

PART I
INTRODUCTION
Understanding Childhood
Socialization

Introduction

As human beings age, they change in many ways. Over the early years of our lives, we grow in physical strength and stature. Most of us start to walk, talk, and perform other feats that were previously beyond our physical capabilities. The onset of what we call *puberty* initiates radical bodily changes that may both fascinate and frighten us. Much later in life, our physical strength and capacities may decline. Although we tend to pay less attention to physical changes during our middle years of life, they never cease.

Our social lives are at least as dynamic as our bodily being. The ever changing character of our social lives sometimes parallels bodily changes. In many past and some societies still today (see Chapter 3), the young are expected to take on more and more physically demanding tasks as they grow in physical strength and stature. Visible signs of puberty such as menarche, or first menstruation, may occasion elaborate rituals marking a dramatic change in social status, expectations, and obligations. As our physical capacities decline during later years, we may lose much of the autonomy that we had long taken for granted.

Yet, the changing contours of our lives are largely a matter of social definition and convention. This is particularly apparent in contemporary, technologically advanced societies like our own. In most cases, our early lives are largely confined to our immediate family and its place of residence. The social, relational, and organizational contexts of our lives then gradually expand. We enter into new relationships with similarly aged peers and with elders outside of our family, such as paid care providers and teachers. Over our early years we move from preschools to elementary, middle, and high schools, often on to college or university, and eventually out of school, changing teachers and often friends as we do. More and more of us move in and out of jobs and from one employer to another in the course of our working lives. We end social relationships and begin others. Even those social relationships that endure are commonly transformed over time. Close friends may become distant and occasional ones, while former strangers become close friends. The birth or adoption of a child and the departure of that child from the family home may profoundly alter our relationship with our spouse. Many of us marry, divorce, and remarry over the course of our lives, and some are widowed.

The ever changing character of our social lives requires continual learning and adaptation. Social scientists have coined the term *socialization* to refer to this continual process of learning and adaptation. It refers to *the processes by which we learn and adapt to the ways of a given society or social group so as to ade-*

quately participate in it. Adequate participation in a social group clearly requires understanding of the social expectations and obligations associated with our particular position within that group, such as daughter or son, student, retail clerk or physician, mother or father, and so on. However, it does not necessarily imply conformity to prevailing social expectations but adaptation to them. Such adaptation may involve strategically circumventing social expectations or altering them. In any case, knowledge and practical skills must be acquired in order to follow, evade, or alter the ways of a social group and the expectations associated with a given position within it.

Socialization is clearly a lifelong process. In societies like our own, young children first learn the ways of their family. When they attend preschool or a daycare center, they must learn how to deal and play with similarly aged peers from varied family backgrounds. As students, they learn the procedures and conventions of the different schools they attend and the peer cultures of the student body. When they become employees, they are socialized to the formal and informal operations of the factory, store, or office. Later in life, they may have to learn and adapt to the peculiar ways of a nursing home.

Although we must continually acquire new knowledge and skills in response to the changing contexts of our social lives, socialization tends to have a cumulative character. That is, later socialization tends to build upon already acquired social skills, knowledge, and capacities to regulate our own conduct in relation to the actions of others. That is why the socialization that occurs early in life is often called *primary*, and later socialization *secondary*. Successful secondary socialization must either build upon the foundation laid by primary socialization or dismantle it. Building upon primary socialization is obviously far less challenging than attempting to purge an individual of previously acquired and often deeply ingrained ways of feeling, thinking, and acting. Although primary socialization is not irreversible, it typically has a continuing influence over later life (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 140; Handel 2003, 104–107). Because of that continuing influence, understanding primary socialization is essential to explaining how people become the kinds of social beings they do and how human societies endure and change.

