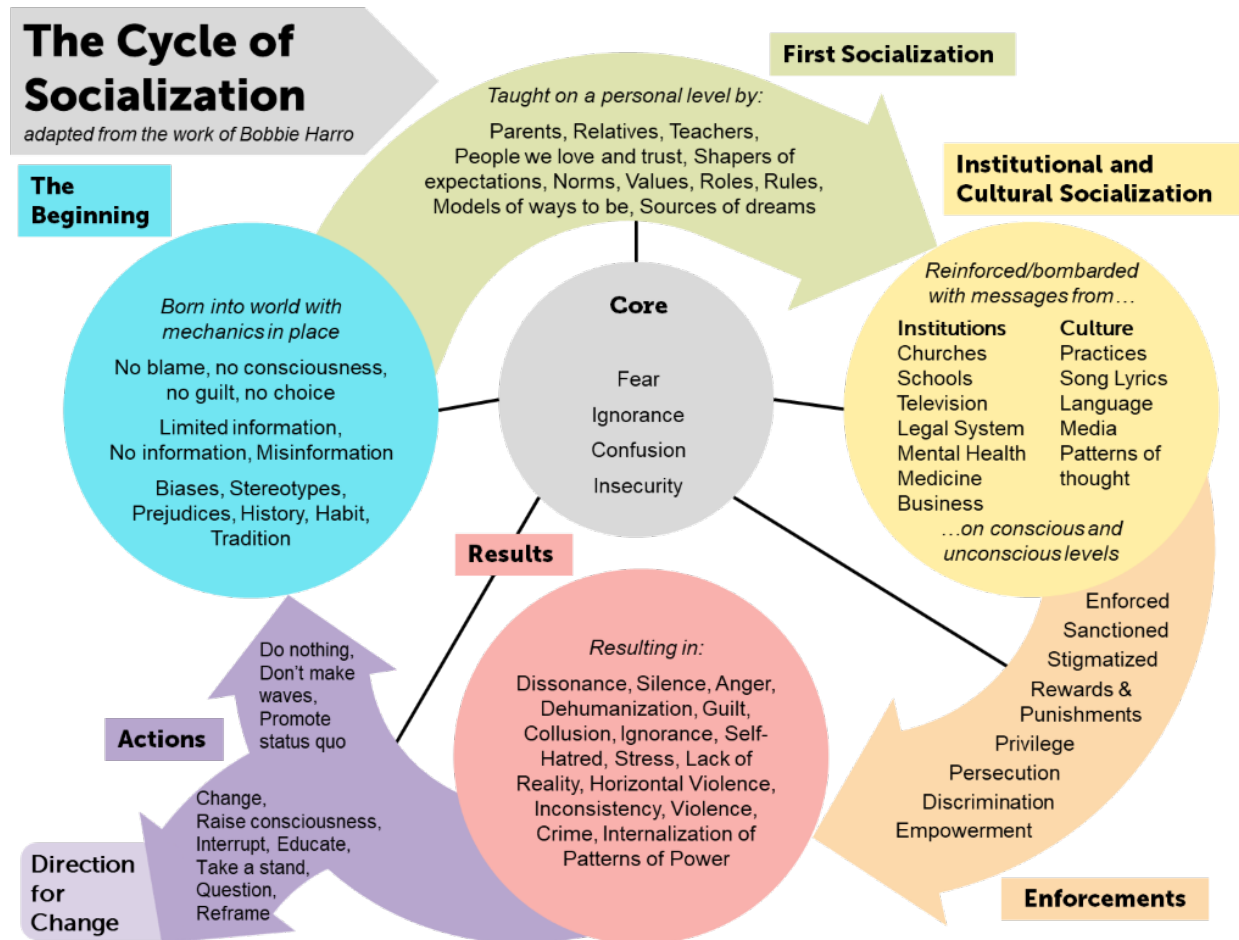


The Cycle of Socialization

LEARNING AND MAKING CHOICES ABOUT “HOW TO BE” OUR IDENTITIES

Socialization is the process of learning to behave in a way that is acceptable to society. We get systematic training in “how to be” each of our social identities throughout our lives. The cycle of socialization is one way of representing how the socialization process happens, from what sources it comes, how it affects our lives, and how it perpetuates itself.

The content on the Cycle of Socialization comes from Bobbie Harro, an author who contributed to the anthology of *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*.





