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Social Groups

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Groups form a diverse tapestry of interactions and social relationships that the developing child, adolescent, and adult need to engage with and understand to become a mature and effective social actor. Every individual is a part of at least one social group, and membership in these groups gives an individual an identity and a sense of social place within a larger set of groups, a society, or a culture. Exploring how children learn about and identify with social groups is therefore a fundamental question in developmental and social psychology. From a psychological perspective, groups are a source of identity and profoundly influence self-understanding and behavior. Throughout the course of human development, groups are a socializing force that have both positive and negative dimensions and can serve as protective and disruptive forces for individuals and their relationships across the life span. This entry describes, in chronological order, how the understanding of social groups develops and the ways in which this development may influence behavior, social cognition, social relationships, and well-being.

Before Birth, Infancy, and the Social Context

The infant enters a world that is replete with social groups that commonly place individuals, and their relationships, in the context of distinct social categories. These categories organize our social, societal, and cultural structures and frame our social relationships. These social groups can be considered on a broad, societal, macro level; on a micro level of couples and families; and group memberships often structure our interactions and sense of self in profound ways. For instance, men will speak differently, using more interruption and more action-related language when speaking with a woman than with another man. Similarly, women will adjust their conversations, using less assertive language, when speaking with a man than when speaking with another woman. Gender groups are powerful influences not only on interpersonal behaviors but also on personal preferences, relationships, and self-identifications. Of course, many other social groups—ethnic, national, work and friendship groups—affect us throughout the life course too.

Infants are born into a system that predates their birth, is organized in terms of groups, and will influence their development across life. Parents may select a baby’s name because of an association with ethnic or family heritage or may choose to decorate a girl’s room pink and a boy’s room blue even while the mother is still pregnant. These early choices signify group differences, and an important task for the developing individual is to understand these groups and the relations between them.

From birth, interactions are primarily needs based in one-to-one interactions with caregivers, parents, other significant adults, and siblings. These one-to-one interactions constitute the building blocks for communication and language skills that facilitate group interactions. By preschool, some aspects of social identity may already have begun to shape behavior. Most notable from 24 months is gender group membership, which can influence children’s friendship and toy choices, the language they use, and their beliefs about themselves. However, ethnic and other group memberships may also begin to influence behavior in the preschool period. How far such differences are underpinned by innate or biological factors remains a topic for ongoing research, but most differences (such as toy choice) are likely a response to social learning from parents, siblings, other peers, and the media. At the preschool stage, and throughout early childhood, these influences are largely reactive; children absorb and internalize the features of their group memberships and reproduce them in their interactions with others. Preschoolers first become aware of themselves, then begin to attach group memberships to their sense of self. Once children have an emergent sense of
self, they begin to notice that others react to them in different ways depending on social categories such as gender and ethnicity. Self-schemas thus develop and drive friendships and group memberships, leading to identification with different groups.

The family, generally considered the most fundamental social unit, may vary widely depending on its makeup. The family offers an early forum for practicing group interactions and developing a sense of belonging and group cohesiveness. Thus, children may begin to compare their family to other families and notice that there are differences between them, fostering a sense of groups and differences between groups. Sociologists and psychologists have argued that it is not until children attend school that they encounter the more formal, social, and institutional characteristics of groups because bonds of love in a family can override the sense in which group membership demands compliance to norms and rules. This latter point is important because social structures usually imply hierarchies and intergroup relations of status and power, which before may only have been associated with family in-group dynamics.

**Childhood**

Children’s understanding of groups advances dramatically in early and middle childhood. Preschool children tend to spend more time playing with peers from similar social groups (gender, ethnicity, and social class). Thus, not only do children begin to label and identify with particular groups, they also spend more time in those groups. This process is known as the peer segregation cycle, whereby children will tend to choose friends who share similar characteristics, such as gender, ethnicity, and even socioeconomic status, and spend more time sharing and developing common interests and reproducing group norms and behaviors. Such patterns of friendship group choice are maintained and deepened throughout childhood, and even if there is movement between and across friendship groups, often such groups remain relatively stable and coherent.

