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## UNIT 3 OPINION LEADERS AND DIFFUSION NETWORKS

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- 3.3 Methods of Measuring Opinion Leadership
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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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The term ‘opinion leaders’ is used to refer to individuals who are influential in approving or disapproving new ideas. A variety of terms were used by many social scientists other than opinion leaders such as key communicators, informal leaders, adoption leaders, fashion leaders, consumption leaders, local influential, tastemakers, style setters, sparkplugs, gatekeepers etc. Opinion leaders are those individuals from whom others seek advice and information. They play an important role in the diffusion and adoption of innovations. It is impossible to ignore opinion leaders in studying the spread of ideas. The central idea of this unit is how interpersonal communication through opinion leaders drives the diffusion process by creating a critical mass of adopters.

After studying this unit, you should be able to:

- Explain the meaning and concept of opinion leaders, diffusion networks and critical mass.
- Discuss the methods of measuring opinion leadership with advantages and disadvantages.
- Describe the characteristics of opinion leaders.

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### 3.2 OPINION LEADERS AND COMMUNICATION MODELS

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Opinion leadership is the degree to which an individual is able to informally influence other individuals’ attitudes or overt behavior in a desired way with relative frequency. Opinion leaders are individuals who lead in influencing others’ opinions. The behavior of opinion leaders is important in determining the rate of adoption of an innovation in a system. In fact, the diffusion curve is S shaped because once opinion leaders adopt and begin telling others about an innovation, the number of adopters per unit of time takes off in an exponential curve.

The ‘hypodermic needle model’ postulated that the mass media had direct, immediate, and powerful effects on a mass audience. The mass media were perceived as a strong influence on behavior change. The hypodermic needle model was based primarily on intuitive theorizing from unique historical events and was too simple, too mechanistic, and too gross to give an accurate account of media effects. It ignored the role of opinion leaders.

In the ‘two step flow model’, ideas often flow from radio and print to opinion leaders and from these to the less active sections of the population. The first step, from media sources to opinion leaders, is mainly a transfer of *information*, whereas the second step, from opinion leaders to their followers, also involves the spread of interpersonal *influence*. This two step flow *hypothesis* suggested that communication messages flow from a source, via mass media channels, to opinion leaders, who in turn pass them on to followers. This model has been widely tested in diffusion of innovations studies, and found generally to provide useful understandings of the flow of communication.

**Activity 1 :** Visit a near by village or community and enquire about influential leaders in that village or community. Write your observations.

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**Check Your Progress 1**

**Note:** a) Use the spaces given below for your answers.

b) Check your answers with those given at the end of the unit.

1) What do you mean by an opinion leader?

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2) Name any four synonymous names used to denote opinion leaders.

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## 3.3 METHODS OF MEASURING OPINION LEADERSHIP

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The four main methods of measuring opinion leadership are:

- i) Sociometric method
- ii) Informant's rating method
- iii) Self-designating method
- iv) Observation method

### 3.3.1 Sociometric Method

The Sociometric method consists of asking respondents whom they sought (or hypothetically might seek) for information or advice about a given topic, such as a particular innovation. Opinion leaders are those members of a system who receive the greatest number of Sociometric choices (and thus who are involved in the largest number of network links). Undoubtedly, the Sociometric technique is a highly valid measure of opinion leadership, as it is measured through the perceptions of followers. It necessitates, however, interrogating a large number of respondents in order to locate a small number of opinion leaders. The Sociometric method is most applicable when all (or most) members of a social system provide network data, rather than when a small sample of the total population is contacted.

It is usual to specify the number of Sociometric network partners to be named by a respondent:

*Example:* Who are the three (or four or five) other women in this village with whom you have discussed family planning methods?

Such limited choice questioning leads a respondent to name only the strongest network partners. It is, however, possible that others with whom a respondent converses less often may exchange information with the respondent that is more crucial in the diffusion process. Another approach is to conduct a "roster study," in which each respondent is presented with a list of all the other members of the system and asked whether he or she talks with each of them and how often. The roster technique has the advantage of measuring "weak" as well as "strong" links.

**Advantages:** Sociometric questions are easy to administer and are adaptable to different types of settings and issues and have highest validity.