This book concerns primary, or childhood, socialization. As we will discuss later (see Chapter 3), the duration of childhood is a matter of social definition and varies over time and among different human societies. However, for the sake of convenience, we follow the social convention of contemporary Western societies and define childhood as the period of life from birth to puberty. This definition of childhood is admittedly somewhat arbitrary, but such arbitrariness is unavoidable. The character and duration of childhood socialization are as varied as the human societies that populate and have populated the earth. Yet, however childhood is defined, processes of primary socialization shape the kind of people who will populate a society and, thereby, its future. Understanding childhood socialization is, therefore, essential to understanding human social life and experience.

Complexities of Childhood Socialization

Initiates into a society, whether newborns or new immigrants, must acquire considerable knowledge and skill in order to participate in it adequately. They must learn what utensils, if any, to use when eating specific foods; how to greet strangers and acquaintances; in what situations to express and conceal different emotions; and when to speak and when to remain silent. In our society, they must learn to expect different things from a doctor and a store clerk and the difference between acceptable behavior at a football game and in a church. They must learn these and countless other lessons from observation and interaction with others. The ways of the society from which immigrants come may both facilitate and interfere with their learning of the ways of the society that they are joining. In comparison, a newborn starts from scratch.

As we discuss in more detail later (Chapter 2), infants are born with the potentialities to acquire the knowledge and skills required for adequate participation in human society. Yet, those potentialities are wide and varied and are only realized through interaction with others. For example, all children are born with the biological capacity to speak any language, but learn to speak only the language (or, in some cases, languages) they hear from others. In one social setting, they may learn to speak English; and in another, Japanese. Similarly, in one setting a child may learn to eat rice with chopsticks; in another, with a fork. In one, they will learn to value personal independence; and in another, the interest of the group. In one setting, a boy will learn to be deeply respectful of his father; and in another to treat his father as a “pal” or “buddy.” In one social setting, a girl will learn that her future social acceptability and well-being require marriage as a virgin and childbearing; while in another, she will learn that she can choose whether to marry or not and whether to have children or not.

Childhood socialization is concerned with complex matters such as these. Some are matters of everyday custom, such as whether to eat rice with chopsticks or a fork. Others have lifetime consequences, such as whether a girl learns that she must marry a man her parents choose or is encouraged to choose whether and whom to marry. Some of what children learn in the course of their socialization is overt and visible, such as what clothes are appropriate for different kinds of occasions. Yet, even such overt behaviors depend on a more generalized learning, the effects of which are not directly visible but must be inferred.

Over time, children acquire common sense understandings of how their social environments are organized. They come implicitly to recognize that it is made up of different kinds of people, such as doctors and store clerks, and different kinds of situations, like football games and church services. They learn to be concerned with “appropriateness” as a general guide to conduct. They develop a “sense of propriety,” which not only governs behavior in situations comparable to those that they have already experienced but also guides them in dealing with new situations. Hence, when they enter a novel situation they do so with some sense of how to act because they have learned how to define varied situations and to be concerned with acting appropriately in them. For

example, when they get their first job, they are not at a total loss. They have experienced other situations that have the general quality of “being supervised by someone with authority to supervise.” They know they are expected to listen to the boss and undertake the tasks she or he assigns them. They then go on to learn the specific requirements of being supervised as an employee, which are different from the supervision they received as children from their parents and as pupils from teachers.

Children also learn to experience specific emotions in particular kinds of situations. Depending on their social environment, they may learn to feel possessive with personal property or feel indifferent to it. They may learn to react angrily to apparent slights or to dismiss them as unimportant. They may learn to feel proud at embarrassing a rival, ashamed of having done so, or a mixture of the two.

Some of what children learn in the process of socialization, as when they learn to say “please” and “thank you” or arithmetic, is explicitly taught by people who are socially responsible for teaching them. In many societies, parents and teachers are specifically entrusted with the responsibility to prepare the young to participate in adult society. Of course, children do not always respond as these adults would wish, and children’s responses may influence adults to change what they expect of and how they treat those children. Socialization is an interactive process, a process of mutual influence. Adults socialize children, and children socialize adults. For example, as children learn from one another, they often bring expressions and practices home that are unfamiliar to their parents. Children also learn to keep aspects of their distinctive peer cultures secret from parents and other adults, especially those that they know or suspect would meet with adults’ disapproval. Yet, that too is part of their socialization. Learning to keep secrets is an important social skill, requiring an understanding of social expectations and a capacity for self-regulation.

