

## Social Activism Analysis of A Local Community from the Perspective of Reference Group Theory

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**Abstract:** The article covers usage of the reference group theory theses to study low social activism problem in municipal units. It analyzes possible description of a municipal unit community as a reference group according to three membership criteria used by R. Merton. A municipal unit community is defined as a “group unit”; the article states the ways of its further investigation through division of different reference groups according to social context.

**Key words:** Municipal Unit • Social Activism • Reference Group • Membership • Social Interaction • Self-Definition

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### INTRODUCTION

Municipal units are specific social and territorial communities where local self-government takes place. In virtue of complexity and weak formalizability of emerging problems, implementation of traditional methods is not enough to analyze local self-government and municipal units [1]. Self-government is a local population activity which includes local community sustainment provision, *i.e.* existence of common goals, their acceptance, interaction, cohesion, etc. As a result of the analysis we defined: sufficiently high understanding level of purposes and objectives faced by residents and authority to provide community sustainment, critical resource evaluation and adequate evaluation of necessary professional and personal characteristics of leaders. But at the same time, we stated inadequate social activity of residents which is evident as a low voter

turnout, inconsiderable membership in non-governmental organizations (Table 1), lack of personal initiative and others’ initiative support.

The question that arises then is why cognitive elements of the orientation towards local self-government are not fit for the behavior? May people be geared to somebody defining their intention and behavior?

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

Reference group theory theses were taken as a theoretical basis of forming types of local residents’ behavior. We suggested people are geared to “their” reference group members in such questions as their behavior towards their settlement, neighbors, local authority, problems within their municipal unit territory, etc.

Table 1: Data concerning membership of municipal unit residents in non-governmental organizations

Answers to the question, “Are you a member of a non-governmental organization”.	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
Yes, I am	193	37,0	37,0
No, I am not	289	55,4	92,3
We have no such organizations	40	7,7	100,0
Grand total	522	100,0	

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As is known, sociology includes a lot of elaborated themes concerning group analyses [2-4] and so there is a theoretical and methodological base of group process researches. It is generally accepted that group as a social concept refers to a quantity of people who interact among each other according to the stated model [5]. Also a group is defined as a quantity of people with stable and specific relations. The statements do not contradict each other, as social relations are forms of such a social interaction which takes place according to a model and lasts a while to become an identified part of a social structure [6].

Officially, a reference group as a definition came into existence from social psychology. First of all, social psychology studies response of an individual to his interpersonal and wider social environment. As a result of development of experimental and theoretical reference group researches, their interest was focused, basically, on the question what defines the reference group choice of individuals and what consequences this choice has. A reference group as a definition also takes its place in sociological theory, scientific interest of which is focused on structure and functions of a social environment, a social system, or a social context where individuals are allocated.

We decided to define whether the local community-municipal unit residents-is a reference group and we analyzed whether the municipal unit residents correspond to the conceptual group membership criteria described by R. Merton.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

One of the group membership criteria is not an interaction itself, but its frequency. In our research interaction frequency was defined by the question, "how often do you communicate with your neighbors?". The results of received empirical data processing can be seen in Table 2.

The data show the interaction level is low; only 33.9% of the municipal unit residents communicate with their neighbors constantly. More than 25% communicate with them very seldom or have no contacts with them at all. Such a situation can be seen as an alarm situation, because we speak about rural areas mainly, small urban settlements, where frequency and quality of interaction are traditionally high, as their social and territorial distance are small.

Table 2: Data concerning interaction level among municipal unit residents

Answers to the question, "How often do you communicate with your neighbors?"	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
Constantly	177	33,9	33,9
From time to time	214	41,0	74,9
Very seldom	99	19,0	93,9
I do not communicate with them at all	32	6,1	100
Grand total	522	100,0	

Table 3: Pearson correlation between variables characterizing interaction frequency

Variables	Communication with neighbors
Age	
Pearson correlation	-,210**
Significance (two-tailed)	,000
N	522
Education level	
Pearson correlation	,105*
Significance (two-tailed)	,017
N	522
Family size	
Pearson correlation	-,123**
Significance (two-tailed)	,005
N	522

\*\*Correlation is significant at 0.01.

\*Correlation is significant at 0.05.

