

This chapter looks at some of the basic ideas or concepts that sociologists use to understand human behaviour. It begins with the idea of **culture**, the learned, shared behaviour of members of society. Comparisons are then made between human and non-human societies in order to develop an understanding of the importance of culture for human behaviour. Some of the main aspects of culture - values, norms, statuses and roles - are then examined. The chapter ends by showing the importance of **socialisation** - the process by which people learn the culture of their society. Throughout the chapter comparisons are made between Western and non-Western society in order to illustrate the variety of human behaviour.

CULTURE

Human beings learn how to behave. They share much of their behaviour with other members of the society to which they belong. The learned, shared behaviour of members of a society is known as **culture**. The following passage examines the importance of culture for human society.

Many living creatures do not learn how to behave. They have not been taught by their parents, they have not copied older brothers and sisters or imitated adult members of their society. They do not have to learn their behaviour because their actions are directed by instinct. Instincts are instructions about how to behave which are biologically inherited. They guide the salmon's return from the sea to spawn and die in fresh water. They direct the migration of birds and organise the complex society of ants and bees.

The instinctive behaviour of creatures which belong to the same species is very similar. For example, blackbirds build similar nests at the same time of year. All human beings belong to the same species but studies of various human societies show considerable differences in behaviour. This suggests that the way of life of men and women is learned rather than biologically inherited. If their actions were based on instinct, human beings, as members of the same species, should behave in much the same way.



Tibetan nuns in 1904



Kikuyu women, Kenya

The following examples of customs concerning marriage and family life indicate the variety of human behaviour. In traditional China, a woman's father or one of her brothers is responsible for finding a husband for her. If a woman does not marry, her entire family is disgraced. When unmarried female missionaries came to China from the West, they were thought to be escaping from the shame brought about by the failure of the men of their household to find them a husband. For a Koryak woman of Siberia, sharing a husband with other wives is an ideal system. It reduces her workload and provides her with company. She cannot understand how Western women could be so selfish as to restrict their husbands to a single wife. Amongst the Cheyenne Indians a son-in-law is expected to provide food for his mother-in-law. However, he must never speak to her. Should he find himself alone in her presence, he must cover his head with a buffalo robe.

The above examples are taken from three societies which have different ways of life. Sociologists use the term culture to refer to the way of life of members of a society. Culture includes the values, beliefs, customs, rules and regulations which human beings learn as members of a society. People need culture to meet even the most basic of human needs. For example, they have no instincts to tell them what is edible and how to prepare



Russian women in 1890

food and eat it. They learn these lessons from the culture of their society.

It is essential that culture is not only learned but also shared. Thus without a shared language members of society could not communicate and cooperate effectively. Without rules applying to everybody, there would be disorder in society. Imagine the

chaos and confusion that would result in today's society if there were no road traffic regulations. Rules must be both learned and shared.

Culture then is the learned shared behaviour of members of a society. Without culture human society would not exist.

(adapted in part from 'Sociological Perspective' by Ely Chinoy, Random House, New York, 1968 and 'The Individual and Culture' by Mary E. Goodman, Dorsey, Homewood, 1967)

QUESTIONS

1. What is instinctive behaviour? (4)
2. How does behaviour based on instinct differ from behaviour based on culture? (4)
3. Why do the examples of different customs concerning marriage and the family and the different forms of dress shown in the pictures suggest that human behaviour is learned rather than instinctive? (5)
4. Human beings spend considerable time and effort teaching young people the culture of their society. Why do they do this? (7)

2

PART

INSTINCT

Many living creatures apart from human beings live in social groups. An understanding of human behaviour can be developed by an examination of non-human societies. The following passage gives a brief description of the social life of honeybees. It shows how a society can be organised on the basis of *instinct* rather than culture.

