CHAPTER 4:

The Process of Socialization

Photo by Mary Rosenberg 2010

A Mursi tribe woman stands patiently for a photo in the rain near Ethiopia's border with Uganda.
What explains the differences between her lifestyle and yours?

Ten days into a punishing road trip through the remote Omo Valley of Ethiopia, sick from dust, exhaust fumes and bad water, Mary and I had begun to have some serious doubts about the wisdom of continuing our planned route. But our complaints quickly faded when we finally made contact with the Mursi tribe, one of the most isolated and interesting human communities on Earth.

The visible differences between us could not have been sharper. Some of the Mursi men wore no clothing other than jewelry, feathers or paint pigments derived from plants or mineral soils. They were rather tall, trim and seemed quite strong and somewhat fierce in facial expression. The women all wore numerous bracelets of beads or metal. They tied a single cloth around their abdomens.

But the most unique and striking aspect of the Mursi women was the large fired-clay lip disc that painted a mysterious image in the minds of foreigners nine time zones from home. By making a careful single cut below their lower lip or in the center of their ear lobes, and by gradually stretching the freed lower lip or lobe, they created an elastic loop which fit into a groove in the clay disc. The skin on the rest of their bodies was adorned with patterns of tiny cone-shaped bumps created by tiny intentional infections they had cultivated and engineered to produce the desired artistic pattern.

The Mursi live self-sustainably, outside of any government support, apart from the modern world.   They live geographically in what the Western European map makers consider to be extreme southern Ethiopia. But the Mursi do not accept or recognize these borders drawn a century ago by the European slave traders.

The Mursi religion is *animist.* They hold no concept of a single god. Instead they sense a presence of spirits in all living creatures, animals and plants. There is much cooperation and sharing in their social lives, although the men perform some stick-fighting rituals to win the right to take a female mate.

How can we explain the vast *differences* between us and the Mursi? And how can we explain the amazing *similarities* within the Mursi people - or *similarities* within our nation's population? After all, the Mursi were not born with a physical *need* for lip discs or infection bumps anymore than we were born with a *need* for tattoos, breast implants or blue jeans. It's illogical to think that free will determines the behavior of individuals. After all, what are the chances that nearly every woman in the Mursi community would just, by chance, happen to *choose* a lip disc body ornament?

The Mursi spirituality, their behavior and even their thoughts - like our own - were *pre-determined* by a history and socialization process that existed before any of us were born. The lip disc tradition was an adaptation to past centuries of the slave trade. Mursi women disfigured their faces to lower their value to the foreign slave traders from Europe. It saved them from capture. However, they also wished to appear attractive to their mates, so the lip disc was used by some Mursi women to regain a quality of beauty. The disc gradually became a tradition and was passed on to their daughters long after the slave trade finally ended. Thus, the Mursi's unique history created unique behaviors that have endured. The passing of traditions across many generations explains a lot about who we become as individuals.

Socialization is the process of social interaction through which people acquire personality and lifestyle. This chapter explains how the socialization process produces the vast behavioral similarities in people *within* cultures and vast differences in people *between* cultures on planet Earth.

THE DEBATE OVER NATURE vs. NURTURE: HOW IS THE "SELF" CREATED?

A classic debate has raged for more than a century. **This controversy over how personality (the "self") is created is referred to as the "Nature vs. Nurture" debate.** "Nature" side advocates claim that individuals have an *internal* ability to create their own "self," to make personal choices and to have free will. Conversely, the "Nurture" side advocates (sociologists and anthropologists in particular) claim that influences *external* to the individual create a "self" that gradually emerges from being socialized inside our most intimate groups and surrounding cultural influences**.** Below, evidence is examined from both perspectives.

The "Nature" Side of the Argument
Do you think you created your personality by your own free will? If so, you can count on getting a lot of support from Western cultural traditions for your belief. That is because - especially in the USA – faith in the individual's ability to determine the "self" is very strong indeed.   It fits into our traditions, the Christian tradition in particular, that we make personal *choices* to be either good or bad, holy or sinful, right or wrong, believers or non-believers. The concept of going to heaven - or hell - makes no sense without it. For if YOU as an individual are *not* the creator of your own behavior, what is the point of the reward of heaven, or the punishment of hell?

The Nature view of personality development is widely accepted in the USA. Our economic, religious and criminal justice systems are deeply rooted in it. It has become a "moral imperative" for our society. That is, free will *must* be the driver of behavior… otherwise our social system might be based on a faulty foundation.

But moral imperatives do not count as proof in scientific debates. In recent decades, "Nature" proponents began to shift their argument. Instead of merely focusing on free will (a philosophical or a religious concept), they looked for some scientific backing. Proponents of the Nature argument began to suggest that our *genetic* makeup is the main determinant of personality. After all, it is an undisputed scientific fact that genes greatly influence our height, hair color, and countless other hereditary *physical* characteristics of all living creatures. Could genes be shaping our personality too?

How could we measure the power of genetic makeup on our personalities? One way in which the effect of genes could be tested would be to study *identical human twins* (having *identical* genes) that had been *separated at birth* to see if – despite being raised in different social environments – they still behaved similarly. If so, then genes would appear to be powerful determinants of personality.

Over several decades, studies of twins separated at birth have been compared to see if genes could be *consistently relied on* to determine behavior. The answer is no. Although *some* studies seem to show striking similarities between separated twins, others do not.[1] From a scientific point of view, outcomes that cannot be reproduced reliably ("replicated") by different gatherers of data would not be taken very seriously. But the moral, political

and economic implications of this debate are so emotionally charged that some - on both sides of the debate – tend to focus on particular studies that support their beliefs and ignore others. This is not good science, but some scientists can be overcome by their biases too. Happily, the scientific method weeds these errors out through further study and peer review. These processes take time.

