

Clique

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Sociology, Social Psychology, Developmental Psychology, Education

1. Core Definition

A **clique** is fundamentally defined as a small, exclusive social group whose members share common interests, values, or backgrounds, and who either actively or passively exclude individuals perceived as outsiders or as not conforming to their established norms. This social phenomenon is characterized by strong in-group cohesion and often a discernible boundary around the group, making it challenging for non-members to gain entry. The exclusivity is a defining characteristic, often stemming from a collective desire to maintain a specific social identity or perceived status within a broader social environment.

These groups typically form based on a variety of shared attributes, which can include common hobbies, activities, social standing, socioeconomic background, ethnicity, or even physical appearance. The shared identity and mutual support found within a clique can provide members with a sense of belonging and validation, reinforcing individual self-concept through group affiliation. However, this internal solidarity is often achieved at the expense of external openness, leading to deliberate or unintentional social barriers.

The phenomenon of cliques is frequently observed in adolescent social structures, particularly within high school settings, as highlighted in foundational sociological and psychological studies of peer groups. In these environments, teenagers often gravitate towards like-minded individuals, forming close associations that can significantly influence their social experiences, identity formation, and overall well-being. The formation of such groups and their subsequent exclusionary practices play a critical role in shaping the social hierarchies and dynamics prevalent in educational institutions.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The term "clique" originates from the French word "cliquer," which initially meant "to click" or "to make a sharp sound," but later evolved to describe the formation of a closed circle or cabal. In its earlier usage, particularly in the 18th and 19th centuries, it often referred to a secret or exclusive political or social faction, implying a group united by common interests or intrigues. This historical connotation underscores the inherent exclusivity and often strategic nature associated with the term, even before its widespread application in modern sociological and psychological contexts.

Academically, the study of cliques has roots in early sociological observations of group dynamics and social stratification. Pioneering sociologists like Georg Simmel explored the nature of social

circles and the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, laying groundwork for understanding how small groups function within larger societies. While not explicitly using the term "clique" in its contemporary sense, these early works contributed to the theoretical framework for analyzing exclusive social formations and their impact on individual behavior and societal structure.

The concept gained significant prominence in the 20th century with the rise of developmental psychology and systematic research into adolescent peer groups. As researchers began to focus on the intricate social worlds of children and teenagers, the notion of cliques emerged as a crucial construct for understanding peer influence, social learning, and identity development. Studies by researchers such as James Coleman in his seminal work "The Adolescent Society" (1961) meticulously documented the existence and impact of these exclusive peer groups, cementing "clique" as a key term in the lexicon of social and developmental psychology. For further context, refer to scholarly resources on social exclusion from organizations like the [American Psychological Association](#) and definitions provided by general encyclopedic sources such as [Encyclopædia Britannica](#).

3. Key Characteristics

One of the foremost characteristics of a clique is its inherent **exclusivity**. This is often manifested through deliberate and sometimes overt behaviors aimed at preventing perceived outsiders from joining the group. Members may employ specific communication patterns, shared inside jokes, or non-verbal cues to signal group membership and deter non-members. This exclusivity serves to maintain the group's distinct identity and cohesion, often creating a clear delineation between "us" and "them."

Another crucial trait is the high degree of **homogeneity** among its members. Individuals within a clique typically share similar interests, values, socioeconomic backgrounds, cultural identifiers, or even academic performance levels. This shared commonality forms the bedrock of the group's bond, fostering a strong sense of understanding and mutual identification. This homogeneity can be a source of comfort and validation for members, reinforcing their choices and perspectives through collective agreement.

