



# **The Child & Society**

The Process of Socialization

**Fifth Edition**

FREDERICK ELKIN  
GERALD HANDEL

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Socialization**

**FIFTH EDITION**

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## THE CHILD AND SOCIETY: THE PROCESS OF SOCIALIZATION

Fifth Edition

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# PREFACE TO THE FIFTH EDITION

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Since the first edition of this book, the study of the socialization of the child has undergone an extensive development. In the successive editions we have sought, while maintaining our basic perspective, to integrate new ideas and new research into the enduring theories and concepts of the classical writers. This edition then has the same goal as that of the earlier editions: to provide a coherent account, from a sociological standpoint, of how children are socialized into modern society. We are interested in how the child as an active person incorporates a constantly changing society into his or her very being.

Extensive changes have been made in this edition. In discussing the processes of socialization, we have elaborated our analysis of the concepts of self, identity, and self-esteem and have given more consideration to the place of sentiments in development. We have introduced more material on the biological foundations and historical context of socialization. Throughout the volume, data have been updated. In discussing agencies of socialization, we have included new materials on day care, schooling for minority children, and peer influences. The section on the role of television in socialization has been completely rewritten. Our discussion of subcultural patterns has been elaborated with newer materials on social class, ethnic groups, black consciousness, and recent research on socialization among Old Order Mennonites. We have included new material on sex and gender. While we have sought throughout to be conscious of recent trends, we have not hesitated to retain discussions of less recent research and concepts where we believe they have merit.

Some topics in the study of socialization continue to be controversial. We have attempted, citing the evidence, to present the issues clearly and fairly. In some instances we indicate our evalua-

tion of the evidence and view of the controversy; in others, we leave the matter open because we do not believe the evidence is sufficiently definitive to justify a conclusion. We are more interested in identifying major issues and stimulating thought in the student than in promulgating particular points of view or reinforcing the "correctness" of certain views.

We have been helped greatly in preparing this revision by the thoughtful comments from several anonymous reviews from McGraw-Hill, Inc. We have adopted many of their suggestions and acknowledge our appreciation. Our thanks also to Sylvia Elkin for helping with the index.

F.E.  
G.H.

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# CHAPTER 1

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## Socialization Defined

As children grow they develop in many ways. Physically, they become taller, heavier, stronger, and capable of such activities as walking, talking, writing, riding a bicycle, and, later, having sexual relations. Mentally, they become capable of such activities as memorizing poems, working out problems in algebra, imagining love scenes, and acquiring the knowledge necessary to carry through a job. Each child also acquires a more or less consistent personality structure, so that he or she can be characterized as ambitious, shy, sociable, cautious, and so on. However, these descriptions, useful as they may be, are of limited value in explaining how someone functions in society, because they do not reveal the interactions and relationships that a child has with others in the society. They do not tell us, for example, how a child learns what to expect from a doctor or a store clerk or learns the difference between behavior that is acceptable at a hockey game and behavior acceptable in church. In the course of growing up, a child must acquire varied knowledge and skills, such as what utensils to use when eating specific foods; how to greet strangers; how to show or conceal emotion in different settings; when to speak and when to be silent. As children grow they move into a widening world of persons, activities, and feelings—all shaped by encounters with others who help define a socially organized world. These others will establish standards of right and wrong, and as a result children will come to have certain feelings if they are inadvertently rude, fail an examination, upset a friend, or in some other way do not measure up to their own expectations or the expectations of others.

Babies, of course, know nothing of these ways of the society; but they have the potentialities to learn them. The potentialities are in fact wide and varied. In one setting children will speak English, in another, Russian; in one they will eat rice with chopsticks; in another, with a fork; in one they will be taught to empha-

size self-interest; in another, to focus on the interests of the group. In one setting a boy will be deeply respectful of his father; in another he will speak to him as a "pal." In one setting a girl will be taught that her future inevitably will involve being a wife and mother; in another, that she will have the freedom to choose her life style and commitments.

◎ It is with such matters that the socialization of the child is concerned. Socialization may be defined as the process by which we learn the ways of a given society or social group so that we can function within it. As the examples above illustrate, many kinds of learning are encompassed within this general process. Some of what is learned is overt and visible, such as wearing appropriate clothes for different kinds of occasions. But even these overt behaviors can be understood only if we recognize that they come to be guided by more generalized learning, the effects of which are not directly visible but must be inferred. Put otherwise, children learn to be concerned with appropriateness as a general guide to their conduct. They develop a "sense of propriety," which not only governs their behavior in situations comparable to those they have already experienced but which also guides them in dealing with new situations that they encounter for the first time. Thus, when they enter a new group they do so with some sense of how to act, because they have learned to be concerned with acting appropriately in a group. When they take their first job, they are not at a total loss, because they have had experience in other situations that have the quality of "being supervised by someone with authority to supervise." Of course, people then go on to learn the specific requirements for membership in a new group or the requirements for being supervised as employees, which are different from the kind of supervision they received as children from their parents or as pupils from their teachers.

