

How Socialization Occurs

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about the process of socialization. We are repeatedly socialized into different communities and settings throughout our lives, and you will learn about some of the ways in which that process occurs. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Social Agents of Socialization

Socialization helps people learn to function successfully in their social worlds. But how does the process of socialization occur? How do we learn to use the objects of our society's material culture? How do we come to adopt the beliefs, values, and norms that represent its nonmaterial culture? This learning takes place through interaction with various agents of socialization, like peer groups and families, plus both formal and informal social institutions.

Social groups often provide the first experiences of socialization. Families, and later peer groups, communicate expectations and reinforce norms. People first learn to use the tangible objects of material culture in these settings, as well as being introduced to the beliefs and values of society.

1a. Family

Family is the first agent of socialization. Family may include neighbors and/or close friends, but more typically includes parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, etc. These family members teach a child what he or she needs to know about life. For example, they show the child how to use objects and tools such as clothes, toilets, eating utensils, books, or bikes; how to relate to others (some as “family,” others as “friends,” still others as “strangers” or “teachers” or “neighbors”); and how the world works (what is “real” and what is “imagined”). As you are aware, either from your own experience as a child and/or from your role in helping to raise one, socialization includes teaching and learning about an unending array of objects and ideas.



HINT

Remember that what constitutes family is also socially constructed and may or may not exclusively refer to blood relatives.

Keep in mind, however, that families do not socialize children in a vacuum. Many social factors affect the way a family raises its children. For example, we can use the sociological imagination to recognize that individual behaviors are affected by the historical period in which they take place. For example, people raised in the 1940s (perhaps your grandparents or great grandparents) typically did not have televisions in their homes but people raised in the 1950s and 1960s typically did. Today, parents are deciding when to buy their child a cell phone, how much “screen time” they can have in a day, and may be using many types of technology to

monitor their children, from location tracking apps to Internet filters. Not only are families demonstrating norms related to technology through their own modeling and ongoing process of socialization, but they are also teaching norms and values explicitly.

Sociologists recognize that race, social class, religion, and other factors play an important role in socialization. Likewise, children are socialized to abide by gender norms, perceptions of race, and class-related behaviors.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Poor families usually emphasize obedience and conformity when raising their children, while wealthy families emphasize judgment and creativity. A functionalist interpretation of this trend may be that because working class parents usually have less education, and often occupy repetitive-task jobs for which it is helpful to be able to follow rules and conform. Wealthy parents tend to have better educations and often work in managerial positions or careers that require creative problem solving, so they teach their children behaviors that are beneficial in these positions. A Marxist interpretation of the same trend might instead emphasize that the power structures of society are not designed to protect the poor and the working class, and that such families need to teach their children obedience in order to protect them in interactions with powerful authority figures. In either case, this means children are effectively socialized and raised to take the types of jobs their parents already have, thus reproducing the class system.



THINK ABOUT IT

In Sweden, stay-at-home fathers are an accepted part of the social landscape. A government policy provides subsidized time off work—480 days for families with newborns—with the option of the paid leave being shared between parents regardless of their genders. As one stay-at-home dad says, being home to take care of his baby son “is a real fatherly thing to do. I think that’s very masculine.” Close to 90 percent of Swedish fathers use their paternity leave (about 340,000 dads); on average they take seven weeks per birth (*The Economist*, 2014). How do U.S. policies—and our society’s expected gender roles—compare? How will Swedish children raised this way be socialized to parental gender norms? How might that be different from parental gender norms in the United States?

1b. Peer Groups

A **peer group** is made up of people who are similar in age and social status and who share interests. Peer group socialization begins in the earliest years, such as when kids on a playground teach younger children the norms about taking turns, the rules of a game, or how to shoot a basket. As children grow into teenagers, this process continues. Peer groups are important to adolescents in a new way, as they begin to develop an identity separate from their parents and exert independence. Additionally, peer groups provide their own opportunities for socialization since kids usually engage in different types of activities with their peers than they do with their families.

The way peer groups interact has also changed over time with technological advances. Look at gaming as an example of these transitions. Forty years ago, video games first became popular with the rise of arcades. When kids wanted to play games with each other, they would meet at an arcade, where they could play with their friends or with other kids they met at the arcade. Then in the 1990s, it became more common to have home video game consoles. To play a game with friends, kids would arrange to go over to one person’s house to play together, and rarely would they encounter unknown kids while playing games. Today, thanks to online gaming, kids can play video games with their friends without leaving home, and they can also play with people from all over the world with a few clicks. Their peer group might include people they have never met outside of video games or social media.

Peer groups provide adolescents’ first major socialization experience outside the realm of their families.

Interestingly, studies have shown that although friendships rank high in adolescents' priorities, this is balanced by parental influence.



TERM TO KNOW

Peer Group

A group of people who are similar in age and social status and who share interests.

2. Institutional Agents of Socialization

The social institutions of our culture also inform our socialization. Formal institutions—like schools, workplaces, and the government—teach people how to behave in and navigate these systems. Other institutions, like the media, contribute to socialization by inundating us with messages about norms and expectations.

