

“A” Level Sociology

Teaching Notes

Module: Family Life

Unit 5b: Gender Socialisation

Introduction

The main Aims of these Notes are to help you understand:

1. The process of gender socialisation as it develops throughout childhood.
2. The relationship between the individual and various agencies of socialisation.

The main Objectives of this Study Pack are to help you understand:

1. The process of primary socialisation.
2. The ideological significance of children's toys and books.

The Process of Gender Socialisation.

In the social sciences generally, the nature of the relationship between **biological sex** and **gender** can, for convenience, be expressed in terms of two basic perspectives:

1. The claim that the biological / genetic processes that combine to create **biological sex differences** in some way **determine** the shaping of **gender characteristics**.

These "basic and fundamental" differences - expressed **anatomically** by such things as different:

External genitalia,

Internal organs of reproduction (a womb, for example),

Brain functions,

Hormonal states (chemical reactions which function, in part, to regulate an individual's body to enable them to partake in the reproductive process - females produce greater levels of oestrogen, males greater levels of testosterone, for example),

Secondary sexual characteristics (the most obvious being larger female breasts, buttocks and so forth),

- are considered to contribute, in some way, to the shaping of gender characteristics.

Whatever the supposed biological cause (hormonal differences, differences in brain functions, differences in physical stature and so forth), the basic idea is fairly simple to express:

Natural biological differences predispose males and females to **different gender characteristics**. The differences in gender behaviour that we see in our society, for example, result from fundamental biological differences.

A variety of writers have adopted this type of argument (or a variation of it) ranging from the "hard biology" of sociobiologists and some radical feminists to the "soft biology" of Functionalists like Parsons and Murdock.

Question:

Briefly define what is meant by the terms "hard" and "soft" biology.

2. For the vast majority of **sociologists**, however, the relationship between sex and gender is viewed rather differently. For writers such as **Ruth Hartley** and **Ann Oakley**, "**gender**" represents a set of **learned social attributes**.

"Gender", in this respect, relates to "sex" **ideologically** (or **subjectively**) insofar as **observable biological sex differences** are merely used to **justify** differential socialisation and **differential treatment** based upon biological sex.

In relation to this position, biological sex is only significant insofar as it can be used to **discriminate** against a particular group of people (men or women). There is no hard-and-fast relationship between gender roles and biological sex - only an unjustifiable assumption that sex determines gender.

Thus, for writers adopting this perspective, gender is related to sex only in the minds of those who want to justify gender inequalities (usually, but not exclusively, involving the domination of females by males).

This argument involves the idea that the relationship between gender and sex is a **political** one based upon an **ideology of male domination** (or "**patriarchy**").

To argue that "sex determines gender" is as unhelpful as arguing that "being born" is a cause of death - there is a relationship between the two (just as there is a relationship between sex and gender), but it is difficult to justify the idea that it is a causal one...

In relation to the above, an analogy here can be made to the way in which **blacks** have been variously **discriminated against** by **whites** on the basis of **skin colour**. In "Sex, Gender and Society", 1972, for example, **Oakley** draws upon the work of **Helen Hacker** to show how both **females** and **blacks** are basically "**minority groups**" (in the sense of being discriminated against) and have been given various **stereotyped characteristics** that show a wide degree of similarity (Hacker, for example, draws some interesting parallels between the various ways black Americans and women have been portrayed through, for example, the media.

Of the two positions I've outlined above, I want to concentrate on the **second** (the idea that gender is socially constructed) for a couple of reasons:

1. Firstly, the evidence for the idea that "sex determines gender" tends to be patchy, inconclusive and mainly restricted to animal studies / experiments.
2. Secondly, the latter position appears far more **plausible** than the former when we consider the concept of **power** in the context of gender socialisation (something that **Oakley** advocates and which tends to be overlooked when the attempt is made to translate evidence collected from animal studies into the human world).

If you want to review some of the evidence for the former position, both **Haralambos** ("Themes and Perspectives" pp 522 - 527) and **Giddens** ("Sociology" pp 156 - 161) cover this area in some detail.

What we need to do now, therefore, is to look at the way **gender identities** can be considered to be a **product** of the **socialisation process** in any society.