Furthermore, cliques exhibit **strong in-group cohesion**, characterized by loyalty, shared norms, and often established rituals or communication patterns. This cohesion strengthens the bonds between members, creating a protective social environment where individuals feel understood and supported. This internal solidarity is often reinforced through shared activities, private gatherings, and a collective investment in the group's identity. Cliques also frequently engage in **boundary maintenance** through various mechanisms, such as distinctive dress codes, preferred hangouts, selective language, or gatekeeping behaviors to control who can interact with or join the group. These practices reinforce the group's perceived status and reinforce the exclusionary aspect of the

clique. Lastly, many cliques develop a form of **social hierarchy**, often with an informal leader or a core group of influential members who dictate norms, make decisions, and shape the group's dynamics. This internal structure contributes to the stability and organization of the clique, influencing the roles and statuses of individual members within the group. The collective provision of a strong **social identity** is also a defining feature, where members derive a significant portion of their self-concept and social standing from belonging to the clique.

4. Significance and Impact

The significance and impact of cliques are multifaceted, presenting both potential benefits for their members and considerable drawbacks for those excluded. For individuals within a clique, the group can serve as a vital source of social support, providing a sense of belonging, identity reinforcement, and a context for developing social skills. During formative years, particularly adolescence, cliques can offer psychological security, allowing members to navigate complex social challenges and develop a sense of self-worth through shared experiences and mutual validation. They can also act as a buffer against broader social anxieties and uncertainties.

Conversely, for non-members or individuals who are actively excluded, the impact of cliques can be profoundly negative. Feelings of loneliness, social anxiety, decreased self-esteem, and even symptoms of depression are common among those who feel marginalized or rejected by dominant peer groups. The experience of exclusion, especially in social environments like high schools, can be a significant source of psychological distress, potentially leading to long-term issues with social integration and trust. This negative impact is often amplified when exclusion is deliberate or accompanied by bullying and harassment.

Beyond individual psychological effects, cliques contribute significantly to broader social stratification within a community or institution. They can influence social mobility, dictating who gains access to certain social networks, information, and opportunities, thereby impacting an individual's social capital. Cliques often play a crucial role in shaping and enforcing social norms and values within peer groups, creating a micro-culture that can either align with or diverge from institutional expectations. Their existence can therefore perpetuate social inequalities, reinforcing existing power structures and potentially hindering inclusive environments. Such dynamics are extensively explored in sociological literature concerning peer pressure and social hierarchies.

5. Debates and Criticisms

Debates surrounding cliques often center on their fundamental nature: whether they represent natural, inevitable formations in social development, or if they are pathological structures that warrant intervention. Some scholars argue that the human tendency to form small, cohesive groups is an intrinsic aspect of social bonding, providing evolutionary advantages related to

cooperation and protection. From this perspective, cliques are seen as a natural outcome of individuals seeking affinity and shared identity. However, this view is frequently countered by criticisms highlighting the often-negative consequences of exclusivity.

A primary criticism of cliques revolves around their potential to foster intolerance, prejudice, and outright discriminatory behavior against out-groups. When group cohesion is excessively strong, it can lead to deindividuation and a diminished sense of empathy for those outside the clique, potentially resulting in social ostracization, bullying, and even more severe forms of harassment. The ethical implications of deliberate social exclusion are a significant area of concern, particularly in educational and professional settings where fostering inclusivity and equality is paramount. This can exacerbate existing social inequalities and create hostile environments for those deemed "different" or "unworthy" of inclusion.

Furthermore, studying cliques presents several methodological challenges. Defining their precise boundaries, accurately measuring their influence on individual behavior, and distinguishing them from broader, more fluid friendship groups can be complex. Researchers must navigate the subjective perceptions of group membership and exclusion, as well as the dynamic nature of adolescent social networks. The manifestation and impact of cliques also vary significantly across different cultural contexts, posing challenges for universal definitions and interventions. For a definition of the concept itself, one can consult the [Merriam-Webster dictionary](#), which outlines its core meaning and usage.

Further Reading

[American Psychological Association. \(n.d.\). *Social exclusion*.](#)

[Encyclopædia Britannica. \(n.d.\). *Clique*.](#)

[Merriam-Webster. \(n.d.\). *Clique*.](#)