2a. School

Most U.S. children spend a huge amount of their time in school—about seven hours a day, 180 days a year! Students are not only in school to study math, reading, science, and other subjects. Schools also serve a latent function in society by socializing children into behaviors like practicing teamwork, following a schedule, and using reference guides.

School and classroom rituals, led by teachers serving as role models and leaders, regularly reinforce what society expects from children. Sociologists describe this aspect of schools as the **hidden curriculum**, the informal teaching done by schools.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In the United States, schools have built a sense of competition into the way grades are awarded and the way teachers evaluate students, and this competition teaches the values of American capitalism. When children participate in a relay race or a math contest, they learn there are winners and losers in society. When children are required to work together on a project, they practice teamwork with other people in cooperative situations.

The hidden curriculum prepares children for the adult world. Children learn how to deal with bureaucracy, rules, expectations, waiting their turn, and sitting still for hours during the day. The latent functions of teamwork and dealing with bureaucracy are features of U.S. culture. Schools also have structures in place to reward students for attendance and timeliness and to punish students for absenteeism and lateness.

But socialization is not always intentional, and children learn many lessons by observation that their teachers and schools may not be consciously including in the hidden curriculum.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Many children face big challenges to even showing up to school, such as when they and their families are experiencing homelessness, or if there is a lot of disruption in the home, or if they are an older child who has to take care of younger children. It's unfair that children facing these barriers are judged on attendance the same as a child from a housed, stable, and financially-secure family; unfortunately, this kind of unfairness and inequity is also part of American society, and learning that American society is not fair and not just can be part of school's hidden curriculum too.

Schools in different cultures socialize children differently in order to prepare them to function well in those cultures.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Korean high schools used to be single-sex. In those single sex schools only girls were taught domestic sciences and the boys learned technology. High schools are now coeducational and

both the boys and girls study domestic sciences and technology. In both of those contexts, they were teaching students what was expected of them based on gender after high school. Schools also socialize children by teaching them about citizenship and national pride, which are commonly held values in many cultures.

➔ **EXAMPLE** In the United States, many children are taught to recite the Pledge of Allegiance, and most districts require classes about U.S. history and geography. In Brazil, school children sing the national anthem and raise the Brazilian flag each day, and there is a nation-wide Brazilian Studies program that teaches citizenship and history at all ages.



THINK ABOUT IT

As an academic understanding of history evolves, textbooks in the United States have been scrutinized and revised to update attitudes toward other cultures as well as perspectives on historical events; thus, children are socialized to a more inclusive world history than earlier textbooks might have offered. For example, information about the mistreatment of African Americans and Native Americans more accurately reflects those events compared to past textbooks. However, the experience of Latinos, Blacks, and Asian Americans is still neglected in many standard textbooks.



TERM TO KNOW

Hidden Curriculum

The informal learning that happens in a school environment.

2b. The Workplace

Just as children spend much of their day at school, many adults at some point invest a significant amount of time at a place of employment. Workers require new socialization into the specific culture of any new workplace, in terms of both material culture (such as how to operate the copy machine) and nonmaterial culture (such as whether it's okay to speak directly to the boss or how to share the break room refrigerator).

Different jobs require different types of socialization. In the past, many people worked a single job until retirement. Today, the trend is to switch jobs at least once a decade, and the younger a worker is, the more frequently they are likely to change jobs. This means that people must become socialized to a variety of work environments, and will also be socialized by those environments in turn.

2c. Religion

While some religions are informal institutions, here we focus on practices followed by religions that are formal institutions. Religion is an important avenue of socialization for many people. The United States is full of synagogues, churches, mosques, and similar religious communities where people gather to worship and learn. Like other institutions, these places teach participants how to interact with the religion's material culture (like a mezuzah, a prayer rug, or a communion wafer). For some people, important ceremonies related to family structure—like marriage and birth—are connected to religious celebrations.

Many religious institutions also uphold traditional gender norms and contribute to their enforcement through socialization, whether in the reinforcement of the dominant society's gender norms or in contradiction of them. From ceremonial rites of passage that reinforce the family unit to power dynamics that reinforce gender roles, organized religion fosters a shared set of socialized values that are passed on through society.

2d. Mass Media

The mass media distribute impersonal information to a wide audience, via television, newspapers, radio, and the Internet. With the average person spending over four hours a day in front of the television (and children averaging even more screen time), media greatly influence social norms. People learn about objects of material culture (like new technology and transportation options), as well as nonmaterial culture—what is true (beliefs), what is important (values), and what is expected (norms).

Mass media influences our political views, our views on gender norms, entertainment and popular culture. Trends come and go rapidly as evidence of how quickly information can travel around the globe, And every person it touches can have a small impact on the greater trend. “Influencers” spend their careers literally telling people what to do, where to be and how.



Relationship Building: Why Employers Care

Effective employees must have strong relationship skills to be productive. For instance, a manager will need to clearly communicate expectations to their staff and know how to follow up appropriately if expectations are not met. Employees who work directly with customers will need to know how to mitigate issues that arise such as unhappy clients and know how to build a strong working relationship in order to maintain a positive company image. By evaluating how you have been socialized, you can determine how to effectively strengthen your relationship building skills, benefiting both your personal and professional life.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about common **social agents of socialization**, including family and peer groups, and formal, **institutional agents of socialization**, like school, workplaces, and religion.

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