Module 4 Socialization and Social Control

Lecture 22
Social Roles and Identity

Culture pertains to those aspects of society which are learnt, rather than inherited. The process by which children or other members of society learn the way of life of their society is called socialization. Socialization is the primary channel for the transmission of culture over time and across generations.

Animals low down on the evolutionary scale are capable of fending for themselves very soon after they are born, with little or no help from adults. Higher animals, however, have to learn appropriate ways of behaviour – the young are often completely helpless at birth and have to be cared for by their elders. Human infants are the most helpless of all; a human child cannot survive unaided for at least the first four or five years of life. Socialization, therefore, is the process whereby the helpless infant gradually becomes self-aware, knowledgeable person, skilled in the ways of the culture into which s/he is born. Socialization is not a kind of ‘cultural programming’ in which the child absorbs passively the influences with which s/he comes into contact. Even the most recent newborn infant has needs and demands that affect the behaviour of those responsible for its care: the child is from the beginning an active being.

Socialization connects the different generations to one another. The birth of a child alters the lives of those who are responsible for its upbringing – and they themselves therefore undergo new learning experiences. Parenting usually ties the activities of adults to children for the remainder of all of their lives. Older people remain parents when they become grandparents, of course, thus forging another set of relationships connecting different generations with each other. Socialization, therefore, should be seen as a lifelong process in which human behaviour is continually shaped by social interactions. It allows individuals to develop themselves and their potential, to learn and to make adjustments.

Social Roles

Through the process of socialization, individuals learn about social roles – socially defined expectations that a person in a given social position follows. The social role of ‘doctor’, for example, encompasses a set of behaviours that should be enacted by all individual doctors, regardless of their personal opinions or outlooks. Because all doctors share this role, it is possible to speak in general terms about the professional role behaviour of doctors irrespective of the specific individuals who occupy the positions.

Some sociologists, particularly those associated with the functionalist school, regard social roles as fixed and relatively unchanging parts of a society’s culture. They are taken as social facts. According to such a view, individuals learn the expectations that surround social positions in their particular culture and perform those roles largely as they have been defined. Social roles do not involve negotiation or creativity – rather, they are prescriptive in containing and directing an individual’s behaviour. Through socialization, individuals internalize social roles and learn how to carry them out.
This view, however, is mistaken. It suggests that individuals simply take on roles, rather than creating or negotiating them. In fact, socialization is a process in which humans can exercise agency; they are not simply passive subjects waiting to be instructed or programmed. Individuals come to understand and assume social roles through an ongoing process of social interaction.

**Identity**

The cultural settings in which we are born and come to maturity influence our behaviour, but that does not mean that humans are robbed of individuality or free will. We might seem to be merely stamped into preset moulds which society has prepared for us. Some sociologists do tend to write about socialization as though this were the case; but such a view is fundamentally flawed. The fact that from birth to death we are involved in interaction with others certainly conditions our personalities, the values we hold and the behaviour we engage in. Yet socialization is also at the origin of our very individuality and freedom. In the course of socialization each of us develops a sense of identity and the capacity for independent thought and action.

The concept of identity in sociology is a multifaceted one, and may be approached in a number of ways. Broadly speaking, identity relates to the understandings people hold about who they are and what is meaningful to them. These understandings are formed in relation to certain attributes that hold priority over other resources of meaning. Some of the main sources of identity include gender, sexual orientation, nationality or ethnicity, caste, race, social class, etc.

There are two types of identity commonly used by sociologists:

(a) Social identity
(b) Self-identity (or personal identity)

These forms of identity are analytically distinct, but are closely related to one another. **Social identity** refers to the characteristics that are attributed to an individual by others. These can be seen as markers that indicate who, in a basic sense, that person is. At the same time, they place that person in relation to other individuals who share the same attributes. Examples of social identities might include student, mother, lawyer, Catholic, homeless, Asian, dyslexic, married, and so forth. Many individuals have social identities comprising more than one attribute. A person could simultaneously be a mother, an engineer, Muslim and a city councillor. Multiple social identities reflect the many dimensions of people’s lives. While this plurality of social identities can be a potential source of conflict for people, most individuals organize meaning and experience in their lives around a primary identity which is fairly continuous over time and across place.

Social identities therefore involve a collective dimension. They mark ways that individuals are ‘the same’ as others. Shared identities – predicated on a set of common goals, values or experiences – can form an important base for social movements. Feminists, environmentalists, labour unionists, supporters of nationalist movements, and so on are all examples of cases in which a shared social identity is drawn on as a powerful source of meaning.
If social identities mark ways in which individuals are the same as others, self-identity (or personal identity) sets us apart as distinct individuals. **Self-identity** refers to the process of self-development through which we formulate a unique sense of ourselves and our relationships to the world around us. The notion of self-identity draws heavily on the work of symbolic interactionists. It is the individual’s constant negotiation with the outside world that helps to create and shape her / his sense of self. The process of interaction between self and society helps link an individual’s personal and public worlds. While the cultural and social environment is a factor in the shaping of self-identity, individual agency and choice are of central importance.

Tracing the changes in self-identity from traditional to modern societies, we can see a shift away from the fixed, inherited factors that earlier guided identity formation. If at one time people’s identities were largely informed by their membership in broad social groups, bound by class or nationality, they are now more multifaceted and less stable. The processes of urban growth, industrialization and the breakdown of earlier social formations have weakened the impact of inherited rules and conventions. Individuals have become more socially and geographically mobile. This has freed people from the tight-knit, relatively homogeneous communities of the past where patterns were passed down in a fixed way across generations. It has created the space for other sources of meaning, such as gender and sexual orientation, to play a greater role in people’s sense of identity.

In today’s world, we have unprecedented opportunities to make ourselves and to create our own identities. We are our own best resources in defining who we are, where we have come from, and where we are going. Now that the traditional signposts have become less essential, the social world confronts us with a dizzying array of choices about who to be, how to live and what to do – without offering much guidance about which selections to make. The decisions we take in our everyday lives – about what to wear, how to behave and how to spend our time – help make us who we are. The modern world forces us to find ourselves. Through our capacity as self-conscious, self-aware human beings, we constantly create and recreate our identities.

**Reference**


**Questions**

1. What is the correlation between socialization and social control?
2. How is social role significant in the process of social control?
3. ‘The concept of identity in sociology is a multifaceted one’. Explain.
4. What is the difference between social identity and self identity?
5. Explain the shifts from the fixed, inherited factors that earlier guided identity formation?