

SOCIAL GROUPS, TYPES OF GROUPS AND FACTORS AFFECTING GROUP FORMATION

Social Group Work | Easy and Simple Exam Notes
Based on Toseland & Rivas | Social Work Group Practice

Part 1: What is a Social Group?

Before we study types of groups or how they form, we must first understand: what is a social group? This sounds like a simple question, but in social work, it has a very specific meaning.

In everyday life, the word 'group' is used loosely — we say 'a group of people at the bus stop' or 'a group of students in the classroom.' But in social group work, a group means something more than just people who happen to be in the same place.

Scholarly Definitions

Toseland and Rivas (2009): "A group can be defined as two or more individuals who share a common purpose, whose members interact with each other, who are interdependent, and who are capable of acting in a unified manner."

From these definitions, we can say that a social group must have the following essential features:

- 1. Two or More People:** A group cannot have just one person. At least two people must be there. In social group work, groups usually have 5 to 15 members for effective functioning.
- 2. Common Purpose or Goal:** The people in the group must share something in common — a common need, a common problem, a common goal, or a common interest. Without a shared purpose, people are just a crowd, not a group.
- 3. Interaction:** The members must actually communicate and respond to each other. They must talk, listen, react, and relate to one another — not just sit silently in the same room.
- 4. Interdependence:** The members of a group depend on each other to some extent. What one member does affects the others. If one member is absent, the whole group feels it.
- 5. A Sense of Belonging:** Members feel that they are part of the group — a feeling of 'we' rather than just 'I.' This sense of belonging is what makes a group meaningful and powerful.
- 6. Norms and Roles:** Over time, every group develops its own unwritten rules (norms) — things like 'we respect each other here' or 'we start on time.' Members also begin to take on different roles — some lead, some support, some question.

Simple Example: *Ten women in a village who all walk past each other every morning are NOT a group. But when a social worker brings them together, helps them identify a common problem (like lack of water supply), gives them a name (like 'Jal Shakti Mahila Sangha'), and helps them meet regularly to solve the problem together — NOW they are a social group. They have a common purpose, they interact, they depend on each other, and they feel a sense of belonging.*

In One Line: A social group is a gathering of two or more people who interact with each other, share a common purpose, and feel a sense of belonging — not just a crowd.

Part 2: Types of Social Groups

Social groups can be classified or divided into different types based on different criteria. The most important classification — used by Toseland and Rivas and widely adopted in social work — divides groups into two broad categories: (A) Natural vs. Formed Groups, and (B) Treatment vs. Task Groups.

A. Natural Groups vs. Formed Groups

The first way to classify groups is to ask: How did this group come into existence? Did it form on its own — naturally? Or was it deliberately created by someone?

A1 Natural Groups

Natural groups are groups that come together on their own — without any professional planning or external help. People join these groups because of natural ties like family, friendship, shared neighbourhood, shared culture, or common experience. Nobody planned these groups — they just happened. Natural groups come together spontaneously based on naturally occurring events, interpersonal attraction, or the mutually perceived needs of members

Key features: Formed voluntarily by members themselves. Based on natural bonds — friendship, family, culture. No formal leader imposed from outside. Members feel a very strong sense of belonging. No fixed agenda or structure imposed from outside.

Examples of Natural Groups: 1. A group of college friends who meet every Sunday. | 2. A family — parents, children, grandparents. | 3. A gang of young men in a neighbourhood. | 4. A caste or community group. | 5. A group of neighbours who come together during a flood.

A2 Formed Groups

Formed groups are groups that are deliberately created or organised by a professional, an agency, or an institution for a specific purpose. Someone — usually a social worker, a hospital, a school, an NGO, or an organisation — decides that a group needs to be formed, selects the members, sets the purpose, and guides the group toward its goals.

Key features: Deliberately planned by a social worker or agency. Members are selected or invited based on common needs. Has a professional leader or facilitator (the group worker). Has a specific purpose or goal set in advance. Usually has a structure — regular meeting time, venue, activities.

