Socialization

"I don't think about people's race, class, or gender. I just see people as human."

This chapter explains the process of socialization and the interplay between our individuality and our membership in social groups (such as race, gender, and class). We explain how important it is for us to understand that our ideas, views, and opinions are not objective and independent, but rather the result of myriad social messages and conditioning forces. We describe how, in addition to our families, institutions and other social forces work together to form our worldview. Examples are provided to illustrate the power of socialization and how it works as an unconscious filter shaping our perceptions.

Imagine that you are in a class or workshop and your instructor makes any one of the following statements:

"White people receive the message that they are more important and more valuable than people of Color."

"Members of the middle and upper classes have an easier time getting into universities and getting jobs."

"When men enter women-dominated fields, they quickly rise to the top to positions of leadership over the women."

"Heterosexuals publicize their sexuality daily in a multitude of ways."

Several people in the class, perhaps including yourself, hear this and have an immediate defensive reaction: "Wait a minute, you can't generalize like that! You don't know me, and you definitely don't know what obstacles I faced getting into college. I was taught to see everyone as equal. I have a female boss! I don't talk about my sexuality in public!"

Such reactions are common when discussing politically charged issues such as race, class, gender, and sexuality. But defensiveness is triggered by more than a difference of opinion. In order to understand the instructor's statements and why
**Socialization**

**PERSPECTIVE CHECK:** Of course, some members of this class may be excited to hear the instructor make these statements precisely because they challenge dominant ideas and/or affirm their own experiences.

they so often cause defensiveness, we have to have a thorough understanding of socialization.

**What Is Socialization?**

Each one of us is born into a particular time, place, and social context—into a particular *culture*. Culture refers to the characteristics of everyday life of a group of people located in a given time and place. Some of these characteristics are visible and easily identified by the members of the culture, but many (indeed most) of them are below the surface of everyday awareness.

The iceberg illustration presented in Figure 2.1 is a helpful visual representation. While we may be able to identify superficial elements of culture (such as food, dress, and music), deeper levels of culture (such as notions of modesty and concepts of time) are more difficult to see. Like a fish that is immersed in water from the moment of consciousness and thus cannot know that it is separate from the water, we too are immersed from birth in the deep water of our culture.

*Socialization* refers to our systematic training into the norms of our culture. Socialization is the process of learning the meanings and practices that enable us to make sense of and behave appropriately in that culture. Notice the massive depth of the iceberg under the water and how many aspects of socialization are below the surface—not consciously thought about; we just know when someone is "unfriendly," or is "acting crazy," or has "poor hygiene." We know because we have been socialized into the norms of our culture, norms that regulate these aspects of social life. Socialization begins at birth and continues throughout life. Indeed, the forces of socialization are gathering even *before* birth when our families begin to project their hopes, dreams, and expectations onto our lives.

The clearest example of this cultural education is the process of gender socialization. Consider the first question most people ask expectant parents, "Is it a boy

**Culture:** The norms, values, practices, patterns of communication, language, laws, customs, and meanings shared by a group of people located in a given time and place.
Is Everyone Really Equal?

Figure 2.1. The Iceberg of Culture

Like an iceberg, the majority of culture is below the surface.

**Surface Culture**
- Above sea level
- Emotional load: relatively low
- Food
- Dress
- Music
- Visual arts
- Drama
- Crafts
- Dance
- Literature
- Language
- Celebrations
- Games

**Deep Culture**
- Unspoken Rules
  - Partially below sea level
  - Emotional load: very high
  - Courtesy
  - Contextual conversational patterns
  - Gender roles
  - Facial expressions
  - Nonverbal communication
  - Body language
  - Touching
  - Eye contact
  - Patterns of handling emotions
  - Notions of modesty
  - Concept of beauty
  - Courtship practices
  - Relationships to animals
  - Notions of leadership
  - Tempo of work
  - Concepts of food
  - Ideals of childrearing
  - Theory of disease
  - Social interaction rate
  - Nature of friendships
  - Tone of voice
  - Attitudes toward elders
  - Concept of cleanliness
  - Notions of adolescence
  - Patterns of group decision-making
  - Definition of insanity
  - Preference for competition or cooperation
  - Tolerance of physical pain
  - Concept of "self"
  - Concept of past and future
  - Definition of obscenity
  - Attitudes toward dependents
  - Problem-solving roles
  - Representations of roles in relation to age, sex, class, occupation, kinship, and so forth

**Unconscious Rules**
- Completely below sea level
- Emotional load: intense

*Source: [http://www.homeofbob.com/literature/esl/icebergModelCulture.html](http://www.homeofbob.com/literature/esl/icebergModelCulture.html)*

or a girl? Why do we ask this question? We ask this question because the answer sets in motion a series of expectations and actions. For example, if parents are informed that they are having a girl, they may begin to buy clothes and decorate the room in preparation for their daughter's arrival. The colors they choose, the toys they buy, their expectations for her future, will all be informed by what that culture deems appropriate for girls.

