

# Influences on peer groups and friendships



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Peer groups, social competence and friendship. Indicate the relevance or not of the following: Theory, Cultural differences, Age differences, Gender differences and methodological issues.

### Introduction

It has been established that humans are social creatures. It has also been established that humans have an inclination to form social groupings for a myriad of psychological reasons, such as friendship, acceptance, comfort, togetherness and so forth. However, the ways in which these grouping takes place are rather more complex than one might expect.

An examination of group development paying particular regard to the effects of age, culture, gender and theoretical bias on the concepts of peer groups, social competence and friendship was embarked upon. An evaluation was conducted of some key research that has attempted to examine and explain much of the core concepts and issues involved in social grouping and development.

- Group Alignment, Group Development and Group Dynamics

Levine et al (1998) indicated that groups were more likely to accommodate new members if there was an established relationship between newcomers and already established members. This was believed to be due to the need to establish socialisation of new members through mentors. The relationship of newcomer to mentor was heavily dependant upon age difference (Levine et al, 1998).

Research on socialisation effects conducted by Irons and Moore (1985) revealed that the significance of a mentor in including subjects that were  
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formerly excluded. They suggested that these formerly excluded subjects were people such as women and people of alternate colour (Irons & Moore, 1985). It should be noted that the theoretics used by Irons and Moore are based upon patriarchy and racial prejudice.

Tuckman (1965) devised five stage theories in group development theory and later with his colleague Tuckman and Jenson (1977) extended this concept further.

- Forming - Potential members align themselves to a group.
- Storming - Members try to influence the group. This creates conflict within the group.
- Norming - Members try to reconcile conflicts. Norms and roles are established.
- Performing - Members perform tasks in accordance to group need.
- Adjourning - Members become distanced from the group and group activities due to the perception that group costs outweigh group benefits.
- Social Facilitation

Zajonc (1965) suggested three important factors in the significance of social groups.

- The presence of others generates arousal in the subject and stimulates behaviour.
- Arousal increases the tendency to perform a desired response from the subject.

- The quality and success of this response is dependant upon the type of task.

Zajonc concluded that a dominant response was perceived as being required from the subject within a group. This affected the performance of easy tasks in a positive manner and difficult tasks in a negative manner.

- Mere Exposure Theory, Evaluation Theory and Distraction/Conflict Theory

The idea of mere presence is integral to Zajonc's findings on social facilitation. That is to say that effects of others as stimuli are dictated to by presence alone. However, others have suggested otherwise.

Cottrell (1968), Henchey and Glass (1968), put forward evaluation theory which suggested that the success of social facilitation is dependant upon those who are perceived to be able to evaluate performance. For instance, those in a subjects peer group with certain perceived traits, such as competence, would have either positive or negative effects on the subject's performance.

Put forward by Baron (1986) and Sanders (1981) distraction/conflict theory suggests that the presence of distractive stimuli will effect social facilitation. For instance, the subject will produce social facilitation effects when others, such as friends, create distraction or attentional conflict.

- Group Roles, Norms and Cohesion

Forsyth (1990) Levine and Moreland (1990) suggest that there are three major contributors to the dimension of social groups: Social roles, social norms and group cohesion.

- Roles - a set of expected behaviours that are evaluated by a subjects established group role (established by either formal title or informal appreciation).
- Norms - a set of established rules of conduct defined by the group dynamic.
- Cohesion - the forces that push a group closer together in terms of purpose, attitude and goal (Cartwright & Zander, 1960).

Using a methodology supporting the idea of biologically predetermined group roles and norms Bales (1958) suggested that group roles and norms were based upon the traditional family dynamic i. e. the elite male role of the breadwinner and the submissive female role of caretaker.

Examination of his methodological approach revealed that gender difference was not a predefining factor. Wood and Karten's (1986) experiments into role performance of cross sex groups, was reevaluated by Dovidio et al (1988). It was found amongst men and women who felt equally as competent, that the roles adopted were often similar (Dovidio et al, 1988).

- The Effects of Group Cohesiveness and Friendship

Following on from Cartwright and Zander (1960), Carron et al (1985) suggested that group cohesiveness was comprised of two significant factors: a group's orientation towards a goal and a group's orientation towards its social relationships.

It was observed by Carron (1985) that goal setting was a much more important part to success than social relationships. He determined that the successful completion of goals would increase self esteem and belief in the roles and norms of a group, whereas social relationships, such as friendship, would be more likely to distract the group from its collective goals.

Carron (1982) defined a cohesive group as having a collective identity, a sense of shared purpose and structured patterns of communication (Carron, 1982). These were considered essential elements to the effectiveness of a group's success and to its cohesion.

- Collective identity – the identity of a group seen in terms of its roles and norms.
- Sense of shared purpose – an understanding of the importance of roles and the goals that they achieve
- Structured patterns of communication – group acknowledgement, understanding, appreciation and communication of each roles needs and requirements.

### Conclusion

The need for social groups drives the subject to undergo many developments in terms of social facilitation. It would seem from our examination that these factors are driven through a variety of factors.

From the research we can see that group alignment is dependant upon relationships based upon age difference. It would also appear that group development requires challenges and subsequent reconciliation's from certain subjects. It also appears that group dynamics are not necessarily

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composed of culturally or racially defined roles. Rather, it would appear that roles are intrinsic to socially defined goals and needs.

The subject within the group would appear to be driven by other members in a way that is not quite as simple as, say, group conformity or peer competitiveness. It would also appear that group success is dependant upon the successful achievement of role defined goals. Furthermore, these role defined goals seem to be effected negatively by intimate individual relationships, such as friendship.

In essence, theory, age, gender, culture and methodology are relevant to the way in which we understand peer groups, social competence and friendship and have psychological impact upon the development of social groupings and the very concept of ourselves as social creatures.

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