

KS-3 Sociology (Lesson1)

Culture, Identity and Socialisation

Society

Society is not something natural or fixed; it is created by people through their everyday interactions. Culture, norms, and values are made by society and guide how we think and behave. At the same time, our actions keep shaping and changing society, making it an ongoing process. Society is a group of people who live together and share common rules, values, and ways of life. It includes the relationships and institutions that organise how people interact with each other. In its simplest form **society is a group of people living in the same territory, sharing common values, beliefs, and ways of life. It is formed through their interactions and relationships. These people also work towards shared goals within that society.**

Understanding Culture

The term *culture* does not have a single fixed definition, but it is commonly used in two main ways. In everyday language, culture often refers to “high culture,” including art, music, and literature. It can also refer to “popular culture,” such as media, fashion, and advertising. However, in sociology, culture is understood more broadly as a society’s entire way of life.

In this wider sense, culture shapes nearly every aspect of human behaviour. People constantly refer, consciously or unconsciously, to their society for guidance on how to think and act. Culture includes everyday practices such as what people eat and drink, how they dress, the language they use, how they spend leisure time, the nature of their homes and families, the work they do, and their religious or spiritual beliefs. It also includes shared celebrations and festivals.

Every society develops ideas about what is considered right or wrong in these areas, showing how deeply culture influences daily life.

The Relationship Between Society and Culture

Society and culture are closely linked, although they are not the same. Society refers to the structure made up of institutions, both formal, such as education and legal systems, and informal, such as the family. Culture, on the other hand, refers to how these institutions operate and the expectations they create about behaviour and roles.

Neither can exist without the other. Society provides the framework, while culture gives meaning and direction to social life. Within this structure, individuals develop their identities.

Identity and the Social Self

Identity refers to an individual's understanding of who they are, how they see themselves, and how they believe they are similar to or different from others. This sense of self is not developed in isolation. Instead, it is heavily influenced by how others perceive and respond to us.

People receive feedback from others about their behaviour, but even without direct feedback, they can imagine how others might judge them. This ability to see oneself from another's perspective shows how identity is socially constructed and shaped through interaction.

The Social Construction of Identity

Social identity is socially constructed, meaning it is shaped through interaction and cultural influences rather than being purely natural or fixed. Individuals form their identities based on the norms, values, and expectations of society. This process connects personal identity with social roles and group membership. Sociologist Stuart Hall argued that in modern society, identities are becoming more complex due to cultural diversity and the increasing number of roles individuals perform. While this provides more freedom and choice, it can also create uncertainty and confusion about one's sense of self.

Norms and Values as Elements of Culture

Two fundamental components of culture are norms and values, which guide behaviour and shape social expectations.

Norms

Norms are the expected patterns of behaviour within a society. They vary widely, from simple everyday practices to deeply significant rules about right and wrong. For example, greeting someone may involve a handshake in one society and a bow in another.

Some norms become so widely accepted that they turn into customs, while others are formalised into laws and regulations. Norms are usually enforced informally through social approval or disapproval, whereas laws are enforced formally through institutions such as the legal system.

Values

Values are the underlying beliefs about what is good, right, and important. They guide how individuals think and act. While people may believe they hold personal values, these are usually shared with others in their society.

Values shape norms. For instance, if a society values personal space, this will influence norms about how closely people stand or where they choose to sit. Understanding values allows individuals to predict appropriate behaviour even in unfamiliar situations.

Cultural Variation and Social Construction

Norms and values differ across societies, demonstrating that they are not universal or natural. People are not born with them; they learn them through socialisation. For example, ideas about personal space vary widely. In some cultures, standing close during conversation is normal, while in others it may feel uncomfortable.

Similarly, values surrounding wealth and possessions differ. In many modern industrial societies, wealth and material success are seen as indicators of status. In contrast, among Indigenous American communities, wealth was traditionally demonstrated through generosity, such as giving away possessions during potlatch ceremonies. This highlights how values can vary dramatically between cultures.

Changes in Norms and Values Over Time

Norms and values are not fixed; they change over time as societies evolve. The sociologist Norbert Elias, in *The Civilising Process*, explained how behaviour in Europe became more regulated over centuries. During the Middle Ages, social behaviour was far less restricted—people commonly shared beds with strangers, ate with their hands from communal bowls, and showed little concern for privacy or bodily control. However, as state power grew and societies became more organised, expectations of behaviour became stricter.

