

# The Functions of Groups: A Psychometric Analysis of the Group Resources Inventory

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**ABSTRACT.** What do groups *do* for their members? A functional model that assumes groups satisfy a number of basic survival, psychological, informational, interpersonal, and collective needs is offered. The authors examined the comprehensiveness of the model by asking members of various types of naturally occurring groups to describe the benefits they gained through membership. Analysis of those descriptions identified 16 key interpersonal functions of groups (such as social comparison, social exchange, social control, social esteem, social identity, and social learning), and individuals' evaluations of the quality of their group were systematically related to their ratings of the group's functionality. The authors discuss possible applications of these findings for improving groups but have concluded that additional work is needed to determine the applicability of the functions model to psychotherapeutic groups.

MORENO (1934), IN HIS ANALYSIS OF THE NATURE OF GROUPS and their durability, argued that the psychological impact of a group on its members depends in large part on the group's structural integrity. He believed that groups with harmonious attraction and authority relations among the members were likely to survive and that the individuals in such groups would be more likely to prosper psychologically. Moreno also noted, however, that structure is inextricably linked to function, for one cannot accurately recommend one social structure over another without considering the group's purposes. Moreno noted, for example, that a sociometric structure that developed in a purely social grouping, such as a collection of friends or a family, may not be an adaptive one when the group finds itself in a new situation, facing new demands: "the same structure occurring in the organization of a home group and which may express little or no disturbance in the functions of this

group can express a very severe disturbance in the function of a work group, even if the same individuals are concerned in both instances" (1934, p. 112).

But what *are* the functions of groups? Prior studies of therapeutic groups, supportive groups, work groups, and other naturally occurring groups have explored the general utility of groups for their members (Mackie & Goethals, 1987). In the classic analysis of the functions of interpersonal relations, for example, Weiss (1973) argued that social relationships satisfy six basic needs: attachment, reliable alliance, enhancement of worth, social integration, guidance, and opportunity for nurturance (DiTommaso & Spinner, 1997). Shaver and Buhrmester (1983), in a more streamlined model, suggested that social needs and their corresponding social provisions fall into one of two fundamental categories: psychological intimacy and integrated involvement. The need for psychological intimacy, although often satisfied by long-term dyadic pairings, such as close friendships and love relationships, can be achieved through membership in a group that provides emotional support and nurturance. According to Shaver and Buhrmester (1983, p. 265), such groups provide members with "affection and warmth; unconditional positive regard; opportunity for self-disclosure and emotional expression; lack of defensiveness, lack of concern for self-presentation; giving and receiving nurturance; security and emotional support." Groups that provide members with integrated involvement, in contrast, provide members with (Shaver & Buhrmester, 1983, p. 265) "enjoyable and involving activities and projects; social identity and self-definition; [a sense of] being needed for one's skills; social comparison information; opportunity for power and influence; conditional positive regard; support for one's beliefs and values."

Researchers studying groups created for therapeutic purposes, such as psychotherapeutic groups and encounter groups, have also identified a number of critical functions that those groups serve for their individual members. Lakin (1972), for example, argued that the successful group must facilitate emotional expression and generate feelings of belongingness, but it must also stimulate interpersonal comparisons and provide members with the opportunity to interact with one another. Roller (1997) included universalization, differentiation, experimentation, socialization, communication, externalization/internalization, recapitulation/reparation, reorganization, sublimation, and revelation on his list of group resources. Developmentally oriented analyses of groups, such as those offered by Dugo and Beck (1997), Tuckman (1965), and Wheelan (1994), highlight time-dependent functions that groups serve, such as creating bonds between people, the stimulation of identity development, fostering productivity, and encouraging self-exploration.

Yalom's interpersonal model of group psychotherapy is by far the most comprehensive and well-researched analysis of why groups are effective (Yalom, 1995). According to Yalom, certain therapeutic, or curative, factors

underlie effective psychotherapeutic groups. Some of the factors on Yalom's list are mechanisms that are responsible for facilitating change, whereas others describe the general group conditions that should be present within effective therapeutic groups. The list includes the installation of hope, universality, imparting of information, altruism, the corrective recapitulation of the primary family group, development of socializing techniques, imitative behavior, interpersonal learning, group cohesiveness, catharsis, and existential factors. Self-understanding is also a potential candidate for the curative factors list, although Yalom has suggested that factor may be more epiphenomenon than mediator of change.

