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### Socialization and the Nigerian Child: Context and Implications

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**Abstract:** Growing up in a constantly changing world as ours is a dynamic and important process for a child that must be nurtured properly. As humans develop, they must continually adapt to changes in their world on a personal, social, and societal level. The social context of individual interactions and experiences determine the degree to which individuals can develop their abilities and realize their potentials. Children are at an important stage of their development that they need to be properly guided, nurtured, and mentored. Socialization enables the children to acquire the knowledge, skills, and character traits that enable them to participate as effective members of groups and society. Children are socialized and supported by their families, schools, and communities in that these agents of socialization are extremely important for the children's moral, educational, physical, and psychological development. For the Nigerian child, these agents nurture them thereby enabling them to become successful adults. The paper therefore looks at the socialization process, the context in which the socialization takes place and the practical implications for the Nigerian child.

**Keywords:** Nigerian Children, Socialization, Knowledge, Skills

#### INTRODUCTION

Socialization is just as essential to us as individuals. Social interaction provides the means via which we gradually become able to see ourselves through the eyes of others, learning who we are and how we fit into the world around us. In addition, to function successfully in society, we have to learn the basics of both material and nonmaterial culture, everything from how to dress ourselves to what's suitable attire for a specific occasion; from when we sleep to what we sleep on; and from what's considered appropriate to eat for dinner to how to use the stove to prepare it. Most importantly, we have to learn language – whether it's the dominant language or one common in a subculture, whether it's verbal or through signs – in order to communicate and to think (Open Stax College, 2013).

Socialization is how we learn the norms and beliefs of our society. From our earliest family and play experiences, we are made aware of societal values and expectations. Socialization is the process through which people are taught to be proficient members of a society. It describes the ways that people come to understand societal norms and expectations, to accept society's beliefs, and to be aware of societal values. When we are born, we have a genetic makeup and biological traits. However, who we are as human beings develops

through social interaction. Many scholars, both in the fields of psychology and in sociology, have described the process of self-development as a precursor to understanding how that "self" becomes socialized (Open Stax College, 2013).

Socialization can simply be defined as the process of learning and practicing the culture of a given society by both the young and the adult members, it is the way of acquiring the specific prescriptions and proscriptions of standardized practice of a given society (Ajayi and Owumi, 2013). Socialization is the process by which individuals acquire the knowledge, skills, and character traits that enable them to participate as effective members of groups and society (Maccoby, 2007 in Berns, 2013).

According to Ajayi and Owumi (2013), essentially socialization can be looked at from two viewpoints: that of the society and that of the individual. To the society, socialization is the process of fitting new individuals into an organized way of life and teaching them the society's cultural traditions. The raw human animal is transformed by socialization into a human being capable of rational actions with others in the society. As a result of that transformation most babies grow up into fully functioning social beings, able to use the language of their parents and competent in

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their society's culture. The baby grows and become familiar with the total ways of life of his/her people with nothing strange to him/her. Though each new day, brings into consciousness new experiences. That must be learnt either consciously or otherwise. It is upon the basis of what is learnt and internalized that the child relate with the outside world.

The concept of socialization, including parenting or child rearing, social development, and education, really goes back in time as far as human life: "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6). As we shall see, many forces in society contribute to children's development—as do the children themselves. Socialization takes place in the family, school, peer group, and community, as well as via the media. While socialization enables a person to participate in social groups and society, it also enables the very existence of a society and its consequent social order (Berns, 2013).

### **Socialization as a Unique Human Process**

Most social scientists agree that socialization is unique to human beings. More than 75 years ago George Mead (1934), a social interaction theorist, wrote that it is language that sharply separates humans from other animals. Mead goes on to say that language makes ideas and communication of these ideas possible, and language also makes it possible to replace action with thoughts and then use thoughts to transform behavior. A little boy who breaks his mother's favorite vase and encounters her anger understands her threat the next day when she says, "If you don't hold your glass with both hands, it might fall and break, and then I will be very angry." The child now well understands what *break* and *angry* mean.

Language enables humans to develop the ability to reason and a characteristic pattern of behavior. It is reason and behavior that enable us to internalize the attitudes of others. (*Internalization* is the process by which externally controlled behavior shifts to internally, or self-regulated, behavior.) Children internalize the attitudes of their parents in the form of role-taking. They incorporate parental and significant adult expectations into their behavior, thereby becoming socialized as a "generalized other." They, in turn, have similar expectations of others with whom they interact. These expectations for people to behave appropriately form the foundation for a society (Berns, 2013).