Some of what children learn in the course of their socialization is self-motivated. Children actively attempt to understand the social world around them, to recognize the types of people and types of situations that constitute it. Parents who are overwhelmed by young children’s endless “why” questions are well aware of their social curiosity. They want to know why a lighter- or darker-skinned child looks different from them, why “that man” is dressed “like that,” why “that woman” is “doing that,” and so on. Partly, through such questioning, children learn about the dimensions and methods of social classification that organize their social world.

On their own initiative, children also look to others for guidance in how they should act. Having first become responsive to their parents or other adult caregivers, children are prepared to be responsive to others. Early on, children begin to see other people as models for what they might like to do and become. At home, they are apt to take their parents as models of behavior. For example, if a mother wears high-heeled shoes, her 3-year-old daughter may sneak into her closet, put on the oversized shoes, and shuffle around the house “like mommy.” Sports celebrities are early heroes of many young boys who see them, at least for a time, as models for their own behavior.

Children also learn much about social life from one another. Although children often view adults as models and knowledgeable authorities, they learn many subtle lessons about the negotiated character of social relationships from similarly aged peers. They teach each other what it means to be a friend, how to manage others' impression of them, how to circumvent formal rules with relative impunity, and many other practical lessons about social life. And, children not only learn from age-mates but also pick up many pointers and practices from older peers who are more like themselves than are adults, yet more knowledgeable, skilled, and "cool" than they themselves are.

These different varieties of socialization take place in many settings—at home and in school, in front of televisions and on playgrounds. Childhood socialization can also be fairly readily observed in public places, as the following example that occurred in a neighborhood bank illustrates.

After a young woman finishes her transaction at a teller's window, she and her approximately 2-year-old son head toward the door of the bank. The boy runs ahead of her and sits on a swivel chair near the door, turning from side to side. When the mother urges him to come along, he says, "No, I like it." She replies in an even, matter-of-fact tone, "Goodbye, I'm leaving," and walks out the door without looking back. The boy jumps off the chair and quickly follows.

This brief episode illustrates how adults draw upon their power over children in an attempt to influence children's current behavior and thereby socialize them. First, the mother uses the threat of abandonment (although it seems virtually certain that she would not have left the boy in the bank if he had not followed her out) in an attempt to alter her son's behavior. Adults often use threats of *negative sanctions* in an attempt to influence children's behavior. They may even carry out such threats. Other times, adults may promise a reward—a *positive sanction*—if children will act as the adult wishes. For example, another mother might have offered the boy some ice cream if he would come with her. In either case, adults routinely draw upon their power of potential punishment and reward to impose their *definition of a situation* on children. Children may challenge adults' definitions of situations, but adults often act so that their definition prevails. For example, by proceeding to leave right away, the mother in the above episode obliges the boy to sacrifice his immediate pleasure to her schedule and projects or face possible abandonment. This is but one example of how adults impose definitions of situations on children and thereby create the social reality to which children must respond.

The definitions of situations that adults attempt to impose upon children often include definitions of appropriate conduct in different situations. For example, the following conversation between an approximately 5-year-old girl and her mother was overheard in a busy laundromat:

The girl asks her mother, "Mommy, do you see that baby?" When the mother does not respond, the girl continues, "His face is so fat. . . ." Before she can finish, her mother emphatically interrupts, "*Don't* talk so loudly about other people. They might hear you." The girl giggles and points out

that “the baby won’t understand.” Her mother replies, “That’s not the point. It’s not polite. You have to keep your voice down.” (Adapted from Cahill 1987, 316–317)