But even our conception of what girls and boys are is rooted in our culture. Although sex and gender are often used interchangeably, they mean different things. Sex refers to the biological, genetic, or phenotypical characteristics that are

**Perspective Check:** What's below the surface is often easier to see when your deep culture is not the same as the deep culture that surrounds you, for example, if there is a difference between your home culture and language and your school or work culture and language.
used to distinguish female and male bodies: genitals, body structure, hormones, and so on. These biological differences among humans are necessary for reproduction. Gender, on the other hand, is what it means to have that body in that culture. Gender refers to the roles, behaviors, and expectations our culture assigns to those bodily differences: how you are "supposed" to feel and act based on whether your body is seen as female or male. Males are expected to learn to "act like a man"—they are trained into "masculinity"; and females are expected to learn to "act like a woman"—they are trained into "femininity."

More often than many people realize, babies are born with variant sex characteristics that are not easily understood as being female or male, or with a combination of both female and male genitals (Bergvall, Bing, & Freed, 1996; Fausto-Sterling, 2000). Gender in many cultures is a binary system that insists on male/female opposites, and this binary has profound meaning and consequences. Because of this, doctors routinely opt to surgically and hormonally "correct" any variations and assign one or the other sex and gender status to the child even though many of these babies are healthy at birth. Through medical intervention, the bodies of sex-variant babies are reshaped into what is considered normal for a male or female and therefore understandable in terms of gender binaries.

Because we are taught that sex and gender differences are natural, we rarely notice how much we have been socialized into them. Indeed, as the title of a popular book from the 1990s tells us, men are from Mars and women are from Venus: so fundamentally different that they don't even come from the same planet. Yet in fact, there are actually fewer, rather than more, differences between women and men (Fausto-Sterling, 1992). However, because society is invested in the differences (in maintaining the different social statuses of women and men), the research that validates difference between women and men is the research that gets promoted.

Like gender, many other aspects of our socialization are also invisible to us. For example, how close do we stand when talking to someone? How do we know when someone is standing too close? And how do aspects of socialization (such as age, social class, religion) and context (such as at a party, in the office, or at home) influence our assessments of whether or not someone is standing too close? The norms of our culture are most often invisible until they are violated.

Cultural Norms and Conformity

Let's consider the example of grooming norms to illustrate the power of cultural conformity. Imagine it is a hot summer day and you are having lunch in an outdoor café. You notice an attractive couple sitting at the table next to you. Just like many others, they are wearing shorts and tank tops, enjoying the weather. At some
point, the man raises his arm to flag down the waiter. The café's busy, and the waiter doesn't notice. After a few minutes of being ignored, the woman raises her arm in an attempt to get the waiter's attention, and you see that she does not shave under her arms and has a thick patch of black underarm hair.

Many people would feel a sense of shock; some might even lose their appetite. You might point it out to your lunch mate, and tell your friends about it later that day. However, thinking back to when the man raised his arm, you might realize that you did not have any reaction at all to his unshaved armpits. In fact, they didn't even register. Yet underarm hair is completely natural to the adult human body—male and female. Why would the woman's hair disgust many of us, but not the man's? It is because we have been socialized to see underarm hair as inappropriate for women. This socialization is so effective that we actually have a physical reaction when the norm is violated. Further, this norm is specific to dominant culture in Canada and the United States. In a different social context (or place or time), underarm hair on women would appear natural, perhaps even sexy, to most people.

This leads to another key aspect of socialization—our beliefs need not be inherently true to have very real consequences. For example, it is not inherently true that underarm hair on women is disgusting. But if that is the norm in our culture, it will be true in its impact; we will still feel disgusted and this disgust will seem natural and appropriate. So despite not being inherently true, the effect and consequences of our socialization are real. Similarly, while the colors blue and pink are simply colors that occur in nature and are not naturally male or female, once we assign that meaning to them, they become real in their consequences. Any male who has worn pink (in the wrong shade or to the wrong place) will know this firsthand; young males in particular actually risk physical harm if this norm is violated in certain spaces. (Why then, you might ask, can a girl wear blue without risking violence? To understand why, you must understand social power, which is addressed in Chapter 4).