Alongside the influence of group memberships on children’s friendship choices, attitudes, and behaviors, understanding social groups and social group dynamics advances significantly over childhood and into adolescence. This understanding begins early (preschool) and initially forms around a basic distinction between the in-group (consisting of members of one’s own group) and the out-group (members of another group). Up until around 5 years of age, this distinction is rather basic, and children may express a preference for the in-group, but group identifications are generally reproduced as simple labels, personal ascriptions, or matters of fact.

Through early and middle childhood, group norms and beliefs about groups are consolidated. Additionally, knowledge and beliefs about other groups increase during this period of development. Although in early childhood a child may express a simple preference for a group (e.g., “I like being on the red team.”), later in middle childhood the same child may begin to associate a certain set of beliefs, values, and stereotypes with the child’s own and other groups (e.g., “the blue team aren’t good at running.”). Thus, the early intergroup context is dominated by a simple in-group–out-group dynamic. Social psychologists have characterized this process as a feature of social identity theory, whereby individuals are motivated to draw distinctions between their own and other groups and to positively evaluate their own and denigrate other groups, to raise self-esteem.

Through childhood, the focus on intergroup processes becomes increasingly powerful and pervasive. By the end of childhood, children can make polarized evaluations of in-groups and
out-groups and can express extreme views and stereotypes about others based on their group memberships. These evaluations can lead to stereotyping, and out-group members increasingly become viewed as homogenous and less individual when compared with the in-group. However, children still judge exclusion based on group memberships as morally wrong, even though their friendship choices tend to be polarized along group lines.

At the same time, children continue to internalize norms and values associated with the in-group. If norms are associated too rigidly with group memberships, there can be negative consequences as children begin to enter adolescence. Children may begin to adopt a view that one group is better suited to a certain activity than another. For instance, a child may believe that one ethnic group is more suited to sport and another more suited to academic success. This can have an influence on friendships, self-concept, and future choices about where to deploy energy that endures into adulthood.

Children’s understanding of internal group dynamics also develops toward the end of childhood. In the early years, most learning about groups comes from interactions with peers in play. Play affords an opportunity to rehearse basic social skills and to reproduce group cooperation and collaboration. However, in preschool and early childhood, meaningful collaboration is based largely on self-interest, and play can have a solitary character. As they grow, children increasingly play in parallel with other members of a group. Until early adolescence, children typically fail to grasp that, for instance, a problem is often best solved with a joint focus, shared goal, and strategic deployment of individual skills and perspectives. Thus, it is not until the end of childhood and into early adolescence that young people grasp the strategic utility of internal or intragroup cohesiveness as distinct from cohesion that stems from in-group identification (and out-group denigration) in an intergroup context.

Adolescence

The distinction between in-groups and out-groups provides a powerful motivator for behavior, attitudes, and self-identification throughout life. In childhood, this distinction is clear-cut and motivates children to emphasize differences and intergroup comparisons. Adolescents and adults also often think and behave in terms of group distinctions and make comparisons between groups based on their own group identifications. But early adolescence sees the emergence of a more nuanced understanding of intragroup dynamics. That is, in adolescence, young people still see and appreciate distinctions between groups, but they also begin to appreciate the details of social dynamics within groups and the ways in which groups map onto social institutions and social structures.

