

THE FAMILY AS ‘SIGNIFICANT OTHERS’ IN THE SOCIALIZATION PROCESS: EXPLORING ITS FUNCTIONS, DYNAMICS AND MEMBERSHIP INFLUENCE

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Abstract

This paper explored the family’s pivotal role, as a significant others in the socialization process, by making clarifications on the concepts of socialization, family and significant others. It also discussed the functions of the family, influence of family dynamics as well as influence of individual family members in the socialization outcomes of the child. It concluded that the family, due to its functions and dynamics, with family members serving as primary role models and influencers of the child, is the cornerstone of the socialization process, which shapes a child’s identity, values and behaviours, especially at the formative age. The paper suggested, among others, that government should formulate and implement policies that promote family life, family wellbeing and family-life/work-life balance.

Keywords: Family, Significant others, Socialization, Functions, Dynamics, Membership influence

Introduction

Every human society whether primitive or modern has its cultural heritage, which comprises norms, values skills, customs, knowledge, beliefs and attitude(s) that are highly cherished by its members. This common heritage is what binds members of society together as a unit. Order, stability and continuity of society is guaranteed when its cherished and established ways of life are transmitted from one generation to the next, as well as, when its children learn to act in conformity with expected patterns of behavior through the conscious and unconscious socialization they receive from older members of society with whom they interact. By internalizing and acquiring the commonly held patterns of living, the child grows to become an active and acceptable member of society.

The family is a cornerstone of socialization, profoundly influencing the individual’s development through its multifaceted functions, diverse structures and dynamics and intricate membership influence. As ‘significant others’ in the socialization process, family members play a crucial role in transmitting cherished cultural norms, values, traditions and expectations from older generations to younger ones. Families perform essential functions, including providing emotional and practical support, regulating sexual activity and reproduction, and granting members a social identity. This process, where individuals learn and internalize societal values, attitudes, and

behaviors, is significantly shaped by the dynamics within the family unit. Understanding the family as a significant others, its functions, its dynamics and the influence of the complex relationships within it, is essential for comprehending individual development and socialization outcomes and this is what this paper attempts to highlight.

Theoretical framework

Structural-functional theory also called functionalism emerged in the early 20th century and is associated with scholars such as Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) and Talcott Parsons (1902-1979), who dominated American social theory in the 1950s and 1960s. In their view, society is a complex and dynamic system, comparable to an organism, with various and distinct but interdependent parts (individuals, groups and institutions) that perform different functions to keep society in order. According to functionalism, an institution only exists because it serves a vital role in the functioning of society. If it no longer serves a role, an institution will die away. When new needs evolve or emerge, new institutions will be created to meet them. When considering the role of family in society, functionalists uphold the notion that families are an important social institution and that they perform key functions for both society and its members. These functions include socializing children, regulating sexual behavior, providing emotional and economic support, and assigning social status. The family is seen as a key unit that contributes to the overall stability and order of society. In addition, sudden or far-reaching changes in the family's structure or processes threaten its stability and weaken society.

Clarification of concepts

Socialization

Every human group or society has certain ways of life (i.e. customs, norms and values) which it has established and which its members must observe and it is the socialization process that makes this happen. Like other concepts used in the social sciences, socialization has several definitions. Ashley, et al (as cited in Ekpiwre, 2016, p. 54) defines socialization as the process by which the child as a biological organism is given a sense of identity with the capacity to regulate his behaviour in relation to the surrounding situation. Similarly, Onwuka (as cited in Ekpiwre, 2016, p. 54) maintained that socialization is "the learning that enables the learner to perform his roles in groups, a process by which young people acquire the already existing culture within group or groups with which they are associated". Similarly, Giddens (2014: 263) refers "Socialization as the process which transforms a quite helpless human infant into a self-aware, knowledgeable person who is skilled in the ways of their society's culture". In addition, Zanden (1996 p.65), views socialization as a "process of interaction by which people acquires the knowledge, attitudes, values and behaviours essential for effective participation in society".

Socialization enables the transformation of human raw materials of society into full membership of society. This raw material can be a newborn infant, a newly admitted student into a college or a newly employed staff. A finished product of one stage of socialization can be a raw material at another stage as there are many stages of socialization in the life cycle of individuals. While socialization is often thought of as something that happens to children, it is a lifelong process. Adults need socialization when they enter new groups or organizations (Ekpiwre, 2016).