Gary Payne 2013

This young man has been socialized into two cultural worlds at once; he is clothed in the symbols of his proud Ojibwe upbringing. But this pow-wow at the Mille Lacs Indian Reservation includes plenty of patriotic symbolism and rituals from the larger nation surrounding it.

Tragically, the Nature argument has been used by certain of its proponents to encourage some of the most wretched events in human history [2]. In some form or another, the belief in *innate qualities* (biological, DNA or soul or free-will related characteristics) of certain groups have been used to justify slavery, lynchings, segregation, genocide, war, colonialism and the toleration of extreme poverty in the midst of riches.

When *innate qualities* are used to rank people in a hierarchy of separate categories, a question arises that opens a dangerous door: *If certain groups of people are not fully human in the same sense that we are, why protect them from exploitation?* Our own nation's Constitution set this precedent by counting black slaves as only *three-fifths human*, one example of systemic racism in those times.

It would be incorrect to assume there is absolutely *no* connection between genetic makeup and personality. Enough evidence has been gathered to demonstrate that *some* connection exists. It is the *strength* of this connection that is still in dispute. Luckily for humanity, the connection between genes and personality appears very weak compared to the influence of our social surroundings (nurture), so there is no scientific reason or justification to discriminate against any racial or ethnic group.

The "Nurture" Side of the Argument
Sociologists consider **learning through socialization** to be - by far - the main determinant of our individual personalities. They point to evidence that suggests we are who we are because of *how we are nurtured in the social world around us*. That is, the unique mix of groups that we belong to and the cultural institutions we are encircled by shape us into the unique personalities we become.

Yes, it violates the "moral imperative" noted earlier and makes some individuals feel as though they are merely empty vessels into which this nurture is poured, as if our innate qualities are irrelevant. That really rubs against grain of our ancient religious and philosophical traditions.

But science is not about feeling comfortable, confirming traditions or supporting that which some people *wish* were true. It is about discovering what really is true whether we like it or not. And the evidence we are about to examine suggests that these social and cultural influences *outside* the individual are indeed the primary determinants of almost all aspects of personality. That is to say, the Nurture side of the debate is heavily supported by the weight of scientific evidence.

How could we measure the power of *nurture* on personality? One way would be to observe a human being that had experienced an absence of nurture. Of course, it would be cruel to deprive someone of the opportunity of nurture, to force someone to live in isolation from birth without the benefit of an upbringing that included love, social interaction and education. The good news is that such an experiment is not necessary. The bad news is that it has already been done, inadvertently, by dysfunctional parents and also at some very poorly organized orphanages.

In the 1940s, sociologist Kingsley Davis was the first to report on the tragic cases of children whose parents had failed to provide the nurture necessary to create a normal personality.[3] These cases of children did not involve *total* isolation, but years of almost solitary confinement. For various reasons, the parents rarely revealed their existence to the outside world. Their children were hidden in basements or attics, for example.

In the famous case of Anna, the mere fact that she had been born "illegitimate" resulted in her imprisonment in an attic, where she had minimal physical care and very little human interaction. When she was discovered by the outside world at the age of six, she could not talk, walk, feed herself or control her bowels appropriately. Content to lie in her own feces, Anna was expressionless and indifferent to every human being. She died at the age of eleven, having reached only the social skills of a child of two. Davis noted that her

pathetic condition "shows how little her biological (internal) resources …could contribute to making her a whole person."

All cases of children isolated from birth confirm that nurture – caring interaction – is an absolute necessity for the development of human personality. There are *no* cases in which children raised themselves from birth. The longer a child is separated from humans, and the more severe the separation is, the greater is the damage done.

Social isolation has profound effects on adults as well. Solitary confinement is officially considered "cruel" by our judicial system for good reason. But in the case of an incarcerated adult placed in solitary confinement, the individual has at least already had the benefit of passing earlier through some human contact. For infants, socialization is everything.

Photo by Orla Kenton

This old family picture was not posed. My son often imitated me, as I imitated my own father. These interactions - or the absence of them – shape the personalities of every young child in the most profound ways.

Rene Spitz broadened the known range of impairment through social isolation by studying children raised in badly understaffed orphanages in 1945.[4]   Although the physical needs of these orphaned children were met in terms of feeding and sanitary care, the staff was spread too thin to enable them to regularly hold or interact meaningfully with each child.

Spitz followed the progress of these children and found that they were emotionally devastated by their experience, showing a much higher than expected rate of personality disorders, and a dramatic increase in their rate of early mortality. Sadly, after they left this extremely overcrowded orphanage, their problems persisted.

An even more extreme and exacting study was performed by psychologist Harry Harlow on rhesus monkeys, in which the effects of raising young monkeys in *absolutely total isolation* could be observed.[5] Harlow put newborn monkeys in isolation with just two items in their cage: a wire-covered feeding bottle, and a carpeted piece of wood with a crude face. The young monkeys clung to the soft carpet whenever they were not feeding, suggesting an unfulfilled desire for intimate contact.

When later, as adults, these monkeys were later brought back into an environment with normal monkeys, the previously isolated monkeys were unable to interact, would not mate, and if artificially impregnated, would not care for their offspring.

Monkeys are not humans, so we may view this last piece of evidence more as *support* of previous findings than as perfect proof of the influence of nurture on humankind. Many have noted that these tests (which have since been replicated successfully over and over) are cruel and unnecessary, given that the scientific evidence already had demonstrated the powerful effect of nurture on personality long ago. I agree with that point of view, but it would not help to ignore what was learned from the suffering of these young monkeys, so I have included the findings here.