In our current work, we sought to extend the functional model of groups by examining the social functions served by groups. Drawing on the work of Weiss, Lakin, Yalom, and others, we examined 16 key provisions that groups supply their members in naturally occurring groups. This list, although based on previous analyses, differs in that it provides a more extensive listing of the interpersonal needs of group members.

*Social bonding:* Groups provide members with contact with other people; they create connections between people and so set the stage for the development of more intimate interactions.

*Social comparison—downward:* Members can compare themselves to others who, in some cases, may be experiencing problems and outcomes that are even more negative than theirs.

*Social comparison—upward:* Members can compare themselves to others who are coping well with their problems and situations and so are a source of hope and inspiration.

*Social control:* Groups provide members with opportunities to take actions to change the beliefs or behaviors of other people.

*Social esteem:* Acceptance by the group confirms the individual's sense of self-worth.

*Social exchange:* When group members pool their resources in a common effort they minimize their costs and maximize their gains.

*Social expression:* Groups provide members with a forum for sharing emotions and ideas with others.

*Social identification:* Members feel identified less as individuals when they are immersed in a group.

*Social identity:* Groups provide members with a sense of self-definition and collective identity.

*Social influence:* Groups help members manage their actions by encouraging certain actions and negatively sanctioning others.

*Social learning—information:* Members are given information and ideas through direct and indirect instruction by other group members.

*Social learning—self-insight:* Members discover information about themselves during group interactions.

*Social relations:* Groups create intimate, emotionally meaningful, and reliable connections between people.

*Social skills development:* Members can observe, practice, and model basic interpersonal skills in group settings.

*Social support:* Groups provide their members with tangible, emotional, and cognitive support when they encounter problems or difficulties.

*Socialization:* The group's normative structures provide members with norms and standards that guide their actions by instilling socially approved values.

We tested the utility of the social provision model by developing an instrument, the Group Resources Inventory, to assess the social functions of groups. We developed an extensive set of items that tapped each of the functions and, through pretesting and item analysis, narrowed the set down to 103 items. We then administered that version to members of various types of community-based groups and asked them to rate their group's capacity to make available each type of group provision. Overall, we predicted that groups that were very satisfying for their members would be rated more positively in terms of their functional utility for those members.

## Method

### *Participants*

The 251 participants (187 women, 64 men) were all members of intact community groups in a mid-sized metropolitan area. The groups ranged in purpose and longevity and included a troupe of Israeli folk dancers, a handball group, a historical reenactment group, students from a dormitory floor, women from several sororities, a Sunday school class, an Alcoholic Anonymous chapter, a group of academic colleagues, a local society for human resource management, teachers at an elementary school, a Baptist women's group, an aerobics class, a bible study group, members of the Baptist student union, a group of employees at a bank, a chapter of Weight Watchers, and a group dynamics class.

### *Procedure*

All subjects, after completing an informed consent form, responded to 103 items that became the basis of the Group Resources Inventory (GRI). The items were drawn from extant models of social provisions (Shaver & Buhrmester, 1983), curative factors (Yalom, 1995), social support (Sarason, Pierce, & Sarason, 1990), and perceived needs (Porter, 1962). Following a phe-

nomenological approach, the GRI requires group members to describe their perceptions of the provisions their group supplies by indicating a degree of agreement with such items as "In the group, I feel accepted," "I can express my feelings in this group," "My sense of identity comes, in part, from my membership in this group," and "We group members share a common bond." (See Appendix for the list of items.) The GRI uses a checklist, 3-point response scale. The abbreviated response continuum restricts the response range and contributes to higher variability within each scale, but it increases the ease of administration. Most subjects completed the inventory in 10 to 15 min.

