cola Company. To someone from other regions of the United States, the words “pop,” “soda pop,” or “soda” may be the familiar way to refer to a soft drink; not necessarily the brand “Coke.” In this example, both you and the waiter understand the word “Coke,” but you each understand it to mean something different. In order to communicate, you must each realize what the term means to the other person, and establish common ground, in order to fully understand the request and provide an answer.

Figure 1.4 Constructivist Model of Communication