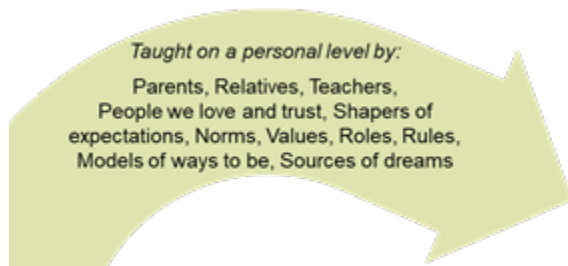
The Beginning (Circle #1)

Our socialization begins before we are born, with no choice on our part. No one brings us a survey, in the womb, inquiring into which gender, class, religion, sexual orientation, cultural group, ability status, or age we might want to be born. These identities are ascribed to us at birth through no effort or decision or choice of our own; there is, therefore, no reason to blame each other or hold each other responsible for the identities we have. This first step in the socialization process is outside our control. In addition to having no choice, we also have no initial consciousness about who we are. We don't question our identities at this point. We just are who we are.

On top of these givens, we are born into a world where all of the mechanics, assumptions, rules, roles, and structures of oppression are already in place and functioning; we have had nothing to do with constructing them. There is no reason for any of us to feel guilty or responsible for the world into which we are born. We are innocents, falling into an already established system.

The characteristics of this system were built long before we existed, based upon history, habit, tradition, patterns of belief, prejudices, stereotypes, and myths. Dominant or agent groups are considered the "norm" around which assumptions are built, and these groups receive attention and recognition. Agents have relatively more social power, and can "name" others. They are privileged at birth, and ascribed access to options and opportunities, often without realizing it. We are "lucky" to be born into these groups and rarely question it. Agent groups include men, white people, middle- and upper-class people, abled people, middle-aged people, heterosexuals, and gentiles.

On the other hand, there are many social identity groups about which little or nothing is known because they have not been considered important enough to study. These are referred to as subordinate groups or target groups. Some target groups are virtually invisible while others are defined by misinformation or very limited information. Targets are disenfranchised, exploited, and victimized by prejudice, discrimination, and other structural obstacles. Target groups include women; racially oppressed groups; gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people; disabled people; Jews; elders; youth; and people living in poverty. We are "unlucky" to be born into target groups and therefore devalued by the existing society. Both groups are dehumanized by being socialized into prescribed roles without consciousness or permission.

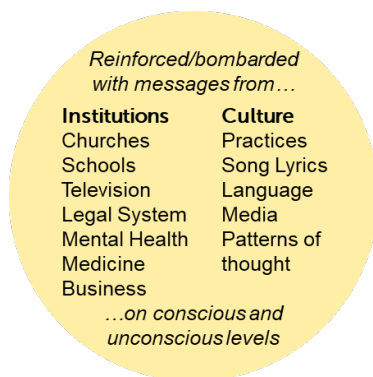


First Socialization (Arrow #1)

Immediately upon our births we begin to be socialized by the people we love and trust the most, our families or the adults who are raising us. They shape our self-concepts and self-perceptions, the norms and rules we must follow, the roles we are taught to play, our expectations for the future, and our dreams. These people serve as role models for us, and they teach us how to behave. This socialization happens both intrapersonally (how we think about ourselves), and interpersonally (how we relate to others). We are told things like, "Boys don't cry"; "You shouldn't trust white people"; "They're better than we are. Stay in your place"; "Don't worry if you break the toy. We can always buy another one"; "Christianity is the true religion"; "Children should be seen and not heard"; and "Don't kiss other girls. You're supposed to like boys." These messages are an automatic part of our early socialization, and we don't initially question them. We are too dependent on our parents or those raising us, and we haven't yet developed the ability to think for ourselves, so we unconsciously conform to their views.

It is important to observe that they, too, are not to be blamed. They are doing the best they can to raise us, and they only have their own backgrounds from which to draw. They may not have thought critically about what they are teaching us, and may be unconsciously passing on what was taught to them. Some of us may have been raised by parents who have thought critically about the messages that they are giving us, but they are still not in the majority. This could be good or bad, as well, depending on what their views are. A consciously racist parent may intentionally pass on racist beliefs to his children, and a consciously feminist parent may intentionally pass on non-stereotypical roles to her children, so it can go either way.

