

## THE ESSENCE OF GROUP DYNAMICS IN MISS BRODIE'S CLASSROOM

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### ÖZET

Bu çalışma öncelikle ait olma ihtiyacının insan davranışını nasıl etkilediğini göz önünde bulundurarak, sosyal grupların yapısını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Sonrasında, sosyal normlar ve roller, kurallara uyma ya da uymama, grup zihniyeti, grup karar alma süreci gibi bazı temel etkileşim süreçlerini, Muriel Spark'ın 1961 yılında yayımlanan The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie romanından örneklerle tartışmaktadır. Spark'ın kaleme aldığı bu çok ses getiren roman, öğrencileri üzerinde oldukça olumsuz etkiler bırakan ilginç ve bir o kadar da karizmatik bir öğretmeni anlatır. Çalıştığı okulun kurallarına son derece riayet eden bir öğretmen görünümünde olan Miss Brodie, aslında kendisine emanet edilen taptaze beyinleri yanlış yönlendirmektedir. Sınıf ortamında geçen bu roman, eğitimle ilgili pek çok konuya değinmekte ve özellikle otoriter bir öğretmenin öğrenciler üzerinde yaratabileceği korkunç etkileri vurgulamaktadır. Daha önce de bahsedildiği gibi, bu çalışma Spark'ın hayal ürünü olan bir sosyal grupta gelişen olaylar aracılığıyla grup dinamiklerine farklı bir bakış açısı getirmeyi amaçlamaktadır.

### ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the nature of social groups, considering how the mere need to belong affects behavior. Next, it discusses some of the basic processes of interaction in small cohesive groups, including social norms and social roles, conformity versus non-conformity, group mentality and group decision making with examples from the novel The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie (1961) by Muriel Spark. This ground breaking work of Spark concerns an eccentric but charismatic teacher who creates a potentially corruptive force on the young students entrusted to her. While maintaining the appearance of adherence to the school's codes, Miss Brodie misleads the impressionable girls under her tutelage. Set in a classroom environment, the novel touches on the issues of education and warns against the truly disastrous effects of authority on young people. As has been intimated above, the present study has the aim of unraveling the mystery, shedding some light on the essence of group dynamics through the analysis of interactions within a fictitious social group.

### 1. Introduction

There is no doubt that the social group occupies much of our day-to-day life. If we stop for a moment and think of the number of groups to which we belong, we remember our family, campus groups, sports teams and the other more temporary groups through which we represent our views and attitudes. In all these groups we belong to, we interact with the other members and are interdependent on them in the sense that they have a profound impact on our lives.

Not all collections of individuals can necessarily be considered a group by social psychologists, however. Groups are more than a mere collection of persons who happen to be occupying the same space. People with green eyes or people on a beach, for instance, do not constitute a group because all people in these categories do not know one another or influence one another directly. Thus, minimally, groups are two or more individuals who influence each other. Collections of individuals become increasingly 'group-like', however, when their members are interdependent and share a common identity, and when they possess structure (Kennick&Neuberg et al., 2002, p. 419).

Perhaps the most basic question concerns the reasons why people join groups. What social psychologists claim may provide an answer pertinent to this question. They believe groups have a number of benefits for today's people: Other people can become an important source of information, helping us resolve ambiguity about the nature of the social world. Groups become an important part of our identity, helping us define who we are. Additionally, groups establish social norms, the explicit and implicit rules defining what is acceptable behavior (Aronson&Wilson et al., 2004, p. 301).

## **2. Group dynamics within Miss Brodie circle**

So strong is this **need to belong** that many people, more specifically the young, would desperately want to be part of a social group. It goes without saying that for most youngsters the groups they belong to give them a sense of their own identity. In the novel, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961) by Muriel Spark, for instance, adolescents at Marcia Blaine School for Girls in Edinburgh, Scotland during the 1930s, admire their charismatic teacher Miss Brodie and long to be a member of the Brodie Set; a small group of girls favored by Miss Jean Brodie in her prime. With her alarming capacity to dazzle girls' minds, Miss Brodie makes the members of the Brodie Set believe they are privileged to have her as a teacher. Indeed, her lessons are fun, and the girls learn quite a lot of information from this energetic teacher whose educational methods contrast favorably with the orthodoxy of the school.

What sort of group is Jean Brodie's? What she tells her pupils near the beginning seems to be one of the first clues:

"Little girls," said Miss Brodie, "come and observe this."

They clustered round the open door while she pointed to a large poster pinned with the drawing-pins on the opposite wall within the room. It depicted a man's big face. Underneath were the words 'Safety First'.

"This is Stanley Baldwin who got in as Prime Minister and got out again ere long," said Miss Brodie. "Miss Mackay retains him on the wall because she believes in the slogan "Safety First". But Safety does not come first. Goodness, Truth and Beauty come first. Follow me" (p.15).