Table 4: Municipal unit residents' interaction data

How do you define the interaction character in your settlement?	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
Family	88	16,9	16,9
Staff	56	10,7	27,6
Neighbors	42	8,0	35,6
Home folks	213	40,8	76,4
Everyone defends his/her own interests	68	13,0	89,5
No answer	55	10,5	100,0
Grand total	522	100,0	

We defined the correlation between such variables as “age”, “education level”, “family size” and “interaction frequency” variable. The received data are consolidated in Table 3.

The table data demonstrate correlation relationship between the mentioned variables. Communication with neighbors becomes more frequent when age increases. Vice versa, when education level increases, people communicate less frequently. Perhaps, it happens due to the achieved social status-increase in education level can be the result of leisure time reduction; the time is spent on education. Correlation between interaction frequency and family size is quite natural and logical. The bigger a family is, the more answers about constant communication with neighbors we have.

The empirical data analysis in our research gives an opportunity to draw a conclusion on interaction frequency difference in various municipal units. The factors defining the differences are settlement size (territory), population size and its density, settlement type, level of social and economic development. At this stage of our research the differences are not significant.

So, according to the first objective criterion, *i.e.* an interaction frequency, only about 40% of the residents can be defined as a group member within the municipal unit.

The only criterion, albeit it is objective one, is not enough. That is why self-definition as a group member is called the second criterion. Self-definition is a feeling of group membership, affiliation to it. As a factor of social self-definition for municipal unit residents we chose average quantity of answers to the questions about existence of a perspective in the municipal unit development and people's desire of their children and grandchildren's living here.

21.1% of the pollees were sure about existence of perspective for their municipal unit, 42.3% of the respondents feel optimistic about the future, 31.0% of the people are doubtful of development perspective and 1.4% of the pollees do not see any perspective at all.

8.5% of respondents want their children and grandchildren to live here against all the odds, 31.0% of the people do not want their children and grandchildren to live on the territory of their small motherland in spite of everything, 16.9% of the residents would like their children and grandchildren to stay here, if special conditions would be created. 40.8% were undecided.

Thus, the second criterion also gives us an opportunity to define a part of municipal unit residents as members of a reference group. It should be pointed out, according to the second criterion-subjective one-quantity of people who can be defined as group members is a little bit bigger than it is according to the first criterion-more than 50%.

R. Merton supposes group membership definition by other people as a third criterion [7]. It was more difficult to evaluate the situation according to this criterion. The purpose of research appeared during our work. Among the received empirical data we chose several questions which helped us to reveal attitude of one group of people to others, whether they treat them as “friends” or “foes”. Giving the answers to these questions a respondent defines how he compares himself to a local community, whether those people who live nearby are “friends” or “foes”, whether he treat the local community as “we” or “they”.

From our point of view, the table data demonstrate a positive reference to those people who live nearby. The quantity of those who define people who live nearby as “friends” (family, staff members, neighbors, home

folks) is more than 80%! Therefore, according to the third criterion, we state that municipal unit residents can be called reference group members.

If all those three criteria-existence of long-term interaction forms based on the moral principles, self-definition as a group member and group membership definition by other people-take place to the full extent, it is possible to define all those people who are involved in the stable interaction as a group which includes them. The first criterion of our analysis is not in evidence to the full extent, thus, we cannot define the municipal unit residents as a group, but we can call it a “group unit” which may not be recognized by those who were included in this unit by a research worker [8].

The problem of social activity and forming behavior types of municipal unit residents should be analyzed by means of reference group theory. The identified “group unit” should be divided into different reference groups according to a social context. It is also necessary to analyze the group context influence on social attitude towards local authority and specific behavior type formation (social activity) [9].

### CONCLUSION

Reference group theory implementation is interesting for various scientific spheres. The problem of low social activity level among municipal unit residents in Zabaykalsky Krai can be effectively solved by means of theoretical and methodological theses of reference group theory. According to Merton, municipal unit residents, as a whole, cannot be defined as an integrated group because of objective membership criterion discrepancy-interaction frequency among group members. But there is a real opportunity to form a reference group which will include 40% of residents, who demonstrated the high interaction frequency level, because reference group size is not limited. As a consequence, we have another parallel scientific purpose of identification non-member municipal unit residents. The problem also can be solved by means of reference group theory-these research objectives will be described in our following articles.

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