On an abstract level most people grasp the concept of socialization. However, applying it personally to our own lives is much more challenging. We live in a culture that teaches us that human objectivity (or independence from socialization) is not only possible, but that it can be readily attained through simple choice. In other words, if I want to be an individual who is not influenced by the forces of socialization around me, then I can just decide that I am an individual who is not influenced by those forces; it is presumed that this decision is all that it takes to break away from the undertow of socialization. Yet this break away from socialization is much more complicated than it may appear. There are social, psychological, and material rewards for conformity, such as social acceptance, being treated as “normal,” and career progression.
Conversely, there are penalties for not conforming. Take our example of the woman with the underarm hair. While she has the right to not shave under her arms, she also has to deal with the consequences of that choice. For example, she will face looks of disgust, pressure from family and friends, and questions about her sexuality and her hygiene; this choice may even be cause for censure in the workplace. That is, by not playing by the rules, she jeopardizes her status as a "normal" member of that society. Thus the effects of socialization, whether we conform to them or choose to challenge them, are unavoidable and undeniable. Of course this still assumes that we can readily identify aspects of our socialization we want to change. However, much of our socialization is so internalized and taken for granted that we don't even see it as a choice—we just believe that it's natural to feel and act the way we do.

Consider a study on discrimination in hiring (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004). Seeking to understand the well-documented patterns of inequality between Whites and Blacks in the U.S. job market in terms of rate of employment and pay, researchers at the University of Chicago conducted a large study. These researchers responded to over 1,300 help-wanted ads in Boston and Chicago newspapers by sending out close to 5,000 resumes. While the qualifications on the resumes were consistent, they randomly assigned very White-sounding names, such as Emily Walsh or Greg Baker, to half of the resumes, and very Black-sounding names, such as Lakisha Washington or Jamal Jones to the other half. Resumes with White-sounding names received 50% more callbacks than the resumes with stereotypically Black-sounding names, regardless of the employer, occupation, industry, or size of the company.

The researchers also investigated how improvements in credentials affected the callback rate. While the resumes with White-sounding names received 30% more callbacks when the credentials improved, there was no significant improvement in callback rates for the applicants with Black-sounding names. In other words, there were no benefits to Black applicants for improving their credentials. The discrimination stayed consistent and did not vary across occupations, region, or industry; even when the applications of people perceived as Black were more qualified, they were still discriminated against. This study also illustrates the intersecting nature of our group memberships. The stereotypically Black-sounding names used on the resumes are also associated with a lower socioeconomic class status. Although race was the focus of the study, it is virtually impossible to separate class from race (we discuss this relationship—termed intersectionality—in Chapter 5).

While this study provides clear evidence that racial discrimination against Blacks is alive and well, it raises another question: What happened when the human resource workers screened these resumes? They were likely not aware that
they were discriminating, and would probably have vigorously (and sincerely) de­
nied any suggestion to the contrary. They would not be intentionally lying when
they denied discriminating, and herein lies the power of socialization: We often
have no idea that we are discriminating. What we see appears to be the truth; that
is, this batch of applicants appears to us as more qualified than that batch. But we
have interpreted these resumes through our racial filters, filters that have been
activated as soon as we read the names. When we read the resume and see, for
example, the name Lakisha Washington, a name traditionally associated in our
culture with (lower-class) Blacks, our racial filters are triggered. We are now un­
consciously reading her resume through these filters, which are filled with the as­
sumptions and expectations about her qualifications that we have absorbed from
the culture at large.

Whether we are aware of these filters or not, we have associations based on
names that cause us to see some in a more favorable light than others. Because
dominant culture constantly reinforces the idea that Blacks are underqualified, even
when the qualifications of an already qualified applicant with a Black-sounding
name were increased, the resume readers still perceived them as unqualified. In
other words, the facts are not enough to trump the socialized beliefs.

In the case of Lakisha, this happens instantaneously and is almost always
unconscious—we will simply interpret her resume in a way that fulfills our expec­
tations that she is less qualified based on assumptions about her race and class.
Names such as Emily Walsh or Greg Baker don’t trigger the same set of racial
filters because they are associated with dominant culture and thus “neutral” or
“normal” in terms of racial association. The unconscious racial filters for these
names allow us to interpret their resumes as from “normal” candidates, and thus
we can take in the facts of their qualifications with different (more positive) bias.
Regardless of the race of the readers of these resumes themselves, names convey
ideas about race and class to everyone, and these ideas are often unconscious, yet
still play a powerful role in the presumed “fit” of one candidate over another.