In contemporary society, change is driven less by state formation and more by shifts in lifestyle, technology, and digital dependence. For example, the rise of smartphones and social media has reshaped norms of interaction—constant connectivity, checking phones during conversations, and communicating through screens are now widely accepted behaviours. Similarly, ideas about work, leisure, and relationships have changed, with remote working, online learning, and virtual friendships becoming normalised. These changes show that norms continue to adapt to new social conditions, particularly in a digital age where behaviour is increasingly influenced not just by immediate surroundings, but by global online cultures.

Symbols and Language in Culture

Other important aspects of culture include symbols and language, both of which are closely linked to norms and values. A symbol is something that carries a shared meaning within a culture. For example, a religious symbol, a national flag, or even clothing associated with a particular group can communicate identity and beliefs. Understanding these symbols is part of cultural knowledge.

Language itself is a system of symbols, where words and sounds convey meaning. It allows communication between individuals and is governed by norms, for instance, using formal language in professional settings or avoiding offensive words in polite conversation.

Social Order and Control

Because people in a society share common norms and values, social life tends to be orderly and predictable. Individuals can anticipate how others will behave and how they will respond in different situations.

However, not everyone follows all norms. Societies have mechanisms to deal with this, including expressing disapproval or applying pressure to conform. These mechanisms help maintain social stability.

Status and Role

Understanding Status

Most norms in society are linked to *status*, which refers to the position a person holds within a society. For example, a student has the status of a learner, while a teacher holds the status of an educator. However, individuals do not have just one status; they hold multiple statuses at the same time. Within a family, a person may be a son or daughter, and also a brother or sister.

Status can also change over time. For instance, being a teenager often means having a lower status compared to parents or adults, but this changes as an individual grows older and is recognised as an adult in society.

Ascribed and Achieved Status

In many societies, especially in the past, most statuses were *ascribed*. This means they were assigned at birth and individuals had little or no control over them. Examples include status based on gender, age, or ethnicity. Even today, some aspects of status are still ascribed.

However, in modern societies, there is a growing importance of *achieved status*. This type of status is gained through an individual's own choices and efforts. For example, the type of job a person has or the level of education they achieve can influence their status in society.

Role

Each status comes with a set of expected behaviours known as a *role*. A role includes the norms that guide how a person should act in a particular position. For instance, the role of a student involves attending classes, participating in learning, asking questions, and following classroom expectations such as sitting attentively and listening to the teacher.

Having a role can be compared to playing a part in a play. While there are expectations about how the role should be performed, individuals still have some freedom in how they carry it out. For example, a student may choose to be hardworking and engaged or careless and uninterested.

Stereotypes

Stereotypes are simplified and generalised beliefs about a group of people. They are learned through socialisation and often reinforced by the media. Although they may contain a small element of truth, stereotypes are usually exaggerated and fail to represent individual differences. They can be positive or negative, but both types can influence how people are judged and treated, especially when there is little personal experience to challenge them.

The Relativity of Culture

Human cultures differ widely across societies, and what is considered normal or acceptable in one culture may be viewed as unusual or even offensive in another. This idea is known as the **relativity of culture**, which means that norms and values are not universal or fixed but vary depending on the cultural context. It highlights that behaviours and beliefs can only be properly understood within the society in which they exist, rather than being judged by external standards.

Areas of Cultural Variation

Cultural relativity can be seen in many aspects of everyday life. Language differs significantly across societies, shaping how people communicate and interpret the world. Norms related to dress and appearance also vary, with different cultures having distinct expectations about modesty, fashion, and identity. Food and drink practices are another key area of variation, along with traditions such as rituals and festivals, which reflect the beliefs and history of a society. Additionally, ideas about morality, what is seen as right or wrong, are not the same everywhere and are deeply influenced by cultural values.

Cultural Differences in Food Practices

Food provides a clear example of cultural relativity. Different societies have specific ideas about what is acceptable to eat. For instance, certain animals or insects may be considered normal food in some cultures but unacceptable in others. Religious beliefs also strongly influence dietary habits; for example, Muslims avoid pork and alcohol, while followers of Jainism avoid harming living beings and therefore follow strict vegetarian diets, sometimes even avoiding root vegetables. Cooking methods also vary, while many cultures prefer cooked food, others include raw items such as fish in their diets. Eating practices differ too, including the use of hands, chopsticks, or cutlery, as well as customs about who eats together and at what times.

