4.7D: Stages of Socialization Throughout the Life Span

The socialization process can be separated into two main stages: primary socialization and secondary socialization.

Learning Objectives

• Give examples of how the socialization process progresses throughout a person’s life

Key Points

• The life process of socialization is generally divided into two parts: primary and secondary socialization.
• Primary socialization takes place early in life, as a child and adolescent. This is when an individual develops their core identity.
• Secondary socialization takes place throughout an individual’s life, both as a child and as one encounters new groups. This involves more specific changes in response to the acquisition of new group memberships and roles and differently structured social situations.
• Some of the more significant contributors to the socialization process are: parents, guardians, friends, schools, siblings or other family members, social clubs (like religions or sports teams), life partners (romantic or platonic), and co-workers.

Key Terms

• **secondary socialization**: The socialization that takes place throughout one’s life, both as a child and as one encounters new groups that require additional socialization.
• **primary socialization**: The socialization that takes place early in life, as a child and adolescent.
Socialization is a life process, but is generally divided into two parts: primary and secondary socialization.

**Primary Socialization:** The nuclear family serves as the primary force of socialization for young children.

Primary socialization takes place early in life, as a child and adolescent. Secondary socialization refers to the socialization that takes place throughout one’s life, both as a child and as one encounters new groups that require additional socialization. While there are scholars who argue that only one or the other of these occurs, most social scientists tend to combine the two, arguing that the basic or core identity of the individual develops during primary socialization, with more specific changes occurring later—secondary socialization—in response to the acquisition of new group memberships and roles and differently structured social situations. The need for later-life socialization may stem from the increasing complexity of society with its corresponding increase in varied roles and responsibilities.

**Secondary Socialization:** By the time individuals are in their preteen or teenage years, peer groups play a more powerful role in socialization than family members.

Mortimer and Simmons outline three specific ways these two parts of socialization differ:

1. **Content:** Socialization in childhood is thought to be concerned with the regulation of biological drives. In adolescence, socialization is concerned with the development of overarching values and the self-image. In adulthood, socialization involves more overt and specific norms and behaviors, such as those related to the work...
role as well as more superficial personality features.

2. Context: In earlier periods, the socializee (the person being socialized) more clearly assumes the status of learner within the context of the initial setting (which may be a family of orientation, an orphanage, a period of homelessness, or any other initial social groups at the beginning of a child’s life), the school (or other educational context), or the peer group. Also, relationships in the earlier period are more likely to be affectively charged, i.e., highly emotional. In adulthood, though the socializee takes the role of student at times, much socialization occurs after the socializee has assumed full incumbency of the adult role. There is also a greater likelihood of more formal relationships due to situational contexts (e.g., work environment), which moderates down the affective component.

3. Response: The child and adolescent may be more easily malleable than the adult. Also, much adult socialization is self-initiated and voluntary; adults can leave or terminate the process at any time if they have the proper resources (symbolic, financial, and social) to do so.

Socialization is, of course, a social process. As such, it involves interactions between people. Socialization, as noted in the distinction between primary and secondary, can take place in multiple contexts and as a result of contact with numerous groups. Some of the more significant contributors to the socialization process are: parents, guardians, friends, schools, siblings or other family members, social clubs (like religions or sports teams), life partners (romantic or platonic), and co-workers. Each of these groups include a culture that must be learned and to some degree appropriated by the socializee in order to gain admittance to the group.