6.1E: Reference Groups

Learning Objectives

• Explain the purpose of a reference group

Social comparison theory is centered on the belief that there is a drive within individuals to gain accurate self-evaluations. Individuals evaluate their own opinions and define the self by comparing themselves to others. One important concept in this theory is the reference group. A reference group refers to a group to which an individual or another group is compared. Sociologists call any group that individuals use as a standard for evaluating themselves and their own behavior a reference group.

Reference groups are used in order to evaluate and determine the nature of a given individual or other group’s characteristics and sociological attributes. It is the group to which the individual relates or aspires to relate himself or herself psychologically. Reference groups become the individual's frame of reference and source for ordering his or her experiences, perceptions, cognition, and ideas of self. It is important for determining a person’s self-identity, attitudes, and social ties. These groups become the basis of reference in making comparisons or contrasts and in evaluating one’s appearance and performance.

Robert K. Merton hypothesized that individuals compare themselves with reference groups of people who occupy the social role to which the individual aspires. Reference groups act as a frame of reference to which people always refer to evaluate their achievements, their role performance, aspirations and ambitions. A reference group can either be from a membership group or non-membership group.
Reference group: Reference groups provide the benchmarks and contrast needed for comparison and evaluation of group and personal characteristics. They become the individual's frame of reference and source for ordering his or her experiences, perceptions, cognition, and ideas of self.

An example of a reference group is a group of people who have a certain level of affluence. For example, an individual in the U.S. with an annual income of $80,000, may consider himself affluent if he compares himself to those in the middle of the income strata, who earn roughly $32,000 a year. If, however, the same person considers the relevant reference group to be those in the top 0.1% of households in the U.S., those making $1.6 million or more, then the individual's income of $80,000 would make him or her seem rather poor.

Key Points

- Social comparison theory argues that individuals use comparisons with others to gain accurate self-evaluations and learn how to define the self. A reference group is a concept referring to a group to which an individual or another group is compared.
- Reference groups provide the benchmarks and contrast needed for comparison and evaluation of group and personal characteristics.
- Robert K. Merton hypothesized that individuals compare themselves with reference groups of people who occupy the social role to which the individual aspires.
Key Terms

- **self-identity**: a multi-dimensional construct that refers to an individual's perception of "self" in relation to any number of characteristics, such as academics and non academics, gender roles and sexuality, racial identity, and many others.

- **social role**: it is a set of connected behaviors, rights, and obligations as conceptualized by actors in a social situation.

- **reference group**: it is a concept referring to a group to which an individual or another group is compared.