Respondents also rated their group, using six 9-point bipolar items suggested by Moreland and Levine's (1982; Pavelchak, Moreland, & Levine, 1986) model of member socialization in groups. The endpoints of each item were separated by a line of digits ranging from 1 to 9, with 9 always appearing closest to the endpoint with a positive connotation. Respondents circled a number from 1 to 9 to indicate their appraisal of their group. The items were "enjoyable-unenjoyable," "unrewarding-rewarding," "satisfying-dissatisfying," "worthless-worthwhile," "important-unimportant," and "I am very attracted to this group - I am not attracted to this group." We averaged the responses to these six items together to generate an overall group satisfaction index. The Cronbach alpha for this scale was .92.

## Results

The items from the GRI were averaged together to create scores corresponding to the 16 a priori provision scales (see the key shown in the Appendix). Item analysis was then conducted to evaluate the psychometric adequacy of the scales, including inspection of item-to-total correlations, each item's contribution to its respective scale's internal consistency, and the amount of variance in responses to the item. That analysis resulted in the deletion of 13 problematic items that substantially decreased the internal coherence of the scales and did not add substantially to the conceptual content of the scale. The social comparison scales, social esteem, and social learning—self-insight scales lost 2 items each, whereas social control, social influence, social learning—information, social relations, and social support scales each lost 1 item.

As we indicate in Table 1, only 3 or 4 items were needed to assess relatively specific functions, such as upward and downward social comparison. Functions with a more complex content, such as social relations and social support, required as many as 10 items to tap the full range of their domain adequately. Despite the small number of items comprising several of the scales in Table 1, their internal consistency was adequate. Cronbach's alpha, as an index of internal consistency, is sensitive to the number of items included on a scale,

**TABLE 1**  
**Number of Items, Means, Standard Deviations, and Alpha Indexes of**  
**Internal Consistency for the 16 Scales of the Group Resources Inventory**

Scale	# of items	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	alpha
Social bonding	6	2.61	.45	.82
Social comparison—downward	3	2.54	.52	.77
Social comparison—upward	4	2.59	.45	.67
Social control	4	2.13	.54	.74
Social esteem	4	2.70	.42	.79
Social exchange	9	2.52	.41	.81
Social expression	4	2.55	.53	.82
Social identification	3	2.08	.58	.59
Social identity	5	2.56	.41	.74
Social influence	4	2.42	.51	.68
Social learning—information	6	2.65	.38	.73
Social learning—self-insight	5	2.32	.54	.78
Social relations	10	2.33	.44	.80
Social skills development	8	2.42	.52	.87
Social support	10	2.44	.44	.86
Socialization	5	2.43	.47	.67

so that alpha increases as more items are included in calculating scale scores. Hence, the Cronbach alpha coefficient was the lowest for the smallest scale (the social identification scale,  $\alpha = .59$ ) but higher for most of the other scales. Alpha coefficients ranged from .75 to .87.

#### *Functionality and Satisfaction With the Group*

Respondents, in general, considered their groups to be highly functional, with means for the scale ranging from a low of 2.08 (for social identification) to a high of 2.70 (for social esteem). The standard deviations of the scales, however, suggested substantial variation in respondents' ratings of their groups, for despite the abbreviated 3-point scale used, deviations ranged from a low of .38 (for social learning-information) to a high of .58 (for social identification). From our inspection of the means, however, we concluded that groups were most successful in providing bonding, esteem, and information (all *M*s > 2.60), and least successful in providing control, insight, intimate relationships, and decreased identifiability (all *M*s < 2.35).

Functionality was also related to the members' overall evaluation of their group. We examined that relationship by classifying participants' groups into

one of two categories through a median-split procedure. The groups that were rated as relatively unsatisfying by their members (with scores at or below the median of 5.3 on the 9-point scale) were designated as low in satisfaction, whereas those that were rated as relatively satisfying (with scores of 5.4 or more) were designated as high in satisfaction. We then examined the 16 GRI scores in 2 (group evaluation) x 2 (sex) analyses of variance that adjusted each effect for those of equal or lower order to control for the nonorthogonality of the factorial design. Those analyses consistently, across the 16 GRI scales, yielded a main effect of satisfaction. As shown in Table 2, individuals who felt that their group was a satisfying one rated the functional utility of their group more positively than did individuals who were not satisfied with their group. Of the 16 functions assessed, 13 were significantly related to satisfaction, with identity, support, bonding, upward social comparison, and influence qualifying as the most robust predictors of satisfaction. Only social control and downward social comparison were not significantly associated with satisfaction with the group.