From Conception To Adulthood: Gender Socialisation.

It's an obvious - but important - point to note that any human infant is born into a culture that already exists and this culture involves a multitude of social relationships (both inter-personal and institutional). Not only does this mean that a child has to **learn** how to fit into these **existing cultural arrangements**, it also means that the people charged with the task of raising an infant already possess a set of ideas (an "**ideology**") about how to raise that child in line with the various moral and normative expectations of the social groups and society to which they belong.

In this respect, **gender preconceptions** about **how** males and females should be raised, **how** they should respond to adult stimulation (such as **toys, books and language**) and so forth are already in place from the moment a child is born. Thus, a baby is born into an already **existing cultural environment** - with all its attendant **labels, categorisations, expectations and cultural preferences**.

From the moment of birth - once the **identifying label** of "male" or "female" is applied upon the basis of genital identification (very sophisticated isn't it - so sophisticated in fact that sometimes a misidentification takes place) - a human infant is categorised on the basis of their biology.

The child is **not**, however, **simply identified** as **male or female**, since these are merely labels on the boxes that contain socially defined characteristics associated with "masculinity" and "femininity" in the society into which the child is born. Whilst all societies recognise biological sex differences, they may attribute very different gender characteristics to the respective sexes. In effect, therefore, the child is categorised in terms of gender (using sex as the initial mechanism of such a categorisation).

"He" is **not simply male**, but **heir** to a wide range of **social traits** that our culture attributes to "being male" (masculinity).

"She", similarly, is **not merely female**, but **heiress** to the (different) range of **social traits** that our culture associates with masculinity.

Question:

I've used the analogy of boxes to illustrate the idea of categorisation. If you think about the biological names "male" and "female" as labels tied to two different boxes, what kind of "masculine" and "feminine" traits might you expect to find within each box?

The main point here is that **parents** have a **socially derived** and **socially constructed "world view"** (or "**ideological framework**") that tells them something about the kinds of behaviour that the people in their culture **expect** from males and females. Their objective, as parents, therefore, is to raise their children in line with the generally-held **normative expectations** associated with gender appropriate behaviour.

This is significant when we consider that, for the first few months of its life, the human baby is totally dependent upon adults not just for its physical survival but also for its social stimulation. A baby is born into a strange world of light and sound that it is not fully-equipped to understand...

However, we should **not assume** that because it doesn't understand it is **not conscious** of its surroundings - on the contrary, even new-born babies are involved in the rapid learning process (albeit largely unconsciously). One of the most significant stages in child development is the learning of language, but language - as a form of communication - has many dimensions and is not restricted to verbal utterances.

Non-verbal communication, for example, is important at this early stage in a child's development. The child will be aware of **physical differences** in the way it is **handled**, for example, as well as differences in **smell, tone of voice** and so forth between males and females. Even at this early stage in its development a child is aware - at a primitive level of comprehension - of gender differences.

As a child develops physically within their cultural environment it is generally considered that, by the age of 2, a child knows whether they are a boy or a girl.

By 5 or 6 the child will have come to understand that "gender" does not change and that male / female differences are anatomically based.

What this starts to demonstrate is the **process of socialisation** that begins when a child is born and that the **label** applied to it is a **key cultural categorisation** (that is, it represents a "**master label**"; in this case, an **ascribed** label (one that is given to us regardless of whether we want or accept it) that will stay with the child for the rest of its life.

This idea is important - not just in relation to gender but to all forms of socialisation - because it allows us to note two major ideas:

1. Firstly, any **socialisation** process must have a **cultural context**. That is, a set of existing values and associated norms into which the child is to be socialised.
2. Secondly, just as **adults** (parents, for example) develop **mental maps** concerning acceptable and unacceptable cultural values and norms that reflect their knowledge and experience in and of the social world, so too does a **child**...

These two points lead us neatly to a further observation about the nature of any socialisation process (further proof, if proof be needed, of the well-structured and very cleverly constructed nature of these Notes).

The **cultural context** in which we develop as an individual sets various **boundaries** for our behaviour, **some** of which are **highly specific** and **rigid**, **others** which are **highly generalised** and **open to various interpretations**. The socialisation process to which children are subjected reflects adult's knowledge of these boundaries (they are landmarks, if you like that guide the development of our mental maps / ideological frameworks concerning such things as "how to be a female, husband, child, friend, lover, check-out operator, brain surgeon or whatever).