The evidence cited here in this text - and we have only scratched its surface - suggests that humans, like other primates, are *profoundly social* animals. Without each other to socialize with, we are helpless hulks of flesh and bone. By comparison, our biology and free will (if it exists at all) explain very little about our personalities.

To be fair, the effect of nurture doesn't explain *everything* about human behavior either. We need not embrace the extreme position that innate qualities and free will are completely irrelevant. It seems fair to say that the creation of our identities is heavily dominated by an individual's surrounding social influences, but with a dash of biology and perhaps a wee bit of free will tossed in for those of us lucky enough to study that subject and react to it.

Sociologists seek to *increase* the human potential for free will. I have noted that students and others that come to recognize and accept the powerful influence of culture and socialization on the "self" are often eager to rethink their own concept of self as well as their perspective on humanity. They seek more *actual self-control* over their individual lives. But that requires a reckoning with the awesome power of the external social environment to shape us. Not everyone gets this educational opportunity and those who do are often not up to the task of questioning their culture's moral imperative.

Courtesy of The Brainerd Dispatch

Thousands of Boy Scouts enjoy climbing around on armored weapons during this annual event at a military base. Children from the USA are far more likely to be casualties in military combat as adults than children in other developed modern nations. Is that because it is their "nature?" Or is it a learned response to militaristic cultural institutions that surround and shape them at an early age and encourage military intervention? Sociologists suggest it's the latter. I enjoyed my own involvement with Boy Scouts and eventually earned Eagle Scout status in Kansas City, Missouri. Looking back, it operated almost like a paramilitary unit. I was unaware of the shaping process underway. It dawned on me later as I was sent to fight in Vietnam at 18.

THE AGENTS OF SOCIALIZATION

Socialization generally takes place in five major social contexts that compete with each other for influence:
   1. **Family**
   2. **Schools**
   3. **Religious group**
   4. **Mass media**
   5. **Peer group**

Sociologists refer to these five contexts as **the "agents of socialization**," for these are the gatherings in which individual personalities and social ideas are formed.

The Family
In the last century, the traditional family has experienced a dizzying downward spiral of collapsing integrity and fading influence. Yet for many of us the family is still the most powerful agent of individual socialization. While parents only maintain overall control of their children for about five years – at which point the other agents begin to take over – the first years of life are crucial for personality development. The setting of self-esteem levels, the development of emotional potential, and the internalization of the basic values and norms of parents are fixed in this early period.[6]

Whatever behavioral characteristics are found in the family environment are likely to show up later in the lives of the family's children. If a child is raised in a loving and stable family environment, the chances are good that a similar healthy family can be reproduced by the child at adulthood. But *negative* traits are likely to transfer through family learning as well: child abuse, smoking, alcoholism, violence and criminal behavior. The educational attainment and social class background of the child's family is a very strong predictor of the child's educational attainment and social class in the future.

One century ago, divorce was a rare event. A family context usually included both parents, at least one of the grandparents, and sometimes more distant family members. The number of children per family was triple today's standards. This was the **extended family.** Fifty years later, the effect of urbanization and specialization had created the **nuclear family,** which typically included only two parents and two or three children. Children had been viewed previously as a family *asset* when they could work on the farm. But in the city, children were more of an economic liability, so parents gradually chose to decrease family size with the help of birth control beginning in the 1970s.

Today, the family is undergoing redefinition once again. About half of marriages in the USA now end in divorce, and the average number of children per woman has been reduced to 1.6 which is substantially below replacement level of 2.1. Far fewer adult members per household amounts to a loss of critical economic and emotional support options for children. Youth today often seek out radically new "family" structures with whoever can add to the security and economic support in their lives.

Sometimes this means living for long periods with friends or roommates, joining an inner-city youth gang, living in group homes, residing in homeless shelters, or forming "intentional communities" of like-minded people. Thus, sociologists today can only cling to a vague definition of what constitutes a **family – a *somewhat* permanent group of persons related by ancestry, marriage, adoption, values or merely acquaintance, who live together and form an economic unit which may include taking care of their young.** That's a very loose definition, but it's realistic today.

That definition would not be acceptable to many who wish for the nuclear family or even the extended family to reappear, and who would not want a youth gang – for example - to be defined as a family. But sociologists cannot ignore that a fundamental shift away from the traditional family forms is already well established.

Families are about support. The fate of families is the future fate of the society. Most modern democratic nations support biological families better than in the USA in the areas of education, daycare, early child development programs, health care and housing.

Statistics demonstrate that families today are prone to a high level of chaos in which our youngest citizens are neglected or subject to physical abuse each year. This often leads children to become runaways. In 2021, the Biden administration temporarily doubled the Child Tax Credit during the Covid pandemic, drastically reducing child poverty. This financial support helps families function and stay together. But making this funding permanent faces political opposition in the present administration.

The School
Large modern public schools, with classes separated by age group, were an invention of the 20th century. Previously, most children had been educated within the family home, or by neighbors or clergy that held values similar to the parents. The opposite has been true now for several decades. Our children are now educated most often by unfamiliar personnel in stressful bureaucratic environments. That, by itself, doesn't make it a failure.

But compounding that feeling of impersonality in the USA are extremely large student numbers *per certified fully educated teacher* compared to other modern democracies. To *artificially* reduce that ratio, public schools have had to hire far less educated and poorly paid "para-professionals" to take over some of the teaching duties. EducationWeek reported in 2022 that some para-professionals in the USA were paid less than $12 an hour, and over 70% surveyed expected to quit within one year, a marker of low morale.

Unlike other wealthy nations, a substantial fraction of school funding comes from *local property taxes* in the USA. That means that children in poor communities will likely be receiving lower quality education than children in wealthy neighborhoods. All the issues above have combined to lower the nation's educational rank with competing democracies as measured by Program for International Student Assessment scores.