This is the Brodie ideology. In an educational system which is attempting to root out the unscientific, the poetic and beautiful, Miss Brodie cuts a colorful, cultured dash in the middle of those grey conformities, and sends her pupils' minds on progressive flights of imagination. This explains why many girls are so willing to be a member of the Brodie Set, whom the teacher herself terms 'the creme de la creme'. "Hold up our books," she instructs her pupils; "prop them in your hands in case of intruders. If there are any intruders, we are doing our history lesson" (p.16). As this scene indicates Miss Brodie, as an adult in the position of power, instructs her students to cultivate deceiving appearances to fool their superiors. However, her protégées cannot realize the harm done by this authoritarian and naively follow her, feeling happy that they are just able to belong somewhere. These special students do not get particularly good grades or get on in life but they do get, for a short while, satisfaction from the Brodie circle until Miss Brodie shows her real colors.

It is natural that groups often exert powerful effects upon their members through **norms** – rules established by groups that tell their members how they are supposed to behave (Baron&Byrne, 2002, p.479). Social norms are powerful determinants of our behavior, as shown by what happens if people violate them too often: They are shunned by other group members and, in extreme cases, pressured to leave the group (Aranson&Wilson et al., 2004, p.302). Here lies the role of group norms as enormously potent sources of **conformity** since each member in the group tends to yield to the majority. People may conform, social scientists would claim, in order to feel sure about the objective validity of their opinions, in order to obtain social approval and avoid social disapproval, or in order to express or validate their social identity as a member of a specific group (Hogg&Vaughan, 2002, p.265).

This is true of the Brodie Set. Overwhelmed by her charisma, the girls of the Brodie Set are not able to judge Miss Brodie objectively and they make very few decisions without first making sure that such a decision would be in accordance with the group's social rules. When the girls are about to decide whether they will go on the Modern side or the Classical side for the senior school, they first consult their teacher and Miss Brodie says they are free in their choice but her speech overtly points to the fact that she is contemptuous of the Modern side. Thus, the girls feel obligated to submit because they are so devoted to her.

As a seemingly modern teacher, Miss Brodie mistakenly moulds her pupils' minds according to her own principles and taboos, ignoring any other outer reality. In other words, she always wants to know what the girls are doing to the smallest detail, by forcing their lives to fit into the mould she wants them to live in and wishing to produce 'clones of herself' (Walker, 1988, p.41). "Give me a girl at an impressionable age" Miss Brodie says, "and she is mine for life. The gang who oppose me shall not succeed" (p.99). This axiom reveals itself when she says, "Art is greater than science. Art comes first, and then science . . . That is the order of great subjects in life, that is their order of importance" (p.28). To Miss Brodie, the most important subject is art and she gives very little credit to the practical use and necessity of science. To make

matters worse, she blatantly imposes her dogmatic assertions on her students and discourages these impressionable ten- year-old girls to have their own. Once she even goes further and asks her class to name the greatest Italian painter and one of the students names Leonardo da Vinci. Her reaction to this answer is, “That is incorrect. The answer is Giotto, he is my favorite” (p.16).

From all the above, it is apparent that Spark aims to make specific points about conformity as an aspect of group dynamics and is strongly opposed to the kind of authoritarian power exercised over the young girls by an eccentric school teacher. Social psychologists define conformity as ‘a deep-seated, private and enduring change in behavior and attitudes due to group pressure’ and add that given the right circumstances, we all have the potential to obey commands blindly, even if the consequences of such obedience include harm to others (Hogg&Vaughan, 2002, p.246).

This is clearly present in Spark’s novel, as seen by the dynamics of the group formed by Miss Brodie. Her chosen girls follow a set of beliefs and bigoted ideals set by their teacher who beguiles them with awe, fear and charisma. When Sandy Stranger, for example, the shrewdest and the most complex of the Brodie Set, expresses the desire to be nice to Mary Macgregor, a girl shunned by the other members of the group, she decides not to because she knows that such an action would not be in accordance with the Brodie Set’s system of behavior. It is tragic to witness that the Brodie Set requires Mary to play the role of the ‘scapegoat’ and she accepts it deeply for the sake of belonging. Even Miss Brodie, as an adult, blames Mary for the things she has not done and manipulates her girls to blame her for their own faults. Thus, Sandy expresses something she calls ‘group fright’; “If she were kind to Mary, she would separate herself, and be lonely, and blamable in a more dreadful way than Mary, who although officially the faulty one, was at least inside Miss Brodie’s category of heroines in the making” (p.32). What Sandy feels reflects the reality that this social group tries to regulate behavior, by establishing boundaries and explicitly excluding others

Herein lies the role the phenomenon of how people are strongly affected by **group mentality** in ways ranging from the trivial, to the profound, and the clearly dangerous. Group mentality, W.R.Bion (1948, taken from <http://blogs.law.harvard.edu>) writes, ‘is the unanimous expression of the will of the group, contributed to by the individual in ways of which he is unaware, influencing him disagreeably whenever he thinks or behaves in a manner at variance with the basic assumptions governing the group’. Apparently, Sandy cannot refuse one of the basic assumptions of this social group that Mary is doomed to be mistreated since the survival of the group trumps over the welfare of mere individuals.