### *Sex Differences and Functionality*

Men and women differed, to a small extent, in their evaluations of their groups. Although those in more functional groups rated their groups as more satisfying, this main effect was qualified, in five cases, by the two-way interaction of satisfaction and sex. We show in Table 3 that the 2-way interaction reached significance for the following GRI scales: social control, social exchange, social skill development, and social support. In each case, inspection of the means indicates that men's ratings were more polarized than women's ratings. Satisfied men were more favorable toward their group than satisfied women, but men who were not satisfied with their groups were more negative than women who were not satisfied.

## **Discussion**

Which kinds of group resources contribute to satisfaction with one's group? Following a tradition established by Charles Horton Cooley, J. L. Moreno, and Kurt Lewin, researchers have long argued that individuals satisfy a variety of basic survival, psychological, informational, interpersonal, and collective needs by joining with others in groups. But which resources contribute most directly to the evaluation of the functional utility of the group?

In our research, we stressed 16 interrelated provisions, including bonding with others, social comparison, opportunities for influence over others, enhanced self-esteem and productivity, emotional expression, freedom from evaluation, social identity, interpersonal pressure, social learning, intimacy,

**TABLE 2**  
**F-ratios, Significance Levels, and Means for the Main Effect of Satisfaction With Group Membership on Ratings of the 16 Scales of the Group Resources Inventory**

Provision	F-ratio	p-value	Low Satisfaction Mean	High Satisfaction Mean
Social bonding	63.49	< .0001	2.40	2.80
Social comparison—downward	1.43	<i>ns</i>	2.56	2.52
Social comparison—upward	63.74	< .0001	2.38	2.78
Social control	2.23	<i>ns</i>	2.07	2.17
Social esteem	23.98	< .001	2.57	2.81
Social exchange	47.01	< .0001	2.37	2.68
Social expression	42.48	< .0001	2.35	2.75
Social identification	13.67	< .01	2.21	2.42
Social identity	84.81	< .0001	2.36	2.75
Social influence	62.84	< .0001	2.18	2.64
Social learning—information	22.34	< .001	2.54	2.76
Social learning—self-insight	27.13	< .0001	2.15	2.49
Social relations	43.03	< .0001	2.15	2.69
Social skills development	9.45	< .05	2.31	2.51
Social support	76.34	< .0001	2.23	2.65
Socialization	16.83	< .01	2.31	2.54

*Note:* For all provisions, higher scores indicate more positive ratings of the group's adequacy in meeting the members' needs (*ns* = 121 & 130, respectively, for the low and high satisfaction groups).

**TABLE 3**  
**F-ratios, Significance Levels, and Means for the Two-Way Interaction of Group Satisfaction and Sex on Ratings of 5 Group Provisions**

Provision	F-ratio	p-value	Low Satisfaction		High Satisfaction	
			Men	Women	Men	Women
Social control	4.18	< .05	1.99	2.10	2.32	2.11
Social exchange	4.22	< .05	2.14	2.43	2.62	2.69
Social expression	4.32	< .05	2.19	2.40	2.81	2.72
Social skills development	8.61	< .01	2.17	2.36	2.69	2.45
Social support	4.32	< .05	2.10	2.26	2.70	2.70



the opportunity to learn social skills, support, and normative guidelines. All these resources are likely valued by the members, but as the findings in Table 2 suggested to us, the relationship between satisfaction and functionality was greatest when individuals felt their groups provided them with a sense of identity (social identity), provided them with support and encouragement (social support), and influenced them in positive ways (social influence). Satisfaction with one's group was not systematically related to opportunities to exert influence over other group members or to the inclusion of individuals in the group who served as targets for downward social comparison. On the basis of these findings, we suggest that the Group Resources Inventory is a useful means of measuring important features of groups, and can serve as a potential predictor of members' attitudes toward their groups (Wright & Forsyth, 1997).

