

UNIT 2

Basic Concepts in Sociology

Overview

Now that you have explored what founding scholars in sociology thought about the discipline and how research on human behaviour is conducted, we will now explore what are some critical terms and concepts in sociology. In this unit you will learn about terms such as norms, values and processes such as socialization. The identification of definitions and explanations for these terms and processes will be accompanied by short learning activities designed to test your knowledge of them and your ability to distinguish between terms.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this Unit you will be able to:

1. Define the terms 'norm', 'value', and 'custom'.
2. Explain what are the necessary characteristics of a group.
3. Critically review understandings and classifications of socialization.
4. Critically review understandings and classifications of culture.

This Unit is divided into three Sessions as follows:

- Session 2.1:** Basic Concepts in Sociology
- Session 2.2:** Socialization
- Session 2.3:** Groups



Readings & Resources

Required Readings

Mustapha, N. (2013). *Sociology for Caribbean Students* Second Edition, Kingston, Ian Randle Publishers (Module 1). Available at [UWIlInC](#).

OpenStax, *Introduction to Sociology*. OpenStax CNX. May 18, 2016. Available at http://cnx.org/contents/rQzKsl_@7.23:FRUxRAYN@2/Introduction-to-Culture

Suggested Reading

Ritchie K. (2012) What are groups? *Philosophical Studies*.166(2). 257-272. Available at [UWIlInC](#).

You are also advised to locate and read: Additional papers relevant to the topics covered.

Session 2.1

Basic Concepts in Sociology

Introduction

As you would have learnt from the discussions in Unit 1, the core of the focus of Sociology is the interactions between groups and societies. So, we have to spend some time identifying, exploring and understanding the basic concepts that are required for the study of society. These concepts we shall be working with are the following:

- society
- culture
- beliefs
- values
- norms

Society? What Is It?

In your readings for the previous unit you would have come upon a definition for the term, society. A society is made up of a collective which organizes actions according to agreed human behaviour. This agreement can be referred to as a pattern of behaviour of human beings that make up this collective and how they relate to each and their environment within a particular geographical place. When we are speaking about a society, we often identify some main characteristics such as, people existing within set borders over time and within these borders have submitted to forms of cooperation that constitute how they live.

You also would have encountered a definition of culture. This is such an important concept that we need to return to it and probe some more. Our reading will also introduce other critical basic concepts. Be ready to make create your notes for the session.



READINGS

Chapter 1 of Module 1 in Mustapha, N. (2013) [Sociology for Caribbean Students](#), from page 34.

Chapter 3: Introduction to Culture, of Openstax', [Introduction to Sociology 2e](#). Available via UWInC.

Now that you have completed the readings and made your own notes let us extract some important points that you need to keep in mind.

Culture

1. Sociologists refer to culture as the way of life of a people. It is a complex concept that describes how people relate to each other as well as the shared experiences they have together that becomes the basis of understanding and meaning to them. A society's culture makes it easy to identify what is important and not important to them. Having a culture and understanding a people's culture allows for the ordering of their way of life as everything they value also comes to life through events, actions, communication and the arts. Derived from culture are terms such as values, norms, customs, beliefs, laws.
2. Culture has its own characteristics. It is transferable because it can be learnt which also means it can be shared. It may not be static, so it can evolve. For example, the culture of doing business transactions in almost every society has undergone some form of change in the last two decades. Culture is also symbolic because the meaning attached to particular behaviours or attitudes represents a sense of belonging to the wider group. During Independence Day celebrations, the Olympics and World Cup Football, national flags are usually on show. Can you think of any other examples of representations of culture in your society?
3. When thinking about the culture of a people you may do so by thinking of two components, material and non-material culture.
4. **Non-material culture** refers to all the intangible ways of our life, such as our language, philosophies, ideas, customs, values, beliefs. Material culture refers to those tangible items that we use in our daily life. These include, clothing, books, appliances and artistry such as painting. Our non-material culture can affect our material culture so the two are sometimes linked.

Beliefs

- These are shared systems of meaning that help with integration of people in society. Beliefs can also contribute to conflict such as what we have historically seen in clashes between alleged Islamic extremists and perceived Christians. Beliefs make people behave distinctly different from others in a society. Beliefs can be found in religion and religious practices, for example.

