

Key Concepts to Understand how Groups Change

To understand how groups change, we must first understand what a group is. According to Schriver, a group is “a small, face-to-face collection of persons who interact to accomplish some purpose.” Another definition suggests that a group is “two or more individuals in face-to-face interaction, each aware of his or her membership in the group, each aware of the others who belong to the group, and each aware of their positive interdependence as they strive to achieve mutual goals.”

“These definitions suggest a compatibility with the core purposes and values of social work and the assumptions we make about ourselves, others, and social work.” –Schriver

Some think the term *group* refers exclusively to a counseling or therapy group for troubled individuals. In fact, there are many different kinds of groups with a variety of purposes. Jacobs et. al (2002) have organized groups into seven different categories:

1. Education
2. Discussion
3. Task
4. Growth and experiential
5. Counseling and therapy
6. Support
7. Self-help

Groups can fit into more than one category and do not have to be a formal group, they can be as simple as a group of friends that fit into all of the above categories.

Process vs. Product Dimensions

To consider how groups change, consider whether the group is a product or a process group.

Process groups- process groups are primarily concerned with the internal group processes that occur during the life of the group.

How a group changes by process:

- The members of a group get to know each other better and the group therefore changes because members are more vocal and willing to share which in turn leads the group to work.
- New members come into the group: this affects the process of the group by adding a new dimension in which the members have to accommodate during the life of the group.
- Members leave the group or are absent from a group session: this also affects the process of the group because members that were part of the group and members were used to having are either permanently or temporarily absent making members have to adjust their behavior in the group.
- An internal leader may develop within the group and individuals in the group may follow that key individual that will get them to change. For example, it may be that just one person in the group wants to move the meeting night to Friday instead of Monday, but because that person is such a key individual to the group members, the members agree to switch meeting nights.

- There may be a change in leadership at a point during the group. The change in leadership, whether internal or external, changes the group because the new leader is a different person with new ideas and different styles of leadership.
- A new *norm** is established in the group and the members and consequently the group change to conform to the new norm.
*Norms are the group's common beliefs regarding appropriate behavior for members.

Product groups- product groups are primarily concerned with emphasizing the outcome of the product dimension of the group.

How a group changes by product:

- The group changes the goals that they originally set for themselves. This can also be a process change, but it is product in the sense that the outcome that the group desires is changed.
- The group completes the goals it originally set therefore having to create new goals or conclude the group.
- The group does not make progress towards the goals that it originally set. Something in the group has to change in order for the goals to be met, whether it is a change in goals, or a change in strategy etc.

Groupthink

Groups can also change because of groupthink. Groupthink can be defined as, “a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members’ striving for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative course of action...a deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment that results from in-group pressures.”

A good example of groupthink is taking into consideration what often happens after important sports games between rival teams. Rioting often occurs and people act out of control and in ways that they would normally not act by themselves. This is a result of individual members in the group to act in ways that are conducive to fit into the group. The group starts out as a in control group and then changes to be out of control as people become more and more upset and others follow their lead so as to fit into the group.

Symptoms of groupthink:

1. Direct social pressure placed on a member who argues against the group's shared beliefs.
2. Members' self-censorship of their own thoughts or concerns that deviate from the group consensus.
3. An illusion of the groups' invulnerability to failure.
4. A shared illusion of unanimity.
5. The emergence of self-appointed mind guards that screen out adverse information from outside the group.
6. Collective efforts to rationalize.

7. Stereotype views of enemy leaders as weak or incompetent.
8. An unquestioned belief in the group's inherent morality.

Sequential-Stage Theories and Recurring-Phase Theories

Sequential-stage theories specify the typical order of the phases of group development. Recurring-phase theories specify the issues that dominate group interaction which reoccur again and again. Sequential-stage theories are more consistent with traditional paradigm thinking and recurring-phase theories are more consistent with alternative paradigm thinking.

Sequential-stage theories (traditional paradigm):

These theories suggest that groups go through a number of sequential stages and change as they go. Several theories exist; one of these theories is by Tuckman and Jensen (1977). The stages are:

1. *Forming*-this is a stage of uncertainty and some discomfort as new group members come together for the first time in a new situation.
2. *Storming*-this occurs as group member raise questions and display resistance to the demands of the group. This is a period of conflict and resolution.
3. *Norming*- this is the group's establishment of mechanisms for resolving conflict, working together as a group, and accomplishing the group purpose. Order is established.
4. *Performing*-this is the actual carrying out on the part of the group and its members of the tasks necessary to accomplish its purpose.
5. *Adjourning*- this is the termination of the group. It occurs as the task is completed and the group members make preparations to end their work together.

Recurring-phase theories (alternative paradigm):

These theories expect that developmental stages are subject to recurrence throughout the life of the group. These theories accept that change and movement are ongoing and necessary in groups.

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