However, whilst we will be made **aware** of various **behavioural boundaries**, we are **not** simply "**prisoners of our socialisation**" (just as we are not simply "prisoners of our biology"). As **conscious, reflective** (that is, we think about what we do and why we do it), human beings we are able to **interpret** our experiences in and of the social world in order to define ourselves and our relationship to others - in short, **to shape our own socialisation** by a process of **selection, rejection, questioning** and so forth.

For example, in our society, the cultural context of masculinity / femininity specifies various dress codes appropriate to each gender (they also apply to age). As a male, I am aware of these codes and have been socialised to recognise that some forms of dress are not considered socially-appropriate for males.

I am aware, as a well-socialised male that if I choose to walk down the street wearing a blouse, knee-length skirt, tights and high-heeled shoes topped-off with a rather fetching fake leopard-skin pill-box hat I will be **infringing** one of the **boundaries** of male / female gender distinction.

There is, in our society, nothing legally to stop me acting in this way. If I want to dress in this way, I can (some societies have much stricter dress codes however - Islamic fundamentalist societies, (such as Iran), attempt to enforce a strict dress-code, for females especially).

However, because such a choice is so far **beyond the cultural norm** for male behaviour in our society, there's a very good chance that people will be **disturbed** (and possibly **offended**) by my choice of action - and they will express their annoyance in various ways.

They will stare at me, pass comment about my appearance to their companions and to my face. I can expect to be called "queer", "poof", "transvestite" and the like and I suspect that my behaviour would produce a response in many people (males especially) that would involve both threats and physical violence.

For these reasons - although I am aware of the fact that I can dress any way that I choose - I tend to conform to broadly expected patterns of male dress in our society (at least in public). My socialisation tells me that **not** to conform (to "**deviate**") runs the risk of all kinds of **social sanctions** (verbal, physical and so forth) being applied to me.

Not wishing to subject myself to these problems,(of "paying the price" for my deviation), I refrain from wearing such clothes. In effect, this represents a form of "**self-socialisation**" - I don't need to actually do something because my experience of the socialisation process in our society has given me a reasonable idea about the boundaries of acceptable / unacceptable behaviour appropriate to a male.

Having established in your mind, I hope, the idea that the process of **socialisation** involves a **mixture** of **boundary-setting**, **social control** (both **external** - what others do to you) and **internal** - what you do to yourself) and **interpretation**, we need to now look in more detail at the process of gender socialisation that surrounds and envelops the developing child in his or her environment.

In the first place, we can divide the concept of socialisation into two main ideas:

1. The **process of socialisation** (what socialisation involves and how it is carried out). This includes discussion of concepts like:

Role, Status, Values and Norms.

2. **Agencies of socialisation** (who or what does the socialising): These include things like:

Adults (parents, friends, teachers, etc.).

Mass Media.

Toys.

Books.

1. The Process of Socialisation

We can start to look at the **general process of socialisation** by using the concept of "**role**" (or "**role play**"). In particular, we can examine it in relation to the contribution made by **George Herbert Mead** (see "Mind, Self and Society", 1933) to our understanding of the socialisation process.

For **Mead**, amongst others, **children** start to develop as **social beings** (that is, recognising who they are and what their relationship to others is), through a process of **imitation**. This involves, **initially**, the simple **copying** of behaviour and, as the **child develops**, **experimentation** and **innovation**.

Question:

Can you think of any examples of how very young children copy the behaviour of the people around them?

As the child starts to **interact** with other children (her / his "**peers**"), Mead noted that "**play**" assumes greater significance, mainly because the child has to **learn how to cope with the behavioural responses of others on an equal footing**. This is the start of a **more-structured phase** in the child's **socialisation**, insofar as she / he learns how to cope with the behaviour of others by adopting "**role play**".

Mead argued that this stage in a child's social development is significant because it is through this initial **role play** that a child starts to **see itself "through the eyes of others"**. By taking what **Mead** called the "**role of the other**", the child starts to see itself as it **thinks** other people might see it (in sociological terms "**objectively**" as opposed to "**subjectively**").

