

## Unit 3 - Socialization

### Podcast text

Hello and welcome to the podcast for Unit 3 of Sociology 1101. Today, we will be discussing the issue of socialization. As we discussed in the first two units, sociology is the study of society. More specifically, it is the study of how each one of us contributes to and participates in the creation of society, and also how society then affects us – constraining and enabling our behaviours in various ways.

Sociologists pay attention to socialization because this is how people learn how to become functioning members of society. Socialization begins almost at the moment of birth, and continues throughout our lifetimes. It is an ongoing process of learning from other people, including parents, peers, authorities, and strangers. As we will see, socialization has a powerful impact on people – this is one of the major ways that we learn right from wrong, who we are as individuals, how to treat others, and how to navigate different social situations. Socialization is key to understanding how people can get along in complex societies.

To understand the importance of socialization for human beings, we first need to consider some basic facts from biology. Human beings are exceptional in many ways – we have big brains, we live longer than most animals, and we have the physical and mental capacities for creating and using language. One of the most interesting things about humans, though, is how helpless our infants are. If we look over most of the animal world, we see that most newborn animals are far more capable than human beings. A newborn horse, for instance, is able to walk less than an hour after birth. Newborn whales can swim on their own within 30 minutes. If you're a parent or an older sibling, you know first-hand that human children take much longer to hit these milestones. The reasons for this are complicated, but one major factor is that most animals rely primarily on **instinct** to guide their behaviour, while human beings rely primarily on **learning**. There is a trade-off here – animals that have less complex brains can do things more quickly because they are driven by ingrained instincts, but they then have limited capacities for learning. Humans, on the other hand, have very few instincts but an almost unlimited capacity for learning. To use a technological metaphor – most animals are born with a great deal of hardware but little capacity for software. Humans are born with very little hardware but an almost unlimited capacity for software.

People, above all else, are **learners**. This means that we rely on other people to teach us the skills that we need. Think for a moment about what this means. It means that while each one of us is an individual, a big part of our individuality has been **constructed** from pieces provided by other people. This doesn't mean that we are mindless zombies who perfectly reflect the conditions in which we were raised. Most sociologists accept that there is a thing called a personality – a set of characteristics and dispositions that each one of us are born with. At the

same time, though, the human brain is an incredibly plastic and malleable thing. Different personalities are encouraged or suppressed in different cultures. For example, in Western societies it is more acceptable to be gregarious and extroverted than in certain East Asian cultures, which value humility, loyalty, and under-statement. Socialization can therefore be understood as the process through which we learn to **reconcile** individuality with society, and this is how we will examine it here.

Sociologists generally make a distinction between **primary** socialization and **secondary** socialization. Primary socialization is the kind that happens early in life, while secondary socialization is an ongoing process that continues throughout the life-course. Let's first talk about primary socialization.

Primary socialization can be understood as learning “the fundamentals” about how to get along with others. As mentioned, it happens early in life, and it happens primarily within the family (although daycares, pre-schools, and schools also play a role for many children). Everyone knows that children don't have the same social graces as adults. In a way, they are just too honest. Young children will tell you if they don't like you, they will repeat embarrassing things they've heard their parents say, and they will be openly selfish about their needs and wants. On their way to becoming adults, most children will be taught how to suppress these perfectly honest thoughts. Sociologists who look at socialization argue that one of the key skills that children must acquire to become members of a broader community or society is the ability to “see beyond the self”. This is a difficult and abstract thing to learn. For children (and for adults as well) the world is as it appears in the first person. We look at the world outward from our own bodies, and we only have access to our own thoughts and feelings – those of others have to be anticipated and inferred. One of the most fundamental lessons we ever learn is that others are like us even if we cannot access their bodies or thoughts. Children learn this through interactions with others. It can be dramatic – such as when a child pinches or scratches another person and that person reacts, or it can be routine, like observing that people take turns in a conversation – alternating speaking and listening.