Today's children in the USA spend far more waking hours in school and on buses than in the presence of their parents. Poorer families are so beleaguered that most have not objected to the growing influence of schools on their children's socialization and the loss of contact time with them. In fact, many parents found it difficult to manage their own lives when children were forced by the Covid pandemic to shelter at home. It was an impossible situation for working mothers.

Schools do a lot more than merely transmit knowledge. Schools in every culture engage in at least some level of *indoctrination* of the children into the patriotic personalities desired by the nation state. Students also absorb at least a basic awareness of the obedience that will be expected of them in relationships with officialdom, and later, in their future employment. In the USA a fierce battle continues today over which embarrassing events in our nation's history should be censored in public schools.

Gary Payne 2004 USA

Witches! Socialization even determines when children are *not* supposed to act normally. Above example: during Halloween rituals.   Below: at Pagwah ceremonies in Suriname when children in school are *expected* to run wild and chase each other with splashes of colored talc powder.

Gary Payne 2012, Suriname

In short, school introduces children to the wider cultural machine they were born into. This shaping of personality – unrelated to the teaching of pure knowledge – is often referred to as the "hidden curriculum." The Pledge of Allegiance, for example, is a classic common chant ritual in our society, as is the 23rd Psalm and The Lord's Prayer in religious contexts. The use of these chants unites the chanters, and also encourages their lifelong loyalty to the institutions from which the chants emerge. Some version of these loyalty rituals are common to all nations.

The books, worksheets and other materials used by schools today are focused more than ever on the history, values and goals of the *nation* rather than their community as a century ago. It is a change that encourages *universal allegiance to the nation-state*. This helps to homogenize the entire society's perspective on life at the expense of community loyalty, a significant tradeoff. Certainly, it then becomes even more crucial for each generation to study the historic errors of the nation to ensure that past mistakes are not repeated. But those lessons are being reduced by censorship as I edit this yearly edition.

Religious Group
The "sacred" aspect of religion gives it a powerful advantage as an agent of socialization. It would be difficult to find a more motivating influence on human behavior than regular attendance in religious services. The moral glue that the early forms of religion created centuries ago appears to still be an important part of the foundation of today's social order for millions of U.S. citizens.

Although not everyone attends formal religious gatherings, no one on our planet completely escapes the influence of religious belief. The traditions, laws and behavioral norms of every society have been shaped over time by whatever religions have dominated a given territory. Everyone inside these borders - regardless of their personal beliefs - must fit at least loosely within those behavioral boundaries or be subject to significant negative social sanctions.

An example in education is the domination of the Christian calendar holy days over all competitors. Few public schools or colleges celebrate the less dominant Islamic Ramadan, Jewish Hanukkah, or the religious Holy days of regional American Indians. As a result, most citizens don't know when those days occur or their meaning, or purpose. If Jewish or Islamic students wish to attend each and every class in public schools, they must attend these classes during their holy days.

Public colleges have operated in this fashion for so long that it seems "normal," even though most colleges have many students in attendance from various religious quarters and even though colleges claim to be seeking greater global and diversity inputs. But, of course, public colleges aren't alone in this; the vast majority of other public and private institutions in the USA are operating in the same way. Culture is a funnel.

To be fair, similar or even higher levels of discrimination against Christians are found in many nations around the world. The *sacred* aspect of religious loyalty is a double-edged sword. History demonstrates it can rally its membership towards peace and civility or it

can be used to gather armies from its pool of followers and encourage them towards brutality. No less a participant in this tactic than Adolph Hitler wrote in his book, *Mein Kampf:* "Any violence which does *not* spring from a firm spiritual base will be wavering and uncertain." The rituals of religious institutions are a time-tested means of guiding individual human behavior, for better or worse, into the activities favored by their institutional leaders.

Photos by Gary Payne 2005-2016

Four separate cultures = four very different belief systems and lifestyles. How much opportunity did any of these children have to think or act by their own *free will*? What *choice* did they have?   Sociologists point to the incredibly powerful influence of socialization. Culture runs the show. How else would you explain it?

The Mass Media
Impersonal communications - targeted at massive audiences – are referred to as mass media. The internet, social media, movies, television, newspapers, magazines, books, plays, comic books, posters, video games, graffiti, radio and theater are all part of this mix of socializing influences.

The time we spend in contact with the mass media has taken yet another giant bite out of the time spent with family in the last century. Mass media has profoundly powerful and growing influences on modern life. *Most* of our free time as citizens of the USA is spent in front of a cellphone, computer, television or other screen. Children spend at least 6 hours each day relating to various mass media devices.[7] In particular, the attraction of youth to social media has become one of the most controversial issues of our times.

The most common concerns are that social media users have reduced participation in family life, in civic life, in traditional face to face interaction, in physical activity and on the urgent problems of their day.

But social media is only one piece of mass media.

How does the mass media affect the personalities of children exposed to so much of it? One of the more easily measured effects is the amazing power of mass media to influence consumption (shopping) patterns of youth. Successful advertising campaigns have largely determined the brand loyalties of youth for everything from shoes to cigarettes as advertising techniques became more refined and targeted. Thus, citizens of the USA often become walking billboards, wearing commercially branded items.

A possibly overblown controversy continues over the effect of violent images portrayed in mass media. It is true that the majority of today's commercial television programming contains violent content.[8] The average child in the USA will watch thousands of movie, TV and video game murders play out by the time they become young adults. Outrageously violent and sexist video games in which players become prostitute-killing pimps or serial murderers are commonly accessible leisure time activities for today's youth in their teen years.

Certainly, the net effect cannot be expected to be a positive one.