We focused the current research on dynamic, face-to-face groups, but other evidence suggests that the functional approach may apply equally well to larger groups. Deaux, Reid, Mizrahi, and Cotting (1999), for example, recently made use of items drawn from the GRI to study the functions of social identity. Deaux and her colleagues investigated aspects of social identity that were derived from membership in larger social categories, such as religious affiliation (e.g., "I am a Christian"), ethnicity (e.g., "I am an Asian American"), occupation (e.g., "I am a bartender"), relationships (e.g., "I am a father"), or stigmatized groups (e.g., "I am an alcoholic"). When they asked individuals to evaluate the functions served by those social identities, they too identified functions corresponding to self-insight, self-esteem, relations and support, and downward social comparison. Their findings suggest that these larger social categories, if they are central to the individual's self-conception, may meet needs left unsatisfied by face-to-face groups.

The functional model also sheds light on the curative factors that may operate in change-promoting groups (Yalom, 1995). The current model relied heavily on prior theoretical analyses of the functions of therapeutic groups, which suggest that members of therapy groups can secure advantages and avoid disadvantages that would plague the lone individual. When group members encounter stressful experiences, such as failures or personal trauma, they can turn to the group for emotional support, advice, and guidance. Psychotherapy groups provide members with identity-confirming feedback in the form of approval and admiration. A member of a group may also enjoy the identity-sustaining benefits provided by a positive collective identity, particularly if the group is widely admired by others. Groups may also function as arenas for the development and refinement of social skills that are necessary for the positive interactions with people outside of the group. Despite the theoretical origins of the model, however, research using the GRI with psychotherapeutic groups is needed to determine its applicability in ongoing change-promoting groups.

Our findings have implications for the design of effective, adaptive groups. Just as Moreno (1934) argued that groups whose attraction and authority relationships among individual members were harmonious would be more satisfying for members, we argue that a functional model of group membership assumes that groups that satisfy members interpersonal needs are more likely to prosper. Although structurally sound social groups, communities, or countries will be more likely to survive than those with an unstable sociometric structure, a collective that fails to meet its members needs will likely also fail to survive. Moreno focused on the structure of the groups he studied, for he argued that only by paying notice to the naturally developing structural relations among members could groups, communities, and collectives be correctly engineered to sustain and support the individual. The functional approach offered here supplements his mandates by suggesting that groups should also be engineered so that they are functional for group members. Different structures are also required for groups that vary in their function. If the group, by design, is one that stresses intimate connections among members, then a relatively flat, vertically differentiated structure may be more adaptive than a hierarchically differentiated one. A group that must deal with tasks and the dispersion of duties (social exchange, control, and influence functions) may, in contrast, require a more centralized sociometric structure. Given their interdependence, structure must mesh with function.

#### **APPENDIX THE GROUP RESOURCES INVENTORY**

Thank you for completing this inventory. It assesses your personal reactions to this group, so there are no right or wrong answers. Just indicate whether or not you agree with the statement by indicating A (Agree), D (Disagree), or N (Neutral).

1. I depend on this group.
2. I feel safe in my group.
3. I enjoy being part of this group.
4. By pooling our energies, we get more done.
5. Some people in this group are a source of inspiration to me.
6. I enjoy being able to influence people in my group.
7. In the group, I feel accepted.
8. By working together, we are able to survive.
9. I can express my feelings in this group.
10. My sense of identity comes, in part, from my membership in this group.
11. The group has changed me.
12. I learn things in this group.
13. The group meets many of my most basic social needs.