Like human beings, the honeybee lives in societies. It is a social insect. A hive consists of one queen, a few hundred male drones and between twenty and sixty thousand female worker bees. Each honeybee has a part to play in the running of the hive. The queen specialises in the production of eggs. This is her only job and she lays up to 200,000 a year. The male drones have the sole task of fertilising the queen. They receive food from the worker bees and help themselves from the stores of honey in the hive. In the autumn, at the end of the breeding season, the workers refuse to feed them or allow them access to the stores of honey. The starving drones drop to the bottom of the hive and are pulled out by the workers and left to die.

The worker bees spend the first three weeks of their lives performing household tasks. They build and repair the honeycombs from their wax producing glands and feed the newly hatched youngsters from their food producing glands. They clear out the hive removing debris and dead bees which have collected at the bottom. For the remaining two weeks of their lives most worker bees become field bees, foraging for nectar and pollen.

Honeybees live a highly ordered and organised social life. Each bee specialises in particular tasks and has set duties to perform. However, they have *not* learned how to behave. They have not been taught by older members of the colony, they



A honeybee with yellow pollen sacs performing a dance

have not imitated other bees. Instead, their behaviour is directed by instinct, by instructions contained in the genes which they inherit from their parents. The behaviour of honeybees is therefore inborn. This can be shown by the ways in which honeybees communicate. When a worker bee discovers a source of food it passes this information on to other bees by dancing on its return to the hive. The dance indicates the distance and direction of the food from the hive. One study suggests that the distance is indicated by the speed at which the bee turns. If the food is 275 metres away it turns 28 times a minute. If it is 2,750 metres away it turns nine times a minute. Worker bees who have never had any contact with other workers can both perform and interpret the dance. These skills are therefore instinctive. Since the bees have had no opportunity to learn from others, their ability to understand and perform the dance must be inborn.

(adapted from 'Bees and Beekeeping' by A.V. Pavord, Cassell, London, 1975)

QUESTIONS

1. Name the three types of honeybees and briefly outline the tasks they perform. (6)
2. Explain why honeybees do not have to learn the parts they play in society. (4)
3. What evidence is given in the passage which can be taken as proof that the behaviour of honeybees is based on instinct? (4)
4. Without instinct the society of honeybees could not exist. Explain this statement. (6)

3

PART

ANIMAL BEHAVIOUR

The closer we approach human beings in the animal kingdom, the less important instincts are for directing behaviour and the more important learned behaviour becomes. It was once thought that the behaviour of all creatures apart from human beings was based on *instinct*. A large number of studies, particularly of apes and monkeys, has shown that this view is incorrect. The following study of macaque monkeys illustrates this point.



Japanese macaques washing potatoes

For a number of years Japanese scientists have been studying the behaviour of macaque monkeys on islands in northern Japan. On one island the macaques lived in the forest in the interior. The scientists tried to discover whether they could change the behaviour of the monkeys. They began by dumping potatoes in a clearing in the forest. The macaques picked them up, sniffed them inquisitively and tasted them. Gradually they changed their eating habits and potatoes, a food previously unknown to them, became their main diet. The scientists then began moving the potatoes towards the shoreline and the macaques followed. The potatoes were regularly dumped on

the beach and the troupe took up residence there rather than in the forest. Then, without any encouragement from the scientists, a number of brand new behaviour patterns developed. Some of the macaques began washing potatoes in the sea before eating them, a practice which was soon adopted by the whole group. Some of the younger monkeys began paddling in the sea then took the plunge and learned how to swim. Their elders followed suit and swimming became normal behaviour for the whole troupe. Finally, some of the more adventurous youngsters began diving into the sea from rocks on the shoreline. Other members of the troupe imitated them but some of the older macaques



Paddling in the sea

decided that this time they would not follow the lead of the youngsters.