In this episode, the mother instructs her daughter about an important and complex rule of social propriety: Do not publicly make comments about others. When the girl objects that “the baby won’t understand,” the mother elaborates that it does not matter whether the subject of the remark understands or hears the remark. The implication seems to be that others might hear, understand, and judge you harshly for such an impolite remark. However, note that the mother does not object to the daughter calling the baby fat, but to doing so loudly. The mother thereby subtly conveys that what might be appropriate in a private conversation among intimates can be quite inappropriate in a more public situation. Whether or not the girl recognizes this subtle distinction at the time, it is a lesson she will undoubtedly hear repeated in different ways and on many occasions. Socializing lessons such as this often occur when a child inadvertently violates a standard of social appropriateness. Parents or other adult caretakers attempt both to alter the child’s immediate conduct and to prevent its recurrence in the future. In the process, they teach the child general standards of social appropriateness, which the child may then gradually adopt as her or his own.

Socializing lessons often are even less direct. For example, a simple request to explain or account for one’s conduct or appearance suggests that it requires explanation—that it is not socially expected or appropriate under the circumstances. For example, when one kindergartner asks another boy, “Why do you always dress up the same?” he sends a message that day-to-day changes of costume are socially expected. The fact that the second boy always dresses “the same,” in the words of the first, requires explanation. The second boy apparently understands the message and denies the implied accusation by noting that “no, I sometimes wear blue” (adapted from Much and Shweder 1978, 27). Yet, by claiming that he does not always dress like that, the second boy acknowledges the general convention that one should not “always dress up the same.” If he did not already know it, he has learned a lesson about social conventions.

Socialization is a complex process that takes many different forms. It occurs through simple observation, imitation, direct and indirect instruction, applications of positive and negative sanctions, trial and error, and continual participation in social interaction. Social rules and standards of appropriateness are general guidelines and not elaborate instructions for how to conduct oneself under every conceivable circumstance. Individuals must learn how to apply and adapt social rules and standards to different situations and how to align their actions with those of others. These are practical skills and are acquired through practice, the practice of social interaction.

The complex and varied process of socialization helps explain two different kinds of phenomena. On the one hand, it helps to explain how a person becomes capable of adequate participation in a human society, as we have emphasized and will continue to do throughout this book. On the other hand,

it helps explain how ongoing human societies are possible at all. Although some other animals have rudimentary societies, none of them approaches the complexity or wide variety of human societies. The continuation of such complex societies across generations requires explanation of how human beings can finely attune their actions to one another in ways that make possible ongoing, relatively orderly social life. Although a full explanation, if one is possible, is beyond the scope of this book, the socialization process is a key element to such an explanation. Ongoing, orderly human social life is possible because individuals learn to be self-regulating participants in social life. They learn to recognize different socially defined categories of people and situations, to regulate their actions in accordance with varied standards of social appropriateness, to align their actions with those of others, and to negotiate collective definitions of social situations. They thereby come to reproduce the orderly social worlds into which they are born.

This does not imply that socialization is a guarantee against social disorder. The traditional ways of a society may prove ineffective in dealing with new challenges, including challenges that are caused by those traditional ways. For example, some agricultural techniques may result in environmental damage that then makes them ineffective for feeding the population, resulting in growing conflict over increasingly scarce resources. Political leaders may act in capricious or tyrannical ways that excite widespread rebellion. Different groups within a society may have or develop diametrically opposed conventions and customs that engender intergroup conflict, as the many civil conflicts of the past and present attest. Yet, even under such extraordinary circumstances, people tend to band together, negotiating collective definitions of their common situation, if only of a common foe, and act in concert. They are able to do so because of the social knowledge and skills that they have acquired through prior socialization. The process of socialization is as central to explanations of social collapse, rebellion, and civil conflict as it is to explanations of more orderly social life.

Limitations of the Study of Socialization

The study of childhood socialization does not address a number of topics that are of social scientific interest. Its principal focus is on the process through which the young learn the ways of a society and social groups. Although, as previously argued, it must necessarily attend to the ways that children influence adults, its interest in such influence is limited to how it may affect children's socialization rather than how it may socialize adults. The study of childhood socialization is principally concerned with the likely influence of socializing interactions on the young's subsequent participation in social life, and not that of adults.