The socialization process is a semi-conscious one, in that the primary agency of socialization, the family, would not necessarily see itself in this role, while some secondary socialization agencies such as education are deliberately set up for this purpose. The socialization process is never total, as the young take on some lessons, but reject, adapt, or expand on others. In this way, societies retain some of the continuity but also progress.

From the angle of society, socialization is a process through which the society perpetuates itself beyond a single generation. While from the angle of the individual, socialization is a process that leads to the development of personality. As the individual internalizes the culture and values of his society, a distinct self or personality unique to this individual emerges. He develops a unique way of thinking, feeling and acting (Ekpiwre, 2016, p. 116).

Concept of the family

The family is a social group characterized by common residence, economic co-operation and reproduction. It is a social unit made up of people related to each other by blood, birth or marriage. The family as a unit is made up of the father, mother and children and it is the first socializing agent for the child. The family is universal and no human society could possibly exist or has ever existed without some form of family organization. This is why both psychologists and sociologists maintain that the family is important in personality development of the individual. The parents of the child and other siblings constitute the most important socialization agents for the child at the very early stages of his development.

A family is far more than a collection of individuals sharing a specific physical and psychological space, (McLanahan & Sanderfur, 1994). It may be considered a natural social system, with properties all on its own, one that has evolved a set of rules, is replete with assigned and ascribed roles for its members, has an organized power structure, has developed intricate overt and covert forms of communication and has elaborated ways of negotiating and problem solving that permit various tasks to be performed effectively (Goldenberg and Goldenberg, 2007). In the process of growing up, family members develop individual identities but nevertheless remain attached to the family group. These family members do not live in isolation, but rather are interdependent on one another – not merely for money, food and shelter – but also for love, affection, companionship, socialization and other non-tangible needs. A well-functioning family encourages the realization of the individual potential of its members, allowing them freedom for exploration and self – discovery along with protection and the instillation of a sense of security.

There are different categories of families. The major categories of families according to Anderson and Taylor (2000) includes: traditional families-where the father is the major breadwinner and mother at home rearing children; divorced families-families that have been reconstituted following the breaking of marriage; single parent families-likely headed by women; step families-with new siblings and new parents stemming from re-marriage. A family could also be categorized as extended or nuclear. Extended families are those in which large group of related kin in addition to parents and children live together in the same household. This is the type of families prevalent in African countries. Nuclear families are families where married couple resides together with their children. This type of family is common in Western countries (Anderson & Taylor 2000). Anderson and Taylor also acknowledged stepfamilies, grandparent families, and adoptive families, as well as beanpole and lone parent families No matter the categorization, the

family has been recognized by sociologists as a "significant others", whom the child observes, imitate and identify with.

The family as "significant others"

In sociology, "significant others" refers to those persons who are of sufficient importance in an individual's life to affect the individual's emotions, behavior, and sense of self and identity. These persons are usually those with whom a person has a strong emotional bond, trust, and mutual support. This emotional connection is a primary factor in the individual's perception of the other's importance in his life. While in common parlance "significant other" has come to designate a romantic partner, sociologists' broader use of the term include other relations such as family members and close friends or mentors. Through interactions with significant others, and perceptions of their opinions and responses to one's behavior, an individual gains a sense of who he or she is, and comes to understand how to act in a given context and role. Self-concept is based largely on our perceptions – whether accurate or not – of who we are in the eyes of those whose opinions matter to us (Owens, 2007). The concept is rooted in George Herbert Mead's theory of the self, where "taking the role of the other" is crucial in developing self-awareness.

The functions of the family as "significant others" in the socialization process

The functions of the family in the socialization of the child are as follows:

1. **Moral training:** The family lays the moral and spiritual foundation for the child to build on in later life. From the very moment the child is born, the members of the family teach the child their own concepts of good and bad or right and wrong. By teaching him the socially approved way of behaving and inculcating in him cherished beliefs and values, the child is exposed to the culture of the wider society as he grows. By this, the family prepares the child for acceptance in the society.
2. **Intellectual training:** The family lays the foundation for the child's intellectual development. A well-functioning family encourages the realization of the individual potential of its members, allowing them freedom for exploration and self – discovery. The family does this by engaging in series of activities that help the child to grow intellectually. For example, the child acquires a language for communication through the help of his family members. They listen attentively to him as he makes attempt to talk and encourage him to make progress by making meaningful sounds and calling names of persons or objects for him to repeat. They help him by asking him simple questions and answering those he may ask.
3. **Character training:** The family plays a very important role in character training of the child. Whatever future behaviour the child exhibits in the public is often attributed to the kind of family he comes from. It is the family that teaches the child the spirit of politeness, respect for elders and authorities, love, affection, companionship, etc. A good discipline installed in the home helps the child to learn right habits that would enable him become a responsible member of society. If the family fails to inculcate in the child the required self-discipline before he begins schooling, he might become a social problem to the society.