And yet - as vulgar and mindless as these media offerings often are, **evidence suggests that violent images from the mass media are *not* powerful contributors to the chronically high violence rates in the USA.**

First of all, the USA has maintained high rates of violence that date back long before television, social media and video games existed. Canada, which shares the same mass media programming and widespread gun ownership as the USA, has a very low rate of violence and homicide. Japan, which routinely maintains high levels of violence in its mass media, often enjoys the lowest rate of homicide in the entire developed world.

It appears that the chronically high rate of violence in the USA is related to other factors, especially economic inequality, as we shall see in later chapters. Evidence suggests that the mass media is very capable of influencing lower to moderate intensity level choices of children – the previously mentioned shopping habits for example – but not powerful enough to cause a significant increase in the overall rate of serious physical violence.

Children who watch violence on TV or play the more violent games may be blowing off steam or getting a little charge out of contact with a socially forbidden activity. Youth are apparently aware of the difference between violence in a video image and violence in real life. However, social media harassment (bullying), is a growing and very serious concern.

Gary Payne 2002

Graffiti is an interesting but rarely studied form of mass media. The rich may own the newspapers, radio and TV stations, but the poor of any society own the graffiti, and they often communicate through it in poor nations. Here in Caracas, Venezuela, a bank is removing spray-painted graffiti accusing it of causing a national economic crisis to destroy popularly elected President Hugo Chavez. Chavez sided with the poor on many issues, and against the richest banks.

The Peer Group
Of all the agents of socialization, only one offers a measure of personal freedom and participation in decisions for young people: the **peer group (like-minded equals of the same age**.) All the other agents of socialization are in control of the interaction. The peer group is an especially powerful and inviting influence, because it must respect the individual member at least somewhat. If it does not, the individual is free to join a different peer group, which is not an option with the other agents of socialization. After experiencing the authority-controlled life in the family, schools and religious institutions - and the passive and impersonal interaction of the mass media – time spent in the peer group often seems very real, fair and liberating to most young citizens.

Youth are soon tightly drawn to this collection of equals. High school teens spend more time with peers than with parents today, and so this agent of socialization – like schools and mass media - also takes time away from family. A century ago, the family siblings *were* the main peer group. Thus, the growing importance of peers outside the family is another fundamental social change in who we are today.

Peer groups constantly *negotiate* their norms regarding music, drug use, sex, dress, piercing, tattoos, emotional difficulties and other subjects which are too personal, intimate or rapidly changing for the other agents of socialization to manage. Despite the existence of significant levels of respect, power and freedom for individuals within a peer group, conformity of each individual to some peer group norms is still expected in exchange for membership.

Gary Payne 2011

Nicaraguan schoolboys. Bonds between peers often become as strong as those between family members.

RESOCIALIZATION

After passing through the cultural funnel created by all these agents of socialization listed above, one might think our individual personalities are set in stone.

But we are such profoundly social creatures that if we are suddenly placed in a drastically different social environment, we have the capacity to develop an entirely different personality within a few months. The process, which was explored by popular Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman, is called **resocialization – learning new values as a result of being isolated from our social surroundings.**

Resocialization can occur in a number of social contexts: prisons, jails, mental hospitals, military duty, strict boarding schools, prisoner-of-war camps, kidnapper hideouts, and

religious cult meetings. Goffman suggested that what all these social contexts have in common defines them as "**total" institutions – confining institutions in which *all* authority is in the hands of the operators and all aspects of life are controlled.**

In total institutions, the individual is forced to surrender control over his/her own life. The total institution becomes the *only* socialization agent, and the individual has little choice but to comply. The more extreme total institutions also strip away the former identity with a number of systematic and intentional procedures. Common examples come from military boot camps, in which facial and scalp hair is often removed in the first minutes of entrance, along with civilian clothing and personal items that remind the individual of the former "self." Conformity to the new identity that the institution desires for the individual is rewarded, and non-conformity is quickly punished.

In the last half century, resocialization methods have been refined. The techniques work, not just because human personality is quite moldable, but because the individuals who enter total institutions usually do not fully understand how they are being manipulated. They become the pawns of those who *do* understand.

Jack Nicholson's portrayal of a charismatic troublemaker inside a mental institution became a classic. The original novel by Ken Kesey came out in 1962, shortly after sociologist Erving Goffman published *Asylums* in 1961, a stinging research critique of psychiatric institutions. The themes in both books were so similar that many suspect that *Cuckoo's Nest*, made into a movie in 1975, was inspired by Goffman's book.

The effect on almost all individuals who enter total institutions is very profound, and has been described by some observers as, "brainwashing." After a few months inside a military boot camp, it may become difficult for recruits to completely reclaim the original personality they entered with. In fact, many who have been through the process do not even wish to try. Prisoners of war often face an even more severe treatment, and for a longer time period.

An understanding of the known effects of resocialization in total institutions also reveals the irrationality of using incarceration to improve the behavior of convicted criminals. If an individual who is convicted of a crime is then isolated in a prison environment dominated by other convicts, what kind of values and norms will be transmitted back and forth?

Statistics indicate that the longer an individual remains incarcerated, the *greater* the chances that the individual will reoffend after being placed back in society.[9] Most prisoners' identities harden during incarceration. Therefore, incarceration is an illogical social response to criminal behavior. There is no doubt that some individuals are just too dangerous to remain in society. But in light of what is already known about resocialization, societies are better off reducing the prison populations whenever possible.

Some alternatives to incarceration (for less violent criminals) which are being used by more progressive states are: fines, mandatory community service, compensation of victims, treatment programs, electronic surveillance and house arrest. These are helpful.