Second, the study of childhood socialization does not speculate or attempt to explain how a society or social group came to be. The society into which a child is born, with its common understandings, ways of doing things, standards of appropriateness, and current issues, is a product of a unique history and exists before the child enters it. The study of socialization begins with that ongoing, preexisting society and asks how the young are recruited into self-regulated participation, and different kinds of participation, in it.

Third, the study of childhood socialization does not try to explain the uniqueness of individuals. Although no two individuals are alike and each person has a singular genetic inheritance, distinctive experiences, and personal characteristics, the study of childhood socialization focuses not on such individualizing factors and processes but on how individuals learn of and adapt to a shared culture and society. As children age, they develop both distinguishing personal characteristics and shared cultural and social characteristics. They inevitably develop some sense of individual identity, but the particular aspects of their uniqueness—be they distinctive physical characteristics, special ways of acting, or tastes—and how those aspects are judged are matters of social definition and consequences of a socialization process. Even a person's sense of individuality bears the mark of their social experiences.

Finally, the study of socialization is ill suited to prescribe what a human society should be or the type of child rearing necessary to achieve it. Its concern is with how children learn the ways of a given society or social group as it is, however harmonious or turbulent, peaceful or violent, and just or unjust it may be. Its findings can certainly be used to praise or condemn a particular society, social group, or type of child rearing, but such evaluations are beyond its scope. Similarly, its findings can be used to argue against one or another social policy proposal, but it does not specify what the goals of public policy should be. That is a matter for public debate and discussion, hopefully debate and discussion that are informed by an understanding of the complexities of children's social lives and socialization.

Organization of the Book

The remainder of this book provides a detailed overview of childhood socialization. We will use a wide range of illustrations, although most of them are from contemporary North America, with which we are most familiar. However, we will give some attention to patterns of socialization in other places, at other times, and among varied social groups. Part I consists of four chapters. Chapter 1 summarizes varied approaches to and methods of studying children and childhood socialization, and briefly presents our own integrative approach. Chapter 2 discusses the biological and social foundations of childhood socialization and is followed in Chapter 3 by some illustrations of cross-cultural and historical variations in conceptions of and the treatment of children. Chapter 4 considers the processes, mechanisms, and techniques through which socialization occurs, as well as its major outcomes. There are also four chapters in Part II, 5 through 8, that discuss the primary socializing agencies in North American and similar societies. They are, respectively, families, schools, peer groups, and media of mass communication. Although we

consider diverse patterns of childhood socialization both between and within human societies throughout the book, Part III focuses specifically on the most fundamental sources of such diversity within societies. Chapter 9 discusses social class variations. Chapter 10 deals with diverse patterns of socialization among ethnic and minority groups and across neighborhoods. Chapter 11 addresses issues of sex and gender socialization. Finally, in Part IV, Chapter 12 offers a brief concluding overview of childhood socialization and discussion of adolescence and continuing socialization throughout the life course.

We hope that this book will sensitize readers to the complexity of children's social lives and socialization. The knowledge and social skills that children acquire through processes of socialization and how they acquire them shape the kind of people they become and, thereby, the future of the society into which they are born. Hence, the study of childhood socialization is essential for understanding human social life and experience.

Over the years, as we discuss in Chapter 1, different approaches to the study of children have emphasized one or another aspect of children's social development or socialization to the neglect of others. That has led some who study children to reject the very idea of childhood socialization. We argue, in Chapter 1, that this is an overreaction. Adequate understanding of childhood socialization requires appreciation of the variability of childhoods, children's influence over adults, their peer cultures, and current concerns. Yet, adequate participation in a human society requires the acquisition of considerable knowledge and skills. It requires socialization. This book provides an overview of that most fundamental process of human being during childhood, in all its fascinating but challenging complexity.

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