4. **Vocational training:** No family would want to be associated with failure. Hence, the family ensures that the child is prepared for a vocation or trade for his future self-reliance. The family ensures that the child acquires a skill or vocation before he becomes of age. The family trains the child to be creative and hard working in preparation for adult life.
5. **Physical training:** No family would love to see their children in a physically disadvantaged position. Parents and other members of the family are always careful about the health and physical well-being of their children. Thus, ensuring the physical development of the child by exposing the child to useful physical exercises is a key function of the family.

Influence of family dynamics on the socializing roles of the family as "significant others"

The patterns of interaction and relationships, forms of behaviours and prevailing environment within a family determine to a great extent what the child learns and his/her learning ability as explained below:

Family size

Family size has to do with the total number of people in a single family which may include the father, mother, children and even the extended members - all living in one hamlet. The size of the family determines to a great extent the relative amount of physical attention and time which each child gets from his parents. A family that is small has the capacity to pay more attention to the individual child's development. Fundamentally, the parents share close relationship with their children and are ready to invest their resources on their children's education. On the other hand, a large family has many children to train and the resources, particularly finance, at their disposal may not be enough to enable parents to invest on their children's education.

Parenting styles

This has to do with the patterns of attitudes, behaviours and approaches parents use when relating and raising their children. There are four typical parenting styles: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive and uninvolved. Authoritative parenting is characterized by a close, nurturing relationship between parents and children. Parents set clear rules and explain the reasons behind their disciplinary actions to their children. Parents willingly engage in discussions with their children and encourage them to make input in setting goals and expectations. Authoritarian parents typically require obedience from their children, and they punish disobedience without compromise. They establish strict rules that are rarely explained that the child is expected to follow without question or negotiation. Permissive parents are typically more receptive to the child's desires, showing more affection than control, and they tend to be very nurturing and communicative - perhaps more than the child requires. They have few clear expectations and impose few rules that are not always enforced. Their children enjoy considerable freedom, making decisions on key issues that concern themselves independently. Finally, indifferent and uninvolved parents simply are not involved in their children's life and grant them a high degree of freedom. While they may fulfill their child's basic needs, they remain emotionally detached and disengaged from their child's life (Steinberg, 1996; Arnett, 2001; Sanvictores & Mendez, 2025; Lansdown & Walker, 1996).

The results of studies indicate that authoritative parenting are by far the most likely to produce children that are well-balanced emotionally and successful in their academics. While children of parents who adopt one of the other three styles tend, for different reasons, to show greater anxiety, insecurity and lower self-esteem in their school work (Steinberg, 1996; Arnett, 2001; Sanvictores & Mendez, 2025; Lansdown & Walker, 1996).

Parents' socio-economic status

This has a great influence on children's learning shaping their experiences, opportunities and outcomes. Socio-economic disparities can lead to unequal opportunities and outcomes and can impact social mobility and future connections. Rich parents have the financial wherewithal to cater for the physical and educational needs of their children. Children from such families are well fed, have access to good medical and learning provisions. Hence, all things being equal, these children are more likely to do better academically than children from low socio-economic families. Also, unlike low socio-economic status parents, high socio-economic status parents send their children to good schools where their children learn under conducive environment and are trained by qualified and motivated teachers. Financial stress and economic instability prevailing in a family leading to poor economic conditions and poor living conditions can hinder effective socialization by family members.

Educational levels of parents

The educational level of parents significantly influences the socialization process, impacting on their children's cognitive, emotional and social development. Their educational levels can either facilitate or impede the education of the child. Educated parents are known to be anxious about the educational success of their children, because they know the importance of education. As such, they try to provide adequate learning materials for their children; they also give to their children the necessary encouragement that would motivate them to put more efforts in their academics. Indeed, research findings showed that the academic aspiration of the school child is positively related to his/her parents' level of educational attainment.

Family structure

Family structure has a huge impact on the outcome of socialization. Scholars (McLanahan & Sanderfur, 1994) have established that children who come from families where there are both parents present grow up to be disciplined compared to those who are raised by single parents. Divorced or separated parents exercise less control over their children. As the bread-winner of the home, solitary parents with the most cases being moms find it hard to shape the social behaviors of their kids. This is because they may only have little or no time to attend to their needs, like helping the child with his/her home-work or taking part in other school related activities. All these often disturb the emotional well-being of the kids, as they may, therefore, end up making wrong social choices when they are young. The child's learning ability also depends upon the nature of stability existing between both parents. A stable home enhances the emotional well-being of the child which is necessary for the child to learn effectively. A broken home on the other hand, lowers the emotional well-being and learning ability of the child.