In addition to learning specific overt behaviors and a general sense of appropriateness, children also learn to experience certain specific emotions in specific kinds of situations. They may learn to feel possessive with property or feel indifferent to it. They may learn to feel proud at winning a fist fight or ashamed for having gotten into one, or a mixture of the two.

Some of what children learn in the course of being socialized is explicitly taught by people who have the obligation to teach them, as when they learn to use eating utensils or to feel patriotic.

Parents and teachers are specifically entrusted with the task of preparing the young to become qualified participants in society. But some of the learning that is included in socialization is self-motivated, and children develop and build on a constantly changing base. Having first become responsive to their parents, they have been prepared to be responsive to others. Early on, children begin to see in other people models for what they might like to become, and at home they are apt to take their parents as models for behavior in which they have not been instructed. If father brings home a briefcase, his five-year-old son may pick it up and carry it around "like daddy." Police officers and fire fighters are early heroes of many young children, and children see them, at least for a time, as models for their own later behavior.

Socialization takes place in many settings—at home and in schools, churches, and playgrounds. For the person interested in studying and understanding socialization, some of these settings are accessible only under special conditions; one cannot walk freely into someone else's home. But socialization can be observed fairly readily in public places. Some aspects of the process are well illustrated in the following episode observed in a neighborhood bank:

While a young woman is engaged in her transaction at the teller's window, her little boy, approximately two years old, amuses himself with the velvet rope, supported by two posts, that the bank uses to regulate the waiting line. The boy straddles and rides the rope; one post is thus pulled down, startling the boy but not hitting him. Mother turns around, puts the post upright. The boy starts to straddle again, and she says, "Do you want to fall again and get hurt? You'll get hit on the head." He gets off.

When the mother finishes her transaction, she and the boy head toward the door. He runs ahead and sits on an upholstered swivel chair near the door, turning from side to side. When his mother urges him to come, he says, "No, I like it." She says, "Good-bye, I'm leaving," and goes out the door. He follows quickly.

This little episode reveals some aspects of the socialization process. First, the mother seeks to influence her son's behavior by the use of threats. To control his behavior, she seeks to get him to believe that he will be badly hurt if he continues what he is doing. The teaching of such ideas is part of the socialization process—they may be ideas about physical objects, the supernat-

ural, the political system, or anything else in society. Threat—an example of a negative sanction—is one procedure often used to attempt to attain a socialization goal.

The second part of the episode illustrates another aspect of the socialization process. The mother does not give the boy time to swivel on the chair. By proceeding to leave right away, she indicates to the boy something about adult goals and time spans. He is obliged to leave what interests him and fall in step with her or be abandoned. He must sacrifice his immediate pleasure and accept a definition of reality from the adult. By her actions, the mother defines the situation in these terms: it is now time to leave, not time to play. She uses the threat of abandonment to enforce her *definition of the situation*. Adults constantly define situations for children, and by so doing they create the social reality to which children respond. This episode illustrates that even a child of two can define a situation, but this definition may conflict with that of the adult, in which case the adults are likely to act to have their definitions prevail. They will not always succeed, but over the course of the many situations in which adult definitions of social reality are presented, they will usually succeed well enough that the new generation's social world will come to resemble significantly, though not duplicate exactly, that of the parents.

Socialization is, then, a process that helps explain two different kinds of phenomena. On the one hand, it helps to explain how a person becomes capable of participating in society. For it is clear that the newborn infant is not a social being. Most of the qualities we regard as human are present in the child only as potentialities. In the early days of life, the infant experiences hunger pangs, cries, gains satisfaction by sucking on a source of nourishment, experiences visceral tension, and gains relaxation by excretion. In short, the newborn's capacities for functioning with other human beings are exceedingly minimal. They are developed through socialization.

On the other hand, socialization helps to explain how society is possible at all. While certain species of animals lower in the evolutionary scale function in rudimentary societies, none of these approaches the complexity of human society, which takes so many different forms and is elaborated with infinite subtleties. Consequently, it is necessary to explain how vast numbers of

organisms called human are able to attune their actions to one another in such a way as to make possible an ongoing social order. While a full explanation, insofar as one is possible, would take us far beyond the subject matter of this book, the socialization process is one key element of such an explanation. Social order is possible because human infants encounter adults who teach them and from whom they can learn to regulate their actions in accordance with various standards of appropriateness.

As implied in some of our earlier examples, the process of socialization is not confined to infancy and childhood. It continues throughout the life of the individual. The term "socialization" refers to learning the ways of any established and continuing group; a newly hired employee becomes socialized into the operations of the plant or office; the upwardly mobile person is socialized into a new social class; an immigrant becomes socialized into the life of his or her new country. The recognition of the continuing nature of socialization has led to the concept of *adult socialization*. The term recognizes the fact that adults are obliged to go through certain experiences and developments somewhat similar to those undergone by infants and children, although there is a basic difference in that later socialization is built upon an already acquired capacity to evaluate one's own behavior and function as a social being.