Regardless of the content of the teaching, we have been exposed, without initial question, to a strong set of rules, roles, and assumptions that cannot help but shape our sense of ourselves and the world. They influence what we take with us when we venture out of our protected family units into the larger world of other institutions.



Institutional and Cultural Socialization (Circle #2)

Once we begin to attend school, go to a place of worship, visit a medical facility, play on a sports team, work with a social worker, seek services or products from a business, or learn about laws and the legal system, our socialization sources are rapidly multiplied based on how many institutions with which we have contact. Most of the messages we receive about how to be, whom to "look up to" and "look down on," what rules to follow, what roles to play, what assumptions to make, what to believe, and what to think will probably reinforce or contradict what we have learned at home.

We might learn at school that girls shouldn't be interested in a woodworking shop class, that only white students go out for the tennis team, that kids who learn differently or think independently get put in special education, that it's okay for wealthy kids to miss classes for a family vacation, that it's okay to harass the boy who walks and talks like a girl, that most of the kids who drop out are from the south side of town, that "jocks" don't have to do the same work that "nerds" do to pass, or that kids who belong to another religious group are "weird." We learn who gets preferential treatment and who gets picked on. We are exposed to rules, roles, and assumptions that are not fair to everyone.

If we are members of the groups that benefit from the rules, we may not notice that they aren't fair. If we are members of the groups that are penalized by the rules, we may have a constant feeling of discomfort. We learn that these rules, roles, and assumptions are part of a structure that is larger than just our families. We get consistent similar messages from religion, the family doctor, the social worker, the local store, or the police officer, and so it is hard to not believe what we are learning. We learn that black people are more likely to steal, so store detectives follow them in stores. Boys are expected to fight and use violence, so they are encouraged to learn how. We shouldn't stare at or ask questions about disabled people; it isn't polite. Kids who live in certain sections of town are probably on welfare, taking our hard-earned tax dollars. Money talks. White means good; black means bad. Girls are responsible for birth control. It's a man's world. Jews are cheap. Arabs are terrorists. And so on.

We are inundated with unquestioned and stereotypical messages that shape how we think and what we believe about ourselves and others. What makes this "brainwashing" even more insidious is the fact that it is woven into every structural thread of the fabric of our culture. The media (television, the Internet, advertising, newspapers, and radio), our language patterns, the lyrics to songs, our cultural practices and holidays, and the very assumptions on which our society is built all contribute to the reinforcement of the biased messages and stereotypes we receive. We could identify thousands of examples to illustrate the oppressive messages that

bombard us daily from various institutions and aspects of our culture, reinforcing our divisions and "justifying" discrimination and prejudice.

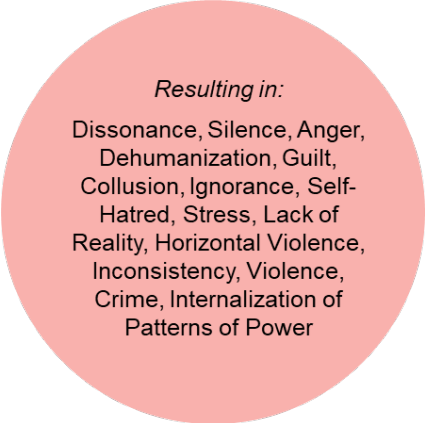


Enforcements (Arrow #2)

It might seem logical to ask why people don't just begin to think independently if they don't like what they are seeing around them. Why don't we ignore these messages if we are uncomfortable with them, or if they are hurting us? Largely, we don't ignore the messages, rules, roles, structures, and assumptions because there are enforcements in place to maintain them. People who try to contradict the "norm" pay a price for their independent thinking, and people who conform (consciously or unconsciously) minimally receive the benefit of being left alone for not making waves, such as acceptance in their designated roles, being considered normal or "a team player," or being allowed to stay in their places. Maximally, they receive rewards and privileges for maintaining the status quo such as access to higher places; attention and recognition for having "made it" or being the model member of their group; or the privilege that brings them money, connections, or power.

