Socialisation: Do we know what the hell we're talking about?

My PGCE mentor really made me laugh. She was a very fat lady and she was relating a conversation she had just had with her GP. Her doctor had asked her if it bothered her that she was over-weight and she replied, "Not as much as it seems to bother other people!"

I would echo that sentiment when it comes to the socialisation of my two children. When I tell people that I home-school my children, that's the question that they always ask me. Something along the lines of: Are you concerned about their socialisation?

For a long time my answer was always that the experience of being home-schooled seems to have had a different effect on each of them. My daughter is very sociable and my son much less so, him being more similar to me.

But that was before I started looking into the topic in more depth because then I realised that I didn't know what the hell I was talking about. Being sociable, or not, is psychological, closely related to extroversion, which is one of the five main personality traits. It is an altogether different thing to socialisation. Most people associate socialisation with school and peer groups and, although there is clearly an innate aspect to extroversion, in other words the personality you're born with, the experience of school and peer groups at a young age, be it a positive or negative one, can affect the degree of a person's extroversion either way. Horrible experiences at school could make someone want to completely avoid the social scene, and the deprivation of that as a result of home-schooling could make a person hungry for social interaction. So socialisation and being sociable are completely different areas of development. Interestingly, no one I said this to ever picked me up on that, so I suppose none of those people knew what the hell they were talking about either. That in itself seems strange, that everyone is talking about it but nobody knows anything about it.

It turns out that the idea of socialisation and its accompanying theories are extremely complex, and for some people even more complex than for others – as I will outline in a moment. I think that most people assume that socialisation is about learning how to be a person, and learning how to live with other people, and it's something that you learn mostly at school. And if you're not socialised then you won't be very good at being a person. But it's actually not at all that simple.

Socialisable?

The actual term 'socialisation' is usually defined as something like this: *The process of learning one's culture and how to live within it.* So the commonly assumed meaning of socialisation as stated previously, that it is about how to act like a person and with other people is pretty much spot on. But it is contextual, and not as simple as it may at first sight appear. This definition begs two fundamental questions: 1) What kind of person are we talking about? and 2) What kind of people are you going to be living with?

These are not simple questions for most people, and in an increasingly complex and interconnected

world they become ever more complex.

If – for example – you are a white French child growing up in France with white French parents and grand-parents who also grew up and spent their entire life in France, and you are destined to spend your entire life in the same village as them, then I suppose the answer to those two questions are quite obvious. But what about my children, who have mixed race parents? Or what about me, even, a white Briton settled in Thailand? Because socialisation doesn't end when you leave school. How well socialised am I? I was so well socialised into English society, apparently, that I left as soon as I could and have been away pretty much ever since. I've lived in Thailand for twenty-five years but all the close friends I've ever made are westerners. It's note-worthy also that the last time someone inquired about the socialisation of my children, it was at a party in Thailand where there wasn't a single ethnically Thai man there! Only Thai wives. How well socialised are any of us expats? Since everyone seems so concerned about the socialisation of my children, that seems like a valid question to ask. What about, say, Sikh children growing up in Britain? Are they being socialised by going to UK schools? What if as an adult they go to live in the Punjab?

Farang!

I could go on asking questions for ever, but I hope I've made the point clear that it's not so simple.

When my children were around six, they were fluent Thai speakers but barely speaking English. This concerned me, I suppose for selfish reasons mostly but also for them, because I wanted to be able to have a good relationship with them and I wanted them to not be completely culturally and linguistically Thai. I guess that in itself speaks volumes about how well socialised I am into the Thai milieu. It was for this reason that I put them into an international school and then they spent time in a school in the UK and international schools in China. I suppose you could say that what I was actually trying to do was to *de-socialise* them at that point. In the international schools, their peer groups were children from a very broad range of different nationalities. So what culture was that? If we are defining socialisation as "learning one's culture" then do those nine years in international schools in three different countries even count *as* socialisation? Certainly nobody during that time was asking me if I was concerned about their socialisation while they were in international schools or in school in the UK, but maybe they should have been. People talk about 'third-culture kids' and the inherent difficulties therein.   Perhaps if socialisation is one's main concern, then none of us should live anywhere else except where we were born, nor should we marry outside our own ethnicity. Perhaps children of mixed race parents are by definition never going to be socialised. Or is it possible to be double-socialised? Are third-culture kids triple-socialised, non-socialised or de-socialised?   These are questions which have long been debated.

Then throw in the Internet and social media. Social media seems to be becoming the number one way that people communicate and meet friends. Both of my children have friends, perhaps their best friends or even a romantic partner that they only ever 'meet' and see via the broadband. If that's the way the future and future relationships are going to be, then does endless hours of playing online games with other young people count as socialisation? Is the interaction on social media a

culture? I think there is a good case for that. In that case, does using social media and interacting with other young people online count as socialisation? Based on observation of the nastiness and stupidity found in much of the YouTube comments and Twitter tweets, it seems that a large percentage of people are not being very well socialised at all into this culture.

These are all serious questions and in asking so many by no means do I intend to trivialise the issue. On the contrary. Perhaps even the very future of humanity is at stake. If people ask me if I am concerned about the socialisation of my children, then of course I am. I am concerned about every aspect of my children's life and development. But clearly there is no simple answer and no simple course of action. If I can cast my mind far back enough to what my intentions were for my children at the beginning of my parental journey, I think it was something along the lines of wanting them to be able to get along with everybody and anybody. If socialisation means learning how to act in one culture, then I don't see it as conducive to that goal. Like most people in the past but increasingly fewer in the information and global age, I was socialised into a single culture, English culture. If I'm brutally honest, that didn't exactly turn me into the kind of person that I would wish my own children to be. I was narrow-minded, religiously-intolerant, arrogant and generally quite bigoted, and it took me decades to unravel it. People in the village in Thailand, where I've lived half my life and raised a family, unless they know personally still gawk at me and sometimes I even hear someone shout 'foreigner' after I've passed by. These people went to school, they were socialised, they know how to behave correctly as Thais, and shouting 'farang' at a foreigner seems to be the Thai thing to do. I have relatives in England who still talk about 'darkies' in hushed tones. Both socialisation and bigotry seem to be everywhere.

Well-socialised?

I'm just glad my children aren't like that. I don't know how well socialised my children are, or even how socialised I want them to be. I suppose I'm not terribly well socialised myself.

But at least we're not narrow-minded bigots.

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