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Dr. Weinberg
December 12, 1973

No problem is so big or so complicated
that it can't be run away from.

Charles Schultz

SOCIALIZATION OF CHILDREN

The children of a culture represent its greatest asset and responsibility. They insure the survival of a culture if its members can accomplish the formidable task of socialization. Americans are acutely aware of this responsibility. This concern is reflected in the tremendous amount of literature about children. For this reason, I used a familiar type of American literature, the comic strip, for an analysis of socialization in the United States. I chose to study "Dennis the Menace" and Peanuts" because they deal specifically with children from a white, middle class neighborhood.

Socialization, as defined by Hartley and Hartley (In HSU 1972:470), is "learning to be a member of a group." It is difficult to develop a more precise definition, because each society has its own conception of socialization. The nature of the learning process in each society is based on two criteria: the inherent abilities of children and cultural ideas about children (Goodman 1970:12). In order to make each child a useful member of his culture, socialization must foster ideas about cultural values and expectations and a desire to conform to these values and expectations. Socialization in the United States has the following general goals:

1. Teaching roles (Endleman 1967:64-69)
2. Controlling sex drives (Endleman 1967: Ibid.)
3. Fostering a desire for self-reliance (HSU 1972:483)
4. Developing achievement orientation (HSU 1972: Ibid.)

The above material provides a basis for an understanding of the nature of socialization. These ideas could apply to any culture. I used them in trying to discover what this society teaches children and how these concepts are taught.

The Family as a Mechanism of Socialization

In the United States, the family provides the basis for socialization. Unable to care for himself, an infant depends

on the family for biological survival. Later, he develops in the family his first interpersonal relationships through which he will learn about his culture.

The families depicted in "Dennis the Menace" and "Peanut" are representative of many middle class American families. Dennis is an only child living with his biological mother and father. Some of the characters of "Peanuts" have brothers and sisters, but no mention is made of more than one or two. In middle class neighborhoods, the large family of more than seven or eight members is unusual. Often, close relatives, including grandparents, are separated from the nuclear family by large geographical distances. There is little mention of Dennis' grandparents, aunts, uncles, or cousins. Presumably they are non-existent or living in another community.

This small nuclear family represents a major portion of the personal contacts of a preschool age child. Although this type of family has more freedom and mobility, it may require more effort from its members. For Dennis, his mother and father are the main source of guidance and support. His parents are responsible for his actions, because they are instruments of his socialization. When Dennis breaks a cultural rule, Mr. Mitchell is informed of it and is expected to take appropriate action. When Dennis is lost or needs help, he goes to his parents first. In contrast, Mrs. Wilson is not responsible for his behavior, so she can "spoil" him. When Dennis asks for food from Mrs. Wilson, he expects to receive it. She is not his parent, so she is not responsible for teaching him eating habits. Finally, when Dennis rebels against his parents' authority, he has no relative from whom he may get support. For this reason, when Dennis runs away from home, his parents are confident that he will return soon. This exclusiveness puts tremendous responsibility on the parents and strengthens the bonds uniting children and parents.

In Culture Against Man, Jules Henry argues that for most Americans the family is a haven from the pressures of the world. An American expects to derive pleasure and a sense of worth from family relationships (Henry 1963:128). For this reason, Americans feel that their family situations must be cheerful and harmonious. This idea is evident from the reactions of Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell when Dennis overhears an argument between them. They stop in mid-sentence and look surprised and embarrassed. First, they are aware that Dennis has observed a breakdown in family harmony. Secondly, he informs a person outside the family that a split has occurred, breaking a cultural rule concerning privacy of family matters.

American parents place an emphasis on the well-being of their children. The traditional roles of mother and father are often reversed, enabling both parents to express affection freely. Only a generation ago, the father was viewed as the figure of authority and the breadwinner, while the mother was

the housekeeper and babysitter. Today, the father may help with household chores or care for the children. In turn, the mother is often responsible for discipline and may contribute to the family income. According to Jules Henry, contemporary parents battle for their children's affections (Henry 1963:132). Mrs. Mitchell can show her love through food and comfort. When Dennis is hungry, he turns to her. It is Mrs. Mitchell who comforts him after a nightmare and bathes him. Mr. Mitchell has assumed duties that in the previous generation belonged exclusively to the mother. Both share in putting him to bed and Mr. Mitchell is the one who often gives in to his whims for a cream puff or a peanut butter sandwich.

A definite contrast exists between two men of different generations. Mr. Wilson represents the gruff, aloof father figure of an older generation. He treats Mrs. Wilson's affection for Dennis with a mild disdain and expects her to maintain the strict role of housewife. Although he has no children, his attitude toward his children would not have been much different from his attitude toward Dennis. By contrast, Mr. Mitchell's role combines authority figure and friend.