Mead talked about this change in terms of the concept of "**The Self**" - the way a child develops both a concept of **self-awareness** and **self-consciousness** (in the sense of being aware that others see them as "a child, a friend, a son", etc.).

In general social terms, it is vital that the child develops a **sense of self** since it involves a **recognition** and **consideration** of the **needs of others**. In this respect, the child **moves** from a position of **self-centredness** (the child as a simple demander of attention) to "**other-centredness**" (an awareness that other people have needs, rights, responsibilities, etc. that have to be taken into account).

As this social development takes place, the child starts to come into increasing contact with children and adults outside the immediate family environment and it starts to recognise **instrumental** as opposed to **affective relationships** (that is, relationships based on what people can do for you, as opposed to relationships based upon mutual love, respect, etc.). For Mead, the "**simple play**" phases starts to give way to a "**game**" phase - the **relatively unstructured nature of (self-centred) play gives way to participation in more-structured (other centred) games**.

"**Game play**" is also significant because it introduces the child to a **wider network of rules** and **obligations** that it begins to meet in its dealings with the **wider society** outside the immediate family group. **Mead** called this "knowledge of **the generalised other**" - not a person, as such, but **the embodiment of general cultural values and morals**. The child acts towards this **sense** of the **generalised other** as he or she would towards a person, since the **generalised other** represents a **set of behavioural rules and guide-lines** against which behaviour (appropriate and inappropriate) can be measured.

If you think back to the "dress-code" **example** I used, I decide not to wear "female" clothing in public **not** because I am afraid of the **social reaction** of any **one** person. My conception of a generalised other (the various people I am likely to encounter) tells me that they would, as a **group**, be offended by my actions.

In a sense, by **internalising** the concept of a **generalised other** (that is, making it a part of its **personal value system** - albeit **unconsciously**) the child starts to understand the full **meaning** of **instrumental**-type relationships.

As I hope can be seen from this brief overview of what is a very complicated body of work and ideas, the various stages involved in the socialisation are many and varied. What it would be useful to do now, therefore, is to look more **specifically** at this **social learning process**, especially as it applies to **gender learning**.

In this respect, we can look at **four main aspects** of the (**primary**) **socialisation** process within **family** groups, namely:

- a. **Imitation.**
- b. **Identification.**
- c. **Role Learning.**
- d. **Conditioning.**

It's important to note that the following observations are a rather "**idealised**" picture of the socialisation process - not all families conform to the various **stereotypes** involved, for example. In addition, the descriptions that follow relate to a **dual-parent, nuclear family** where the **parents** occupy "**traditional**" **gender roles**. I've organised things this way simply to **describe the basic mechanics of the socialisation process**, so it's important to keep this in mind as you work your way through the information...

1. **Imitation.**

One of the earliest ways in which a child starts to become socialised into the culture of any society is through the **observation** and **imitation** of the people around it. Children's play activities, for example, tend to reflect the imitation of adult life and these involve such "traditional" role playing activities as "mothers and fathers" and the rather less-traditional **imitation** of television characters.

Girls have a ready source of imitation within the family group, insofar as they are able to **identify** with their mother (see below). At an early stage in their social development, **girls** tend to **imitate** the form of their **mother's** life (cooking, cleaning, washing and so forth) without particularly understanding the **content** (why these tasks have to be done, the purpose of such tasks and so forth).

The idea of **normality** is significant here, since **girls** tend to learn the **norms** of **female behaviour** in our society through the **constant repetition** and **reinforcement** of this behaviour (the mother, for example, "always" doing the cooking). In this we can see the way **norms** of behaviour become **internalised** (by both males and females).

The world of **family life** becomes a sort of "**taken for granted**" **world** in which it is the task of the female to work inside the home and the task of the male to work outside the home.

For **boys**, while it's evident that a male child will still attempt to **imitate** the world of his **father** - something he will be readily encouraged to do, just as girls are encouraged in different ways to imitate the world of their mother - it's rather more **difficult** for boys in this respect since for long periods of time the **father** is **absent** from home "at **work**". Since boys have no experience of "work", as such, they also tend to adopt more readily **images of masculinity** from **other sources**, such as **television, comics, video games** and the like.