People who go against the grain of conventional societal messages are accused of being troublemakers, of making waves, or of being "the cause of the problem." If they are members of target groups, they are held up as examples of why this group is inferior to the agent group. Examples of this include the significantly higher numbers of people of color who are targeted by the criminal justice system. Although the number of white people who are committing crimes is just as high, those whites are much less likely to be arrested, charged, tried, convicted, or sentenced to jail than are people of color. Do different laws apply depending on a person's skin color? Battering statistics are rising as more women assert their equal rights with men, and the number one suspect for the murder of women in the United States is the husband or boyfriend. Should women who try to be equal with men be killed? The rationale given by some racists for the burning of black churches was that "they were getting too strong." Does religious freedom and the freedom to assemble apply only to white citizens? These examples of differential punishment being given to members or perceived members of target groups are only half of the picture.

If members of agent groups break the rules, they too are punished. Heterosexual men who take on primary childcare responsibilities, cry easily, or hug their male friends are accused of being dominated by their spouses, of being "soft." Middle-class people who work as advocates on economic issues are accused of being do-gooders or self-righteous liberals. Heterosexuals who work for the rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered people are immediately suspected of being "in the closet" themselves.



Resulting in:

Dissonance, Silence, Anger,
Dehumanization, Guilt,
Collusion, Ignorance, Self-
Hatred, Stress, Lack of
Reality, Horizontal Violence,
Inconsistency, Violence,
Crime, Internalization of
Patterns of Power

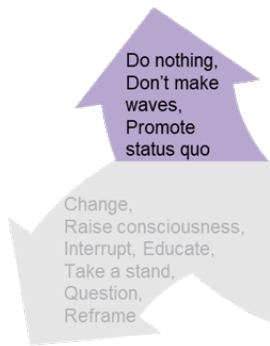
Results (Circle #3)

It is not surprising that the results of this systematic learning are devastating to all involved. If we are examining our target identities, we may experience anger, a sense of being silenced, dissonance between what the United States stands for and what we experience, low self-esteem, high levels of stress, a sense of hopelessness and disempowerment that can lead to crime and self-destructive behavior, frustration, mistrust, and dehumanization. By participating in our roles as targets we reinforce stereotypes, collude in our own demise, and perpetuate the system of oppression. This learned helplessness is often called internalized oppression because we have learned to become our own oppressors from within.

If we are examining our agent identities, we may experience guilt from unearned privilege or oppressive acts, fear of payback, tendency to collude in the system to be selfprotective, high levels of stress, ignorance of and loss of contact with the target groups, a sense of distorted reality about how the world is, fear of rising crime and violence levels, limited worldview, obliviousness to the damage we do, and dehumanization. By participating in our roles as agents, and remaining unconscious of or being unwilling to interrupt the cycle, we perpetuate the system of oppression.

These results are often cited as the problems facing our society today: high drop-out rates, crime, poverty, drugs, and so on. Ironically, the root causes of them are inherent in the very assumptions on which the society is built: dualism, hierarchy, competition, individualism, domination, colonialism, and the scarcity principle. To the extent that we fail to interrupt this cycle we keep the assumptions, the problems, and the oppression alive.

A way that we might personally explore this model is to take one of the societal problems and trace its root causes back through the cycle to the core belief systems or patterns in U.S. society that feed and play host to it. It is not a coincidence that the United States is suffering from these results today; rather, it is a logical outcome of our embracing the status quo, without thinking or challenging.



Actions (Arrow #3)

When we arrive at the results of this terrible cycle, we face the decision of what to do next. It is easiest to do nothing, and simply to allow the perpetuation of the status quo. We may choose not to make waves, to stay in our familiar patterns. We may say, "Oh well, it's been that way for hundreds of years. What can I do to change it? It is a huge phenomenon, and my small efforts won't count for much." Many of us choose to do nothing because it is (for a while) easier to stay with what is familiar. Besides, it is frightening to try to interrupt something so large. "What does it have to do with me, anyway?" say many agents. "This isn't my problem. I am above this." We fail to realize that we have become participants just by doing nothing. This cycle has a life of its own. It doesn't need our active support because it has its own centrifugal force. It goes on, and unless we choose to interrupt it, it will continue to go on. Our silence is consent. Until our discomfort becomes larger than our comfort, we will probably stay in this cycle.

Some of us who are targets have been so beaten down by the relentless messages of the cycle that we have given up and resigned ourselves. to survive it or to self-destruct. We are the victims of the cycle, and are playing our roles as victims to keep the cycle alive. It hurts too much to fight such a big cycle. We need the help of our brothers and sisters and our agent allies to try for change.

