6.1B: Primary Groups

Learning Objectives

- List at least three defining characteristics of a primary group

Sociologists distinguish between two types of groups based upon their characteristics. A primary group is typically a small social group whose members share close, personal, enduring relationships. These groups are marked by concern for one another, shared activities and culture, and long periods of time spent together. The goal of primary groups is actually the relationships themselves rather than achieving some other purpose. Families and close friends are examples of primary groups.

Charles Cooley

The concept of the primary group was introduced by Charles Cooley, a sociologist from the Chicago School of sociology, in his book Social Organization: A Study of the Larger Mind (1909). Primary groups play an important role in the development of personal identity. Cooley argued that the impact of the primary group is so great that individuals cling to primary ideals in more complex associations and even create new primary groupings within formal organizations. To that extent, he viewed society as a constant experiment in enlarging social experience and in coordinating variety. He, therefore, analyzed the operation of such complex social forms as formal institutions and social class systems and the subtle controls of public opinion.
Charles Cooley: The concept of the primary group was introduced by Charles Cooley, a sociologist from the Chicago School of sociology, in his book, “Social Organization: A Study of the Larger Mind” (1909).

Functions of Primary Groups

A primary group is a group in which one exchanges implicit items, such as love, caring, concern, support, etc. Examples of these would be family groups, love relationships, crisis support groups, and church groups. Relationships formed in primary groups are often long lasting and goals in themselves. They also are often psychologically comforting to the individuals involved and provide a source of support and encouragement.
Families as Social Groups: This family from the 1970s would be an example of a primary group.

**Key Points**

- Primary groups are marked by concern for one another, shared activities and culture, and long periods of time spent together. They are psychologically comforting and quite influential in developing personal identity.
- Families and close friends are examples of primary groups.
- The goal of primary groups is actually the relationships themselves rather than achieving some other purpose.
- The concept of the primary group was introduced by Charles Cooley in his book, *Social Organization: A Study of the Larger Mind*.

**Key Terms**

- **Close friends**: They are examples of primary groups.
- **group**: A number of things or persons being in some relation to one another.
- **relationship**: Connection or association; the condition of being related.