Cultural and technological influences

Even right in their homes, children today are increasingly exposed to technology, such as television programs, internet surfing or the latest mobile applications, from an early age. Certainly, research has shown that various technologies have been used in some families to complement and enhance the socialization process. But excessive screen-viewing time may lead to insufficient family interaction, unhealthy eating habits and insufficient physical activity and cyberbullying, thereby rendering ineffective the socialization roles of the family (Giddens, 2014).

Impact of individual family members as ‘significant others’ on the socialization of children

The mother

There is a universal consensus on the central importance of the mother in the lives of most children. The mother as a "significant other" profoundly impacts a child's socialization. Studies have shown that early childhood is a period in which developmentally, a child is learning a lot from their surrounding and the people around them. This is the child's window of learning which will impact their growing years. Therefore, as the main presence in a child's life at this point, a mother's relationship with her child is crucial (Healthway Medical, 2020). Apart from carrying the child in her womb for nine months, the mother is the first person that the child comes into contact with as soon as the mother gives birth to him or her. After this, the child remains very close to the mother for the first few years of his or her life. Early interactions, especially the quality of the mother-child bond, lay the foundation for how children understand and interact with the world, influencing their ability to form healthy relationships and regulate their emotions. Mothers influence their children's attachment style, emotional regulation and empathy, social skills, cognitive development, their sense of self, and a variety of other traits. *They often act as the primary emotional regulators for their children.* Their ability to understand and empathize with their child's feelings helps the child learn to regulate their own emotions. Through their interactions and emotional support, mothers have a profound impact on their child's cognitive development and social skills.

Mothers impart social skills to their children by modeling positive behaviors like empathy and participating actively in conversations. Additionally, they are essential for language development because they engage in frequent dialogues and expand their child's vocabulary, both of which are critical for cognitive development. Mothers also play a key role in teaching children how to cope with adversity. Through their own responses to challenges and through direct teaching, mothers influence how their children perceive and react to problems (Spenner, 2025; Lansdown & Walker, 1996). In summary, the mother's role as a "significant other" extends beyond providing basic needs. It encompasses the nurturing, guidance, and modeling that shape a child's entire social and emotional landscape, influencing their development and well-being throughout their lives.

The father

Much work has been done on tracing children's progress in terms of the relationships they had with their fathers (Lansdown & Walker, 1996). The evidence has clearly shown that whether it is biological, adoptive or stepfathers, living in or outside of the home, fathers have a profound influence on their children's life at every stage of development, and their absence can have lasting

and far-reaching consequences (Behson & Robbins, 2016). Anyone can father a child, but being a dad takes a lifetime (Pediatric Associates of Franklin, 2025).

Involved fathers - particularly biological fathers – play a unique role in their children’s lives, contributing distinct benefits that can significantly impact their development and wellbeing. They have a parenting style that is significantly different from that of a mother and that difference is important in healthy child development (Popenoe, 1996). A father's involvement helps children develop social skills, adapt to social situations, and navigate social rules effectively. In situations where maternal involvement may be limited, a father's involvement can provide a necessary boost to a child's social development (Hennigar, Cabrera & Chen, 2020).

Research suggests that involved fathers positively influence their children's ability to form and maintain positive friendships and relationships with peers in school (Baker, Fenning, & Crnic, 2011). In the area of cognitive function and academics, children with involved fathers have higher IQs on average (Yogman, Kindlon, & Earls, 1995), have increased executive function (Meuwissen & Carlson, 2015), improved school conduct (Forehand & Nousiainen, 1993) and scholastic self-concept (DuBois, Eitel, & Felner, 1994) and are satisfied with their academic pursuits and likely to grow up with high degree of academic success (Landsdown & Walker, 1996)..

Besides, children of caring fathers tend to exhibit more pro-social behaviors, such as being helpful and cooperative (Flouri, 2005), have higher levels of overall well-being (Amato, 1994), experience less depression (Culpin, Heron, Araya, Melotti, & Joinson, 2013) and mood and anxiety disorders (Goodwin & Styron, 2012) and demonstrate improved emotional regulation, including reduced reactivity to stress (Byrd-Craven, Auer, Granger, & Massey, 2012). Additionally, fathers who are more involved in the home also promote future generations of involvement and gender equality: their daughters are more likely to have higher career aspirations (Croft, Schmader, Block, & Baron, 2014) and their sons are more likely to engage in more gender equal behaviors in their own relationships (Levtov, et al 2015).