Examples of Formed Groups: 1. A support group for women who have experienced domestic violence, formed by an NGO. | 2. A therapy group for persons with depression, formed by a hospital. | 3. A youth leadership group formed by a community centre. | 4. A self-help group (SHG) formed by a government scheme. | 5. A group for children with learning difficulties, formed by a school social worker.

Important Note: Social group work primarily focuses on FORMED groups — because in formed groups, the social worker has a clear role and can plan purposeful interventions. However, many principles of group work also apply to natural groups.

B. Treatment Groups vs. Task Groups (Toseland & Rivas)

The most important classification in social group work — especially from Toseland and Rivas (2009) — divides all formed groups into two broad types based on their PRIMARY PURPOSE:

Memory Trick for Treatment vs Task Groups:

TREATMENT Groups = Focus on the MEMBERS inside the group

treatment group is used to signify a group whose major purpose is to meet members' socio-emotional needs

TASK Groups = Focus on the WORK or PEOPLE outside the group

Simple way to remember: 'Treatment = Inside. Task = Outside.'

Type 1: Treatment Groups

Treatment groups are formed to help the members of the group themselves. The purpose is to meet the social, emotional, educational, or therapeutic needs of the people who are in the group. Everything that happens in the group is designed for the benefit of the group members — not for outsiders or for completing a task.

Primary purpose: To change, heal, grow, or support the members of the group.

Who benefits? The members themselves — directly and personally.

Role of worker: Therapist, educator, facilitator, guide, or enabler.

Examples: Support groups, therapy groups, self-help groups, educational groups, socialisation groups, growth groups.

Treatment groups are further divided into 6 sub-types. These are sometimes called the 'Typology of Treatment Groups':

Memory Trick for 6 Types of Treatment Groups:

SEGTSS — "Social Education Grows Through Self-Support!"

S — Support Groups

E — Education Groups

G — Growth Groups

T — Therapy Groups

S — Socialisation Groups

S — Self-Help Groups

1. Support Groups: These groups help members cope with a shared problem or life situation by offering emotional support, information, and encouragement. Members realise they are not alone — others have the same problem. The sharing itself is healing.

Example: *A group for parents of children with autism — they meet weekly to share their experiences, challenges, and coping strategies. Knowing others face the same struggle reduces isolation and gives strength.*

2. Education Groups: These groups help members learn new information, knowledge, or skills that will improve their lives. The focus is on teaching and learning in a group setting.

Example: *A group for pregnant women at a health centre — they learn about nutrition, childbirth, breastfeeding, and infant care. The group format allows members to ask questions and learn from each other.*

3. Growth Groups: These groups help members become more self-aware, realise their potential, and develop their personality. The goal is personal growth, not treatment of a problem.

Example: *A leadership development group for college students — through activities, discussions, and challenges, they develop confidence, communication skills, and self-awareness.*

4. Therapy Groups: These groups are for people who are dealing with serious personal or psychological problems — such as depression, trauma, addiction, or grief. They require a highly trained professional to lead them. The goal is healing and recovery.

Example: *A group therapy session at a psychiatric hospital for patients with depression — the therapist guides the group through structured exercises and discussions to help members understand and manage their depression.*

5. Socialisation Groups: These groups help members learn social skills — how to interact with others, how to behave in different social situations, how to make friends and maintain relationships. They are especially used with children, teenagers, and persons with disabilities.

Example: *A social skills group for children with autism at a special school — they practice greetings, taking turns in conversation, reading facial expressions, and working cooperatively through games and role-play.*

6. Self-Help Groups: These groups are led by the members themselves — not by a professional. Members come together because they share a common problem and help each other based on their own lived experience. The power of self-help groups lies in peer support — 'people who have been there' helping each other.

Example: *Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is the most famous self-help group in the world. Members who have struggled with alcohol support others who are trying to recover — sharing their stories, their struggles, and their strength. Similarly, Women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in India empower rural women through savings and mutual support.*

Type 2: Task Groups

Task groups are formed not to help the members themselves, but to accomplish a specific task or achieve a specific goal — usually for the benefit of people OUTSIDE the group, or for an organisation or community. The members of the group work together to complete a job, solve a problem, or make a decision. The focus is on the work to be done, not on the personal needs of the members.