2. Identification.

The process of gender identification within a family group is one that **appears** to evolve "naturally". **Girls identify** with their **mother** and **boys** with the **father** because they are of the **same biological sex**. However, this process is actually the result of **subtle** - and not so subtle - process of **gender identification** encouraged by a child's parents (consciously and unconsciously).

Question:

In what ways do you think parents encourage gender socialisation (if it's applicable, you might like to think about examples from your socialisation):

- a. Consciously.
- b. Unconsciously.

As **girls** look for **role models** to identify with, so the **earliest model** is their **mother** (it need **not**, of course, be their **natural mother**).

Similarly, for **boys** their **earliest role model** will be their **father** and it is generally true that children are encouraged to act out the adult roles they see around them.

By **identifying** herself with her mother, girls start to acquire the **norms** associated with this **female role**. Parents **encourage** this **gender identification** through their **words** and **actions** - encouraging girls to "help their mother in the kitchen", for example. At a very early age, gender identification tends to be **encouraged** and **reinforced** in many subtle ways – for example, girls attracting praise for being "neat", "helpful", "pretty" and so forth (that is, for displaying the "**feminine**" traits that her parents **associate** with being female).

Conversely, girls may attract **criticism** for behaving in ways that are **not** "ladylike" - shouting, screaming, biting, fighting and so forth. Again, this is a form of gender socialisation - controlling a child's behaviour through punishment rather than through rewards.

Boys, on the other hand, are **similarly encouraged** to identify with their father, again through words and actions. The norms associated with male adult behaviour tend to include relatively long absences from the home (something which the child is unlikely to be able to understand since, as I've noted, the concept of work is one they will not have directly experienced). However, boys rapidly make the **connection** between "absence" (**work**) and **power**, since the person with most power and authority within the home is likely to be the father.

3. Role Learning

All children have to learn about **role** playing since, as I've suggested, it represents a means whereby our lives achieve some sort of **structure**. Within the family group, children are able to **experiment** with different roles - some of which reflect real social roles (mother, father, milkman) and others which give expression to fantasies (He-Man, She-Ra, Superman, Ninja turtles or whatever the current craze may be). These **fantasy roles** also reflect male / female roles, of course, but in ways that tend to be less-direct than their "real-life" counterparts.

As I have suggested, all **roles** in our society represent **socially-created ideas** about how it is **normal** for men and women to behave. There is no natural law, for example, that states that women have to stay at home and rear children while men have to work to provide for their family.

Parents, of course, have been through the type of **socialisation process** that their children are subjected to and, because of their own socialisation, parents develop fairly **explicit ideas** about the **right** and **wrong** ways for their children to behave in relation to their **gender**. If you think about it, parents must use their socialisation experiences as a **guide** for the socialisation of their children - which, in turn, helps to explain why fairly rigid forms of "traditional" gender roles manage to persist over time.

Female roles in our society still tend to stress the idea that the main female role is that of a **mother** - someone who assumes **primary responsibility** for **child care**. Girls are **actively encouraged** to develop role play that mirrors adult expectations of their child's future adult role(s). **Toys**, in this respect, represent an important **learning tool** - the toy vacuum cleaner and washing machine, the doll and so forth. As we've seen, **adult expectations** are also communicated more directly, with girls being **praised** for displaying what their parents believe to be correct role orientations. **Typically**, we find that girls are encouraged to behave passively, especially in the company of boys.

Boys, on the other hand, quickly learn that their **major role** in life is **expected** to be as an **economic provider** for a family - the person who goes out into the wider social world to earn a living. **Male toys** similarly reflect this **active approach** to male socialisation. Boy's toys reflect such social attributes as the manipulation of objects (building sets, for example), exploration and, above all, doing things.

Interestingly, perhaps, when producers wanted to sell dolls to boys (boys, after all represent a huge potential market), they did so on the basis of pretending that the doll was not a doll at all - it was a soldier ("**Action Man**", for example).

Question:

Why do you think it would be difficult for a manufacturer - even today - to sell a doll to boys in the way that dolls are sold to girls?

