

**Lesson
Nine**

Social Control

Aims

The aims of this lesson are to enable you to

- understand that social life has a certain order, that is, is subject to a number of rules
- distinguish between formal and informal agencies of social control
- describe the formal agencies of social control
- define norms, mores, and customs
- identify the various agencies through which these informal controls operate

Context

From education, we move to crime and deviance. This lesson and the next are concerned with the way a society seeks to control the behaviour of its individual members. This is quite a complex topic.



Oxford Open Learning

The Rules of Social Behaviour

Imagine going to a formal dinner and finding men in beach shorts, women with their feet up on the tables, people eating with their fingers.

Or, going to school and finding that the children had all brought their pets with them.

Or, getting into a bus for Oxford from London and finding that the driver had decided to go via Glasgow.


Think of as many absurd situations as you can — the point is not that they are absurd! The point is why you consider them to be absurd.

They are absurd because you cannot think of them ever taking place in the normal course of events — they are unlikely, people do not behave like that. But why do they not? Because there are certain rules, certain ways of behaving which are so much a part of us that we do not even think of them consciously. These rules order our social life, and without them we could not function.

The underlying rules of social behaviour, constitute **social order**, making behaviour predictable. If these rules are broken, the result is social disorder and confusion.

All of us have to play various rôles in life — that of children, parents, teachers, students, employers, employees, etc., etc. In each of these rôles certain behaviour is expected of us — and we make these rules or expectations a part of us. That is, we **internalise** them and take them for granted. Just imagine what life would be like if I could not be sure that my son would not whip out a knife when I told him off!

The maintenance of this order is **social control**. Social control refers to the means by which people are persuaded to obey the rules of society.

Activity 1	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is social order? 2. What is social control?
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 2.

Social Rules


Think of all the rules that control our behaviour. We learn very early to say 'please', 'thank you', 'sorry'; to shake hands in greeting; to stand in queues; to use formal language towards elders; to stop at the traffic lights when they are red; to pay our taxes; etc., etc.

Some of these rules are far more important than others. I may forget to say 'thank you', but I just cannot forget to stop at a red light. Because some rules are more important for social order, society makes them into **law**, or written rules. The rules of etiquette, of manners and morals are generally the unwritten rules of society.

The law is the legal element of social control. Since it can be enforced formally or officially, the written rules or laws constitute formal control.

Unwritten rules are also enforced but through very informal means such as ridicule, gossip, and in extreme cases, ostracism. For instance, the child who sneaks in school is 'sent to Coventry' by his friends, but the one who cheats in an examination is punished by the school authorities. The first is **informal control**, while the second is formal control.

A burglar is caught by the police and punished by law. A person involved in an extra-marital affair is 'talked about', and 'persuaded' to conform. The first example is *formal* social control, the latter is *informal* social control.

Activity 2	Name some of the means of informal social control.
	

Laws

If you jump a queue, social order is obviously not as threatened as it is if you were to evade payment of income tax. Or again, if your behaviour is rude and uncouth you offend the social norm of politeness, but the offence is not as serious as hitting a man and knocking him down. For the latter you can be taken to court on charges of assault.

Those norms or rules which are more important for social order, the breaking of which are regarded as greater offences, are formalised and made into **laws**, which can be enforced by the threat of punishment. Thus, we have laws concerning stealing of property, deliberately injuring or killing someone, etc.

The law, to be really effective, must have the backing or support of public opinion. It must be in line with the moral code of society. For example, the value we place on the preservation of human life is reflected in laws which govern both the way we drive and the way we respond to an insult.

There may be certain laws which cannot be properly enforced, because they go against the custom of society. For instance, in India, the law forbids demanding and giving of dowry (money paid by the bride's parents to the groom), yet people continue to demand and to give dowry.

The opinion of the people can also bring about a change in the laws.

Laws regarding divorce were very strict in Britain till 1937. Long before this, however, ideas had changed about the rightness or wrongness of divorce. Divorce laws had become a farce, as more and more people were getting divorces by giving false evidence. As a result, the divorce laws were changed and made more realistic.

How is the Law enforced?

Who gives you a speeding ticket, or stops you for drunken driving?

Who catches the burglar and takes him off to prison?

The **police**, of course. The police are responsible for the maintenance of law and order — they are the main **formal agency of social control** (there are others, like traffic wardens). The primary duty of the police is to prevent crime, to preserve life and maintain public order.

The success of the police depends on a good relationship between the police and the public. When the police are seen as unsympathetic and ruthless, the people often refuse to cooperate, making the task of the police more difficult.

The police are expected to decide whether an offence has been committed or not, whether an individual should be let off with a caution or whether he should be prosecuted. No wonder they are often so unpopular!

Once the police have decided that an offence has been committed, it is for **the courts**, or the **judicial system**, to decide on the punishment.

The courts determine the guilt of the accused, and pass sentence on the basis of the police reports, the arguments of the prosecution and the defence.