This is both the power of our filters and the dilemma of our denial that they
exist; if we can’t see (or admit) that this is happening, we can’t stop doing it or put
protections in place to help minimize it. For example, because studies such as this
provided powerful proof of racial discrimination, many companies now block out
the names on resumes before sending them to hiring committees in order to pro­
tect against unaware bias.

In order to develop critical social justice literacy, we must be able to see how
our ideas, views, and opinions are not “objective” and independent, but rather the
result of myriad social messages and conditioning forces. The first layer of social­
ization we might easily identify is our family. While our families do indeed form
the first unit through which we learn language, values, and behaviors, our parents
Socialization

and families are not the sole force of socialization. There are many other socializing forces including schooling, media, and religion, which also wield great authority. Thus the common conception that families are the sole forces of socialization is an incomplete view because our families themselves are products of socialization. In order to critically reflect on the forces of socialization that shape us, we must understand the role of broader society.

"You" in Relation to the "Groups" to Which You Belong

Humans are social beings who depend on the humans around us to make sense of our world. A useful metaphor for understanding how we learn to make this sense is to think of our culture as a pair of glasses that we wear at all times (see Figure 2.2). Just like the fish is always immersed in water, we are always wearing our cultural glasses and cannot ever truly take them off. There are two significant parts to these glasses: the frames and the lenses. The frames are the "big picture" (macro) norms—what everyone in that culture is taught from birth. The lenses constitute the individual (micro) perspective.

At the frame (macro) level, for example, in the culture of mainstream United States and Canada, we are all taught that pink is for girls and blue is for boys, that democracy and capitalism are the best forms of government, and that we should strive to be independent from others. Regardless of whether or not we personally agree with these teachings, we all receive them through social institutions like schools, government, and the mass media.

For example, even if parents want to challenge traditional gender roles and intentionally avoid dressing their daughters in pink, we still receive the message in mainstream culture whenever we watch TV, walk through the toy aisles in stores, or order a Happy Meal at McDonald's and are asked if we want the "girl" or "boy" toy. In fact, many parents who try to avoid traditional gender teachings find it to

Figure 2.2. Frame of Reference Glasses Diagram
be a losing battle, given the relentless messages their children receive from everything else around them; we are constantly being pressured to follow the norms of society.

The social groups we are born or develop into are part of the frames of our glasses. For example, when we are born we are socialized according to whether we are male or female, rich or poor, able-bodied or with a disability. While group divisions are not in reality this clear-cut, the macro level of society organizes groups into simple either/or groupings (binaries). For every social group, there is an opposite group. One cannot learn what a social group is, without also learning what the group is not. Thus the frames of our glasses are the big picture ideas about social groups. Although there are many, the primary groups that we name here are: race, class, gender, sexuality, ability status/exceptionality, religion, and nationality. Figure 2.3 is intended to help readers begin the process of identifying several of their key social group memberships.

We develop our ideas about people in terms of their race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, ability, and citizenship from the culture that surrounds us, and many of these ideas are “below the surface” or below the conscious level. But we all rely on shared understandings about these social groups because we receive messages collectively about them from our culture. The frameworks we use to “make sense of” race, class, or gender are taken for granted and often invisible to us.

Race and ethnicity are examples of how complex and interrelated these categories are. While race and ethnicity are related in important ways and often used interchangeably, they are not interchangeable. Race is a socially constructed system of classifying humans based on phenotypical characteristics (skin color, hair

PERSPECTIVE CHECK: We have based the list in Figure 2.3 on categories of identification that are collected by the Canadian and U.S. governments. However, these categorizations do not reflect the complexities of race and ethnicity as experienced in society. For example, in Figure 2.3 we have included Latino/Hispanic under the category of race despite the fact that this is not technically a singular racial group; it includes many racial groups. We have included it because of the very real racialization that occurs for people who identify and are identified as Latino/Hispanic.