Glenys Lobban "Data Report on British Reading Schemes", TES 01/03/74) has noted the way in which "toys" (in this case, **books**) represent a readily-available source of **sex-role socialisation** for males and females. **Lobban**, in particular, has done a great deal of work in relation to **reading schemes** and sex role representations which has shown how rigidly traditional forms of gender stereotyped behaviour are ingrained in our culture

4. Conditioning

All socialisation is, of course, an attempt to condition and control children - to raise them in ways that are acceptable to adults (their parents and those in wider society). **Conditioning**, at root, involves **systems of rewards** and **punishments**, and children quickly **learn** through **experience** (both their own and that of others) which behavioural characteristics bring rewards and which attract punishments.

Following the lead of writers such as **Hartley** and **Oakley**, there are four basic areas of gender conditioning at which we can briefly look:

a. Manipulation:

Typically, parents spend greater amounts of time with the "manipulation" of girls than with boys – where, by "manipulation", is meant such things as stressing the importance of appearance in girls, brushing their hair and the like.

b. Canalisation:

By this is meant the **channelling** of attention onto different things, depending upon the sex of the child. Girls helping their mother or boys being encouraged to play football with their father, for example, helps to **enforce** and **reinforce gender differences**. In this way, by having their behaviour channelled into specific activities, children come to learn that some activities are considered appropriate for boys and others are appropriate for girls (activities, in effect, become "**gendered**" - associated with one or other of the sexes).

c. Language:

The way in which adults use **language** towards children reflects adults' experiences of male and female roles. Not only does **praise** encourage children in their respective role play, it also implicitly **reinforces** ideas about **gender correctness**. This is important when we remember that children are constantly looking to the approval of others as confirmation that what they are doing is right. This is because it takes children time to learn, through experience, the various norms involved in behaviour.

Praising a girl for being pretty, for example, not only rewards the girl, it teaches her that if she wants to continue to receive praise then she must continue to **reproduce** the behaviour that produces such social approval.

d. Activity Exposure:

As I've noted, an important way in which children learn is to **observe** their parents and so forth. In such observation, of course, children are lead towards conceptions about what is "normal" behaviour for both men and women. Although both girls and boys are **equally exposed** to "normal" male / female relationships and activities, each sex is encouraged to **identify** with these norms in different ways.

Household chores, for example, are frequently allocated to children on the basis of their sex. Although males may be praised when they "help their mother", it tends to be made fairly explicit that this is something exceptional and not necessarily the normal way in which boys are expected to behave.

In our society, we are aware that males and females have general personality differences. This, as I've tried to show, results from a process of differential socialisation rather than from different biologies.

The following is a list of "personality characteristics" and, for each, either:

1. Put an "M" in the appropriate box if you think it is generally attributable to males or
2. Put an "F" in the appropriate box if you think it is generally attributable to females.

When considering your answers:

Think about males and females in general.

Think about it in terms of how you think people generally might answer, rather than terms of what you believe.

- | | | |
|------------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| 1. Aggressive. | 11. Stable. | 21. Intuitive. |
| 2. Kind. | 12. Insecure. | 22. Bitchy. |
| 3. Passive. | 13. Careful. | 23. Devious. |
| 4. Brave. | 14. Enterprising. | 24. Dominant. |
| 5. Tearful. | 15. Independent. | 25. Perceptive. |
| 6. Easy-going. | 16. Active. | 26. Sensitive. |
| 7. Warm-hearted. | 17. Gentle. | 27. Brash. |
| 8. Confident. | 18. Logical. | 28. Sappy. |
| 9. Adventurous. | 19. Pushy. | |
| 10. Sympathetic. | 20. Uptight. | |

My answers are at the end of this section.

Question:

To illustrate how culturally-ingrained these personality characteristics are in our society, how do you think people would categorise:

- a. An aggressive, independent, woman?
- b. A sensitive, perceptive, man?

Gender Socialisation: Some Concluding Comments...

To complete this section, it might be useful to note the following:

The **process** of gender socialisation is invariably a **complex** topic, not simply in terms of the relationship between sex and gender, but also in terms of the way in which people are exposed to socialisation - the way socialising messages are transmitted, received, acted-upon and ignored, for example.