Many of life's social expectations are made clear and enforced on a cultural level. Through interacting with others and watching others interact, the expectation to fulfil roles becomes clear. It is generally assumed that an important method of socialization in all societies is imitation of the parents by the child. Verbal instruction is less likely to be important, because in

many preindustrial societies children are given little or no explicit instruction—they are expected to learn the necessary skills and behaviors by observation (Rogoff, Mistry, Goncii, & Mosier, 1993). Young children do imitate their parents in all societies, but they imitate many other people as well: older siblings, nonfamily adults and children and characters they see on television (Lasater & Johnson, 1994). Rowe (1994) has pointed out that it would not make evolutionary sense for children to learn only from their parents; it would mean, for example, that children might fail to pick up useful innovations unless the innovator happened to be their parent. Rowe postulated an innate adaptive mechanism that directs the child to learn from any source, not just parents—a learning mechanism that is "general with respect to informational source"

### **Socialization and the Processes of Learning**

At birth, a child apparently possesses no human nature; he is just a creature with human potentials that will be cultivated through the process of socialization. Smith (1953) (in Ajayi & Owumi, 2013) has this to say about a new born baby:

*"You came into the world a polymorphous perverse little ape with billions of biological evolution precipitated, so to speak in your dimpled organism. You came naked, without shame, without language, food habits or manual dexterity, ideas or religious faith, without respect for law and order, without any discernible admiration....You came with no higher desires than to have your capacious belly filled with milk and your somatic and viscera itches scratched by loving hands"*

John Locke, a philosopher, regarded the minds of new born babies as a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate upon which life experiences and the society writes its norms and values and possible expectations. Therefore, socialization becomes the process through which the new born baby acquires societal norms, values, habits, ideals, and expectations. Ajayi and Owumi (2013) posited that there are four features of this process of learning group values. These are language, suggestion, imitation and identification. A personal description of each shall be provided here.

### **Language**

Language is the medium of social intercourse. It is the means of cultural transmission. Language is the most conspicuous marker of socialization. The reason is that the ideals and values of the society are first transmitted to the child through language. Children learn a lot from their homes and this learning is hinged on the language the child is exposed to practically on a daily basis. The child will have to learn the local language to be able to communicate with family members and peers. Language is the medium through

which we learn about who we are, how we fit with other people, and the natural and social worlds in which we live.

### **Suggestion**

Suggestion is the process of communicating information, which has no logical or self-evident basis. It is devoid of rational persuasion. It may be conveyed through language, pictures or some similar medium. It influences not only behavior with others but also one's own private and individual behavior. In trade, industry, politics, education and every other field people acquainted with psychological facts make use of suggestions to have, their ideas and notions accepted by other people and to make the latter behave according to their wishes. In fact, propaganda and advertising are based on the fundamental psychological principles of suggestion.

### **Imitation**

Imitation can be said to be the act of copying by an individual of the actions of other. In psychology, this could be found in observational learning in the work of Albert Bandura on Social Learning Theory where he said that children learn to behave in certain ways by imitating the behaviours of their parents and other elderly individuals. Thus when the child attempts to walk impressively like his father swinging a stick and wearing spectacles he is imitating. Imitation may be conscious or unconscious, spontaneous or deliberate, perceptual or ideational. The person imitating performs exactly the same activity as the one being performed before him by the person he is imitating. Imitation therefore, is the main factor in the process of socialization of the child. Through it he learns many social behavior patterns. It is because of the tendency to imitate that children are so susceptible to the influence of their parents and friends whose behavior they imitate indiscriminately.

### **Identification**

This is a learning process in which the child learns to identify specific objects and persons and is able to effectively identify the differences. As the child grows in age, he comes to know of the nature of the things which satisfy his needs and therefore such things become the object of his identification. Thus, the toy with which he plays, the picture book, which he enjoys or looking and the mother who feeds him become the object of his identification. The speed and area of identification increase with the growth in age. Through identification he becomes sociable.