**Limitations:** Analysis of Sociometric data can be complex. Requires a large number of respondents to locate a small number of opinion leaders. Not applicable to sample designs where only a portion of the social system is interviewed.

### 3.3.2 Informant's Rating Method

An alternative to using Sociometric to identify opinion leaders is to ask key informants who are especially knowledgeable about the networks in a system. Often a handful of informants can identify the opinion leaders in a system with a precision that is almost as accurate as Sociometric techniques, particularly when the system is small and the informants are well informed. The opinion leaders

can be identified by asking key informants (religious leaders, town officials, school administrators, and other long time residents) to nominate individuals whom other people sought out for information and advice. The opinion leaders were individuals nominated by two or more of the key informants.

**Advantage:** A cost saving and timesaving method as compared to the Sociometric method.

**Limitation:** Each informant must be thoroughly familiar with the system.

### 3.3.3 Self-designating Method

The self designating method asks respondents to indicate the degree to which others in the system regard them as influential. Individuals select themselves to be peer leaders.

*Example:* A typical self designating question is “Do you think people come to you for information or advice more often than to others?”

The self designating method depends upon the accuracy with which respondents can identify and report their images. This measure of opinion leadership is especially appropriate when interrogating a random sample of respondents in a system, a sampling design that precludes effective use of Sociometric methods.

**Advantage:** Measures the individuals’ perceptions of her/his opinion leadership, which influence her/his behavior.

**Limitation:** Dependent upon the accuracy with which respondents can identify and report their self-images.

### 3.3.4 Observation Method

Opinion leadership can be measured by observation, in which an investigator identifies and records the communication behavior in a system. One advantage of observation is that the data usually have a high degree of validity. If network links are appropriately observed, there is no doubt about whether or not they occur. Observation works best in a very small system, where the observer can actually see and record interpersonal interactions as they occur. Unfortunately, in such small systems observation may be a very obtrusive data gathering technique. Because the members of a system know they are being observed, they may act differently. Further, an observer may need to be very patient if the diffusion network behavior that he or she wants to observe occurs only rarely. In practice, observation has been used infrequently to measure diffusion networks and opinion leadership.

**Advantage:** High validity

**Limitation:** Obtrusive; works best in a very small system and may require much patience by the observer.

The choice of any one of the four methods (Sociometric, key informants, self designating, and observation) can be based on convenience, as all four are about equally valid. A comparative summary of the above four methods is given below.

Methods of Measuring Opinion Leadership and Diffusion Networks				
Method	Description	Questions Asked	Advantages	Limitations
Sociometric method	Ask system members to whom they go for advice and information about an idea	Who is your leader?	Questions are easy to administer and are adaptable to different types of settings and issues; highest validity	Analysis of Sociometric data can be complex. Requires a large number of respondents to locate a small number of opinion leaders. Not applicable to sample designs where only a portion of the social system is interviewed.
Informants' ratings	Ask subjectively selected key informants in a system to designate opinion leaders	Who are leaders in this system?	A cost-saving and timesaving method as compared to the sociometric method	Each informant must be thoroughly familiar with the system.
Self-designating method	Ask each respondent a series of questions to determine the degree to which he/she perceives himself/herself to be an opinion leader	Are you a leader in this system?	Measures the individual's perceptions of her/his opinion leadership, which influence her/his behaviour	Dependent upon the accuracy with which respondents can identify and report their self-images.
Observation	Identify and record communication network links as they occur	None	High validity	Obtrusive; works best in a very small system and may require much patience by the observer.

Further, studies of the opinion leaders in a system generally find a high degree of stability over time. However, over a period of decades the opinion leaders in a system must inevitably change, even in a relatively stable community or organization. In general, however, opinion leadership structures are stable in the relatively short term. In a typical distribution of opinion leadership in a social system, a few individuals receive a great deal of opinion leadership, while most individuals have none or very little opinion leadership is a matter of degree. The most influential opinion leaders are key targets for the efforts of change agents in development campaigns.

**Activity 2:** Visit a near by village or community and try to identify the opinion leaders by all the four methods described above. Write your observations.

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### Check Your Progress 2

**Note:** a) Use the spaces given below for your answers.

b) Check your answers with those given at the end of the unit.

1) Name the four methods of measuring opinion leadership.