But even these less-punishment oriented alternatives are still *punishment focused*, rather than *prevention* oriented. **Prevention of social problems is always the first choice of sociologists, because it is usually cheaper and because it gets to the root of the problem rather than trying punishment tactics after it has already occurred.**

How might we go about reducing our "need" to incarcerate? The question is addressed in later chapters 7 and 8 in this text. But in summary, we would have to improve the *nurture* aspects of our society. The idea would be to create a civilization that – to the greatest extent possible - could *prevent* destructive personalities from being created.

It should be no surprise by now to the readers of this chapter that *appropriate* behavior, and *acceptable* personality, develop in social surroundings that are also appropriate and acceptable. Goffman found that mental hospitals, juvenile detention centers, prisons and jails rarely maintain either condition.[10] Likewise, it is well known that violent criminals are likely to have experienced unhealthy and/or impoverished conditions during their childhood socialization.

If we want to be surrounded by good citizens, the evidence suggests that society must provide acceptable living conditions, economic and educational opportunities and at least basic medical care for all families. Most modern democratic societies have already shifted government funding towards *prevention* of negative outcomes through providing positive opportunities for their citizens rather than punishment or treatment. Statistical comparisons among nations that emphasize prevention indicate that these policies tend to work very well.

The legacy of Sultan Qaboose 1970-2017
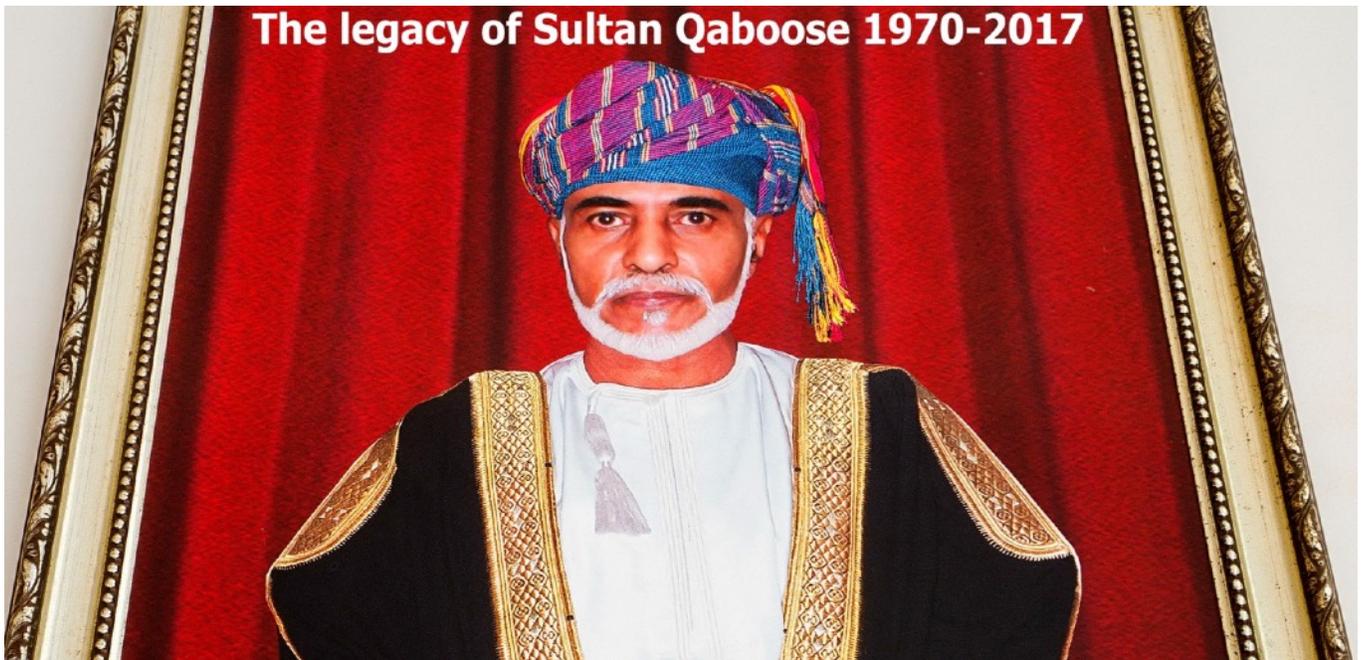
It's not often that a nation recreates its culture. But when Sultan Caboose took control of Oman from his own corrupt father, he gradually established progressive sociological reforms that turned his backward, crime ridden nation into a model of greater freedom, education, equality, health, safety and environmental protection. It was a unique opportunity for sociologists to demonstrate the dramatic benefits of progressive policies, listed below.

Freedom of Religion and of the Press
A Bill of Women's Rights
Free Universal Health Care

