

Factors shaping social values and cultural practices



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Social values and cultural practices are both elements of culture. Social values provide a general outline for human behaviour i. e. they define what is morally correct e. g. right or wrong and what is desirable e. g. good or bad. Values are the abstract standards that define ideal principles in societies or groups (Anderson, Taylor, 2007). Culture is the way of life of a society or group of people defined by their behaviors and meaning. Culture includes values, beliefs, morals, customs, habits and language among others (Anderson, Taylor, 2007). Cultural practices are human behaviours and thoughts that are passed down by generation to generation based on these cultural beliefs (Carr, Neitzel, 1995). These practices are learned directly e. g. parent to child and indirectly through imitation and observation (Anderson, Taylor, 2007). Social values and cultural practices are instilled in people from a young age and this determines how they react to concepts of equality, justice and fairness.

Social inequality refers to the ways in which socially defined categories of people are positioned differently in society in regards to accessing social 'goods' like employment, other forms of income, having access to education, health care, political representation and societal participation (Ceelbas, 2010). These forms of social inequality are shaped by various factors including geographical location, distribution of wealth, income and social status. Structural inequalities operate in any society and the main inequalities are based on class, age, ethnicity and gender (Holmes, Hughes, Julian, 2007).

Class

Social stratification refers to “ the hierarchal arrangement of social classes, castes, and strata within a society” (Inc. Icon Group, 2008 p. 209). Class refers to socio economic status (SES) which is an individuals or groups position in a hierarchal social structure and where they are placed depends on their occupation, education, wealth, income and residence. There are four main classes of people. They are the upper class, middle class, working class and the underclass. The upper class refer to the property owners and entrepreneurs, the middle class refer to the workers whose social position is determined through professional qualifications, the working class refers to workers who exchange their labour for wages and the underclass are the poor people living in poverty (Graetz, MacAllister, 1994).

Wealth and income are key determinants of class. Money can gain access to power, status, high education, better employment opportunities which result in high incomes. Wealth can provide a better lifestyle including access to health care which would create a high standard of living and a longer, more enjoyable life. People in lower classes are forced to struggle through life, suffer discriminations and have a poor quality of life.

Inequalities affect men and women, different religious, ethnic or racial groups and people from different backgrounds. Depending on their location in the class structure will determine whether they will be better or worse off in society (Graetz, MacAllister, 1994).

CULTURAL PRACTICES VALUES??

Age

Ageism is the “ discrimination or the holding of irrational and prejudicial views about individuals or groups, based on their age. It involves stereotypical assumptions about a person’s or groups physical or mental capacities and is often associated with derogatory language” (Marshall G, 1998, p. 1). There is discrimination against the aged in the workplace, health care system, nursing homes and it is reflected in senior abuse (Gutman, Spencer, 2010). There are estimates between 1-3 million people over 65 in the United States alone that have been mistreated, exploited or injured by someone they know or trust to protect and care for them (Gutman, Spencer, 2010). Even capitalism exploits the elderly through pharmaceuticals. When the aged are forced to withdraw from the workforce this can result in them separating themselves from society and even preparing for death. The elderly do not get treated fairly and they are often denied their basic human rights including health care.

Social forces and the media create ageism by shaping negative attitudes towards older people and the aging process. Youth, beauty and health are highly valued in culture and the aged represent the opposite. They are linked to poor health and death. By putting distance between the aged it alleviates the fear of dying (Ventrell, 2002). Institutions also help create ageism by devaluing older workers and ignoring treatable aging problems by medical practitioners and in nursing homes. There is also a lack of attention to cruelty towards the elderly which results in low reporting and a lack of policy changes (Gutman, Spencer, 2010).

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Ethnicity

“ Ethnicity is the cultural background of a group of people who share a common ancestry” (Holmes, Hughes, Julian, 2007, p. 144). These members identify with each other through cultures including a shared religion and a common language. The concept of ‘ ethnicity’ perpetuates inequality for people who are considered different from the dominant group. Individual racism involves the negative attitudes a person has against all members of a racial or ethnic group. They often resort to name calling, derogatory remarks or acts of violence.

Institutional racism refers to discriminatory acts and policies that prevent groups from equally accessing resources such as education, health, employment and housing (Zastrow, Kirst-Ashman, 2009). Some of these acts and policies are illegal and others are not. Macro systems policies are formed by institutional values and these policies occur in communities and organisations. Institutional discrimination is built into the structure that forms society. It is the prejudicial treatment in organisations based on policies or behaviours and is demonstrated on how these macro systems treat certain people (Zastrow, Kirst-Ashman, 2009).