Having thus delineated the basic nature of socialization, it will be useful to indicate some problems that are not encompassed by this concept. First, it is not a problem of socialization to explain or speculate upon how a society or social group began. The society into which the child is born, with its common expectations, ways of doing things, standards of right and wrong, and current trends and issues, is the result of a unique historical evolution and exists before the child enters it. Socialization begins with the assumption of this ongoing preexisting society.

Second, socialization does not try to explain the uniqueness of individuals. Although it is true that no two individuals are alike and that each person has a singular heredity, distinctive experiences, and a unique personality development, socialization focuses not on such individualizing patterns and processes but on similarities, on aspects of development that concern the learning of and adaptation to the culture and society. In the course of development children go through two major processes simul-

taneously: individuation and socialization. In their earliest years children do not experience this distinction, but as they get older they inevitably develop individualities of their own and recognize their own uniqueness. But which aspects of this uniqueness become known and acknowledged—be they distinctive physical or personality characteristics or tastes or ways of doing things—and how these aspects are judged, are themselves results of societal definitions and the socialization process.

Third, socialization is not a one-way process, acting only on a child or a new member of a group. Socialization is always interactive. The entrance of a new member into a family, or any unit, changes the group. It is not just the old group with one added person, it is a *new* group with new relationships and a new organization. In a family, parents socialize their children and children socialize their parents. Parents, like their children, learn new roles, new knowledge, new skills, and new ideas. So, too, in a school do teachers and pupils socialize one another. In this book, however, our focus will be on the child as socializee, as the one who is socialized by parents, teachers, and others.

Finally, it is not a problem for socialization to prescribe what a society should become or the particular type of child rearing to achieve it. Socialization as such does not set a direction to be followed; it is a process in all societies whatever model is used for analysis. Whether society is seen as a system in which an established elite seeks to maintain the status quo or a struggle between groups seeking power or a system of adapting institutions and structures or some other arrangement, socialization remains a universal and necessary process for incorporating new members into ongoing social organizations. What they struggle for once they are part of the social organization becomes another question.

In recent years socialization has often come to be viewed from the perspective of the life span or life course.<sup>1</sup> This perspective emphasizes that human development continues throughout a lifetime and that there are always questions of what is constant and what changes; what aspects of development are continuous and what discontinuous; what aspects are timeless and what characteristics are peculiar to those brought up in a particular historical era; what links exist between the genetic, maturational, psychological, cultural, and social aspects of human develop-

ment. This all-encompassing perspective is valid and necessary to understand human behavior and socialization in its entirety; such a perspective is also almost unlimited. In this volume we have chosen to focus specifically on socialization and specifically on childhood, although in the final chapter, as well as at various points throughout the work, we deal with the question of childhood's relationship to later life. Childhood socialization is *primary socialization*—first, and most important. The direction the person's development takes in later years cannot help but be influenced by the foundations established in childhood. This is not to say that the impacts of primary socialization always persist unchanged. They do not, but they do affect what happens later.

This study deals with the process of socialization, with the problem of how the child becomes a functioning member of the society. We shall use a wide range of illustrations, but generally they will come from North American society, with which we are most familiar. However, we shall also give some attention to socialization patterns that differ from the most familiar. Chapter 2 discusses the basic preconditions for socialization and is followed by a consideration in Chapter 3 of the processes, mechanisms, and techniques by which it occurs, as well as some of its outcomes. Chapter 4 considers socialization patterns of certain basic subdivisions in our society: social class, community, and ethnic group. Chapter 5 is concerned with the primary socializing agencies in our society: family, school, peer group, and media of mass communication. Socialization is intimately related to family life, and although the family is treated as such only in Chapter 5, ramifications of this relationship are discussed at various points throughout the book. Chapter 6 examines the many issues related to sex and socialization. The final chapter discusses later socialization and its relation to childhood.



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## CHAPTER 2

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# Preconditions for Socialization

For children to become socialized, two preconditions are necessary. First, they must have the *requisite biological inheritance*. If a child is feebleminded or suffers from a serious organic mental disorder, adequate socialization will be impossible. Certain other biological deficits do not make socialization impossible but cause it to be beset by serious difficulties. Children born blind, deaf, or mute encounter special obstacles and are necessarily excluded from certain kinds of opportunities available to others. Nevertheless, such children—and those with such other disabilities as the malformed arms and legs suffered some years ago by children of mothers who took the drug thalidomide during pregnancy—can, with special training, achieve levels of socialization that permit them to function more or less satisfactorily in the society.

This requisite biological inheritance includes the possibility, under the right social relationships, of developing a “human nature.” Human nature is not readily given a compact definition, but some of its fundamental components can be specified. Of particular significance is the ability to establish emotional relationships with others and to experience such sentiments as love, sympathy, shame, envy, pity, and pride. Scarcely less important is the ability to transform experience into symbols, which makes possible speech, writing, and thought. Although writing is not, of course, necessary for adequate socialization—some societies have no writing at all, and in earlier periods of our own history a person could be adequately socialized without being able to read, let alone write—human socialization is not possible without speech; and speech depends upon the capacity to symbolize. How this human nature comes about will be considered in our discussion of the processes of socialization; without it, no child can really be considered socialized.

The second precondition is an *ongoing society*. Children are