

THE PRIMARY GROUP
A SYSTEMATIC ORIENTATION

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The rich heritage of the concept of the 'primary group' is accompanied by crippling ambiguity. An attempt is made to correct the difficulty in two ways: 1) the primary group is regarded as a social system; and 2) the irreducible element present in previous definitions is held to be the affective bond between group members. In the primary group affectivity is symbiotic, i.e., it implies mutual dependency as well as shared feeling. Such a definition of the concept allows the researcher to explore the dynamics of primary relations such as groups in which some, but not all relations, are primary (quasi-primary groups) and the dynamics of power-dependence relations in primary groups.

Like many other popular sociological concepts, the term "primary group" has been subjected to extensive discussion designed to hone its analytical precision. These definitional refinements were ensured by the vague and somewhat unsystematic nature of Cooley's (1925) introduction to the concept, and the resulting contradictions in sociological usage. Some of these discussions have attempted to clarify, through explicit organization, Cooley's analysis (such attempts have tended toward fundamentalism, e.g., Jandy, 1942; Lee, 1964); others have tried to refine Cooley's thought so the concept would more closely correspond to perceived social reality (Faris, 1932), or be more easily amenable to operational definition (Bates and Babchuk, 1961).

While each of these approaches has contributed to a growing awareness of the importance of definitional rigor, conceptual efficiency rests upon broad and systematic definition. For such definitions to develop, it is necessary not only for the minimum criteria of internal logical consistency to be met, but concepts must also be subject to the mortar of empirical utility and the pestle of theoretical coherence and integration. To the extent that any of these criteria are slighted, the emerging conception is inherently limited. This paper will attempt the development of such a systematic and efficient conceptualization of the primary group.

The Meaning of Primary

Analytical discussions have frequently had as their focus the defining characteristics of such a group. The evaluation of conceptual components was initiated by Faris (1932), who suggested that since face-to-face interaction is neither necessary nor sufficient grounds for determining whether a group is primary, that criterion should be dissociated from the concept. Lee (1964) responded to Faris' analysis by asserting that Faris had misinterpreted Cooley. Lee presented four properties of primary groups designed to accurately reflect Cooley's original conception: (1) temporal priority in experience; (2) personal and intimate association; (3) psychological unity as expressed by the feeling of "we-ness"; and (4) dissemination and sharing of primary ideals. This final property represents, for both Cooley and Lee, an intrusion of personal values into sociological definition. Lee, for example, denies the applicability of the concept to such diverse social groups as street gangs, insurrectionary political groups, and religious sects "engaging in emotional ecstasy" because associational groups emerging within these structures fail to possess the four

properties. The latter, for instance, is "not based upon the genuine tenet of Christianity" (1964:33). Since the property "dissemination and sharing of primary ideals" is primarily a repository for such ethnocentrism, its value as a defining characteristic is questionable. Similarly, while temporal priority appears to be related to the concept, defining primary groups in terms of temporal priority blurs meaningful distinctions between differential groups (e.g., familial versus peer).

Consideration of the thought of Babchuk and Bates (1961) allows a broader context in which to evaluate the two remaining properties. Initial conceptualizations derive their value only to the extent that they isolate a meaningful and useful aspect of social reality. Recognition and application of this truism allow Bates and Babchuk to develop a much more useful and incisive analysis than that of Lee. By identifying four sociological variables (size, duration, frequency of contact, and homogeneity) as predisposing factors, the authors are able to reduce the defining characteristics of the primary group to two social-psychological variables: (1) member orientation toward other members in activity; and (2) the affective aspect of member orientation. It can be seen, however, that these two elements are interdependent. Specifically, member orientation toward other members in activity, which implies a focus on the shared relationship rather than the instrumental or expressive activity, is dependent upon the affective association of the specific members. Similarly, from this perspective, Lee's properties of personal, intimate association and psychological unity can be seen to be emerging properties of groups characterized by mutual affective ties. Thus the irreducible element in each definitional treatment appears to be the affective bond between group members.