Despite these limitations, our intention is that readers use this chart for the purpose of beginning to understand the relevance of race/ethnicity in society at large.
Figure 2.3. Group Identities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Group identities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race</strong></td>
<td>It is unavoidable that some groups have not been listed. If your group has been left out, please write it in.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived as Person of Color</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived as White</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean ancestry)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Asian (e.g., Indian, Sri Lankan, Nepalese)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black (e.g., African American, African Canadian, Caribbean American)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bi- or multiracial (parents and/or grandparents of mixed racial ancestry)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous (e.g., Cherokee, Inuit, Dakota)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (e.g., Samoan, Guamanian, Fijian)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White (e.g., Irish, French, Ashkenazi Jew)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino/a (e.g., Puerto Rican, Cuban, Mexican)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race detailed</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor, Working Poor, Working Class, Lower Middle Class, Middle Class, Professional Class, Upper Class, Owning/Ruling Class</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Class</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women, Men, Transgender, Genderqueer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, Two Spirit, Heterosexual</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sexuality</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For example: Hindu, Buddhist, Jew, Christian, Muslim, Atheist</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Religion</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For example: Able-bodied, people with physical disabilities, people with developmental disabilities, exceptionality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ability</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous, Immigrant (perceived non-status), Citizen (perceived)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Texture, and bone structure). Ethnicity refers to people bound by a common language, culture, spiritual tradition, and/or ancestry. Ethnic groups can bridge national borders and still be one group (such as the Cree community, which straddles the United States and Canada). At the same time, ethnic groups can live within the same national borders and not share the same ethnic identity. For example, "British" refers to people of English, Scottish, and Welsh ancestry who live in the United Kingdom. However the English, Scottish, and Welsh are distinct ethnic groups. As well, British can refer to citizens of Great Britain who may have racial and ethnic heritages other than English, Scottish, or Welsh—such as African, Asian, or Arab.

As this example shows, race and ethnicity interact in complex ways with language and nationality. For those new to the study of critical social justice, mastering these complexities is of secondary importance. Of primary importance is the ability to understand these categories as socially constructed and reflective of a
particular political and cultural context. This does not mean that we dismiss categories of race and ethnicity because they are unstable; rather we must understand the larger dynamics that their instability is related to and the impact of those larger dynamics on our lives (this will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 7).

There are also important interactions between race and ethnicity, and internal and external dynamics of identity; how one personally identifies versus how one is identified by others. While these may be different, they are also inseparable, because how our identities develop is shaped by how others see and respond to us. Sociologist Charles Cooley (1922) called this interconnection the "looking glass self" to capture the idea that we come to know who we are in large part through the process of what others reflect back to us. The looking glass self includes the concept that the process of learning to know who we are is shaped by learning who we are not.

We now return to the analogy of the "frame of reference" glasses. As we said previously, the lenses constitute the individual (micro) perspective. These are our unique experiences that make us "one of a kind"—our birth order, our family, our personality—the "prescription" lens that fits in the frame. Yet no one is simply an individual. We are all members of multiple social groupings. To understand your personal cultural glasses, you have to explore the interplay or relationship between your frames and your lenses. A primary challenge in developing critical social justice literacy is to understand the relationship between you as an individual and the social groups you belong to; the interplay of positionality. From a critical social justice framework, when we say the words "men," "women," "heterosexuals," "middle class," and so on, we are speaking about specific social group positions and histories.

If we are resisting the very notion of having to identify ourselves in terms of social groups, such as our race or gender, this too provides insight into our collective socialization. In Western society we are socialized to value the individual. Yet, although we are individuals, we are also—and perhaps fundamentally—members of social groups. These group memberships shape us as profoundly, if not more so, than any unique characteristic we may claim to possess.

Consider how one of the key aspects of personhood is one's preference for certain food, music, and dress styles. However, these preferences are never simply one's internally-driven likes or dislikes. It is no coincidence that in 2009 (a year after the release of the film Twilight), the most popular names for girls in the United States and Canada included Bella, while the most popular names for boys in the United States and Canada included Jacob. Both are names of key characters in the Twilight franchise. Similarly, a 2010 report on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) states that one of the most popular haircuts requested by high school
**Dominant Group(s):** The group(s) at the top of the social hierarchy. In any relationship between groups that define one another (men/women, able-bodied/disabled, young/old), the dominant group is the group that is valued more highly. Dominant groups set the norms by which the minoritized group is judged. Dominant groups have greater access to the resources of society and benefit from the existence of the inequality.

students is the “Justin Bieber” cut—referring to the Canadian teen pop star (Niazi & Morrow, 2010). Think back to when other iconic figures from popular culture influenced hairstyles of the time. Conversely, seeking names that are “different” is also a function of culture—you are still reacting to the culture at large. Without the popular names, your different name (different from what?) would not have the same meaning.