### **Agents of Socialization**

The major agents of socialization as has been identified before now by sociologists are the family, the school, the peer group, and the mass media (print and electronic, and in these modern days, social media). A dimension of religion will also be added.

### **The Family**

The family an individual is born to is the first point of contact between himself/herself and the external world with which he/she now must relate. It is in the family that the basic tools that he/she requires to deal with society and future life are passed to him/her. The parents and other siblings are the representative of the larger society from whom the young first learns the appropriate behaviour patterns, attitudes, values, norms, mores and the folkways of the society. Unlike the average American family which operates a nuclear system, the Nigerian family is characterized by the extended family which is laden with uncles, aunties, brothers, sisters, nephews, nieces, cousins all of whom have telling influence on the socialization of the newborn baby. Sometimes in addition to the parents' own offspring, children of other relatives are frequently adopted or raised in other families in order to demonstrate their concern and regard for these relatives of the family.

### **The School**

It is the primary transmitter of information and knowledge. It has also been called upon to assume many of the functions of the family. School systems have assumed other roles and responsibilities that historically had been the domain of the family. Areas such as providing basic needs (breakfast, lunch, and in some instances e.g. the boarding house, dinner) before and after-school programs with children spending most of their waking hours in the care of school personnel other than parents, and teaching morals and values have become a responsibility of the school systems. Here the child internalizes values of punctuality, drudgery, hard-work, independent decision making and mastery over his tasks and profession with the teacher replacing the parents in giving directions, instructions, and orders, and in some ways representing a parental figure in the social development of the child.

### **The Peers**

The child learns also from his peers. This is the group that the child readily identifies with which is a measure of his social and anti-social behaviour. This group offers him the opportunity for self-expression, recognition, and socialization. The child participates in the activities of the group and he shares in the values and otherwise of the group. Few parents would deny the increasing influence of peers in the lives of their children. Although peers can have a positive force manifested in sports, scouting, reading together, faith groups and other positive influences, they often have a negative influence. The most detrimental manifestations of this are drug and alcohol abuse, premature teen sexual activity, and other socially proscribed behaviours like cultism, internet fraud, rioting etc.

### **The Mass Media**

Mass media refers to the distribution of impersonal information to a wide audience, such as what happens via television, newspapers, radio, and the Internet. With the average person spending over four hours a day in front of the TV (and children averaging even more screen time), media greatly influences social norms (Roberts, Foehr, and Rideout 2005). People learn about objects of material culture (like new technology and transportation options), as well as nonmaterial culture – what is true (beliefs), what is important (values), and what is expected (norms). Mass media also has an immense impact on young minds. With the advent of the Internet, television now has a partner in the role of visual stimulant of young minds. The culture portrayed by the mass media emphasizes glamour, sexual satisfaction, and promiscuity, comedic vulgarity, violence, and immediate gratification of needs (Ajayi & Owumi, 2013). With information and communication technology now getting more advanced than before, making internet usage cheap and affordable, a new twist of the *social media* can be added to the existing forms of media as it can now be seen that most young people are now glued to their phones for long hours surfing the internet and thereby encountering all sorts of vices.

Suffice to add here a dimension of the agents of socialization in this age which is Religion from the Nigerian perspective

### **Religion**

Religion these days in a country like Nigeria is becoming a very strong agent of socialization. The observed practices are now that people are being shaped in the society by the kinds of teachings that emanate from the religious centres these days. Religion is shaping peoples' orientation about values, morality, hardwork, diligence, and right living. They also admonish on issues such as dressing, premarital sex, friendship, alcohol consumption, etc which are direct acts that can make people socialize or want to socialize. The moral compass that religion and spirituality provide cannot be downplayed in today's fast-paced, consumer-driven society. Religion continues to play a role in identity formation. The role of religion as an agent of socialization cannot be ignored. It is a primary transmitter of our core personal and societal values.

### **Socialization and the Nigerian child: Issues and Implications**

Like children in most parts of the world. Nigerian boys and girls love to play by themselves at times and with other children at other times. Play activities are of great value to these Nigerian children. Physically, play affords opportunities for large muscle exercise; stimulates growth and increase the demand for oxygen; improves digestion and stimulates adequate excretion. Through play, many lessons in socialization

are learned in a natural way. The child learns how to cooperate with playmates, to lead or to be led, to make compromises, to defend his rights and to learn to withstand antagonism.