The Nature of Affectivity

Bates and Babchuk (1961) state, "A simple way of characterizing the emotional quality of a primary group is to say that, over time, there is a strong predominance of feelings of attraction between the members." Negative feelings will be present, but they will "be outweighed by feelings and expressions of positive affect." This treatment, while consistent with most sociological literature in affectivity, is inadequate to the degree that it fails to consider the dynamics of affectivity.

Simmel (1950) noted the "pure and immediate reciprocity" that characterizes the dyad. Similarly, Bales and Borgotta (1965:502) state that in two-person groups, "each person is under pressure to behave in such a way that the other will not withdraw and will continue to cooperate even though he may have to yield a point at a given time." Each of these observations, although not specifically focused on the primary group, is congruent with Gouldner's (1960) view that behavior is guided by a norm of reciprocity, and Homan's (1958) treatment of behavior as social exchange. The reality of reciprocal interdependence doubtlessly extends into the arena of primary relationships. Recognition of such interdependent influence does not negate the point (emphasized by Bates and Babchuk) that primary relations are voluntary and free from constraint; the consensus based on positive feelings discussed by Gross (1956) is dominant in primary groups. Rather, what is implied is that symbiosis also exists on the affective level.

To assert that affective dependence provides the penultimate basis for affective relations does not imply the psychological reductionism that Winch's (1958) need-complimentarity implies, although psychological factors must not be ignored. Rather, affective symbiosis is seen as emerging from mutual dependence, where dependence implies that power or influence is operative in the relationship. Emerson (1962) makes the point succinctly: "power resides implicitly in the other's dependency." The

power-dependence dimension of affective relations has, for the most part, been masked by the positive and consensual context in which it operates. Yet, the identification of this dimension allows systematic treatment of primary relations that depart from the pure type, i.e., exhibit an unbalanced power-dependency relation, albeit in the context of positive attraction; a point which will be expanded in the discussion to follow.

The Boundaries of a Primary Group

Not only is the term "primary" subject to disagreement, but also the term "group." As Lee (1964) has noted, there is a tendency to use primary relations as the organizing concept rather than primary group. Such a tendency is pragmatically limited because it does not allow consideration of groups of three or more that might be accurately defined as primary. On the other hand, Lee's response of excluding all dyads from the category of primary groups does equal violence to observed social reality. Even less flexible, and therefore less viable, is Lee's emphasis on divergency (i.e., heterogeneity) in primary groups.

If sociological definitions are, indeed, evaluated pragmatically, then the issue of size is a secondary, almost artificial one. Systems (and the primary group can be considered as a specific example) are differentiated from their environment on the basis of their defining characteristic(s). Specifically, then, primary groups can be defined as a system in which all members are bonded by ties of mutual affective dependence.

Realistically, as Kephart's (1950) formula of potential relationships implies, we must anticipate that the likelihood of a group being primary (as determined by a formal application of the definition) will be inversely related to group size. Further, as Simmel (1950) and Bales and Borgotta (1965) have clearly shown, structural factors, as well as the multiplication of relationships, gravitate against the creation of larger primary groups. Thus, primary relations may be regarded as the basic units from which larger groups may be constructed.

Discussion

The definition of primary group presented here is similar to many of the previous usages; its strengths lie in (1) its explicitness, and (2) its emphasis on the internal dynamics of the primary group. As with other usages, a determination can be made whether a specific group meets the criteria of primariness; when the criteria are met, the group can be compared and contrasted with non-primary groups. Of more interest, however, are the insights into the differences (1) within primary groups, and (2) between primary and quasi-primary groups.

Primary Groups. In the first instance, primary groups where all members are, by definition, mutually affectively dependent, may yet be characterized by differential degrees of dependence, which leads to an unequal distribution of influence within the group. It can be seen that unequal dependency within primary groups is hazardous to the continued existence of the group. Bates and Babchuk have posited that in primary groups there is no insistence on equivalence of exchange. However, to the degree that unequal dependency exists, it may force the actor to reevaluate the group, and thereby question its primary basis. Emerson's (1962) discussion of power-dependence relations, although not unique to primary groups, is relevant. Emerson points out that for groups in which dependency is not equalized (unbalanced relations), two kinds of balancing operations are possible: (1) operations which increase the dependency of the super-ordinate member; and (2) operations which decrease the dependency of the subordinate member.