Internal group dynamics are a feature of relationships and interactions within a social group. Groups may have a leader, in addition to those who conform to group norms, and may include some with some divergent views or those who are seen to occupy the periphery of the group. For instance, the supporter of a sports team may not express hostility to a rival team although such an attitude is normative among the larger group of supporters. Members of a group who do not subscribe to group norms are viewed as deviant. Alternatively, there may be competing views about the norms held within a group or possible courses of action and decisions that a group may take. Through childhood, children will tend to ignore or fail to incorporate these nuanced aspects of intragroup dynamics: Children regard all members of an in-group positively and members of an out-group more negatively. From around 11 years of age, research into development of subjective group dynamics suggests that older children and adolescents will be less positive toward deviant in-group members and more positive toward deviant out-group members.
The shift from simple in-group–out-group distinctions in childhood to greater appreciation of differences between in-group members has significant implications for behavior in adolescence. Changes in the social and cognitive appreciation of groups and group functioning often correspond to puberty and the beginning of interest in romantic relationships, which can result in changes in friendship groups. Thus, throughout early and middle adolescence (12–15 years), an individual's group memberships often become more fractured and more labile. Adolescence is also a period of significant self-discovery and identity development. Friendship groups also often develop into smaller groups or cliques, particularly among young women, and serve (at least in part) to help consolidate identity and a sense of self and self-definition.

Simultaneously, adolescence sees a growth in understanding the status and power relations that exist between groups and how they can be understood within a broader institutional and societal framework. Adolescents may show a greater interest in sociopolitical issues and issues of equality and social equity. This new, broader contextual awareness of societal groups affects their judgments about exclusion and inclusion. Children will nearly always regard as wrong, for instance, excluding another child from a game because of gender, but in early adolescence young people justify exclusion on the basis of gender if gender affects group functioning (e.g., because a game may be seen as a male-only domain or concerns about different levels of strength or skill). Such instances of exclusion suggest that children regard morals as absolute whereas adolescents see aspects of group and social functioning as also incorporating a moral dimension.

Learning and decision-making in groups also change in adolescence. In childhood, children regard group collaboration as a matter of individuals working together and sharing information. In adolescence, there is a greater awareness of the utility of group cohesiveness, more willingness to exchange and discuss different perspectives and employ different individual skills to address a common goal. This more developed understanding of the role of group strategy and group cohesiveness in decision-making likely reflects a great social and cognitive awareness of others as well as a shift in orientation toward understanding and exploiting in-group dynamics in a positive way.

Adulthood

Understanding the cognitive and social aspects of groups is largely set by the time an individual reaches adulthood. However, the rapid change in knowledge about groups that was in evidence in childhood and adolescence has slowed, and early adulthood often sees the start of young adults joining new sorts of groups, such as work groups, a new family unit, or a group of their own, such as a pastime, hobby, or sports group.

Groups and group understanding continue to influence many interactions, judgments, and behaviors across adulthood and into older adulthood. Most adults have developed a knowledge of intra- and intergroup functioning but conflicts based on group memberships still arise. For instance, adults can continue to express positive attitudes toward an in-group and negative attitudes toward an out-group, tend to evaluate deviant members of the in-group more negatively (than nondeviant members), and include and exclude others along group lines.

Social identity development theory argues that intergroup conflict can become pronounced if certain contextual factors, such as perceived group threat, exist. Theories of prejudice and
intergroup conflict propose that contact between individuals can reduce prejudice and aggressive behavior (the contact hypothesis) under optimal circumstances, which include the requisite social skills for effective communication and the generation of shared goals across different groups. In adulthood, knowledge of group functioning may remain relatively stable, but the consequences of group membership may still be felt. Changes in attitudes, norms, and behaviors are largely driven by contextual and situational factors and perhaps also affected by new responsibilities that are a result of different life stages, such as having one’s own family, other caring roles, and work responsibilities.

Throughout life, social relationships and group memberships are a protective factor in terms of physical health, mental health, and well-being. In older adulthood, groups may take on greater importance for health and well-being. Group activity may stimulate engagement with physical activity and offer increased opportunities for social support, particularly for older adults living alone or who may have suffered the loss of a spouse or partner.

See also Close Relationships; Gender Development; Interactions, Interpersonal; Social Development; Social Identity

- adolescence
- group dynamics
- children
- preschool education
- childhood
- group cohesiveness
- friendship

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