

Socialization

For more information on this topic, contact:

Dr. Richard Moreland
Department of Psychology, University of Pittsburgh
cslewis@pitt.edu
412-624-4574

Overview of Issue

Socialization is a process of mutual adjustment that produces changes over time in the relationship between a person and a group. Because socialization occurs in groups of many kinds, it has been analyzed by scholars from several disciplines, but some of the best work can be found in social and organizational psychology. Within social psychology, for example, Moreland and Levine (1982; 2001) offer a theoretical model of group socialization that is built around three basic processes: evaluation, commitment, and role transition. According to this model, the group and the individual are always evaluating one another to determine the rewardingness of their relationship. These evaluations produce feelings of commitment, which can rise and fall over time. If such changes are large enough, then commitment may cross a decision criterion, producing a role transition. In this way, the individual can occupy several special roles in the group, each associated with a distinct phase of membership.

The first membership phase is investigation, when the individual is a prospective member of the group. During this phase, the individual engages in reconnaissance, while the group engages in recruitment. If commitment on both sides rises far enough, to the entry criterion, then the role transition of entry occurs and the socialization phase of group membership begins, when the individual is a new member of the group. During this phase, the group tries to produce assimilation in the individual, while the individual tries to produce accommodation in the group. To the extent these efforts succeed, commitment on both sides rises further, and if it reaches the acceptance criterion, then the role transition of acceptance occurs and the maintenance phase of group membership begins, when the individual is a full member of the group. During this phase, role negotiation takes place between the group and the individual regarding more specific duties (e.g., leadership) that the individual might take on, but only in exchange for certain rewards. The maintenance phase can last indefinitely. But in some cases, commitment on both sides starts to fall, and if it reaches the divergence criterion, then the role transition of divergence occurs and the resocialization phase of group membership begins, when the individual is a marginal member of the group. During this phase, efforts to produce assimilation in the individual and accommodation in the group are made once again, and if those efforts succeed, then commitment on both sides may return to levels that warrant convergence, an uncommon reversal of divergence. But if commitment on both sides falls far enough to cross the exit criterion, then the role transition of exit occurs and the remembrance phase of group membership begins, when the individual is an ex-member of the group. During this phase, the individual engages in reminiscence about the group, while the group remembers the individual as part of its tradition. Commitment on both sides eventually stabilizes at some low level.

In a series of papers, Moreland and Levine have elaborated many aspects of their model and used it to clarify many other group phenomena, such as minority influence, group development, and inter-group relations. Their papers also include several empirical tests of hypotheses derived from the model, tests that are generally positive.

Relevance to homeland security

Socialization occurs in terrorist groups and organizations, just as it does in other settings, and there are many ways in which it could have an impact on their success. For example, why do people decide to join a terrorist group, and why do they join one group rather than another? How do terrorist groups recruit members, and what kinds of people are they seeking? What does it take to become a "full member" of a terrorist group? What causes some of these persons to become marginal members? Is it possible to exit a terrorist group without being killed? If so, then where can the ex-members of such groups be found? Do ex-members still have any influence, direct or indirect, on the terrorist groups to which they once belonged? These and other questions are intriguing and seem potentially important.

Recommendations

I suggest funding a combination of basic research on group socialization, and applied research that focuses on the socialization process in terrorist groups and/or groups of other sorts that have some of the same qualities as terrorist groups. Examples of such groups include gangs and other criminal organizations, and deviant political or religious groups (see Kanter, 1968).

References

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