Values

- These are codes for behaviour that help us as a group to identify that which we hold to be desirable, undesirable, good or bad.
- Values can be influenced by religious conformity or principles based on teachings of morality. But there is also a social manifestation which results from how people see things. An aesthetic of beauty is one such. Not all values are universally held and some values that are universally held may not be adhered to by all. That said, there are many values that have moral underpinnings such as the negative and undesirable committing murder. Across many societies this value is widely held. It is a moral value and legal one, too. Moral values such as murder being wrong and undesirable are not just held personally, but have broader subscriptions.
- **Moral values** are regarded as important by groups or an entire society and compliance suggests ways person are expected to behave. But values also represent judgments on issues, behaviour, interaction and even roles. This can be good and bad.

Norms

- These are expectations for social behaviour. Norms can be procedures or laws as well and norms are categorized as formal or informal. Norms are different from values because the latter is really guidelines and norms are more or less rules. Norms either formal or informal carry with them some sanctions. In the formal manifestation, sanctions can be punishment while in the informal, sanctions can differ based on the situation. Breaking an informal norm can result in someone being ridiculed or frowned upon for instance.
- Sanctions are responses that can be rewarding or punishing but most times scholars and users use the term as a negative expression associated with breaking a norm.



LEARNING ACTIVITY 2.1

Norms and Confirmation

Respond to the instructions that follow and post your response in the designated forum.

1. There are four types into which we can assign norms: folkways, mores, laws, taboos. Based on your reading, give a description of each and list one distinguishing characteristic of each.
2. Based on your research briefly identify and explain in your own words, a reason innate to person, that makes them conform. Now do the same for a reason you identify that is external to them which makes them conform.

Social Institutions

Having read previously about norms and learning about why people conform in society it is important for us to now look at the role of social institutions in maintaining these norms, and, generally, social cooperation and order. Social institutions have been described as being enduring and they help with the preservation of norms and values through transmittal to new members of a society. Social institutions can also be regarded as a system ensuring that patterns of behaviour agreed upon are learnt, so they work together (even if they have different roles) to teach expected behaviour. If we adopt an organic perspective, we can expand on the importance of social institutions by saying that they are inter-connected and interdependent in the maintenance of patterned behaviour in society.

Here we have listed below, some of the important social institutions:

- **The Family.** This is a primary social unit responsible for passing on the norms and values of society especially because it is the first group that new members of society come into contact with.
- **Religion.** As a body of beliefs and practices religion is there to provide universal understanding of elements in the environment that are best explained as products of natural forces. Religion provides codes for morals which influence daily life.

- **Education** is important to us for learning attitudes and skills that society values and needs. This transmission happens in schools or learning institutions. These schools and learning institutions have also been criticized for keeping the status quo by encouraging corresponding roles and status in society which are linked to the perpetuation of inequalities. This correspondence can also redound to the benefit of the economy but is accompanied by social concerns such as class divide. We will speak about roles and status in later units.
- **Mass Media.** The mass media can reinforce values which the society holds dear, through images, voice and text. At the same time, it can project these that may not necessarily be held by all of society. Critical areas of focus then are placed on the front burner of public discourse under the umbrella of regulation. Regulation can be an act of the authoritative forces such as a broadcasting commission, interested in the discourse or individual exercising viewer controls. A worthwhile example of this is parental controls applied to viewing of television programmes.

Now that we have looked at the social institutions let us look at the economy and the legal system.



LEARNING ACTIVITY 2.2

Scrambled Word

We have identified the family, education, religion and the mass media as important social institutions or sub-systems. There are two more institutions that are critical to the discussion on patterned behaviour in society.

Below is a scrambled word from which you are to identify the names of the two social institutions that are missing. Once you are finished, share with your colleagues in the designated forum and list two reasons (with a supporting reference) why the two systems you identified are part of the discussion on patterned behaviour in society.

OCMEALGEUOY

1.

2.