The type of operation employed will determine the continued existence of the group. If the first type is operating, the group can be expected to continue at a higher level of cohesion; when the second type of operation is used, the eventual dissolution of the relationship can be forecast.

Another facet of the internal dynamics of primary groups may be noted: the power dependence aspect of affective relations gives rise to shared norms which govern the nature of the relationship. As Thibaut and Kelley (1957:131) have stated, "both weaker and stronger persons stand to gain from the introduction of mutually acceptable rules which introduce regularity and control into the relationship without recourse to the direct interpersonal application of power." The emergent normative structure, which may be viewed as an extension and ritualization of the existing power-dependence relationship, is a central facet of primary groups, and an appropriate focus of primary group studies. Two concerns are paramount for such studies: (1) the effects of differential normative structure within primary groups (e.g., the scope of permissible activities); and (2) the impact that challenges to the normative structure and changes in existing norms have within the primary group.¹ Some of these concerns have been explored in the context of small, task-oriented groups, but their dynamics may be quite different in primary groups.

Quasi-primary groups. Traditionally, "primary group" has been treated as an ideal-type, and contrasted with the concept of secondary group. It may be more revealing, in specific empirical instances, to compare primary groups with groups which, although not (formally) primary, contain many primary characteristics, and thereby explore the effects which the defining characteristics have for the group. The most prevalent example of such a group is the multi-person group where several relations are primary, but one or more are not. Three specific instances of this type will be discussed.

First is the instance of the friendship circle where one or more member pairs do share a bond of affective dependency. This group possesses many aspects of the primary group, and thus presents an interesting empirical contrast to the primary group. Specifically, the distinction allows the researcher to compare: (1) the normative structure, (2) the cohesiveness, (3) the dependence relations, and (4) the stability of such a group with those of a primary group. Further, this instance presents a different context in which to view balancing operations and other such mechanisms. Such comparisons may provide insight into, not only the specific friendship circle, but formal primary groups as well.

The second instance concerns the role of small children in a familial context. While most sociologists recognize that not all families constitute primary groups, the status of children in a cohesive family unit is less clear. Cooley appeared to regard children primarily as inductees into the group, which served a socializing function. In a sense, then, the temporal priority emphasized by Lee (1964) prohibits the establishment of a primary group as defined here. Stated differently, the type of family setting that is normally called a primary group might be better conceptualized as a primary relationship (between the parents) which is open to the children when they acquire sufficient social skills to enter relationships characterized by affectual dependency. It may be noted that the heterogeneity of family members (in terms of age, sex, and status) may decrease the likelihood of primary group formation if Bates and Babchuk are correct in their treatment of homogeneity as a predisposing factor. This example of a quasi-primary group, like the friendship circle, gives rise to a

¹ Interpretive sociology has taken the lead in dealing with questions of this nature. See Wilson, 1970.

number of intriguing questions which can only be answered empirically. At what age do children become capable of mutual affective dependency? Is affective capability in children related to the presence or absence of primary relations between their parents? How do primary "groups" that serve a socializing function differ from those emerging from peer relations? These and other questions suggest important unexplored areas within the context of primary groups.

The final instance is similar to the second; when can Cooley's "play group" be formally classified as primary? Because children do not innately possess social skills, emotional autonomy rather than affective dependency initially characterizes children's play groups. It is clear, then, that early peer socialization must take place in the context of what we have called quasi-primary groups. Analysis of this distinction may have implications not only for students of primary groups, but for the area of socialization as well.

Conclusion

The importance of the concept primary group is clearly established through the process of fruitful usage. Previous conceptions, although disparate, provide the basis for a redefinition of the concept based on logical consistency, empirical utility, and the systematic introduction of related theory. The value of the emerging definition lies in its capability to deal with empirical reality, and isolate new areas of theoretical import. Specifically, from this perspective, insight may be gained regarding the internal dynamics of primary relations, the divergencies among types of primary groups, and the functioning of formal primary groups vis-a-vis quasi-primary groups. With regard to the latter, the role of children in a cohesive family is a special case that can be examined in the context of primary group studies.

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