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UNIT 1

Social Groups: Definition, characteristics and Importance

Core course-CC7-Social Work with Groups
Learning Objective
Introduction
Definition, Characteristics and Importance
Conclusion

1. Learning Objective:

- Student will be able to define social Groups
- To gain some understanding of what is the importance of social Groups

1. Introduction

Human beings never live in isolation. He rarely exists alone. Human life is essentially a group life. As a social animal he always lives in group. He begins his life as a participating member of the group i.e. family. He born, live, grows and dies in group. He forms group to fulfill his different needs and to attain common goals. Groups play an important role in shaping personality, in the development of social organization and socialization. Each day, we interact with groups, in one form or in another - we are born into and dwell in a group (family), we learn in groups (classrooms), we work in group (office, project teams), we interact with friends, and we also spend much in leisure groups. We learn, work, and play in groups. For that matter an individual's personal identity is moulded in the way in which we are perceived and treated by members of our groups.

A potential or quasi group consists of a group of individuals having some common characteristics who does not possess any recognizable structure. But a potential or quasi group became a social group when it becomes organized. A social group has an organizational aspect i.e. rules, regulations, rivals, structure etc. and a Psychological aspect i.e. awareness or consciousness of the members. Members of a social group linked

together in a system of social relationships with one another and they interact with each other according to norms of the group.

2. Definitions of Groups

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

Huse and Bowditch (1977) defines a group as any number of people who:

- have a common purpose or objective
- interact with each other to accomplish their objective
- are aware of one another
- perceive themselves to be part of the group

According to Maclver and Page a social group is “any collection of human beings who are brought into human relationships with one another. According to Williams, “A social group is a given aggregate people playing inter-related roles and recognized by themselves or others as a unit of interaction”. According to E.S. Bogardus, “A social group may be thought of as a number of persons two or more, who have some common objects of attention who are stimulating to each other, who have common loyalty and participate in similar activities. According to Muzafer Sherif a group has to be „social unit consisting of a number of individuals interacting with each other based on certain elements:

- Common motives and goals;
- An accepted division of labour, i.e. roles,
- Established status (social rank, dominance) relationships;
- Accepted norms and values with reference to matters relevant to the group;
- Development of accepted sanctions (praise and punishment) if and when norms were respected or violated.

Based on the above definitions one may consider a few criteria to call a group a group:

- Number of persons – more than one
- Interdependence
- Acceptance of roles and status
- Similarity of goals, motives
- Shared norms and values

3. Characteristics

Following are the important characteristics of groups:

a. Interpersonal interaction - A group is defined as a collection of individuals interacting with each other; individuals are not a group unless they are interacting with one another (Bonner, Stogdill, and Homans).

b. 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. Its members define themselves and are defined by others as belonging to the group. Accordingly, the persons are not a group unless they perceive themselves to be part of a group (Bales and Smith).

c. Interdependency - Group may be defined as a collection of individuals who are interdependent. Usually, individuals are not a group unless an event that affects one of them affects them all. It is questionable that a group could exist without its members being interdependent (Cartright and Zander, Fiedler, and Lewin.).

d. 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. The primary defining characteristic of a group is the craving of its members to achieve a mutual goal (Deutsch and Freeman).

e. Motivation - Group may be defined as a collection of individuals who are all trying to satisfy some personal need through their joint association. Thus, individuals are not a group unless they are motivated by some personal reason to be part of a group (Bass and Cattell).

f. Structured relationships - A group may be a collection of individuals whose interactions are structured by a set of roles and norms. They share norms concerning matters of common interest and participate in a system of interlocking roles. Therefore, individuals are not a group unless their interactions are structured by a set of role definitions and norms (McDavid and Harari, and Shel and Sherif).

g. Mutual influence - A group may be defined as a collection of individuals who influence each other. Accordingly, individuals are not a group unless they are affecting and being affected by each other (Shaw). Based on these characteristics we may define a group for the purpose of group work as: A group is two or more individuals in face to face interaction, each aware of his or her membership in the group as well as of others who belong to the group, and their positive interdependence as they strive to achieve mutual goals.

Importance of Group:

- Under most conditions, the productivity of groups is higher than the productivity of individuals working alone.
- Groups make more effective decisions and solve problems more effectively than individuals working alone. This is the reason why we have committees in organizations.

- It is through group memberships that we learn the values of altruism, kindness, consideration for others, responsibility and so forth.
- Conflicts are managed more productively in groups. Groups normally establish standards or norms for its members to function effectively
- A person's identity, self-esteem and social competencies are shaped by the groups to which he/she belongs.

Conclusion:

We constantly interact with groups that consist of individuals and for various purposes, every moment of our lives. Characteristically groups consist of two or more individuals mutually dependant, having similarities and shared goals, etc. . More importantly, groups are instrumental in moulding the individual's personality, as it provides opportunities for problem solving, self-esteem building, conflict resolution and for that matter the socialization of the person in a society. To this end, groups become very much relevant to social group work practice