Other Key Terms and Concepts

Social Structure

Social structure is concerned with the patterns of relationships between social institutions. Society is stabilized through the organized pattern of interaction that happens with these institutions. Sociologists may study social structure by examining it at a micro and macro level. Where the former is concerned, sociologists may study a single family and how members within it relate to each other. On the other hand, sociologists engaged in macro sociology will study the family as one unit amongst millions that make it an institution.

Nature versus Nurture

It is believed by some that people are born knowing how to act in society. The implication of this non-sociological view is that processes such as socialization which allows new members of society to learn its way of life may not be important as we think. However, there have been early and contemporary studies suggesting otherwise such as those that examine feral children. Sociological views place an importance on cultural practices as key to shaping how people should behave in society. Sociological views do not accept fully that people are already programmed to behave in society or according to roles. What do you think? Do you think that you were born knowing how members of your society should eat or dress? What about the formation of words and speaking?

In discussing nature versus nurture we should consider the sociological and non-sociological views. People like women for example are born with capabilities that instinctively programme them (at least perceptually by society) to be caregivers if they wanted to. In society today, you would find much of this controversial thinking within the growing appreciation of sexual diversity.

Session 2.1 Summary

In this session we have learnt about concepts that provide lenses for us to interrogate and understand human behaviour and how it may be shaped. You were also asked to do a word scramble and identify two missing social institutions. How did that go? You should have arrived at systems associated with production and money and the other with crime, arrest and punishment.

The session closed with an overview of the nature versus nurture debate. To conclude this session, we can leave accepting that to study human behaviour one can adopt a micro and macro approach which involves a deeper conversation about what individuals can do and the influences on them. The influence on the human behaviour is manifested in fear or belief in sanctions that are known to the individual. This can be attributed somewhat to interpretations of why people conform.

Session 2.2

Socialization

Introduction

Having looked at some basic concepts important to examining society, we can turn our attention to defining socialization and groups. In this session you will learn how socialization ensured normative behaviour and how certain agents reinforce learning that produce behaviour society expects. But you will also need to understand that socialization does not always follow through on the delivery of that expectation and because it heavily hinges on the determination of the family, the outcome for conformity can be good for bad. At the close of this session you should be able to know categories of socialization and be able to compare what each mainly recognizes.

Defining Socialization

So how do we put together a meaning for socialization? It is the process by which new members of society learn the norms and values held by the society. It is a process of transference and sharing towards new members becoming assimilated in the ways of life of the society. Socialization is often categorized according to informal and formal which is one category and a second which recognizes primary, secondary and tertiary socialization.

- **Informal Socialization** This type of socialization is not intention or deliberate. It may occur through interaction and the projection of expectations. For example, certain physical gestures may be used by an individual based on observation of others attitude towards an event or expression of others. For example, waving to say hello. And there are different forms of waving based on context but individuals are not necessarily guided through parental teachings.
- **Formal Socialization** is more deliberate than informal socialization. There is an intentional correspondence being sought for introducing something to someone towards a particular attitude, behaviour or outcome. The compliance with the correspondence can be strengthened by the threat of sanctions which could range from minor to incarceration.



LEARNING ACTIVITY 2.3

Types of Socializaion

After reading [Mustapha \(2013\) page 26](#) provide a brief explanation of explain what you understand by the institutions presented in the following list. After you have done that, comment on the explanations of at least two of your colleagues. Point out any refinements, additions, elaborations or subtractions you think are required in responses.

1. Primary socialization
2. Secondary socialization
3. Tertiary socialization

Session 2.2 Summary

This session exposed you to the definition and classification of socialization, a vital process to the incorporation of new members into society. In your discussion of primary socialization, you should have found that the family is one of the key units in the primary socialization process. It is the first point of contact for newborns and what they understand of society. The exploration of secondary socialization laid some foundation for the importance of peers and how through them whether it be playgroups or interaction at school, people also learn about themselves outside of the family but still in a smaller group and about the expectations held by others of them. What new did you learn about Tertiary Socialization?

Did you note that tertiary socialization accounts for an expanded period of development in our lives? This occurs through exposure to work and learning new social skills and expectations that come with the environment.

In the next session you will learn some more about the role that groups play in our personal development.