It is fascism that gives Miss Brodie a great amount of power to manipulate and influence the group. She loves dictatorship as long as she is the dictator. Her model dictators are Hitler, Franco and Mussolini, who she applauds so much and mimics in her teaching methods. With her unstoppable zest for fascism and fascist leaders, Miss

Brodie sees no harm introducing it to girls at such a young age. Even after the horrors of World War II, she comes to no stronger conclusion than that ‘Hitler was a naughty boy’. Her fascist ideas, however, prove to be disastrous when she encourages Joyce Emily, a girl who always wanted to join the Brodie Set but was never quite accepted, to go to Spain to fight for Franco. The poor girl, convinced to die for fascism, never makes it battle, but dies in an accident when the train she is traveling in is attacked. But the group has no remorse. Even after the demise of the girl, Miss Brodie feels triumphant because she has made Joyce Emily see sense. Theorists would agree that the more eager an individual is to become a member of a group, the more that person tends to orient his or her behavior to the norms of the group. This eagerness is true of Joyce Emily, who seems ready to fight to the death for a group she wants to join.

Not all of Miss Brodie’s girls, however, remain so devout to her teachings. Sandy comes to an understanding of what Miss Brodie is doing to her special group of girls. Sandy sees the correlation between Miss Brodie and her girls and Mussolini and his followers. During a walk they have into the slums of Edinburgh, Sandy looks at her companions and sees them ‘in unified compliance to the destiny of Miss Brodie, as if God had willed them to birth for that purpose’. She understands her friends ‘as a body with Miss Brodie for the head’ (p.32). What Sandy comes to realize is best summarized by Hynes (1988) under the title of ‘the basic principles of Miss Brodie’s regime’:

Miss Brodie’s regime, her model, her basis for distinguishing among and evaluating and compartmentalizing her six girls, is herself . . . Religion is important but supposedly ought not to qualify one’s individualistic style. Education means a ‘leading out’ of what is seemingly inherent in each girl; it is an ‘e-duco’ rather than ‘in-trudo’-a breaking into that individuality . . . the world needs to be saved, and Hitler and Mussolini and Franco are restoring economic order to that end. Posture and pronunciation matter; loyalty is crucial (p.164).

However, the girls except for Sandy are completely blind to the consequences of such a regime. To be even more explicit, in Brodie’s group, **group cohesiveness** gets in the way of clear thinking and good decision making. The members of this social group are not allowed to take decisions for themselves since the decision making process is strictly controlled by an assertive and rather arrogant teacher who benignly brainwashes their supple minds into believing that the principles of her ‘regime’ are to be followed unquestioningly, no matter what she herself does in her private life. This defective decision making is one of the pitfalls of **groupthink**, an influential theory of group decision making developed by Irving Janis (taken from Aronson&Wilson, 2004, p.317). Theorists would define it as a kind of thinking in which maintaining group cohesiveness and solidarity is more important than considering the facts in a realistic manner. According to Janis’s theory, groupthink is most likely to occur especially when the group is highly cohesive, isolated from contrary opinions, and ruled by a directive leader who makes his or her wishes known.

This seems to be the case in Miss Brodie's group. It is always Miss Brodie who controls the discussion and the girls never voice contrary views because they believe she can do no wrong. They are also afraid of lowering the high morale of the group by raising objections. The members do not even air objections and doubts when Miss Brodie proposes that Rose Stanley, one of her girls, should have an affair with one of her colleagues, Teddy Lyod, the art teacher. Although this scene unfolds before the reader in all its horror, there occurs no further discussion of the issue at hand: the decision has been made, and the only task now is to support it as strongly as possible.

Unlike her friends in the Brodie circle, however, Sandy considers this event as the last straw and takes it upon herself to put an end to Miss Brodie. Aware that Miss Brodie acts as if she were a kind of God: the God of Providence in her attempts to shape, direct and control the lives of her charges, Sandy Stranger informs the headmistress of her fascist tendencies. Consequently, Miss Brodie is forced to retire at the end of the summer term of 1939, on the grounds that she has been teaching fascism. **Non-conformity** is, thus, played out as a result of Sandy's rejection of the Brodie group norms and her betrayal of Miss Brodie.

### **3. Conclusion**

By way of conclusion, The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie, with its focus on the psychic life of group, projects to the reader that this kind of social conformity under the pressure of authority that Sandy rejects is responsible for many social adversities within the Brodie circle and in society at large. Presenting the bizarre, unforgettable character of Miss Jean Brodie, the author not only rises rapidly to fame, but also brings to the reader's attention the essence of group dynamics and specifically highlights the complexities of social conformity, as well as non-conformity, particularly in small cohesive groups like the Brodie Set. This is also highly relevant to education because the success of classroom learning is very much dependent on how students relate to each other, what the classroom climate is like, what roles the teacher and the learners play and, more generally, how well the teacher and the students can co-operate and communicate with each other. This innovative novel addresses these issues and examines how the power of authority adversely affects the socio-cultural dynamics of school-life, freedom of choice and the social liberty of each student.

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