For the most part, Nigerian children will play with items that are of no practical use to adults. While some families in Nigeria can afford European and American made toys for their kids like video/computer games, electric bicycle, children's keyboard/guitar, baby dolls, and the likes, a good number cannot and hence their kids play with clay pots, pieces of newspapers, empty bottles, bottle caps, old bicycle tyres, spokeless bicycle rims, sticks, mud, and stones. In Nigeria also, children's pastime could involve games like *tente*, *skipping ropes*, *who-is-the-garden*, as well as swings, bouncing castle, *jangirova* (as called in local parlance) available to them both in school and in the neighbourhood.

Suffice to say here that the core of our social values are transmitted among the children through these plays as they get to interact with themselves in an atmosphere of love, cohesion, cooperation and accepting each other for who they truly are. In the play camps of children in Nigeria, hardly can you ever find malice. A child tells another that "I am not going to play with you again" and in under five minutes forgets completely he ever said so and is playing again with the other. They learn the principles of hardwork, tolerance, endurance, and strength through their plays. They even learn and play out adult roles in their play times when they tell each other to act like daddy or mummy, or when they cook with broken pots put on a sand mould. The sticks, stones, broken pots, and sand make their play homes more authentic having a near-reality feeling. Hence they find themselves through their plays imitating their elderly ones and by so doing are being socialized into the acceptable and standard norms and behaviours of the society they live in.

For the Nigerian child, the importance of socialization cannot be overemphasized. Whilst we would not want to stand to compare the socialization of the Nigerian child to that of the American or the British, we can adjudge and say that Nigerian children are socialized in the Nigerian way, into its own ways of life, its acceptable standards of behavior and expectations. In Nigeria, for that child learning the way of life of a people helps in integrating such individuals into the social group to which they belong. A newborn baby for example is taken through the culture of his group by his parents and after sometime as well by his teachers at school who teach and direct him to do the things that are acceptable to the society. A deviant to these things would therefore be considered inadequately socialized. (In Yoruba terms, they are called '*abiiko*' meaning one that was given birth to but not properly

trained or '*akoogba*' meaning one that was trained but did not yield to such training).

Basic disciplines ranging from toilet habits, household chores to the more complex systems are taught through the process of socialization. Sometimes rewards such as gifts, words of approval, non-verbal gestures showing appreciation are given to establish the process of learning the right things to do and at the right time as well as consequences to dissuade certain unwanted behaviours by way of punishment, scolding, words of disapproval, denial of food, play or television. However, rewards and punishment are given carefully and meticulously. That is, rewards are not given to the extent that the child thinks there is always gratification for exhibiting certain behaviours and that punishment is due for every wrong doing so that the child does not begin to see the parent as a tyrant, a demi-god.

Discipline therefore could be so learnt and thoroughly internalized that they even modify the person's physiological and psychological reactions. This means that the culture of the society's expectations or parents' expectations have been perfectly learnt that even unconsciously the child knows what follows a particular act whether rewards or punishment or even nothing at all.

Every society instils a variety of aspirations in its members, these aspirations match the status individuals will occupy because of their age, sex, group membership or family background. Thus in pre literate society a hunter instilled in his son the desire to be a good hunter, a good and faithful participant at deity worship, a leader of hunting expeditions in his mature years, a dependable and strong man in his society. His daughter was brought up to be pious worshipers of the gods, a diligent and capable housekeeper, and a devoted wife and mother.

Socialization is so important to man based on the individuals identities provided largely through the aspirations it encourages or discourages. An identity is a self-concept built up over a lifetime. The son of a chief or a poor man wakes up to see himself acting out the status he occupies in his society. In Nigeria children are socialized early to know who he is, where he comes from and what group he belongs, the religion his group practices etc. All these shape the identity of individuals within the whole. We are practically the way we are partly because of other people's reactions to us and to what we do. We are constantly picking this feedback and incorporating it into our sense of self, thus identity is built up through interpersonal relations. It is a social construction as well as a personal certainty (Ajayi & Owumi, 2013).

The predominant cultural belief is that children must be submissive to elders therefore behavior not in conformity with this is punished. In Nigeria, children experience harsh treatment from their care – givers including their parents. Under normal circumstances, the cry of a baby should attract attention, love and care; instead it attracts aggressive responses from care-givers at home, in day-care centers and in schools.