Free Universal Education including College
Free Land and Housing for the Poor
"Friend-to-all" Foreign Policy
Shifting Economy from Oil to Tourism
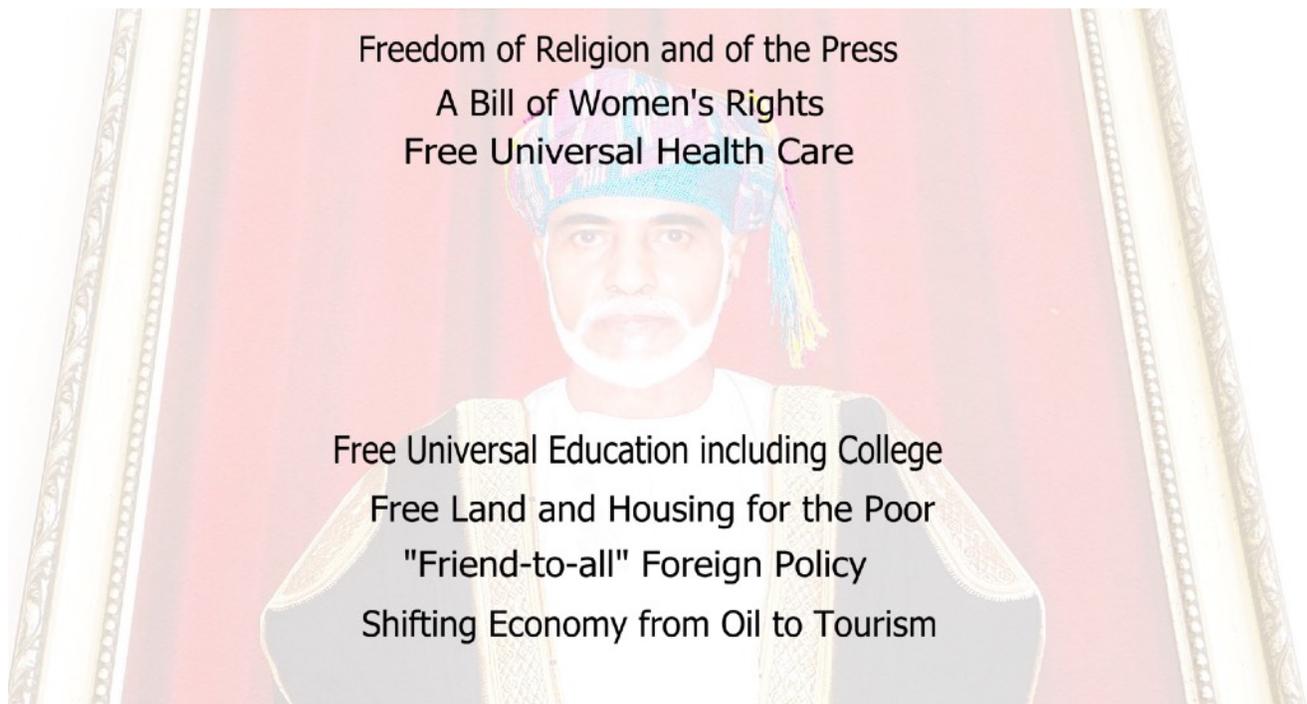
Funding programs aimed at prevention of problematic citizens seems expensive to some conservative critics, but these costs must be weighed against the enormous costs of jails, prisons, detention centers, broken families, crowded emergency rooms and other costs of allowing human failure on a massive scale. Furthermore, as we shall see in chapter 7, punitive institutions are failing in several ways. Ignoring the socialization process is very risky business for a society.

Sultan Caboose faced stiff resistance to these policies by Islamic religious leaders, but the benefits to his nation made him too popular to remove. Below I have compared Oman's homicide rates with its Islamic neighbors (a fair comparison) and the USA (just for reference). But all Omani social indicators indicate the same conclusion: it was a vast improvement. Oman is now enjoying the economic benefits of mass tourism. The higher education levels increased productivity of workers and tax revenue. The Sultan built houses instead of prisons. Prevention! If this can work in Oman, it can work anywhere.

Oman, It's Neighbors and the USA: Homicide Rates in Year per 100K, Year 2017
Sources: Kings College, London; CIA World Factbook; Federal Bureau of Justice Statistics

	Homicide	Incarceration Rate	
Oman	1 per 100,000	36 per 100,000	*USA rate is 36 times higher than Oman*
Saudi Arabia	1.5		
Egypt	3.2		
Turkey	4		
USA	4.9	724	*USA rate is 20 times higher than Oman*
Yemen	6.7		
Pakistan	7.1		
Qatar	8.1		

THE SELF AND THE SOCIALIZATION PROCESS

Our culture's socialization agents are described in this chapter. But what is the view of this process from the standpoint of the individual passing through the process?

Each individual definitely does experience a sense of a personal "self" that is distinct from the groups the individual belongs to. We *are* capable of thinking about ourselves as independent objects. But since we know from studies of isolated children that the "self" is heavily dependent on influences of others for its existence, a question arises.   Does the "self" really exist as a separate entity?

Sociologist Thomas Horton Cooley (1864-1929) claimed that the "self" was merely an image we as individuals hold of how we are viewed by the other people around us. So, for example, if others see us as handsome or beautiful, we will likely see our self as handsome or beautiful. According to Cooley, individuals get a general idea of their own self by observing other people's treatment and reaction to their presence. **Others around us thus become a "social mirror" to see our self; Cooley called this image, "The Looking Glass Self."** Once we have gauged how others see us, we tend to accept this collective judgment and absorb this socially-created identity.

Sociologist George Herbert Mead (1863-1961) also explored the nature of "self" during his lifetime. He went a little further than Cooley in his theory. Mead agreed with Cooley that the "self" amounts merely to an image created by social experience around us. But Mead also suggested that we individuals also possess a mind that actually *anticipates* (through imagination) how others would respond to certain behaviors we might engage in. In other words, we don't always have to *wait* for a reaction from people (as Cooley suggested) to judge what our self is like.

As we grow and become more intellectually sophisticated as children, our minds attempt to step temporarily into other people's personalities (roles) long enough to anticipate what they might think of our behavior. **Mead referred to this process as "role taking."** This use of our imagination is then used to shape how we act in accordance with the imagined social consequences of our acts.

A real-life observable example of Mead's role-taking in action would be little children dressing up "like mommy or daddy" and play-acting the parts of their parents, using dolls. This activity, Mead would say, helps children understand how they are seen by their parents. By doing so, they learn to *anticipate* parental judgments on their behavior. They are then able to shape their future behavior based on this learning. This is one means by which the individual collaborates with her or his own social world to form personality.

THE EXISTENCE – OR NOT - OF INDIVIDUAL FREE WILL

A reader of this chapter might be forgiven for thinking that the concept of individual free will is just an illusion, that we individuals are like robots responding *only* to socio-cultural inputs. The existence -or not- of "free will" is a point of intense controversy in several disciplines, including sociology. After all, we are questioning our very existence – if any - as independent actors!