Primary socialization also involves teaching children about abstract concepts and categories. For instance, children are taught that they are members of something called “a family”. They also learn that membership in a family means something – that members of a family care for one another, have responsibilities to each other, and assigns different roles to different members. Children are also told that they are “a boy” or “a girl”, and that this distinction is important for their future identities. Parents then reinforce these categories by dressing their children in certain ways (in blues or pinks, for example), cutting their hair short or long, and providing them with gender-specific toys to reinforce these categories.

This is called **gender socialization**. Sociologists make a distinction between **sex** and **gender**. Sex refers to the reproductive equipment that we are born with. Gender, by contrast, refers to the learned behaviours and expectations that are associated with sex. To put it another way, if sex refers to male and female, gender refers to male-ness and female-ness. For instance, long hair has nothing to do with sex, and has everything to do with gender. There is no natural link between being female and having long hair – men are genetically capable of growing their hair long, and women’s reproductive capacities are not affected by having short hair. There is, however, in our culture at least, a **social link** between long hair and female-ness. Long hair makes a cultural statement about being female. The same thing can be said about personality traits. In our culture, boys are subtly encouraged to be more assertive, aggressive, and confident. Sociological studies have shown, for instance, that fathers are far more likely to wrestle, rough house, and play sports with their male children than female children. In the process, male children learn how to comport themselves in competitive situations. Female children, in contrast, are encouraged to be more conciliatory, sensitive to others, and deferential (think of tea parties and “playing house”). Learning that “you are a boy” or “you are a girl” is not just about learning categories, but internalizing a set of expectations that then guide people through life.

It is important to recognize that socialization happens both **intentionally** and **unintentionally**. For example, when parents choose to have young girls’ ears pierced, they are intentionally assigning a gender identity to the child. But gender socialization can also be unintentional. For example, children learn about gender roles and expectations by watching their parents interact. This in fact can account for many of the subtle differences in people’s gender socializations. If Mom and Dad have equitable roles in the home – taking turns preparing meals, caring for children, and doing housework – then children will observe less gender differences than if chores are rigidly gendered. Power and mood also play a role – if male role models do not show tenderness in the home, this can shape both male and female children’s views of what “maleness” is. Much socialization happens unintentionally in these kinds of ways.

Now let’s briefly discuss **secondary socialization**. Secondary socialization is life-long, and usually occurs outside the family. The primary agents of secondary socialization are **institutions** and **peer groups**. For many children, secondary socialization begins when first begin attending school. As we discussed in the last unit, one of the major functions of schools is to teach children how to follow rules, respect authority, and complete high quality work on time. It is no accident that these skills are also prized by employers. Schools also teach children that they are but one person in a larger collective. Teachers are supposed to treat everyone the same, and students all have to follow the same rules, wait in line for the drinking fountain, ask permission to go to the bathroom, and follow the same schedules as everyone else.

Sociologists also pay strong attention to the dynamics between primary and secondary socialization. For example, sociologists have long been interested by the fact that a person’s

educational attainment – how far they go in school – is strongly associated with the educational attainment of their parents. To put this another way, children of people who have a university degree are far more likely to themselves acquire a university degree, while the children of high-school drop-outs are far more likely to themselves drop out. The reasons for these patterns are complex, but one of the main reasons may have to do with socialization. For instance, when a child enters school, he or she finds him- or herself in an environment that encourages hard work, curiosity, competition, and pride in individual achievement. Children who have received these messages during **primary socialization** will be more receptive to them during **secondary socialization**. Children whose parents went to university are more likely to have been exposed to these values. This doesn't mean that high school drop-outs do not value learning, but they might value street-smarts over book-smarts. Children raised in an environment that does not reinforce the secondary socialization they encounter in a school have a higher hill to climb.

In summary, socialization is the major way that society integrates new members and ensures its continued smooth functioning. The main agent of socialization are parents, institutions, and peers. Socialization lays the groundwork for how we think about ourselves, how we think we fit in, and what we expect from others. Socialization involves learning big ideas – like what it means to be a man or a woman. It also involves countless little small ideas – like how to behave when standing in line, how to address strangers for the first time, when it is appropriate to be polite or to be crass, and how to keep potentially hurtful opinions to ourselves so that we can all continue to get along. People are learners, and socialization is how we learn the rules that we need to know as members of a society.