In turn, Mrs. Mitchell has become a disciplinarian. Because she spends more time with Dennis, she has a greater influence on his socialization. For example, she teaches him eating habits and proper attitudes toward elders.

Today the roles of each parent overlap as both mother and father try to be sources of affection and symbols of authority. This concept of interchanging parental roles is designed to promote togetherness by dividing parental responsibilities. In their efforts to make the family a haven (Henry 1963:128), the physical and mental health of their children becomes their primary concern. This creates close bonds within the nuclear family which provides for the well-being of the children and the emotional gratification of the parents (Henry 1963:132). Because his parents plan their lives around him, Dennis is the tyrant of the Mitchell household.

The School as a Mechanism of Socialization

As a culture increases in complexity, the need for systematic and deliberate instruction arises. In the United States, an individual may spend from twelve to seventeen years acquiring a formal education. School has taken a major role in socialization in the United States.

Jules Henry begins his discussion of American schools by making a puzzling statement. He says, "The function of education has never been to free the mind and the spirit of man, but to bind them..." (Henry 1963:286). This state-

ment is contrary to American ideals. We believe that an education is the path to a more meaningful life. Furthermore, he states that it is "noise" and not academic subjects that constitutes an education. (Henry 1963:290). The noises provide the tools for transferring cultural attitudes, making the classroom a site of socialization.

The comic strip "Peanuts" illustrates explicitly the forces acting in American schools. School, with its grading system and ability divisions, is inherently competitive. It instills in children a will to achieve and a fear of failure. The author of "Peanuts" makes us aware of this by making his characters fail. We take comfort from Charlie Brown's "C" grades, Sally's struggles with compositions and Patty's dislike of essay tests because we realize that their failings resemble our own. At the same time we feel that we could do better in the same situation. In other words, we are taking comfort from the failures of others.

Jules Henry feels that there is no room in our educational system for the creative child (Henry 1963:287). After following Sally in "Peanuts", I agree with him. Her description of rain as "water which does not come out of faucets" shows insight. She has simply explained a natural phenomenon in terms of objects in her culture. Sally has a talent for mimicry as indicated by her summary of American education in fact and fiction. Her contrast of "make of me a vessel for thy teaching" and "learn those capitals" clearly emphasizes the discrepancy.

Punishment as a Mechanism of Socialization

Because a child can learn to associate punishment with the breaking of a cultural rule, punishment is an effective means of socialization. In order for the punishment to be effective, a child must regard the penalty imposed as punishment and acknowledge the authority of the individual giving the punishment (Richards 1972:143). In spite of her authority over Dennis, Mrs. Mitchell occasionally fails to administer effective punishment. For example, Dennis is able to circumvent Mrs. Mitchell's efforts to force him to eat carrots. She hopes that hunger and loneliness will force him to conform, but he satisfies his hunger with peanut butter and thus does not learn desirable eating habits.

The subject of child punishment is a controversial issue in American socialization. Although Americans agree that some form of behavior correction is necessary, there is disagreement about which type is best. One group argues that using reasoning and guilt bring the best results while others use more arbitrary methods including physical punishment, scolding, and threats. Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell belong to this second group. They often make him sit in a corner or stay in his room. The punishments are usually effective because

they deny Dennis companionship and play, two aspects of his life that he has learned to consider desirable.

Facial Expressions and Gestures as Mechanisms of Socialization

A child soon learns that his elders' facial expressions are good indications of their reactions to his behavior. He then learns to differentiate between unfavorable and favorable reactions. For example, when Mrs. Mitchell sends Dennis to his room, he knows that she is angry. She stands with hands on hips and speaks sternly in short, clipped sentences. In a similar manner, Dennis learns to recognize embarrassment and surprise. He acquires a valuable cultural skill when he learns the meaning of facial expressions and gestures and how to manipulate them to his advantage.

Imitation and Games as Mechanisms of Socialization

Learning by doing is perhaps the most valuable means of socialization. By imitating adults, children learn the roles they will assume as adults. In games, they learn to develop certain culturally desirable character traits, including competitiveness, a desire for success, and a willingness to follow rules. Margaret's interest in dolls and in playing house indicates that she expects to become a housewife. Dennis often plays with toy fire engines, building blocks, and cowboy equipment. Although he may never enter these occupations, both he and Margaret have accepted the fact that they must eventually support themselves.