Globalisation and the 'Global Village'

In recent decades, increased travel, migration, and the rapid growth of global media have made people far more aware of cultural differences. This has contributed to the idea of a 'global village', a concept popularised by Marshall McLuhan, where societies across the world are closely interconnected despite geographical distance. Today, major international events such as the Olympic Games or the FIFA World Cup are experienced simultaneously by global audiences through television and digital platforms, allowing people to engage with cultures beyond their own.

Cultural Change and Concerns About Uniformity

Despite the benefits of cultural exchange, some sociologists argue that globalisation may lead to **cultural uniformity**, where cultures become more alike over time. The influence of Western societies, particularly Europe and the United States, has spread widely, shaping lifestyles, consumption patterns, and values across the world. This raises concerns that cultural diversity may decline, with unique traditions and identities being replaced by a more standardised global culture.

The Nature Vs. Nurture Debate

The nature–nurture debate explores whether human behaviour, personality, and attitudes are mainly shaped by **biology (nature)** or by the **social environment (nurture)**. This debate has existed for many years, with strong arguments on both sides. However, more recent research suggests that behaviour is best understood as a result of the interaction between both nature and nurture, rather than one acting alone. Sociologists generally focus more on nurture because they are interested in how social and cultural influences shape individuals.

Determinism: Extreme Positions

The most extreme views within this debate are known as **determinism**, where behaviour is seen as being controlled by one dominant factor. **Biological determinists** argue that human behaviour is largely determined by genetic inheritance and natural instincts. In contrast, **social determinists** believe that behaviour is shaped primarily by social forces such as culture, norms, and values. These two positions represent opposite ends of the debate, each emphasising one influence over the other.

The Nature Perspective

Supporters of the nature side, including sociobiologists, argue that human behaviour is driven by biological instincts and inherited characteristics. It is well established that physical traits such as eye colour and hair colour are passed down through genes. Extending this idea, nature theorists suggest that behavioural traits like intelligence, personality, and even aggression may

also be inherited. From this perspective, behaviour is seen as largely fixed and biologically programmed.

The Nurture Perspective

On the other hand, sociologists argue that although individuals may inherit certain tendencies, these do not rigidly determine behaviour. Instead, behaviour is shaped through **socialisation**, the process by which individuals learn the norms and values of their society. People with similar genetic backgrounds can develop very different personalities depending on their environment and experiences. This view also highlights human agency—the ability to make choices about how to behave. For example, while biological determinists may view aggression as inherited, sociologists examine how different cultures encourage or discourage aggressive behaviour, such as the expectation in some societies that men express aggression more openly than women.

Evidence from Feral Children

One of the strongest arguments in favour of nurture comes from the study of **feral children**, children who have grown up with little or no human contact. These children often face significant challenges when introduced to society, particularly in learning language and forming social relationships. Their difficulties suggest that many aspects of human behaviour, including communication and social interaction, are not innate but must be learned through interaction with others. This evidence supports the idea that the social environment plays a crucial role in shaping who we become.

Meaning of Socialisation, Norms and Values

Socialisation is the lifelong process through which individuals learn the norms and values of their culture. This learning takes place through various **agencies of socialisation**, such as the family, education system, peer groups, media, religion, and the workplace. These agencies help individuals understand how to behave, what is acceptable, and how to function as members of society.

Although socialisation continues throughout life, the most crucial stage is **primary socialisation**, which occurs in early childhood within the family. During this stage, children learn basic social skills such as communication, behaviour, and interaction. As humans are born dependent, they must gradually learn how to live within their cultural environment, ensuring the continuity and stability of society over time.

Primary and Secondary Socialisation

Primary socialisation mainly occurs in the family during infancy and early childhood. Here, children learn fundamental norms and values, such as manners, language, and ideas about right and wrong.

As individuals grow older, they enter **secondary socialisation**, which takes place through institutions like schools, peer groups, media, religion, and workplaces. In this stage, individuals learn new roles and expectations when they encounter new situations, such as starting school, beginning a job, or entering marriage.