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2) Write one advantages and one disadvantage of any two methods of measuring opinion leadership.

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## 3.4 TYPES OF OPINION LEADERSHIP

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Is there one set of all purpose opinion leaders in a system, or are there different opinion leaders for different issues? In principle there are two types of opinion leaders:

- a) Polymorphic opinion leaders
- b) Monomorphic opinion leaders

Polymorphism is the degree to which an individual acts as an opinion leader for a variety of topics. The opposite, monomorphism, is the degree to which an individual acts as an opinion leader for only a single topic. The degree of polymorphic, opinion leadership in a given social system seems to vary with such factors as the diversity of the topics on which opinion leadership is measured, whether system norms are innovative or not, and so on.

Example: Village leaders in developing countries are frequently opinion leaders for health, agricultural, and educational ideas, as well as political and moral issues.

## 3.5 CHARACTERISTICS OF OPINION LEADERS

The characteristics of opinion leaders can be described under the following major heads.

### External Communication

- i) **Opinion leaders have greater exposure to mass media than their followers:** Opinion leaders gain their perceived competency by serving as an avenue for the entrance of new ideas into their system. The external linkage may be provided via mass media channels, by an opinion leader's cosmopolitanism, or by an opinion leader's greater contact with change agents.
- ii) **Opinion leaders are more cosmopolite than their followers:** An eminent sociologist of communication networks, Professor Ron Burt, described opinion leaders as "people on the edge": opinion leaders have a certain degree of cosmopolitanism in that they bring new ideas from outside their social group to its members. They "carry information across the boundaries between groups". Opinion leaders gain part of their perceived expertise regarding innovations by their greater contact across their system's boundaries.
- iii) **Opinion leaders have greater contact with change agents than their followers:** As explained previously, change agents try to utilize opinion leaders to leverage diffusion activities; thus, not surprisingly, opinion leaders often have greater contact with change agents than do their followers.

### Accessibility

- **Opinion leaders have greater social participation than their followers:** In order for opinion leaders to spread messages about an innovation, they must have extensive interpersonal network links with their followers. Opinion leaders must be socially accessible. One indicator of such accessibility is social participation. Face to face communication about new ideas may occur at meetings of formal organizations and through informal discussions.

### Socio-economic Status

- We expect that a follower typically seeks an opinion leader of some what higher socioeconomic status. So opinion leaders, on the average, are of higher status than their followers.

### Innovativeness

- If opinion leaders are to be recognized by their peers as competent and trustworthy experts about innovations, the opinion leaders should adopt new ideas before their followers. There is strong empirical support for generalization that opinion leaders are more innovative than their followers. However, opinion leaders are not necessarily innovators. Sometimes they are, but usually they are not. What explains this apparently contradictory finding? We must consider the effect of system norms on the innovativeness of opinion leaders, because the degree to which opinion leaders are innovative depends in large part on their followers.

### 3.5.1 Innovativeness, Opinion Leadership, and System Norms

How can opinion leaders conform to system norms and at the same time lead in the adoption of new ideas? The answer is expressed as “When a social system’s norms favor change, opinion leaders are more innovative, but when the system’s norms do not favor change, opinion leaders are not especially innovative”. In systems with more traditional norms, the opinion leaders are usually a separate set of individuals from the innovators. The innovators are perceived with suspicion and often with disrespect by the members of such systems, who do not trust the innovators’ sense of judgment about new ideas. So the system’s norms determine whether or not opinion leaders are innovators.

A general tendency of change agents is that they select individuals as opinion leaders who are too innovative. Change agents work through opinion leaders in order to close the heterophily gap between themselves and their clients .But if opinion leaders are very much more innovative than the average client, the heterophily that formerly existed between the change agent and his or her clients now exists between opinion leaders and followers. Innovators are inappropriate opinion leaders in systems with traditional norms: they are too elite and too change oriented. The innovator is an unrealistic model for the average individual. The norms of the system determine the adopter category in which opinion leaders in a system are found.

