

Socialisation and Social Roles

Most sociologists believe you have to learn how to fit into society, e.g. learn how to behave and what to believe. This process is called socialisation. It begins in childhood and continues throughout life. As usual in Sociology, there are different views about how it all works...

Socialisation is the passing on of Culture

- 1) **Culture** is a key term for this section. It means the "way of life" of a society — things like language, customs, knowledge, skills, roles, values and norms. Culture is **passed on** through **socialisation** from generation to generation.
- 2) **Norms** are **social rules** about **correct behaviour**. For example, by queuing in a shop or wearing formal clothes to a job interview, you're conforming to norms. **Laws** often reflect norms, but sometimes lawbreaking is the norm. Making illegal copies of CDs is a good example of this.
- 3) **Values** are more **generalised beliefs and goals**. Ideas like "freedom of speech", "respect for human life" or "equality" are all **values**.
- 4) **Culture, values and norms** are **not fixed**. They **vary** according to the time and place. For example, British culture is different from American culture, and today's culture is different from the culture of 30 years ago.

Sociologists say that through socialisation the **norms and values** of society are **internalised** — i.e. they become part of everyone's way of thinking.

There are two kinds of socialisation — **primary socialisation** and **secondary socialisation**.

There is only one Agent of Primary Socialisation — The Family

Primary socialisation comes first. In **early childhood**, individuals learn the **skills, knowledge, norms and values** of society. This all happens in three ways:

- 1) Children **internalise** norms and values by **imitating their parents / guardians**.
- 2) Children are **rewarded** for **socially acceptable behaviour**.
- 3) Children are **punished** for **socially "deviant" behaviour**.

Children who are deprived of social contact during development often can't function as social adults. In 1970, an American girl known as "Genie" was discovered. She'd been locked up by her father for her first 13 years and now managed to recognise even basic social norms.

There are many Agents of Secondary Socialisation

Secondary socialisation comes after primary socialisation and **builds on it**. It's carried out by **various institutions**. The most important are **education, peer groups, religion** and the **mass media**.

Education

The education system aims to pass on knowledge and skills such as reading and numeracy. Learning these skills is a part of socialisation, but sociologists suggest that education socialises individuals in other ways as well:

- 1) **Functionalists**, like Durkheim, believe that school promotes **consensus** by teaching norms and values. They also say children learn to value belonging to a larger group through things like school uniform and assembly. All this is important for **fitting into society**.
- 2) **Marxists**, such as Bowles and Gintis (1976) believe education operates a **hidden curriculum** that socialises pupils into **ruling class cultures** and encourages them to accept **exploitation**. The curriculum is the **content of education**. Marxists reckon there are two sorts — the **acknowledged curriculum** (maths, English, geography etc.) and the **hidden curriculum** (doing as you're told and not questioning authority).

Peer Groups

Peer groups are made up of people of **similar social status**. The peer group can **influence norms and values**. This can be towards **conformity** or **deviance**. **Youth subcultures** sometimes encourage **deviant behaviour**, like joyriding.

Conformity = doing what society likes
Deviance = doing what society doesn't like

Religion

Religion often provides **social norms and values**. Most religions oppose theft and murder, and teach respect for elders.

Mass Media

The **mass media** are **powerful** in shaping norms and values in the audience. Some sociologists (e.g. Althusser) argue that the media have now replaced religion in secondary socialisation.

The Workplace

Workplace socialisation involves learning the norms and values that enable people to fit into the world of work, such as being on time and obeying the boss.

Socialisation and Social Roles

Individuals have Social Roles and Status

Like it says on the last page, **socialisation** is the process that turns individuals into members of a social culture. According to some sociological perspectives, an important result of socialisation is that each individual ends up with a number of **roles**. These are associated with different sorts of **status**. This is a bit tricky, so concentrate.

- 1) Your **status** is your **position** in a **hierarchy**. You can have low status or high status. It's the respect and recognition others give to your position. The Queen is a **person**, but **being Queen** is a **status**.
- 2) Your **roles** are the **behaviours and actions** you take on **because of your status**. In sociological terms, a role is a set of norms that go with a status. The Queen has to meet the public and show an interest, she has to speak to the nation on TV on Christmas Day, and she has to travel abroad and meet leaders of other countries. These are all **roles**.

Status can be ascribed or achieved

Ascribed status is fixed at **birth**. For example the Queen (this is the last time with that example, I promise) **inherited her status** from her father (who was King, not Queen, obviously) when he died. Head teachers, on the other hand, have **achieved status**. This means they've **earned** it through **education and work**. This is a **very important difference** for sociological arguments about gender, class and ethnic identities.

Social Behaviour is Regulated by Social Control

- 1) Socialisation puts **limits** on people's behaviour. The functionalist Durkheim called this **constraint** (it's also known as **social control**). If it weren't for internalised norms and values, people would **do what they liked**. Internalised norms and values are like having a **little police officer inside your head**, stopping you from **doing wrong and crazy things**.
- 2) Functionalists say that socialisation creates a **consensus**, where everyone has the **same values and norms**.
- 3) It's important for people to **conform** to the norms and values of society. When people conform to the expectations, they're **rewarded**. When people **don't conform** to social expectations, they're **punished**. Sociologists call these punishments **sanctions**. Sociologists call behaviour which doesn't conform to society's expectations **deviant**.

Society is Diverse

Functionalists say that there's a **consensus** of shared values and norms in society. It's true that many values and norms are shared across the whole of society, but there's actually a lot of **variation**. There are **many different cultures** in today's society — it's **multicultural**.

Postmodernists are big on the idea of **personal choice**. They say that in today's society people have a large amount of choice in their actions and behaviour — and in the values that they believe in.

Sociologists argue that Nurture is More Important than Nature

- 1) Everyone agrees that you can inherit **physical characteristics** like eye colour from your **parents** — but it's **debatable** whether you can inherit **personality traits** like being good at Maths. This is called the **nature vs. nurture debate**.
- 2) Most **sociologists** prefer the idea that it's **society** that **shapes your behaviour and personality**. They argue that it's the **process of socialisation** that makes you the person you are, e.g. the influence of family, peer groups and education.
- 3) It's often **difficult to prove** whether **biology** or **socialisation** has resulted in a characteristic — both your genetic make-up and your social influences are **extremely complex**.
- 4) It's likely that people are formed by a **mixture of biological and social influences**. For example, if parents are intelligent they will probably pass on the biological potential to be intelligent to their children, but they will also nurture them to be intelligent, e.g. through encouraging them to read and giving them educational toys.

Practice Questions

- Q1 When in a person's life does socialisation occur: (a) in early childhood, (b) in adolescence, or (c) throughout life?
- Q2 Name five agents of secondary socialisation.
- Q3 What is a role?

Exam Question

- Q1 Explain what is meant by ascribed status. (2 marks)

And I thought socialisation was just something to do down the pub...

Socialisation is the process by which people learn to be members of society. The main things I remember learning when I was young are to only speak when spoken to, to always eat my greens, not to play with a football in the house, not to take sweets from strangers, not to pogo stick next to the cliff and not to offer myself as food to stray lions. Though I learnt that last one the hard way.