As we have seen, **males and females** in our society appear to develop in such **consistently fundamentally different ways** that there is a great temptation to see the "**hidden hand**" of **Nature** (in the form of **biological determinism**) pushing and guiding the development of **gender identities**. In addition, the various processes of gender socialisation and differentiation are so pervasive, in our society, as to frequently **appear** to us as "**normal**" and "**natural**".

What I have tried to show, in the above, is that **gender characteristics** are **only** related to **biological sex** insofar as the latter represents a useful way for people to **start the process of gender differentiation** (the objective of this process - why people should want to do it - is something that will be discussed when we look at varieties of **Feminist** thought). The **process of gender creation** is, I hope I have shown, a **fundamentally social process**.

In looking at the way children, in particular, are socialised it's important to remember that what we've just looked at is a fairly **idealised** analysis of this process.

Socialisation is, in **reality**, a fairly **messy process** (look around you for the evidence). Adults may have "mental maps" to guide them in the appropriate ways to raise their children, but this **doesn't** mean that:

- a. Socialisation is always "successful" in terms of desired outcomes (adults frequently screw-up and get things wrong, various agencies of socialisation do not always work in harmony - they may send-out quite contradictory socialising messages (think about how your peers try to socialise you and how your parents react to this).
- b. Children are **not "passive victims"** of a **socialisation** process. There is a tendency to ignore the part played by people ("social actors") themselves (even if they are under 10 years old) in the process. In this respect, people do not simply "learn the lines written for them by others" - they may, on occasions, make-up their own lines...

Culture, Socialisation and the Individual

The process of **socialisation**, whilst being fairly easy to describe (as I hope we've seen) is actually an extremely **complex process** that involves a number of **different agents and agencies**. What I want to do now, therefore, is to try and outline as clearly as possible the **relationship** between the **individual**, the **culture** into which they are born and the process of **socialisation**.

In the first place, as we have seen an individual is **born** into a culture that already exists and, in order for that individual to eventually take part in the cultural life of their society, they have to **learn** how to do this - they have, in short, to learn the "**rules of the game**". Two points are worth noting here:

1. Although we talk about "**culture**" **as though** it is something that's relatively **fixed, unchanging** and **homogeneous**, there are in reality two distinct levels of culture to which we can refer:

- a. "**Culture**" as in a **society as a whole** (English culture, French culture, etc.).
- b. "**Culture**" as in the cultural life of various **social groups** that exist within a particular society (in effect, we are talking about **sub-cultural groupings** here).

Although an **overall cultural identity** is important to people, the second of these ideas (**sub-cultural group** membership) is probably more significant in relation to the actual socialisation process as it is experienced on an everyday basis.

2. The **relationship** between an **individual** and the **agencies** which carry-out the socialisation process is **not** a simple "**one-way**" **process**, whereby cultural **messages** are **transmitted** by various **socialising agents / agencies**, **received** by the **individual** and incorporated into that individual's "personality". Apart from the fact that **different** agencies of socialisation may transmit **different** - and perhaps **contradictory** - messages, the individual is **not simply a passive receiver** but rather **an active participant** in his / her socialisation.

We can see this idea in the classroom, for example:

I try to teach you things that I consider to be important, whilst you make various decisions concerning whether you want to record and understand this information.

Similarly, on a nice sunny day when your friends ask you to skip class to go to the beach, a conflict arises: do you miss the class and run the risk of being told-off or do you attend the class and risk offending your friends.

(In reality, of course, this "conflict" is easily resolved since you are aware that my classes are extraordinarily interesting and exciting, whilst the people that you call "friends" don't really like you at all).

By understanding these two points, we can see why:

- a. People in our society conform to broad behavioural similarities.
For example, we:

Speak the same language,
Wear clothes (whether its cold or not),
Conform to basic gender categories (male / female),
and so forth.

- b. People in our society may exhibit quite different personalities - they are able to interpret socialising influences in the light of their experience, interpretations, desires, objectives and so forth. For example, people:

May use language differently,
Wear different styles of clothing,
Test the boundaries of gender tolerance,
and so forth.