The traditional childrearing practices in Nigeria are communal within the extended family system or lineage, and the costs of raising children are not borne solely by the biological parents. Very close relatives also share the costs of rearing children, in terms of emotion, time, finance and other material support, since all children together comprise the strength of the lineage. In Nigeria the extended family structure, which comprises close relatives other than a married couple and children, who live either in the same household or in a close and continuous relationship with one another, are generally in vogue. Nukunya (1992) conceives the extended family as a "social arrangement in which an individual has extensive reciprocal duties, obligations and responsibilities to his relations outside his nuclear family". Within the framework of this family structure, series of childrearing practices are maintained. Right from birth, surrogate mothers, maybe either mother-in-laws or sister-in-laws from either the husband's or wife's family, make themselves available to assist in caring for the new born baby and the nursing mother.

Children in this society are treated quite gently by parents. They are seen as blessing from God after marriage. The most common punishment is scolding, although the threat of corporal punishment is often made. Aside from the occasional 'shouts' of women in the compound, parents do very little to guide the behaviour of smaller children in the family. They feel that there is little need for direct teaching of pre-schoolers since children are thought to learn how to behave from observing older children and adults.

Although many Nigerian parents are strict disciplinarians in their training of children, they often have a warm regard for them as well. This is reflected in the names given to children. For example, 'Adekunle' means 'Crown/Prestige has filled the house' and 'Olalekan' means 'the wealth in the family has increased', and 'Nwakaku' meaning 'the child is greater than wealth'. This shows the value they place on children. The children's names are conceived to be pointers to the events happening within the family at the arrival of the baby. Hence the baby will continue to be a reminder to those events by the nametag he/she now wears.

After the child is old enough to understand simple directions and to carry out elementary tasks around the compound, he is taught the important lesson that interdependence among all family members is essential for the welfare of the family as a whole. Thus, a strong we-feeling is developed in the child at an early age which continues to dominate his way of life until death. Also as said earlier that parents are not the sole agents of socialization in Nigeria as against in the American families, in addition to the parents, older brothers and sisters as well as other others are involved in helping the parents to make the children understand what is expected of the socially. They are sometimes expected to train younger children in toilet etiquette, table manners, cleanliness habits, etc. also, they are often given authority by the parents to teach younger ones social controls. If the younger child misbehaves, the older sibling may use some kind of punishment, and occasionally this may involve corporal punitive measures which are approved by the parents. These are strong means wherein the concept of socialization for the children in the Nigerian context is driven home and hard. They must not only obey their parents but their older siblings and infact anyone older than them.

### Concluding Remarks

Socialization is a lifelong process recurring as we enter new phases of life. Socialization is important because we are social animals. If you can't interact and socialize with those around you, life will be extremely difficult. Not knowing the rules of behavior for your society and culture can create a lot of problems. For example in Nigeria culture, smiling is a sign of friendliness depending on the circumstance but generally it is considered polite, but in other cultures smiling at someone might be considered rude or a sign of weakness. A child is a product of the society in which he/she grows up. Who he is and will be is hinged on the processes of socialization within which he has developed. For the continuity of any culture, the socialization of children is very important. Because the family is said to be the agent of socialization, especially for children, proper upbringing of the children should be encouraged in the Nigerian society.

The hustle after economic gains/concerns have made many parents and other care-givers who these children are supposed to learn from have created gaps in their social development as children. Some are carelessly handled by parents and care-givers alike without the emotional love and care they need for all round physical and mental development. Proper behaviour learnt from homes is a function of good basic home training, is an antidote to negative peer influence, and a building block/foundation upon which other agents of socialization build.

There is an African saying, "It takes a village to raise a child". It is important for other individuals involved in the physical, psychological, and social development of the child such as members of the extended family, teachers, and leaders of religious groups to act well their part by giving teachings, instructions, and guidance on the morals, values, and ethics of a sane, safe, and sustainable society. Because socialization is passed on from generation to generation, a generation must not fail the next in passing on the right values because the effects if not done or done haphazardly are grave. It is therefore important for these socializing agents and other individuals who work with these children to recognize and be sensitive to their physical, psychological, and social needs and provide supportive and nurturing experiences for the children in homes, schools, religious centres, and other public places.

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