But, whatever the offence — **civil** (not preventing your dog from biting the postman), or **criminal** (stealing his registered letters), — the individual remains innocent until proved guilty. This is a way of looking after the rights of the individual.


The individual also has the right to appeal against the verdict of the lower courts. There are higher courts such as the Court of Appeal and the House of Lords, which hear appeals.

Penal Institutions

Together with the law, the police, and the courts, the **penal institutions** also maintain formal social control.

The different institutions which make up the penal system carry out the sentences passed by the courts, to keep individuals in detention or under supervision. Their function is thus **custodial**.

But not all penal institutions are **prisons**. Young offenders cannot be sent to prison. There exist specific institutions for young offenders where those who have committed serious crimes are educated and taught specific skills and trades.

Activity 3	Name the four formal agencies of social control.
	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1.2.3.4.

Customs

We are generally controlled more by the informal controls than by the formal.

The informal controls are the unwritten rules of society, and include **norms**, **mores** and **customs**.

How do we define a norm? A **norm** is the accepted standard of behaviour, — a particular pattern of acting and behaving which the society regards as normal or right. Thus, it is the norm in British society for a man to wear a tie and dinner jacket to a formal dinner, to drive on the left side of the road, to shake hands in greeting, etc, etc.

Some of these norms are simply customary — maintained simply because they have always been accepted in the past. Thus we have plum pudding for Christmas, hang mistletoe up on the door, eat with knives and forks. These are called **folkways**.

Folkways are norms which are observed generally by members of a society, but the breaking of which is not considered morally wrong or something requiring punishment. Those folkways which have been handed down from generation to generation make up the **customs** of a society.

Those norms which are regarded as important and important because they are morally right, are called **mores**. They are patterns of behaviour based on the central beliefs and values within society. Respecting life and property, behaving justly towards others are mores which are common to many societies.

Mores can, however differ from society to society. Thus, one of the mores of British society is that a person should have only one spouse, but there are societies where the mores permit more than one wife, and others which permit more than one husband.

Mores maintain the particular moral values of a society, and are often incorporated into laws. Values are part of the culture of a society and can vary from society to society, and in the same society from time to time.

Activity 4

Define 'mores'.



Learning the Rules

How do these norms, mores and customs operate? How do we learn to act according to them?

We are **socialised** into them through various agencies such as the **family**, the **school**, **peer-groups**, the **work-place** and **religion**.

What do we mean by the term 'socialisation'? We mean the process by which people come to learn all that goes towards making the culture of the society – its norms, values, beliefs and customs, its roles, statuses and language. This process of learning starts at the child's earliest days. The family therefore plays a crucial role in this process. We often refer to the family as responsible for primary socialisation as it is here that our first experiences of social life take place.


The following passage shows how much a child relies on its parents in order to learn:

"Isabelle was an illegitimate child and had been kept in seclusion for that reason. Her mother was deaf and dumb and she and Isabelle spent most of their time in a darkened room. As a result, the child had no opportunity to learn speech and communicated with her mother by means of gestures. When she was found, it was not even clear whether or not she could hear as she was totally unused to responding to sound. Her actions were similar to those of deaf children.


The people who took charge of her when she was found set about a systematic training programme. Slowly she responded. After the first few hurdles had been overcome a curious thing happened. She went through the usual stages of learning characteristic of the years from one to six not only in proper succession but also more rapidly than normal. Two months after her first words she was putting sentences together. Nine months after that she would identify written words and sentences, could write well and add to 10.

In two years Isabelle moved from having the skills of a one to three-year-old to the skills of an eight and a half year-old. Given a stimulating environment, this little girl was able to treble her IQ in a year and a half and eventually entered school and participated as a normal child."

(Adapted from 'Human Society' by K Davis.)

Activity 5	Why was Isabelle unable to speak when she was found?
	

Many of the values and beliefs which we learn as children stay with us for the rest of our lives. They become so much a part of us that they are part of our personalities. In other words, they are **internalised**. If we subsequently act contrary to those beliefs we will feel guilty and punish ourselves with feelings of remorse. This inner policeman or conscience is responsible for most people conforming to the moral code of their society for most of the time.

Activity 6	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Why do you think that parents have such a profound effect on their children's beliefs and behaviour? 2. What sanctions do they use to make children conform to their rules and expectations?
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 2.

The school's role in socialisation

The school also plays an important part in socialising the individual. The rules and regulations of school help to discipline and mould the child into a social being.

The sort of school which a child attends, its general ethos, has a long lasting effect on him or her. Some upper class people send their children to public boarding schools - at these the young person exists in a closed environment where the influence of the school and staff may be at its greatest. (An example of the effect of such an environment on nineteenth century native American children can be seen on pages 24 - 25 of 'Sociology - A New Approach'.)

In the school and the workplace, people are also affected by their peers. A **peer group** is a group whose members share a similar status in society. The members are often of similar age, such as in teenage gangs. They also generally share the same social situation - for example, children in school or at college, people at work. The peer group is an important agent of social control since we usually

want to be accepted by our peers and therefore conform to their norms of behaviour.