(adapted from 'Sociology: Themes and Perspectives', 4th edition, by Michael Haralambos and Martin Holborn, Collins Educational, London, 1995)

QUESTIONS

1. List three new behaviour patterns which developed in the macaque troupe. (3)
2. Give one similarity between the ways in which macaques and human beings learn their behaviour. Provide examples to illustrate your answer. (5)
3. Why did the Japanese scientists argue that much of the behaviour of macaque monkeys is learned rather than instinctive? (6)
4. The learned behaviour of monkeys and apes is simple and limited compared with that of human beings. Show briefly with examples that this is the case and suggest why it is so. (6)

4

PART

CULTURE AND VALUES

Values form an important part of the culture of a society. A *value* is a belief that something is good and worthwhile. It defines what is worth having and worth striving for. Values often vary considerably from society to society. The following description of the major values of traditional Cheyenne society provides a sharp contrast with the values held today in the West.

The Cheyenne Indians lived on the Great Plains of the United States of America, west of the Mississippi River and east of the Rocky Mountains. The following account describes part of their traditional way of life which came to an end at the close of the last century when they were defeated by the US army and placed on reservations.



Cheyenne Indians photographed in 1889

The Cheyenne believe that wealth, in the form of horses and weapons, is not to be hoarded by the owner. Instead it is to be given away. Generosity is highly regarded and people who accumulate wealth and keep it for themselves are looked down upon. A person who gives does not expect an equal amount in

return. The greatest gift they can receive is prestige and respect for their generous action.

Bravery on the battlefield is one of the main ways a man can achieve high standing in the eyes of the tribe. Killing an enemy, however, does not rank as highly as a number of other deeds. Touching or striking an enemy with the hand or a weapon, rescuing a wounded comrade or charging the enemy alone while the rest of the war party looks on are amongst the highest deeds of bravery. The Cheyenne developed war into a game. Killing large numbers of the enemy is far less important than individual acts of courage which bring great respect from other members of the tribe. The brave deeds of a warrior are recounted at meetings of the warrior societies and sung about by the squaws. They may lead to his appointment to the tribal council and to the position of war chief which means others will follow him into battle and respect his leadership.

The values of Cheyenne society provide goals for its members to aim for and general guidelines for their behaviour. Values, like culture in general, are learned and shared by members of

society. Some sociologists argue that shared values form the basis for social unity or social solidarity. They help to bind people into a close knit group. Because they share the same values, members of society are likely to see others as 'people like themselves'. They will therefore have a sense of belonging to a

social group, they will feel a part of the wider society. In this respect shared values form the basis for unity in society.

(adapted from 'The Cheyennes' by E. Adamson Hoebel, Holt, Reinhart and Winston, New York, 1960)

QUESTIONS

1. What are the two major values of Cheyenne society? (2)
2. Identify two major values from your own society. (2)
3. How do the Cheyenne express the values of their society in their behaviour? (4)
4. Give three rewards a Cheyenne warrior might receive for being successful in terms of the values of his society. (3)
5. How does the Cheyenne attitude towards wealth differ from that in your own society? (4)
6. a) Why are shared values beneficial to society? (2)
b) How might it be harmful to society if people held a wide range of differing values? (3)

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PART

CULTURE AND NORMS

Values provide general guidelines for conduct. **Norms** are much more specific. They define appropriate and acceptable behaviour in particular situations. A society may value privacy but this value provides only a general guide to behaviour. Norms define how the value of privacy is translated into action in particular situations and circumstances. Thus in British society norms relating to privacy state that a person's mail must not be opened by other people and that their house must not be entered without their permission. A person's 'private life' is their own concern and others must not pry into their personal affairs. In this way a series of norms direct how people should behave in terms of the value of privacy.

Norms guide behaviour in all aspects of social life. There are norms of dress which define the types of clothing appropriate for members of each sex, age group and social situation. There are norms governing behaviour with family, friends, neighbours and strangers. There are norms which define acceptable behaviour in the home, classroom and workplace, at a party, wedding and funeral, in a cinema, supermarket and doctor's waiting room.