In some cases, individuals experience **resocialisation**, where they must completely adapt to a new set of norms and values. This happens in situations like joining the military, migrating to a new country, or being imprisoned, where previous behaviours may no longer be appropriate.

Active Role of Individuals in Socialisation

Socialisation is not a passive process. Individuals actively interpret and respond to the messages they receive. They think about how others perceive them and may accept or reject certain norms and values. For instance, a young person may experience conflicting expectations from family and peer groups and must decide which values to follow.

Key Agencies of Socialisation

The Family

The family is the most significant agent of socialisation, especially during early childhood. Children learn language, behaviour, and cultural values by observing and interacting with family members. Family structures vary, including nuclear families, single-parent families, and extended families, leading to diverse socialisation experiences.

Some sociologists argue that a stable two-parent family is essential for effective socialisation, suggesting that its absence may lead to negative outcomes such as deviance or emotional difficulties. However, the family continues to influence individuals even in adulthood.

Education

The education system plays a major role in shaping behaviour and values. In addition to the formal curriculum, students learn the **hidden curriculum**, which includes discipline, respect for authority, and acceptance of hierarchy.

For many children, school is the first formal institution they encounter, and they spend a significant part of their formative years there. As a result, education has a long-lasting impact on their future roles and life chances.

Peer Groups

Peer groups consist of individuals of similar age and status. They are particularly influential during adolescence, as the desire to belong and fit in is very strong.

Peer groups shape behaviour through **peer pressure**, encouraging individuals to conform to group norms. This influence can sometimes conflict with the expectations of family or school, making peer groups a powerful force in socialisation.

Media

The media is a major agent of socialisation in modern society. It includes television, radio, newspapers, and increasingly, digital and social media platforms.

The media provides information about the world and influences people's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours. However, it often presents **stereotypical representations** of social groups, which can reinforce biases and inequalities. Despite this, individuals are not passive; they actively interpret media messages.

Religion

Religion can strongly influence an individual's values and behaviour. Through places of worship and religious teachings, individuals learn moral guidelines and expectations.

In many societies, religion remains a powerful agent of socialisation, as its teachings are often seen as coming from a higher authority. However, in some regions, particularly in parts of Europe, the influence of religion is declining due to **secularisation**, where societies become less religious.

Workplace

The workplace is an important agent of socialisation in adulthood. When individuals start a job, they learn expected behaviours, roles, and workplace norms.

Through training and interaction with colleagues, individuals adapt to workplace culture. The concept of **canteen culture** highlights how workers develop shared norms and values through informal interactions, influencing behaviour and attitudes.

Processes of Socialisation

Socialisation occurs through several key processes that shape behaviour from an early age.

Imitation and Reinforcement

Children often learn through imitation, copying the behaviour of others. They are more likely to repeat actions that are rewarded, a process known as **positive reinforcement**. Conversely, behaviour may be discouraged through negative sanctions.

Canalisation

Canalisation refers to the way children are guided towards gender-specific behaviours. For example, girls may be encouraged to engage in activities like dancing, while boys may be directed towards sports. This process reinforces traditional gender roles.

Role Modelling

Individuals learn by observing **role models**, people they admire and wish to imitate. These can include parents, teachers, celebrities, or influencers. Positive role models can encourage desirable behaviour.

Media Influence

Media plays a continuous role in shaping behaviour across the life course. It can influence attitudes towards crime, consumption, and social groups. While some fear negative effects, research suggests that individuals critically engage with media rather than simply accepting its messages.

Peer Pressure

Peer pressure can be both direct and indirect. **Active peer pressure** involves direct encouragement or coercion to behave in certain ways, while indirect pressure occurs when individuals change behaviour to fit in. Social media has intensified peer pressure, where approval is often measured through likes and shares.

Religious Teachings

Religious teachings provide moral guidelines for behaviour. For example, principles like the **Five Pillars of Islam** or the **Ten Commandments** guide followers in their daily lives and decisions.

Workplace Training

Workplace training helps individuals adjust to job expectations and organisational culture. It ensures that employees understand both their tasks and how to interact effectively with colleagues.

Conclusion

Overall, socialisation is a complex and continuous process shaped by multiple agencies and experiences. It ensures that individuals learn the norms and values necessary for social life, while also allowing them the flexibility to question, adapt, and shape their own identities within society.