

AGENTS OF SOCIALIZATION IN SOUTH PARK'S HOOKED ON MONKEY FONICS

Almost all introductory textbooks discuss different social institutions as agents of socialization, although books vary in what they define as agents and which of these are considered primary and secondary. This exercise begins with lecture, in which I describe what I consider the three primary agents for students (*family, daycare, media*) that lay the foundation for the secondary socialization that occurs later in life. Next, I outline secondary agents including *schools, peer groups, religion, sports, and the workplace*. I emphasize that while primary agents are important because they teach us basic social skills and cognitive components of culture, we also need exposure to secondary agents in order to develop an understanding of how our social skills and cultural knowledge are sometimes both contradictory and often relative to different social contexts—especially interaction rituals (Goffman 1967 [2005]). Discussing the *hidden* and *corridor curriculums* of schools is especially effective in making these connections for students (Kohlberg 1983).

Before viewing the [“Hooked on Monkey Fonics”](http://tinyurl.com/prw75s4) episode (<http://tinyurl.com/prw75s4>) from Season 3 of South Park, I pass out the attached worksheet, which first asks students to identify one primary and two secondary agents in this episode and then explain, through examples from the show, why both primary and secondary agents are necessary for social development. The socialization agents and their importance is revealed in the episode when the boys from South Park are introduced to two children, Mark and Rebecca, whom they have never met because they are homeschooled by their parents. Having extensive and extended exposure to highly educated parents as a primary agent of socialization, the homeschooled children immediately affirm their mastery of cultural knowledge by winning a town-wide spelling bee. Yet, lacking secondary agents, the homeschooled children lack social skills and thus have difficulty navigating social situations outside their home (e.g., they cannot interact with other children). For example, Kyle comments “those home-schooled kids are smart,” to which Cartman replies, “too bad they have the personalities of a wet dishcloth.”

The remainder of the episode illustrates the difficulty the homeschooled children experience when exposed to two secondary agents after Mark attends *public school* to interact with *peer groups* of his own age even though his parents, who were also homeschooled, explain how public schools are “no good.” During his first class Mark demonstrates his mastery of cultural knowledge by answering the teacher’s questions, to which the teacher announces how he will throw the grading curve and flunk the other students. However, Mark’s unfamiliarity with *schools* and the interaction rituals of *peer groups* cause him great difficulties. For example, at the beginning of the episode, Mark watches Stan and Cartman call each other names and punch one another. Mark asks, “Oh my goodness, are you two enemies?” Stan says they are in fact friends, to which Mark replies, “Strange, friends would call each other names and fight.” Later on the playground, Mark sees the boys playing a game that involves punching each other on the shoulder and asks, “I don’t understand. You seem to like that boy, yet hate him at the same time?” The next day in the cafeteria Mark asks Stan, “Why do you call Kyle names and laugh at him? Is he not your friend?” Stan replies, “Yeah, dude, but guys just do that. We rip on each other and stuff.” It seems as if Mark begins to understand by exclaiming, “I see, it’s like, you have to mark your territory as a boy, you have to socially find your place,” but he then responds incorrectly to accusations of being a “nerdo” and ends up duct taped to the lunch room bench. Mark tries to explain the boys’ behaviors to his parents: “I don’t know, mother. It didn’t make any sense at all,” illustrating how often the subtle rules of the *interaction action order* do defy logic. Mark’s father attempts to end the bullying by confronting the other boys’ fathers at a bar, only to find himself duct taped to a bench because, by being homeschooled himself, he never mastered the masculine practice that men drink beer, not wine coolers.

However, by the end of the episode Mark assimilates into his public school and a peer group. At a school dance he physically “kicks Kyle’s bitch ass,” and immediately earns the respect, admiration, and friendship of the other boys at the school. Mark then explains the importance of secondary agents to his father:

You see, I've learned something today. Public schools may be a bit lacking in education, but it's the main place where children learn all of their social skills. You can't teach a child social skills. They have to learn them themselves. And the only place to do that is on the playground, in the cafeteria, and so on.

After his talk with his father, Mark is called a nerdo, to which he responds, “Thanks, gay-wad.” Cartman then proudly tells him, “Now you're getting it,” meaning he is beginning to learn the subtle nuances of the interaction order that cannot be read in books or taught by parents.

The After Discussion

After collecting the worksheets for grading, I verbally assure students were able to identify the three agents of socialization depicted in the episode: *family*, *schools*, and *peer groups*. I then guide a discussion about how both primary and secondary agents are necessary for socialization by focusing on how the homeschooled children mastered formal cultural knowledge, but were unable to interact with peers because they lacked the non-rational and informal rules of small groups and school settings. Focusing on the similar difficulties both Mark and his father (both homeschooled) had interacting with individuals outside their families is an excellent means to illustrate how a lack of secondary agents can arrest the development of social skills necessary to function in many informal social contexts, especially interaction rituals that revolve around maintaining face instead of rational exchange (Goffman 1959).

I also build upon this episode to cover a similar topic, gender socialization, which is illustrated through Kyle’s attempt to court Mark’s sister Rebecca. Throughout the entire episode, Kyle’s romantic interest in Rebecca is encouraged by most of the adults in South Park, as the romance is portrayed as an innocent and harmless discovery of love. However, by the end of the episode, Rebecca becomes sexually aggressive because she does not understand how gender norms prohibit sexual behavior, and ultimately the little girl is strongly chastised for behaving in this way. By illustrating how these two similar behaviors were perceived and reacted to depending on the gender of the child highlights how men and women are socialized with different social expectations. In lecture, I also point out how throughout the show the boys were encouraged to be aggressive and even violent towards one another to reaffirm the importance of gender to the socialization process.

Works Cited

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Name: _____

This episode of *South Park* depicts two children who are homeschooled. Their socialization experience resulted in some rather unique character traits. While you watch, first identify one primary and two secondary agents of socialization portrayed in this episode of South Park. Then, in a paragraph that presents well-described examples from the video, explain how the 'homeschooled kids' highlight the need for both primary and secondary agents of socialization.

Explain:

One Primary Agent:

Two Secondary Agents:

- 1.)
- 2.)

Name: _____

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