Siblings

It is often believed that in most homes, parents are the more central caregivers and that children behave and learn from what they tell and show them. In most cases, however, siblings are the most important role models to children. But the role of siblings in socialization is complex, with both positive and negative effects. Siblings - whether they are sharing one or both parents, raised together in an adoptive family, related through marriage of parents or sharing one biological parent - influence each other in such areas as identity development, relationships with others (parents and friends), and degree of sex-typing, that is, how much girls and boys express stereotypically male or female qualities.

Siblings wield influence both directly and indirectly (*McHale as cited in O’Brien, 2020*). Direct influence is the immediate and observable impact one sibling has on another. Siblings are often closer to a child's everyday social environment, hence they, especially older ones, often serve as models for younger siblings, demonstrating how to behave in various social situations, from interacting with friends to engaging in cooperative play and in other informal settings. For example, older siblings can be a conduit to adolescent culture. Younger children frequently copy the way an older sibling talks or dresses (or, as in my case, they actually wear their sibling's old

clothes). This copycat behavior, of course, is not always positive—it can lead to what McHale calls "delinquent activity and risky behavior."

A child's position also matters. Generally, first-born children do not have elder brothers or sisters to look up to. As such, they look up to their parents for direction. In a small family, the first born is likely to be well encouraged educationally by his/her parents; just as his/her younger siblings are likely to be also motivated to study. But in a large family, the younger siblings may have to wait for the elder sibling to be educated to a point before it could get to them, especially if the socio-economic status of the family is low. In such a family, the first born may also be saddled with the responsibility of taking care of younger ones to the extent that he/she may not make any meaningful progress educationally (Landsdown & Walker, 1996).

Emotional support, comfort, empathy, encouragement, shared information and experiences are ways in which siblings socialize each other. A close emotional bond with a brother or sister is associated with the development of a child's social, personal, and moral development and such things as self-esteem, autonomy, and a positive self-image. Sibling interactions can enhance social skills such as communication and cooperation.

Indirectly, siblings influence each other by comparing parental treatment, perceived favouritism, and differential expectations, which can shape their self-perceptions, behaviours and relationships within the family. They see what kinds of privileges, discipline, attention, and time their mothers and fathers dedicate to them relative to their sisters and brothers. Children can feel jealous if they see their sibling getting privileged treatment, and on the other hand, if they see their sibling getting more discipline they might begin to develop a sense that they are the 'good kid' in the family. Children learn who they are not only by how they are treated, but also by how they see others being treated (*McHale as cited in O'Brien, 2020*).

Not all of what siblings learn in their exchanges is positive. Sibling jealousy and conflicts in childhood, for example, can impact development, potentially leading to negative emotional outcomes or behavioral problems such as concurrent and later deviance, school problems, bullying, substance use, and internalizing symptoms ([Bank, Burraston, & Snyder, 2004](#); [Stocker, Burwell, & Briggs, 2002](#)). In some cases, siblings may form coalitions that undermine parental authority and promote deviant behavior (McHale, Updegraff & Whiteman).

Conclusion

The statement by the English poet John Donne some four centuries ago that "No man [or woman] is an island, entirely by itself" (vander Zanden, 1996, p. 1) underscores the importance of the socialization process in molding every person into a social being guided by the cultural heritage of his or her society. Against this backdrop, this paper concludes that the family, due to its functions and dynamics, with family members serving as primary role models and influencers of the child, is the cornerstone of the socialization process, which shapes the child's identity, values and behaviours, especially at the formative age. Indeed, the quotation in the Holy Bible that states "train a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it" (Prover 22: 6) succinctly summarizes the enormous responsibility of the family in the socialization process. The family's success in carrying out this responsibility ensures the smooth transition of the child from a helpless and ignorant infant to a highly cultured, educated and knowledgeable adult.

Suggestions

To strengthen families and support their socialization role, this paper suggests that:

1. Government should, rather than embarking on unwanted projects, allocate reasonable resources to programmes that are aimed at enhancing family bonds and relationships, parenting and child development, particularly among the poor and vulnerable population.
2. Government, community and religious leaders should encourage community involvement and partnerships to support families and promote healthy socialization processes.
3. Government should formulate and implement policies that promote family life, family wellbeing and family-life/work-life balance.

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