The Core

As we begin to examine this decision, we may ask, "What has kept me in this cycle for so long?" Most answers are related to the themes listed in the core of the cycle: fear, ignorance, confusion, insecurity, power or powerlessness.



Fear – For targets, fear of interrupting the system reminds us of what happens to targets who challenge the existing power structure: being labeled as "trouble-makers," experiencing discrimination, being deported, raped, beaten, institutionalized, imprisoned, or killed. There are far too many examples like these. Some targets may decide not to take the risk.

For agents, the fear of interrupting the system is different. We fear losing our privilege if we interrupt the status quo. Will I be targeted with the targets? Will I have to face my own guilt for the years when I did nothing? Will I experience "payback" from targets if I acknowledge

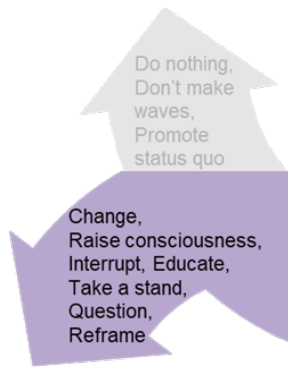
my role as an agent? Agent privilege sometimes allows us to avoid action, and the cycle continues.

Ignorance – For both targets and agents, lack of understanding about how oppression and socialization work makes it difficult to initiate change. Agents struggle more from our ignorance because we have not been forced to examine our roles. Because most of us have some agent and some target identities, we may be able to transfer what we learned in our target identities to educate ourselves in our agent identities. For example, a white lesbian may be able to translate her own experiences as a woman and a lesbian to understanding racism. This inability to see the connections may prevent us from interrupting the system. Targets and agents both struggle with not seeing the big picture, and in our target identities, we may get caught in our own pain to the point that we cannot see the connections to other "isms." For example, a Black man may have experienced so much racism that he cannot identify with gay people or women in the U.S. This may prevent him from interrupting the systems of heterosexism and sexism.

Confusion – Oppression is very complex. It is difficult to know how to interrupt the system. That confusion sometimes prevents both targets and agents from taking action. "What if I use the wrong word when taking a stand on ableism? What if I don't know what to say when someone tells an offensive joke? What if I think I know more than I actually do?" Will I do more harm than good? Targets may know how to deal with their own category of oppression, but not categories in which they are agents. It's easy to make a mistake, and that confusion often prevents action.

Insecurity – Rarely have we been prepared for interrupting oppression, unless we went to a progressive school or worked in a progressive organization that has provided skillbuilding sessions. Most targets and agents feel somewhat insecure about taking a stand against oppression.

Power or Powerlessness – People with power have gained it through the existing system. It is difficult to risk losing it by challenging that same system. People without power may think they can't make a difference. As long as we are "living" in the Cycle of Socialization with the core themes holding us there, it will be difficult to break out of it, but people do it every day.



Choosing the Direction for Change

How do people make the decision to interrupt the cycle and stand up for change? Sometimes the decision is triggered by a critical incident that makes oppression impossible to ignore. Perhaps a loved one is affected by some type of injustice or inequity, and we become motivated to speak out. Heterosexual parents of gay and lesbian children report that they became activists when they saw what their children were experiencing.

Perhaps we have a "last straw" experience, where things have become so intolerable that one last incident pushes us into action. Our discomfort becomes more powerful than our fear or insecurity, and we are compelled to take some action. Women who file sex discrimination suits after years of being overlooked professionally report this example; so do women who leave abusive relationships once and for all.

Sometimes it might be some new awareness or consciousness that we gain. Perhaps a friend from a different identity group shows us a different perspective, or we read a book that makes us think differently, or we enroll in a course that introduces new possibilities. We begin to see the big picture—that groups all over the world are working on these same issues. Change movements are filled with people who made decisions to interrupt the cycle of socialization and the system of oppression. Once you know something, you can't not know it anymore, and knowing it eventually translates into action.

These people often share qualities that have developed as a result of uniting for change. They share a sense of hope and optimism that we can dismantle oppression. They share a sense of their own efficacy – that they can make a difference in the world. They empower themselves and they support each other. They share an authentic human connection across their differences rather than fear because of their differences. They are humanized through action; not dehumanized by oppression. They listen to one another. They take one another's perspectives. They learn to love and trust each other. This is how the world changes.