In The Culture of Childhood, Mary Ellen Goodman describes "play technology." She defines it as the "know how with respect to the materials, the fashioning, and the use of environmental resources" (Goodman 1970:134). Although she uses it when speaking of non-western cultures, I think that the concept is present in the games of American children. Their environment includes complex machinery with which they often devise games. Dennis is especially adept at using the telephone for his games. In a game of strategy, he raids the cookie jar while his friend uses the telephone to trick Mrs. Mitchell. He has also learned how to use the mail system for his own benefit. Dennis has learned to use the materials of his culture, which represent a valuable lesson in socialization.

As an American child finds friends outside the family, he begins to participate in organized games. Organization has become so important to play that often a game is not considered "fun" unless it is organized. Charles Schultz comments on this phenomenon in "Peanuts". It is winter, and Charlie Brown discovers that he cannot build a snowman

unless he belongs to a "snow league" team. Snow leagues have all the characteristics of organized sports: rules, playoffs, player insurance, awards banquets, practices, and referees. To make his point, Schultz incorporates aspects of professional football. For example, Sally becomes irate when her team is penalized for "improper mittens" and a snowman "offside". In his satire on American sports, Mr. Schultz summarizes achievement orientation as demonstrated American games, "It's the winning that counts! What's the sense of doing something if you can't win?"

Role Learning as a Mechanism of Socialization

During socialization, a child learns to recognize roles he and others must fulfill. These roles become a means of distinguishing between individuals and of establishing an identity.

One of the first roles a child recognizes is that of kin or non-kin (Goodman 1970:27). Dennis knows that Mrs. Mitchell, as a mother, cleans house, cooks, gives him baths, and shops for groceries. He realizes that he must obey his parents and that they are the source of both pain and pleasure. In addition, a child may recognize that he owes obedience to an older sibling. When Lucy tells Linus that he must come home, he allows her to drag him home. Outside the nuclear family, kinship roles appear less definite. Although Dennis knows that Mrs. Wilson is not his consanguineal grandmother, he treats her as such because she fits his conception of a "grandmother." He views "grandmothers" as women who have gray hair and wrinkled, pleasant faces, are housewives, and love children.

An American child learns quickly to distinguish certain sex roles (Goodman 1970:27). Dennis plays the role of the "typical" American boy. He hates baths, loves animals, and is confused about girls. Dennis recognizes certain masculine traits in his father, and imitates them. Likewise, he notices that girls wear dresses and like dolls. Patty in "Peanuts" represents the American girl's antithesis, or the "tomboy". She loves sports, speaks so gruffly that Marcie calls her "sir", and usually dresses like a boy.

At some point in his socialization, a child learns about race and nationality differences. At first the child recognizes outstanding physical differences (for example, skin color) but later he learns to use more subtle, culturally defined criteria (Goodman 1970:37). Dennis decides that Gina is of another nationality because she speaks a foreign language. This recognition of national differences influences Dennis' attitude toward Gina. She arouses his curiosity because he understands that being "Italian" implies a life-style different from his own. In addition, Dennis admires Gina because she has knowledge of two differ-

ent cultures and he is familiar with only one.

Language, Traditions, and Social Skills as Mechanisms of Socialization

Although opinions differ concerning the acquisition of language, its importance in socialization is well documented. The degree and type of language exposure creates evidence of social distinctions at an early age (Goodman 1970:19). Schroeder, the "intellectual" of "Peanuts", has a larger vocabulary than his peers. Although I have never met his parents, I imagine that they, too, are "intellectuals". Sally also appears to have a large vocabulary for a first grader (perhaps first graders were less intelligent when I went to elementary school). Because Sally has an older brother, Charlie, to teach her, she has more exposure to adult vocabulary.

Although Dennis can use and understand English, he does not always place words in their correct cultural context. Dennis often takes idiomatic expressions literally, with comical results. Eventually he will learn to use idioms correctly without thinking about their literal meaning.

During socialization, a child acquires social skills and knowledge about American traditions. Dennis demonstrates his knowledge of correct social behavior by greeting an older woman with, "I'm glad to meet ya" and not interrupting his mother's conversation. He learns to associate turkey with Thanksgiving. Dennis assumes that anyone who does not eat turkey for Thanksgiving dinner is unable to and is therefore "poor". He learns about American cultural rules concerning privacy and property rights. For example, he is reprimanded for invading Mr. Wilson's slumber with a flashlight or waking his parents early in the morning. Because Dennis' socialization is incomplete, he questions the need for some social behavior. Eventually, social pressures will force him to conform to cultural rules and he will act unconsciously.

Conclusion and Comments

This paper presents only a broad outline of processes involved in socialization in the United States. I feel that comic strips, especially those dealing primarily with children, can be valuable study tools. "Peanuts" and "Dennis the Menace" represent one way in which adults view children. As was stated earlier, cultural ideas about children influence the nature of socialization. Therefore, an understanding of adult views of children is essential in understanding socialization processes.

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