Sometimes change agents identify potentially effective opinion leaders among their clients, but then they concentrate their contacts on these leaders to such a degree that they become innovators and lose their former followers. The interpersonal relationships between opinion leaders and their followers hang in a delicate balance. If an opinion leader becomes too innovative, or adopts a new idea too quickly, followers may begin to doubt his or her judgment. One role of the opinion leader in a social system is to help reduce uncertainty about an innovation for his or her followers. To fulfill this role, an opinion leader must demonstrate prudent judgment in decisions about adopting new ideas. So the opinion leader must continually look over his or her shoulder and consider where the rest of the system is at regarding new ideas.

**Activity 3:** Analyze the outcome of Activity 2 and write your observations on Polymorphic / Monomorphic opinion leadership prevailing in that village / community.

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## 3.6 DIFFUSION NETWORKS AND CRITICAL MASS

We agree that the heart of the diffusion process is the modeling and imitation by potential adopters of their near peers’ experiences with the new idea. In deciding whether or not to adopt an innovation, individual depend mainly on the

communicated experience of others much like themselves who have already adopted a new idea. These subjective evaluations of an innovation flow mainly through interpersonal networks. So we must understand the nature of networks in order to understand the diffusion process.

### **3.6.1 Diffusion Networks**

Networks provide a certain degree of structure and stability in the predictability of human behavior. A diffusion network consists of interconnected individuals who are linked by patterned flows of information. An individual's network links are important determinants of his or her adoption of innovations. The network interconnectedness of an individual in a social system is positively related to the individual's innovativeness.

#### **Network Influence in Diffusion of Family Planning Extension Innovations**

Strong evidence for the importance of network influences on individuals in the diffusion of innovations comes from investigations of family planning adoption in villages of developing countries. For example, Rogers and Kincaid (1981) studied the diffusion of several different family planning innovations in twenty five Korean villages. They found that certain of the villages were "Pill villages," others were "IUD villages," and one was a "Vasectomy village." In one "Pill village," all of the adopters of family planning methods were using oral contraceptive pills. Similarly, in other villages of study, all contraceptive adopters were using the same family planning method. Certainly such amazing homogeneity in the choice of contraceptives could hardly have occurred by chance. Each of the Korean villages had been the target of the same national family planning programme, in which a standard "cafeteria" of several contraceptive methods was promoted throughout the country. In the "IUD village," for example, certain opinion leaders first adopted a particular family planning method, the IUD, and their experiences were then shared with fellow villagers via interpersonal networks. At one point, a dozen women in this village decided to adopt the IUD and all traveled together to a health clinic to get IUDs inserted. The result, after several years of further diffusion in the village, was a tendency of every adopter in that village to use the same method of family planning. These findings suggest that in Korea, the diffusion of family planning occurs mainly within villages, even though the government program was aimed at the national population.

### **3.6.2 Critical Mass**

The concept of the critical mass is fundamental to understanding a wide range of human behavior because an individual's actions often depend on a perception of how many other individuals are behaving in a particular way. Even if all the individuals in a large group are rational and self interested, and would gain if, as a group, they acted to achieve their common interest or objective, they would still not voluntarily act to achieve that common or group interest. This seeming irrationality of individuals in a social system attracted scholarly attention to the study of collective action by communication scholars, sociologists, social psychologists, economists, and scholars of public opinion. Why is individual behavior in a system so seemingly illogical? The basic reason is that each individual acts in ways that are rational in pursuing *individual* goals without fully considering that he or she might be disadvantaging the system at the *collective* level.

### The Critical Mass in the Diffusion of Innovations

A crucial concept in understanding the social nature of the diffusion process is the “critical mass,” the point after which further diffusion becomes self sustaining. The notion of the critical mass originally came from scholars of social movements, and in recent years has been advanced by communication scholars. The rate of adoption of interactive media such as e mail, telephones, fax, and teleconferencing often displays a distinctive quality that we here call the critical mass. The critical mass occurs at the point at which enough individuals in a system adopted an innovation so that the innovation’s further rate of adoption becomes self sustaining. The interactive quality of new communication technologies creates confidence among the adopters in a system. An interactive innovation is of little use to an adopting individual unless other individuals with the adopter wish to communicate also adopted. Thus, a critical mass of individuals must adopt an interactive communication technology it has much utility for the average individual in the system. With each additional adopter, the utility of an interactive communication technology increases for all adopters.

### Check Your Progress 3

**Note:** a) Use the spaces given below for your answers.

b) Check your answers with those given at the end of the unit.