In this respect, the reason why people who receive "**similar**" types of socialisation may develop socially and psychologically quite **differently** (for example, brothers and sisters within the same family) is to be found in an **understanding** of the **relationship** between **cultural message transmission (socialisation)** and **individual environment and interpretation**.

Thus, as a child starts to develop socially, the people around that child present it with certain **broad rules of behaviour**. They will teach it to talk, to walk, how to eat "correctly", how to behave appropriately towards others and so forth.

Initially, the child is submerged in these rules of behaviour, mainly because it has no wider social experience against which to **test** these rules. They **appear** normal and natural within the limited social context of the child (usually the immediate family group).

As the child develops - and starts to learn how to talk - the role played by **language** is important, since it is by learning a language that the child learns not only how to **communicate** effectively and efficiently with others but language also opens-up the general store of **cultural knowledge** possessed by the people in any society.

In a similar way, the socialisation process provides the means whereby people learn how to communicate with others socially - in short, through its socialisation a child "**learns how to be human**". Through the socialisation process the child learns the basic rules it needs to cope with any social situation. Just as language has "rules of grammar", so the socialisation process involves rules.

We learn the rules of grammar (syntax, tense and so forth) in order to allow us to express complex ideas and we learn the rule of socialisation (roles, values, morals, norms and so forth) in order to allow us to express complex emotions (love, friendship, hate) and actions (how to work, how to learn and so forth).

Thus, the rules of grammar determine how we are able to express ourselves - they do not, of course, determine what we say...

Similarly, the **rules of socialisation** determine how we analyse / interpret various social situations (a party, a schoolroom, a place of work, a home), but how we **choose** to behave in those situations is not determined by our knowledge of our socialisation (although it will, of course, play a part in conditioning our likely behaviour).

In short, just as **rules of grammar** provide a **structure** for the expression of ideas (one that is understood by others because we have a common language. It is difficult - but not impossible - to communicate with people of a different language, but the range of ideas we can express tends to be rather limited), so our **socialisation** provides us with a **general structure** for the expression of ideas and actions.

I learn, for example, that if I mistake a "party" for a "classroom" and start to lecture various funky party animals about the shortcomings of the Hegalian Dialectic, communication tends to breakdown fairly quickly...

Just as we refer **unconsciously** to **rules of grammar** when we speak or write (because they are things we learn and use over and over again they are so familiar we don't have to think about them - something that's quite different, perhaps, when you try to learn a another language), so **in any social situation** we refer to the **rules of socialisation** that we have been **taught** - or that we have **experienced**, since as we get **older** socialisation becomes increasingly a matter of **subjective interpretation** and less a matter of passive instruction.

[My answers were: Male: 1, 4, 8, 9, 11, 14, 15, 16, 18, 19, 20, 24, 27. The remainder I saw as female].

Summary

1. Children learn cultural expectations through a primary socialisation process that involves processes of imitation, gender identification, role learning and conditioning.
2. The socialisation process involves both the conscious teaching and unconscious learning of various values and norms.
3. Males and females are socialised differently in our society. Their socialisation reflects adult perceptions and experiences of the culture in which they live.
4. The socialisation of female stresses their future primary adult roles as mothers and child-rearers. Male socialisation on the other hand stresses a future primary social role as a family provider.
5. Children's toys and books are highly gendered in our society.
6. Males and females develop different personality traits as a result of their differential gender socialisation, not their biology.
7. The processes of primary and secondary socialisation frequently involve different agencies providing contradictory socialising influences.
8. Children are not "passive victims" of a socialisation process. On the contrary, just like adults they play an active part in their own socialisation.
9. Socialisation is not a simple "one-way" process whereby messages are transmitted, received and uncritically accepted.
10. The socialisation process represents a general "structure of rules" relating to acceptable and unacceptable forms of behaviour in our society. People have the ability to obey, reject and change these rules.

Examination Questions.

1. **Explain how the family group helps to create different gender identities for males and females (8 marks).**
2. **Interactionist sociologists have criticised the idea that cultural socialisation is a "one-way process". What evidence is there to support this criticism? (6 marks).**
3. **"The labelling of individuals on the basis of their biological sex is the first crucial step in the socialisation process". Explain the significance of the processes of labelling and categorisation in relation to gender socialisation (12 marks).**