An example of this is provided by research at the Hawthorn Works in the late 1920's. The men were employed in routine manufacturing work. They were paid a basic wage plus a bonus to be divided between members of the work group if their output reached a certain level. The management thought that this would increase productivity. In fact, the work group established their own norm for output which was below the level which could have been reached if each man worked as hard as he could.

The men believed that if they worked flat out the management would expect more and would raise the level of output at which bonuses were paid. They also believed that if they worked too slowly the management would 'bawl them out'. As a result, they established a 'normal tempo'. This tempo was enforced within the work group by the men themselves. Men would be ridiculed or slapped on the upper arm - called 'binging' - if they did not conform.

Religion and the Media

The media has its own part to play in the teaching of social norms and customs. With the tremendous expansion in the means of mass communication, their importance in moulding social attitudes and values cannot be underestimated.


This can be illustrated by the way in which the media has been accused of shaping our attitudes to minority groups like women. The media is frequently accused of presenting women in a demeaning way. They are often stereotyped as mothers and sex objects. Many TV adverts and, of course, 'page 3' pictures, show young women pouting at the camera. It can be argued that such a presentation encourages us to think of women in a particular way, while 'controlling' the sorts of behaviour young girls aspire to.

Religion is also an important means of social control, especially in societies where religion is central to life. A religion may be defined as belief in a supernatural power which influences or controls people's lives. It promotes rewards such as everlasting bliss to those who conform and damnation to those who do not. Generally, religious teachings are similar to the values of society. Thus, it strengthens the values of society and gives them an ultimate meaning. It may also support the social structure by legitimising the power of certain groups within society. For example, examine the words of this hymn:

"The rich man in his castle,

The poor man at his gate;
God made them high and lowly,
And ordered their estate."

Ruling groups may find it in their own interests to promote a religion with such teachings.


Activity 7	What sanctions does religion have at its disposal?
	

In many cases, the various institutions which act as forces of social control operate in unison. The combined effect of family, friends, neighbours and religion, for instance, may even lead to people giving up their lives. The following example demonstrates this. It describes the practice of 'suttee' when a Hindu widow burned herself to death on her husband's funeral pyre.


"To the sound of chanting she began to walk around the pyre, circling it three times as once on her wedding day and wearing the same dress. She had circled the sacred fire, tied by the veil to her husband's corpse which lay on the bed of cedar logs and spices. She mounted the pyre and arranged her dress to show it to best advantage, lifting up the dead man's head and putting it in her lap as if he were asleep. The boy's hand, guided by the Brahmin's (priest's), lit the pyre at the feet of the dead man. Bright flowers of fire sprang up from the wood and blossomed in orange and green. The Brahmin took the brand from him and touched the logs at the suttee's back. A brilliant tongue of flame shot skyward and simultaneously the crowd found its voice and once again roared its homage and approval."

(Adapted from 'The Far Pavilions' by M M Kaye.)

NB: Suttee was officially banned 150 years ago but does occasionally still take place.

Activity 8	Why do you think that many women in traditional Indian society accepted the custom of suttee?
	

Religion has always been an important means of social control. The practical rules of right conduct are the same for all religions. Where religion has a strong hold, the mores are obeyed not so much because of the fear of punishment here and now, as the fear of hell or the hope of heaven. Religion gives ultimate meaning to the norms of society.

Activity 9	Name the agencies of informal social control.
	

Summary

Lesson Nine: Social Control

You now understand that social life has a certain order, that is, is subject to a number of rules. The maintenance of this order is social control, and social control is maintained through formal and informal agencies. You can distinguish between the formal and informal agencies and describe them.

Project Work

Here are some ideas that might make suitable titles for a sociological enquiry on social control:

Study of the changing rôle of the police. Secondary sources plus interviews. (topic suggested by SEG/AQA)

'Divorce is too easy these days' — using questionnaire and/or interviews.



Now read the first part of Wilson, Ch. 5.

Key Terms

Social Order
Internalisation

Formal/Informal Control
Norms/Mores/Customs
Folkways
Civil/Criminal offences
Penal institutions
Peer Group

Suggested Answers to Activities**One**

1. The implicit rules underlying social behaviour constitute social order.
2. Social control is the maintenance of this order.

Two

Gossip, Ridicule, Ostracism.

Three

1. Law
2. Police
3. Courts
4. Penal Institutions.

Four

Mores are norms which are considered important because they are considered morally right.

Five

Isabelle had no opportunity to learn language as her mother did not speak to her.

Six

1. Children are very impressionable. The values and beliefs of their parents become internalised and stay with them for the rest of their lives.
2. Parents use threats of punishment and actual punishment to ensure that their children conform. Parents may also use the opposite tactic, i.e. they may reward acceptable behaviour.

Seven

It may reward people with everlasting bliss or punish them with everlasting damnation.

Eight

Those who did not would be ostracised. They would no longer have a place in society.

Nine

The Family, The School, The Peer-group, The Work-place, The Media, Religion.