- 1) How can opinion leaders conform to system norms and at the same time lead in the adoption of new ideas?

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- 2) Write the main characteristics of opinion leaders.

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- 3) Write the importance of diffusion networks and critical mass in diffusion of innovation.

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### 3.7 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit we started by looking at the meaning of opinion leadership and its relation to communication models and understood that opinion leaders are the individuals who are influential in approving or disapproving new ideas. We discussed the four methods of measuring opinion leadership viz., sociometric method, informant's rating method, self-designating method and observation method along with their important advantages and disadvantages. Later we studied the two types of opinion leaders viz., monomorphic and polymorphic opinion leaders. We also studied important characteristics of opinion leaders and the concepts of diffusion networks and critical mass along with their application in diffusion of innovations.

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### 3.8 KEY WORDS

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- Opinion Leadership** : It is the degree to which an individual is able to informally influence other individuals' attitudes or overt behavior in a desired way with relative frequency.
- Personal Influence** : It is communication involving a direct face-to-face exchange between the communicator and the receiver which results in changed behavior or attitudes on the part of the receiver.
- Homophily** : It is the degree to which pair of individuals who communicate are similar.
- Heterophily** : It is the degree to which pairs of individuals who interact are different in certain attributes.
- Innovativeness** : It is the degree to which an individual (or other unit of adoption) is relatively earlier in adopting new ideas than other members of a social system.
- Communication Proximity**: It is the degree to which two linked individuals in a network have personal communication networks that overlap.
- A personal Communication Network** : It consists of the individuals who are linked by patterned communication flows to a given individual.
- Interactivity** : It is the degree to which participants in a communication process can exchange roles in, and have control over, their mutual discourse.
- Threshold** : It is the number of other individuals who must be engaged in an activity before a given individual will join that activity.

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### 3.9 REFERENCES / SELECTED READINGS

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### 3.10 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS – POSSIBLE ANSWERS

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#### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Opinion leader is the individual who is able informally to influence other individuals' attitudes or overt behavior in a desired way with relative frequency. Opinion leaders are individuals who lead in influencing others' opinions.
- 2) Synonyms used to denote opinion leaders are: key communicators; informal leaders; adoption leaders; fashion leaders; consumption leaders; local influential; tastemakers; style setters; sparkplugs; gatekeepers etc.

#### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) The four methods of measuring opinion leadership are: Sociometric method; Informant's rating method; Self-designating method and; Observation method.
- 2) a) Sociometric method:

*Advantages:* Sociometric questions are easy to administer and are adaptable to different types of settings and issues and have highest validity.

*Limitations:* Analysis of Sociometric data can be complex. Requires a large number of respondents to locate a small number of opinion leaders. Not applicable to sample designs where only a portion of the social system is interviewed.

b) Informant's Rating Method

*Advantages:* A cost saving and timesaving method as compared to the Sociometric method.

*Limitation:* Each informant must be thoroughly familiar with the system.

**Check Your Progress 3**

- 1) When a social system's norms favor change, opinion leaders are more innovative, but when the system's norms do not favor change, opinion leaders are not especially innovative". In systems with more traditional norms, the opinion leaders are usually a separate set of individuals from the innovators. The innovators are perceived with suspicion and often with disrespect by the members of such systems, who do not trust the innovators' sense of judgment about new ideas. So the system's norms determine whether or not opinion leaders are innovators.
- 2) The main characteristics of opinion leaders are: opinion leaders have greater exposure to mass media than their followers; opinion leaders are more cosmopolite than their followers; opinion leaders have greater contact with change agents than their followers, and ; opinion leaders have greater social participation than their followers
- 3) *Diffusion Networks:* Networks provide a certain degree of structure and stability in the predictability of human behavior. A diffusion network consists of interconnected individuals who are linked by patterned flows of information. An individual's network links are important determinants of his or her adoption of innovations. The network interconnectedness of an individual in a social system is positively related to the individual's innovativeness.

*Critical Mass:* A crucial concept in understanding the social nature of the diffusion process is the "critical mass," the point after which further diffusion becomes self sustaining. The critical mass occurs at the point at which enough individuals in a system adopted an innovation so that the innovation's further rate of adoption becomes self sustaining.