Does free will exist, or are we as individuals *totally* controlled from external influences? Perhaps the best proof that *some* spark of free will may exist in individuals is the fact that this question is raised in the first place. *The question itself* demonstrates a somewhat probing independent attitude with at least a hint of rebelliousness at the very thought of being completely controlled by external forces. We can all be happy for that.

Yet if the average individual has little opportunity or time to acquire an understanding of the socialization process…as you have had in this chapter…would that question about free will ever have been seriously raised?

The evidence indicates that we are not born with a strong tendency to express free will, nor do our institutions encourage it. The desire to fit in and conform appears much more powerful, and this desire is understandably encouraged and expected by our institutions.

Free will may or may not be acquired in a lifetime. The secret to achieving free will lies in obtaining an understanding of the culture around us, and becoming aware at pressure to influence or control us and by loyalty rituals and censorship of points of view that cultural institutions reject.

That is, free will only exists to the extent that individuals *have access* to learn about and reflect on the full range of cultural alternatives and thereby the ability to be actively engaged in adopting better ways to think and live. Too few of our citizens get that opportunity.

As you read this, there are individuals sitting at the bottom of nuclear missile silos hundreds of feet beneath the surface of the Earth, in several nations. These "missile-sitters" are not evil people, but their socialization has led them to macabre careers. They wait for an order from *people they do not know and will never meet* to launch missiles to annihilate millions of *people they do not know and will never meet*, especially if they push those buttons.

Have they become institutional machinery?

Under the right circumstances, these missile-sitters from opposing nuclear-armed nations could fall in love with each other, perhaps even marry and raise families together. Instead, having passed through very different socialization processes, they are prepared to kill each other. They accept their intellectual indoctrination in the most absolute manner. Yet, if asked, they would probably claim that they are missile-sitters *by their own free will*...if their commanders allow them to speak with you.

Nevertheless, most sociologists (including me) would agree that at least the *seed* of free will *does* reside in all of us, and this seed can sprout under proper conditions. Free will requires that our cultural blinders be removed, or at least, understood. No discipline is better suited for this task than sociology. Part of our sociological mission is to *create* free will by exposing the cultural barriers to its existence.

We could use everyone's help to encourage school boards to allow critical thinking into classrooms at the upper levels of high school. Otherwise, most young citizens may never have the opportunity to question their cultural programming.

FIGURE 4.1: THE "WILD CHILD" [11]

In 1970, a girl of thirteen years - but weighing only 59 pounds - was discovered by a social worker in a locked room of a house in Arcadia, California. She was wearing diapers. Her name was Genie, but her incredible life history gained national attention immediately. She was soon nicknamed the "Wild Child." From the age of 20 months, she had been placed in almost total isolation by her father who was arrested for child abuse, but then killed himself before trial. The reasons for his treatment of Genie went to the grave with him. Genie learned fairly well once she was free, and began using words, a stellar achievement, given her history. She was a biologically normal child that had been through a terribly neglectful socialization process.

Genie had lived her life almost entirely alone, in a harness and wire cage. She had a long way to go to catch up; too far, it turned out. She was a living example of the importance of the social environment on personality and behavior, for she had had very little of what most of humanity takes for granted and therefore does not fully value.

She sometimes hopped like a bunny and was prone to raging tantrums. Genie spat constantly, she blew her nose on everything. She masturbated almost continuously and in any social situation. She exercised no control over her bowels. Never having worn clothes, she reacted neither to cold nor heat, she had acclimated like a wild animal. Her genes, her personal choices and her other innate qualities (the basis of the "nature" argument) had not mattered much. Socially, she was difficult to recognize as fully human.

And yet, there was a hint that her potential for intelligence and physical beauty had been high. She was alert, and curious about everything. Susan Curtiss, a linguist who studied Genie intensely as a graduate student, described interaction with Genie: "She was fragile and beautiful, almost haunting, and so I was pulled, I was very drawn to her, even though I was nervous and had no idea what to expect."
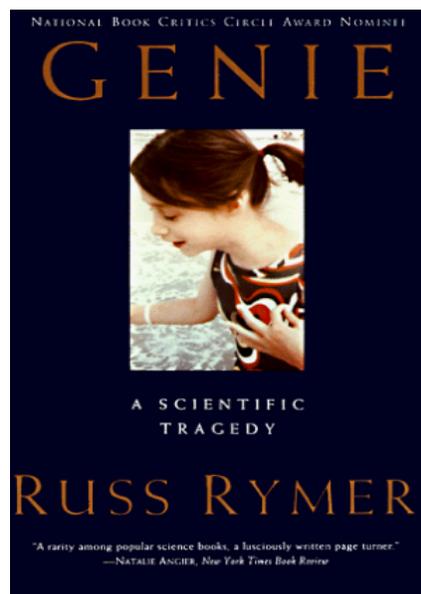
For the whole story on Genie, I highly recommend Russ Rymer's fine summary of her life.

Mursi tribe men in Southern Ethiopia tend to be tall, hardworking and rather serious in their demeanor.

This young Mursi mother has chosen not to subject her face to the disk tradition, possibly signaling the disappearance of this custom which is no longer necessary. It would be interesting to know if she has been pressured to continue it. Her child wears a leather harness that balances carried loads of firewood and water.

Photos by Gary Payne 2010

Dizzy and dehydrated from bad water, Mary poses with our guide Michael (who spoke nine tribal languages) and a Mursi village woman. Mary had been reluctant to even try to walk from our vehicle. The two Mursi women behind her noticed her weakness. Without hesitation they picked her up and carried her around to see the village and here for this picture which revealed their stunning cultural kindness and made this photo a special one.

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