The point is, while parents may have preferences for particular names, and any individual may have a preference for a particular hairstyle, it is not simply a matter of preference. There are predictable patterns of group behavior we can observe and study. And we can make predictions about your preferences based on your class, race, gender, and so on.

Returning to our opening vignette, hopefully you now have a better idea of what was meant by the instructor’s statements when she said for example that “Members of the middle and upper classes have an easier time getting into universities and getting jobs.” The instructor was not making claims about each individual person in these groups, but about patterns among social groups. These patterns are long-standing, measurable, and well documented. The fact that these kinds of statements often cause defensiveness speaks to the way they challenge Western elevation of the individual over the group. We have been taught that social group memberships such as race, class, and gender do not and should not matter, and thus must be minimized and denied.

Specifically, the instructor is challenging a societal norm by moving past individual difference and instead focusing on shared dynamics between members of social groups. She is also challenging a norm connected to our elevation of the individual—the idea that people should be seen as unique, and thus it is inappropriate to generalize. And finally, she is naming the dominant group in each of these examples, which violates assumptions that dominant groups are neutral and “difference” lies with the “other”
Discussion Questions

1. Key careers tend to be organized in ways that are gendered (police and firefighters tend to be men, while teachers and nurses tend to be women). How would the authors explain this pattern?

2. According to the authors, why do so many people feel immune to the forces of socialization?

3. How does the concept of socialization challenge the idea of individualism?

4. Many sociologists say that in part how we come to know ourselves is by knowing who we are not. Sociologist Charles Cooley described this process as the “looking glass self” to capture the idea that it is what others reflect back to us that teaches us who we are—that is, our ideas about ourselves are based on how we see ourselves (people like us) in relation to others (people not like us). What kind of people did you learn were different from you? In which ways were they different? How were you taught about this difference? If you were told that everyone was the same, did the implicit messages of your environment match this explicit message? For example, what key groups (such as the elderly, people with disabilities, people of different social classes than your own, people from different religious groups, people from different racial groups) were you segregated from? As you reflect on this question, consider implicit (unspoken) messages as well as explicit (direct) messages.

Extension Activities

1. “Act like a boy or girl.” This is a popular diversity exercise intended to draw out the forces of gender socialization.

   Divide the group into men and women (if someone doesn't identify with either category, ask the person to choose a group depending on either how mainstream society would categorize him or her or which group he or she most identifies with or has the most insight into).

   Now, imagine that an alien has landed in your group. This alien comes from a planet where gender is organized very differently. The job of this alien is to “get by,” “blend in,” and learn about human society. The alien has already received treatments to “look” human, but has no idea how to “act like a boy” or “act like a girl” in order to pass. As a group, generate a list of instructions for your alien about how to “act like a boy” (if you are the men’s group) and how to “act like a girl” (if you are the women’s group).

   Your list should include verbs. Consider settings like school, work, and family gatherings. Remember, the goal of your alien friend is to blend into mainstream society and understand its basic customs, not to challenge them.
Ask the groups to write their lists on the board or chart paper, then draw a box around each list. As the groups share their lists of instructions, ask the following questions:

How do we “know” these rules? (Even if we personally reject them or think they are silly, notice that we must still know what they are in order to refuse them.)

Since these are learned behaviors, what would it mean to “un-learn” them? Is this possible? How would we do this?

What are the costs of stepping outside of your gender script? That is, what happens when you don’t “act like a boy”? Are there some areas (settings? places? with certain company?) where there is more permission to act in ways outside the script? In what settings is it less permissible?

It should be obvious that many of the things on the list are rather absurd and limiting to our lives. What keeps us in line? In other words, what are the penalties for stepping too far out of these boxes? What do we get called or seen as?

Return to your groups to discuss this question: What doors would be open to you that are not open to you now, if we were truly free of gender roles? Come back together to share the results of your discussion of this last question. Notice if there is a difference in enthusiasm between the men and the women in terms of eliminating gender roles. Why are men usually less interested in eliminating gender roles?


c. Using the text and the film as a window into socialization, reflect upon the following questions:

How would you answer Wiesenthal’s question on forgiveness? What framework are you using to address the question? How did you acquire this framework? Why might so many others answer such a question very differently? How can religious debates help us identify our cultural frameworks?