As a part of culture, norms are learned, shared and vary from society to society. This can be seen clearly from norms concerning food. Amongst the Bedouin of North Africa, sheep's eyes are regarded as a delicacy whereas in the West they are not even considered fit to eat. The Bedouin eat with their fingers and a loud and prolonged burp at the end of a meal is a compliment to the host. In the West such behaviour would be considered the height of bad manners. Or,

as a sociologist would say, it would not conform to Western norms of eating behaviour.

Norms provide order in society. Imagine a situation in which 'anything goes'. The result is likely to be confusion and disorder. This can sometimes be seen in the classroom if teacher and students fail to establish a set of rules for conducting a lesson. Norms help to make social life predictable and comprehensible. If there were no norms stating how people should express pleasure or irritation, warmth or hostility it would be difficult to understand how others felt, to predict their behaviour and respond to them in appropriate ways.



Bedouin eating, Syria 1923

Norms also provide practical solutions to everyday problems. Take an apparently simple operation like cooking, cracking open and eating a boiled egg. There are norms directing the whole operation. Social life would be much less efficient if such methods had to be constantly re-invented by trial and error.

Lacking instincts, human beings need norms to guide and direct their actions. In a thousand and one areas of social life norms define appropriate and acceptable behaviour.

(adapted in part from 'Sociology', by Leonard Broom and Philip Selznick, Harper and Row, New York, 1977)

QUESTIONS

1. It has often been claimed that a high value is placed on human life in Western society. Describe three norms which direct behaviour in terms of this value. (6)
2. Briefly outline the norms which define acceptable behaviour at a party and in a doctor's waiting room and indicate how they differ. (8)
3. Using your own examples, outline two ways in which norms are useful for the operation of human society. (6)

6

PART

CULTURE, STATUS AND ROLE

All the world's a stage
And all the men and women merely players.

In these lines Shakespeare makes the point that in society people have certain positions and play certain parts. In sociological terminology, they hold **statuses** and play **roles**.

For example in Western society there are occupational statuses such as bricklayer, nurse, clerk and solicitor and family statuses such as father, mother, brother and sister. A status can be ascribed or achieved. An **ascribed status** is largely fixed



The Queen at the State Opening of Parliament, 1994

and unchangeable, the individual having little or no say in the matter. Many are fixed at birth such as the gender statuses of male and female. In preindustrial society status was often ascribed, a boy taking on the status of his father, a girl that of her mother. Thus most Cheyenne males automatically became hunters and warriors like their fathers before them while females became wives and mothers and gathered roots and berries as their mothers had done. In present day British society, aristocratic titles provide an example of an ascribed status. Prince Charles is heir to the throne simply because he is the eldest son of the reigning monarch. There are, however, occasions when an ascribed status can be changed. A monarch can abdicate as in the case of Edward VIII who was forced to give up the English throne in 1936 because he intended to marry an American divorcee.

An ascribed status is imposed upon a person. There is little he or she can do about it. An **achieved status**, on the other hand, involves some degree of choice and direct and positive action. A person chooses to get married and adopt the status of a husband or wife. There is often an element of choice in selecting an occupation in modern industrial societies. An achieved status, as the name suggests, results partly from individual achievement. To some extent a person achieves his or her job as an architect, librarian or joiner on the basis of ability and effort.

Each social status is accompanied by a role. Roles define the expected and acceptable behaviour for those occupying particular statuses. Thus the role of doctor states how a doctor is expected to behave. It is a collection of norms defining how the part of a doctor should be played. Roles are a part of culture and often differ considerably from society to society. In traditional Cheyenne society the role of women is mainly domestic - caring for children, preparing and cooking food and making clothing. Hunting is left to the men. However, hunting formed an important part of the female role amongst the Australian aborigines of Tasmania. The women hunted seals and

opossums (small tree-dwelling animals).

Roles are performed in relation to other roles. Thus the role of teacher is played in relation to the role of student, the role of husband in relation to the role of wife. Tasks can often be accomplished more effectively if those concerned adopt their appropriate roles. Thus a doctor can do his job more efficiently if he and his patients stick to their roles rather than also playing the part of old friends or courting couples. Roles provide social life with order and predictability. If teacher and student play their roles, they know what to do and how to do it. Knowing each others' roles they are able to predict and understand what the other is doing. Like other aspects of culture, roles guide and direct behaviour in human society.