14. The group has taught me how to relate to other people.
15. I feel less "singled out" in this group.
16. My group protects me from harm.
17. The group gives me standards by which to live my life.
18. We group members share a common bond.
19. Some people in this group are worse off than I am.
20. The group gives me the strength I need.
21. I can communicate better now that I've been in this group.
22. In general, the people in this group are my friends.
23. In the group, the stronger help the weaker.
24. I get to vent my feelings in this group.
25. I'm proud to be a member of this group.
26. Some of the people in this group have had an influence on me.
27. The group is a source of much useful information.
28. The group gives me insight into who I am.
29. The group allows me to establish meaningful relationships with other people.
30. The group has helped me understand people better.
31. I'm less fearful when I'm in my group.
32. The group lets me know what I should and should not do.
33. The group members are close to one another.
34. The group supports me in many ways.
35. My group helps me get by.
36. I'm able to take charge in the group.
37. The group seems to accept me.
38. We help one another.
39. I can talk about my feelings and ideas in this group.
40. I identify with this group and its goals.
41. The group is an influential one for me.
42. I get good suggestions from the group.
43. I've gained considerable self-understanding in this group.
44. The group makes me feel less lonely.
45. The group has taken some of the mystery out of getting along with other people.
46. The group is a source of reassurance for me.
47. My group helps me set goals for myself.
48. My group is like family to me.
49. I'm doing well compared to some people in the group.
50. The group makes me want to try harder to improve.
51. I feel powerful when I'm in this group.
52. I am respected in the group.
53. Everyone gives and takes in the group.

54. I can say what I feel in this group.
55. I can identify with the people in this group.
56. The leaders of this group have caused me to change.
57. The group makes me realize how other people see me.
58. The group helps me meet people I can get romantically involved with.
59. I am able to submerge myself in this group.
60. The group has taught me how to work with others.
61. Members show their concern for one another.
62. I try to live up to my group's standards.
63. I feel a part of something when I'm in the group.
64. I'm better off than some of the people in this group.
65. I appreciate the encouragement I get in this group.
66. People in this group look to me for leadership.
67. We listen to one another.
68. The other group members let me depend on them.
69. We are very compatible.
70. We work together efficiently.
71. I learn by listening to other people's experiences with their problems.
72. The group helps me understand my feelings.
73. My group is intimate.
74. I'm more skilled socially than I was before.
75. People can share their secrets in this group.
76. I don't want to let the other people in the group down.
77. Just being with others in the group is satisfying.
78. The group makes my future seem brighter.
79. My group helps me feel good about myself.
80. Group members do favors for each other.
81. Because of this group, I understand things better.
82. The group helps me avoid self-blame and self-pity.
83. I like the group because I don't like being alone.
84. I've learned "people skills" in this group.
85. We do what we can to help each other.
86. The more fortunate members of the group help the less fortunate members.
87. The group makes me feel as if I can get along with people.
88. I like the people in my group.
89. My faults are hidden when I am part of the group.
90. The group includes people I may get (have been) romantically involved with.

Note: Scales scores are calculated by taking the mean of the items keyed to each subscale. The items that correspond to each subscale follow: Social

Bonding: 3, 18, 33, 48, 63, 77; Social Comparison—Downward: 19, 49, 64; Social Comparison—Upward: 5, 50, 78, 85; Social Control: 6, 36, 51, 66; Social Esteem: 7, 37, 52, 79; Social Exchange: 4, 8, 23, 38, 53, 68, 70, 80, 86; Social Expression: 9, 24, 39, 54; Social Identification: 15, 59, 89; Social Identity: 10, 25, 40, 55, 69; Social Influence: 11, 26, 41, 56; Social Learning—Information: 12, 27, 42, 71, 81; Social Learning—Self-insight: 28, 43, 57, 72, 82; Social Relations: 1, 13, 22, 29, 35, 44, 58, 73, 83, 88, 90; Social Skills Development: 14, 21, 30, 45, 60, 74, 84, 87; Social Support: 2, 16, 20, 31, 34, 46, 61, 65, 67, 75; Socialization: 17, 32, 47, 62, 76.

**Authors' Note:** The measure of group provisions discussed in this article is being revised on the basis of these findings and other administrations of the index to various groups. If you are interested in obtaining information about the inventory when it becomes available, please contact Donelson R. Forsyth in the Department of Psychology, Box 2018, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia 23284-2018 (e-mail: jforsyth@vcu.edu).

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