Socialization refers to the process through which people learn skills, knowledge, values, motives, and roles appropriate to their position(s) in a social group or society, resulting in a particular identity or identities relevant to that social group or society. Socialization takes place through communicative interaction with others whenever new roles are engaged as part of a group or society. One basic assumption of socialization theory is the internalization of group or social requirements. During socialization, one learns to take on an identity associated with a particular group and perform it in a competent manner.

Disciplinary and Contextual Engagement

The process of socialization involves multiple disciplinary perspectives, including anthropology, communication theory, psychology, social psychology, and sociology, with a common pool of intellectual ancestors (e.g., Erik Erikson, Sigmund Freud, George Herbert Mead). The academic concept of socialization as the relationship of the individual to society or collectives can be traced from its emergence in the late 1800s to current theory and research, including work on self-socialization, moving from a focus on stages tied to biological development to increased focus on the interaction of person and environment through language. Persons are socialized to identities based on their connection to and membership in particular social groups.

Socialization takes place in multiple life contexts, including family socialization, occupational/professional socialization, and organizational socialization. Gender and sex role socialization, language socialization, parental role socialization, political socialization, racial socialization, and consumer socialization tap particular identities drawn from a given domain of social life. Primary socialization refers to family and school socialization, where children learn behaviors appropriate to a particular culture, secondary socialization refers to socialization into particular groups during adulthood (for example, to an organization or occupation), and resocialization refers to learning patterns of behavior different from previously learned ones for example, joining the military.

From the social collective’s perspective, socialization is the individual’s adaptation and conformity to role expectations, others’ opinions, and the norms and values of the collective. This structuralist/functionalist approach stresses the transmission of group culture. Socialization involves adaptation to the group for which the person will develop an identity. From the individual’s perspective,
Socialization is the development of personal and social identity and associated attitudes and behaviors resulting from social influences. Symbolic interaction is the theoretical tradition of this view. Through interaction with others, one is socialized to norms and rules relevant to identity as a member of a particular gender, race, class, or other group.

**Theories of Socialization**

Theories of socialization can be organized according to life stage, life span, and life course perspectives. Life stage perspectives (e.g., Sigmund Freud, Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson) focus on a biological basis for socialization. Life span perspectives (e.g., Orville Gilbert Brim and Stanton Wheeler) emphasize the role of both biology and experience. The life course perspective (G. H. Mead, Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, and Erik Erikson) highlights the influence of social norms, role prescriptions, and group processes on age-related life transitions. Karl Mannheim suggested that one's generation defines a unique socialization experience.

Much subsequent theoretical work on socialization was a reaction to Freud, who assumed that movement from one stage to another is ordered, basically fixed or invariant, and biological in origin. Most sociological research until the late 1960s and the 1970s emphasized childhood socialization, as did Freud, though its basis was no longer believed to be related to psychosexual stages. Socialization theorists came to recognize the role of environmental influences on the person's movement through stages, along with the shaping influence of communicative interaction on identity formation during the socialization process.

Piaget's cognitive-developmental theory has stages similar to Freud's, but differs in that experience and social interaction are central in movement from one stage to another. Freud considered the social environment as potential interference with the individual's development; he attributed development to maturation, not to interaction, assuming that biology unfolds the individual. Piaget focuses more on the social, collective world than does Freud, as does Lev Vygotsky. Piaget's emphasis is placed on the person as active agent in the socialization process, resonating with the symbolic interactionist tradition as articulated by G. H. Mead and Charles Horton Cooley, which highlighted the influence of social interaction on learning to take on a role particular to a given identity.

G. H. Mead's theory of self in social interaction assumes that socialization takes place through a process of social interaction, emphasizing socialization's social character. Whereas Piaget focuses more on the individual's acting on and adapting information to cognitive structures, Mead focuses on taking on society's attitudes as one's own, a process that accompanies maturation. Taking attitudes and roles of other individuals and of the generalized other constitutes the basic process of socialization. Mead's perspective focused on the life span perspective as an ongoing process and suggested two stages to development of identity. In the first, the self or identity is built through particular attitudes of other people toward self or others. In the second, the person constructs a generalized other from these attitudes.

Anthropologists Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict dealt with status transitions or passages during the socialization process, unlike Freud, Piaget, or G. H. Mead. Passages from childhood to adolescence to adulthood are significant to identity as a member of a culture. M. Mead and Benedict focused on the extent to which cultures provide continuity or discontinuity for role transitions. Their work provided an important foundation for subsequent theories on the life course and life cycles.
Erikson offered a socialization theory of self in social interaction with eight ages of the human being, emphasizing the life span. Working from the psychoanalytic tradition with the ego as the central psychic structure, he emphasized developmental tasks that human beings must accomplish in stages from childhood through adulthood. Mannheim brought the issue of generations to the forefront, arguing that each generation is socialized differently, providing a standpoint from which to view the world. From this perspective, a generation could be seen as constituting a distinct group with an identity tied to temporal location.

**See also**

Gender, Group Identity, Identity Change, Language, Looking-Glass Self, Mirror Stage of Identity Development, Role Identity, Self-Concept, Symbolic Interactionism

**Further Readings**


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