(adapted from 'Sociological Perspective' by Ely Chinoy, Random House, New York, 1968 and 'Sociology: Themes and Perspectives', 4th edition, by Michael Haralambos and Martin Holborn, Collins Educational, London, 1995)

QUESTIONS

1. List your own statuses and identify which are ascribed and which are achieved. (2)
2. a) Give one example of an ascribed status that can be changed. (1)
b) Briefly outline the difficulties that such a change might create for the individual concerned. (3)
3. Select one occupational status in modern industrial society and suggest how it is achieved on the basis of ability and effort. (4)
4. Roles are learned rather than instinctive. How do the roles of Cheyenne and Tasmanian women provide evidence to support this statement? (4)
5. Outline, with your own examples, two ways in which roles are useful for the operation of human society. (6)

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PART

SOCIALISATION (1)

In view of the importance of values, norms, statuses and roles, it is essential for the wellbeing of society that culture is effectively learned by its members. The process by which people learn the culture of their society is known as *socialisation*. Socialisation begins at birth and continues throughout a person's life. During its early years, the child learns many of the basic behaviour patterns of its society. This is the period of *primary socialisation*, the first and probably the most important part of the socialisation process. In practically every society the family bears the main responsibility for primary socialisation. As the child moves into the wider society, *secondary socialisation* begins. During this process the child learns from a wider range of people and institutions. Thus in modern industrial societies, schools play an important part in secondary socialisation.

Something of the importance of the socialisation process may be seen from the following extract. It describes the behaviour of two girls who, for a large part of their short lives, had been isolated from other human beings.

In 1920 two girls were reportedly discovered in a wolf den in Bengal, India. Aged about two and eight years, they were taken to an orphanage where they were looked after by the Reverend J. A. L. Singh and his wife. The younger child, Amala died soon after she arrived at the orphanage, the elder girl, Kamala, remained in the orphanage until 1929 when she too died. Despite the fact that Amala and Kamala were called 'wolf-children' and found in a wolf's den, there is no evidence that they were actually raised by wolves. The Reverend Singh wrote the following description of their behaviour in 1926.

At the present time Kamala can utter about forty words. She is able to form a few sentences, each sentence containing two, or at the most, three words. She never talks unless spoken to, and when spoken to she may or may not reply. She is obedient to Mrs Singh and myself only. Kamala is possessed of very acute hearing and evidences an exceedingly acute animal-like sense of smell. She can smell meat at a great distance. Never weeps or smiles but has a 'smiling appearance'. Shed a single tear when Amala died and would not leave the place where she lay dead. She is learning very slowly to imitate. Does not now play at all and does not mingle with other children. Once both



Kamala and Amala soon after they were brought to the orphanage



Kamala receiving a biscuit from Mrs Singh

talk. But one day they gave him such a biting and scratching that the infant was frightened and would never approach the wolf-children again. Amala and Kamala liked the company of Mrs Singh, and Kamala, the surviving one of the pair, is much attached to her. The eyes of the children possessed a peculiar glare, such as that observed in the eyes of dogs or cats in the dark. Up to the present time Kamala sees better at night than during the daytime and seldom sleeps after midnight. The children used to cry or howl in a peculiar voice neither animal nor human. Kamala still makes these noises at times. She is averse to all cleanliness, and serves the calls of nature anywhere, wherever she may happen to be at the time. Used to tear her clothes off. Hence a loin cloth was stitched to her in such a fashion that she could not open or tear it. Kamala used to eat and drink like a dog, lowering her mouth down to the plate, and never used her hands for the purpose of eating or drinking. She would gnaw a big bone on the ground and would rub it at times in order to separate the meat from the bone. At the present time she uses her hands for eating and walks straight on two legs but cannot run at all.

