# Group dynamics basics

# Processes in group dynamics

"Group dynamics refers to the areas of tension and the dynamics between individual, group and, probably, an organisation. Each group, as a social entity, follows certain principles in its course."[1]

The knowledge of processes and developments in groups is based on the contribution of group dynamics (founder: Kurt Lewin 1890-1947). Any behaviour is influenced by the group-specific affiliation (school, peer group, family). In each group-dynamic process certain aspects need to be considered: How are the roles distributed? Who has what position? What do the group norms look like? How can conflicts or decisions develop? [2]

## Roles

"The different roles in a group develop in constant interaction between the personality and the idiosyncrasies of the individual and the expectations of the group towards her/him."[3] After some time, each group member takes on a specific role, which can both develop and/or change. The roles in a group are not rigid and fixed. According to Brocher (1999), four roles can be identified:

➢ **Job role:** Functions that stand, for the group, for compliance with defined targets and execution of tasks (activity, speech, coordination)
➢ **Maintenance roles and creator roles**: refer to behaviours such as evaluating, diagnosing, and mediating.
➢ **Dysfunctional roles:** behaviours such as aggression, blocking, rivalry, clowning, or passivity.[4]

In group dynamics, particular attention is placed on the **leadership role** and the role of the outsider. The leadership role can have a negative or a positive connotation. It is positive on the socio-emotional level (prosocial behaviour such as helpfulness) and with regard to performance (special skills such as language skills). The negative leadership role is characterised by, for instance, intimidation of the group to demonstrate your own power.

The **outsider**, often, does not participate in group life or does not adhere to group norms; this makes her/him look unappealing to others. Non-desirable behaviour (eg aggression) and lack of skills (language difficulties) strengthen this role.[5]

## Position

It refers to the place of the individual within a group.

➢ **Alpha:** fittest/most popular >; keeps eye on group goals
➢ **Beta:** expert/specialist >; takes on factual-advisory role in the group

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[1] Metzinger, A. (2016). Grundlagen der Gruppendynamik. Jugendhilfe, 54, p. 259.
[2] Cf. ibid.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Cf. ibid. quoted in Brocher (1999).
[5] Cf. Metzinger (2016), p. 260

➢ **Gamma:** all those who have joined Alpha; support without raising any leadership >; usually, this position is the majority of the group
➢ **Omega:** Counterpoint to Alpha >; critically questions objectives, speaks out difficulties >; address opposite positions that Gamma do not dare to address, but secretly think of[6]

## Norms

"For the members of a group, norms serve as a common reference point for the behaviour of all group members."[7]

Group norms can be divided into relationship norms (Who talks to whom? Who is avoided?), communication norms (How issue-related need statements be?), emotional norms (Do they laugh? Can boredom be expressed?) and sanction norms (What behaviour patterns are there when group norms are violated?).[8]

## Conflicts

Problems are stressful experiences for groups. They seem threatening; therefore, a conflict between members of the same groups is often avoided. However, the group may again be united after a difficult situation if the conflict resolution was successful. Signs of conflicts can be well observed in the behaviour of the group members (members complain about each other; are impatient with one another; proposals are criticised before they have even been expressed; members don't do an effort to understand each other's viewpoints). In actual conflict situations, the following behaviour patterns can be identified: [9]

➢ **Avoiding:** denying, belittling or concealing problems; ignoring the counterparty
➢ **Eliminating:** exclude members who disagree
➢ **Suppressing:** trying to gain other opinions by influencing
➢ **Consenting:** majority decides, minority agrees
➢ **Uniting:** both opponents unite in a strategic alliance, the conflict is not resolved and remains, is put on ice for some time
➢ **Compromising:** everyone makes concessions; arrangements are made
➢ **Integrating:** different opinions are heard, discussed; the conflict is discussed; entire group develops a solution which is acceptable to all

## Decisions

"Decision-making in groups can be issue-centred or gain a momentum that, in the worst case, is rather charged by the forces of group dynamics than by the issue itself. When groups work together over a longer period of time, usually, the effect of intra-group forces outside of the issue cannot be avoided."[10] The following decisions can be made: [11]

➢ One member, on behalf of the group, decides **on her/his own**,
➢ A member **exerts pressure** on other group members,
➢ A compromise is reached through **consensus** or
➢ by **majority decision** following a vote.

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[6] Cf. ibid. pp. 260.

[7] Ibid. p. 261.

[8] Cf. ibid.

[9] Cf. ibid. pp. 264.

[10] Ibid. quoted in Sader (2008), p. 265.

[11] Cf. Metzinger (2016) quoted in Antons (2000), p. 265.

In order to visualise group dynamics, creating a **sociogram** of the group can be very helpful. This clearly shows the relationship between the group members, the roles of the members and how the relations within the group work.