Primary purpose: To complete a task, solve a problem, or achieve a goal.

Who benefits? Primarily people outside the group — clients, organisations, or the community.

Role of worker: Coordinator, chair, facilitator, or leader of the task.

Examples: Committees, boards, teams, social action groups, coalitions.

Task groups are divided into three categories based on who they serve:

Memory Trick for Task Groups:

'Task Groups Serve Three Masters: Clients, Organisations, Communities'

1. Task Groups to meet CLIENT needs (Teams, Treatment Conferences, Staff Development)
2. Task Groups to meet ORGANISATIONAL needs (Committees, Cabinets, Board of Directors)
3. Task Groups to meet COMMUNITY needs (Social Action Groups, Coalitions, Delegate Councils)

Task Groups 1 Groups to Meet Client Needs

Teams: A group of professionals from different fields who work together to provide services to a client or a group of clients. Example: A hospital team with a doctor, social worker, nurse, and physiotherapist who collectively plan the treatment of a patient.

Treatment Conferences: A meeting of professionals who come together to review a specific client's case and decide on the best course of action. Example: A case conference at a child welfare agency to decide whether a child should remain in foster care or return to their family.

Staff Development Groups: Groups formed to train or improve the skills of staff members — so they can better serve their clients. Example: A monthly training group for social workers at an NGO, where they learn new counselling techniques.

Task Groups 2 Groups to Meet Organisational Needs

Committees: Small groups within an organisation formed to handle specific responsibilities. Example: The Finance Committee of an NGO that manages the organisation's budget and expenditure.

Cabinets: A select group of senior leaders or advisors who help an organisation's head make important decisions. Example: The Cabinet of Ministers advising the Director of a social welfare department.

Board of Directors: The governing body of an organisation — responsible for overall policy, direction, and accountability. Example: The Board of Trustees of a social welfare organisation that sets its long-term vision and ensures it is functioning ethically and effectively.

Task Groups 3 Groups to Meet Community Needs

Social Action Groups: Groups formed to advocate for social change — to challenge unjust policies, demand rights, or bring about social reform. Example: A group of Dalit activists who campaign for the implementation of SC/ST welfare schemes in their district.

Coalitions: Multiple organisations or groups that come together temporarily to achieve a shared goal. Example: A coalition of NGOs, government bodies, and community groups working together to address child malnutrition in a district.

Delegate Councils: Groups made up of representatives from different organisations or communities who come together to coordinate services or make collective decisions. Example: A district-level social welfare council with representatives from health, education, women's welfare, and tribal development departments.

Treatment Groups vs. Task Groups — Quick Comparison

Feature	Treatment Groups	Task Groups
Main Purpose	Meet the needs of the members	Complete a task / serve others outside the group
Who Benefits?	The members themselves	Clients, organisations, or the community
Focus	Feelings, growth, healing, learning	Goals, decisions, plans, policies
Leader's Role	Therapist / facilitator / guide	Chairperson / coordinator / manager
Confidentiality	Very high — what members share is private	Lower — decisions and reports are often shared
Examples	Support group, therapy group, SHG	Committee, board, coalition, team

Conclusion

Social groups are at the heart of human life. We grow in groups, we learn in groups, and we heal in groups. In social work, understanding what a social group is, what types of groups exist, and what factors affect their formation is the foundation of effective group work practice.

To summarise — a social group is two or more people who interact, share a common purpose, and feel a sense of belonging. Groups can be natural (formed on their own) or formed (deliberately created by a professional). Formed groups are further divided into treatment groups (which serve the members

themselves) and task groups (which complete a task or serve others). Treatment groups are of six types — support, education, growth, therapy, socialisation, and self-help. Task groups serve clients, organisations, or communities.

Forming a group is not just a matter of gathering people together. The social worker must carefully think about the purpose, the composition, the size, the duration, the setting, agency support, and member preparation — because every one of these factors shapes the group's culture, safety, and effectiveness. A well-formed group, led by a skilled social worker, is one of the most powerful instruments for personal change and social transformation.

— *End of Notes* —