Session 2.3

Groups

Introduction

Groups can be classified into primary and secondary. We will speak to this later, but groups generally comprise of two or more persons who identify themselves as belonging to each other on the basis of a common identity. It is not enough to say that people belong to a group if they are in the same location at the same time as these people may not regard themselves as together since they may not have had any lasting interaction. Another key determinant then, is duration of interaction for persons to be considered a group. This duration of interaction leads to bonding among members and the development of a collective thinking, as opposed to individualized or self interesting behaviour. In other words, it is more about a “we” factor and not an “I”.

Defining Groups

Based on the shared identity and bonding, groups can become very protective of members and view outsiders as people who have not subscribed to the expectations and ways of interaction of the group. Groups can develop cultures of their own that rival mainstream culture and even feelings that their culture is superior. The patterns of interaction coupled with a sense of belonging can also create an in-group out group attitude, and a perception of that person or body as anti the group. Examples of such can be found with ethnic and racial groups. This close knit nature that underlines the sense of belonging characteristic of groups makes it easy for members to distinguish themselves against non-group members.

Groups can have many members and can shrink or expand in size (Ritchie 2012). Membership can be up and down in some groups and with some groups it is possible for members of one to also be members of another. Groups are not restricted by time, space or location. It is possible for example to be in one country and still be a member of a group headquartered elsewhere.



LEARNING ACTIVITY 2.4

Research Definitions

We will now research and share findings with our colleagues in the designated forum.

1. Research the definition for the following terms:
 - a) Primary groups
 - b) Secondary groups
 - c) Reference groups
 - d) Social networks
2. Ensure that the definitions you provide are supported by a reference, i.e. source of information so that others can also go to that source and read for themselves.
3. Select two of the groups and, in no more than 100 words explain the function of the groups in the context of socialization.

Session 2.3 Summary

We have gone on in this session to illustrate how groups may be categorized differently from others based on timing of the place in the one's evolution. We have also been able to see that groups provide lens from which we can evaluate ourselves and others. The function of groups in society extends beyond the pull factors of sense of belonging and shared identity and also includes the development of cohesiveness and solidarity. At the same time, cohesiveness and solidarity even small groups can provide a negative view and energy in society if the intent of the group is to rebel against established norms or engage in acts that inflict oppression onto other groups based on religion, ethnicity or social status.

UNIT SUMMARY

The unit has built on the understanding of how we should interpret the study of sociology by providing associative words and terms with human behaviour. You may also think about what has been discussed as adhesive facilitating the “stick-to-it-ive-ness” that society needs for order. What are some of the take-away points from this unit?

1. Socialization is a process that teaches new members of society the norms, values and beliefs necessary for the order in society. The family is part of the primary group tasked with this role and function. Socialization also takes place beyond the family, in the school, in the church and in the workplace. In your reading of socialization, you would may have also come across the term re-socialization which is where one’s values, beliefs, way of thinking may become totally transformed. This has been exemplified to experiences of persons who become prisoners.
2. Socialization is continuing. We identified one of its agents, the family and went on to identify schools and the church. All of these are key social institutions.
3. Much of what is learnt about society is achieved through small groups. The family is a unit that represents a sense of belonging and identity for members of society. It can serve also as a reference group. We should also not forget the influence of the mass media on the learning process.

References

- Moore, S., Chapman, S., Holborn, M. & Haralambos, M. (2013). *Sociology Themes and Perspectives*. Harper Collin Publishers, pp. 4-5, 726-728.
- Mustapha, N. (2013). *Sociology for Caribbean Students* (2nd ed.). Module 1. Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers. Retrieved from [UWIlInC](#)
- OpenStax (May 18, 2016). Introduction to Sociology. OpenStax CNX. Retrieved from [http://cnx.org/contents/rQzKsl_@7.23:FRUxRAYN@2/Introduction-to- Culture](http://cnx.org/contents/rQzKsl_@7.23:FRUxRAYN@2/Introduction-to-Culture)
- Ritchie, K. (2012). What are groups? *Philosophical Studies*, 166 (2): 257-272. Retrieved from UWIlInC.