Amala and Kamala somewhat liked the company of an infant by the name of Benjamin while he was crawling and learning to

(letter quoted in 'Human Societies' edited by Geoffrey Hurd, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1973, pp95-96)

QUESTIONS

1. The children had apparently spent much of their lives isolated from other human beings. Why did this prevent them from behaving in ways which would be considered normal in human society into which they were born? (4)
2. List four items of Kamala's behaviour which suggest that she was beginning to act in ways considered normal in human society. (4)
3. a) Briefly compare what Kamala had learned by the age of fourteen after six years in the orphanage with what most children have learned by the age of five. (3)
b) Why does this suggest that primary socialisation is vital to effectively learn the culture of society? (3)
4. a) Give three possible reactions by people in the wider society to Kamala's behaviour which would make it difficult for her to cope outside the orphanage. (3)
b) Suggest why people would respond to her in these ways. (3)

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PART

SOCIALISATION (2)

The socialisation of young people can be seen as a series of lessons which prepare them for their adult roles. During childhood people learn many of the basic skills they will require in adult life. This is clearly seen from the following description of children's games and activities in the society of the Mbuti pygmies.

The Mbuti pygmies live in the tropical rain forest in the northeast corner of Zaire in central Africa. They are hunters and gatherers, the men being mainly responsible for hunting and the women for gathering edible fruit, berries and roots. Nets are often used for hunting. They are stretched into a long arc and women and children drive game such as antelope into the nets where they are killed by the men with spears and bows and arrows. Arrows, usually tipped with poison, are also used to kill birds and monkeys. The pygmies' favourite food is honey. For two

months of the year they spend considerable time and effort breaking into hives in the trees to extract honey. They are almost as much at home in the trees as they are on the ground. They take to the trees to avoid dangerous animals such as the forest buffalo and to chase game.

Women are mainly responsible for cooking. They roast plantains - a banana-like fruit - in hot ashes and make stews of meat, mushrooms and chopped leaves. They gather wood for the fire and carry water to the camp site. Women make the huts

from a framework of saplings - young trees - thatched with broad leaves. They also make the carrying baskets which are used for transporting food and equipment.

Pygmy children enjoy their early years. They love climbing trees and swinging on vines. Some children actually begin climbing trees before they can walk. One of their favourite games involves half a dozen climbing to the top of a young tree and bending it over until the top touches the ground. Then they all jump off together. If anyone is too slow, they go flying upwards as the tree springs back. Their friends are highly amused and laugh and jeer as they swing in the air.

Like children in all societies, pygmy children like to imitate older people. Their parents encourage them to do this. Fathers make tiny bows for their sons with blunt arrows made of softwood. They may also give their sons a strip of hunting net. Mothers weave tiny carrying baskets for their daughters much to the enjoyment of all concerned. Boys and girls often 'play house', building a miniature house from sticks and leaves. The boys shoot their arrows at plantains and ears of corn and proudly carry them back to the play house. They are then cooked and eaten in a serious and solemn manner.

Hunting is a favourite childhood game. Boys stretch out their pieces of hunting net while girls beat the ground with bunches of leaves driving an old frog towards the net. If a frog cannot



Masalito shows his nephew Kelekome how to examine a piece of honeycomb to see if the hive is ready for raiding.

be found, a grandparent will be asked to imitate an antelope. He is chased round the camp and finally driven into the net. The children then jump on the unfortunate grandparent and playfully pound him with their fists.

(adapted from 'The Forest People' by Colin M. Turnbull, Jonathan Cape, London, 1961)

QUESTIONS

1. What evidence does the extract contain to indicate the role of parents in the socialisation process? (4)
2. How do the games of pygmy boys help to prepare them for their adult roles? (6)
3. How do the games of pygmy girls help to prepare them for their adult roles? (6)
4. Select one children's game from your own society and suggest how it might prepare young people for adult life. (4)