Inequalities of ethnic groups can be seen in everyday community life. In non-white groups, unemployment is higher, the infant mortality rate is higher, they have a poorer life expectancy and their achievements in education are less than whites (Zastrow, Kirst-Ashman, 2009). There are many inequalities found in the education system towards ethnic groups. Schools in white neighbourhoods have highly trained teachers and better facilities than those of minority groups. Due to either a high unemployment rate or discrimination

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of ethnic groups in the workplace, these families struggle to provide financially for their families. As a result of this they are unable to provide for extra expenses like class trips, clothing, supplies and transportation which prevent their children from being fully involved in the education process (Zastrow, Kirst-Ashman, 2009).

A major factor affecting health inequalities in minority groups is their socioeconomic status. Education and employment barriers lead to financial instability and if they cannot afford proper health care they will have a low quality of life and a shorter life expectancy. Their ability to access health care services and a willingness to obtain treatments can have an impact on their health. Other inequalities can occur from religious beliefs, language barriers, their environment, their lifestyle and genetic issues (Bhopal, 2007).

The stereotyping, which is fed by prejudice, continues to shape the housing outcomes for ethnic minorities. The inaction of administration workers, the effect of policies in housing agencies and the national processes condoned by the state all reinforce inequalities (Somerville, Steele, 2002). Ethnic groups continue to be regularly excluded from accessing resources to improve poverty and living conditions.

The criminal justice system is supposed to be non-discriminatory and fair. The name justice in itself implies fairness but institutional racism is still evident in this macro system. In the United States for example (Zastrow, Kirst-Ashman, 2009), African Americans make up 12 per cent of the population but they make up half of the prison population. They also receive harsher sentences than whites and half of the people sentenced to death are

African American (Zastrow, Kirst-Ashman, 2009). Police are more likely to respond harshly to offenses committed by minority groups or lower income people than middle or upper class white groups. Minority groups and poorer class people are less likely to afford bail so are forced to remain in jail which can lead their families and people who rely on them into poverty. They cannot financially afford a good defense and they are more likely to be found guilty (Zastrow, Kirst-Ashman, 2009).

There have been conflicting views on immigration and the effects that migrants have on the economy so much so it has swayed immigration policies. The reasons for them are that they take the low paying jobs where there are labour shortages thus stimulating the economy through the taxes they pay (Zastrow, Kirst-Ashman, 2009). The other view people have is that they believe the immigrants are a burden on the economy, reap public benefits and take jobs away from the citizens (Zastrow, Kirst-Ashman, 2009). There are also fears of terrorism since the September 11 attacks.

Gender

“ Gender is the division of people into two categories, ‘ men’ and ‘ women’. Through interaction with caretakers, socialisation in childhood, peer pressure in adolescence, and gendered work and family roles, women and men are socially constructed to be different in behaviour, attitudes, and emotions” (Borgatta, Montgomery, 2000, p. 1057).

From a young age, boys will be treated in ways to form masculinity and girls will be handled in ways to form femininity. Gender stereotypes are reinforced and influenced through agencies like the family, peers, schools and the

media (Holmes, Hughes, Julian, 2007). Stereotypic behaviour is learned by individuals through the culture of these influences. Gender roles are the expected behaviour from males and females and this helps sustain gender stereotypes which in turn create perceptions which lead to inequalities (Crespi I, 2010). Gender roles, patriarchy, sexism and discrimination contribute to gender inequality and these inequalities take place in all social institutions including the workplace and at home. The relationship between patriarchy and gender has been crucial to the subordinate position of women. Patriarchy is a social system where men have power over younger men, women and children. This power rests in the public and private spheres (Holmes, Hughes, Julian, 2007).

The role of women traditionally has been to nurture and stay at home to look after the children and the men were seen as the 'breadwinners' going off to work to earn an income. Segregation from society, no opportunities to make their own money, fewer opportunities for education and at times domestic violence all contributed to the oppression of women. Even though there are more women in the workforce, due to gender roles, they still shoulder the responsibility of a 'second shift' when it comes to maintaining the domestic sphere (W. W. Norton & Company, 2005).

It is a basic human right to be free from gender inequality in the workplace but the fight for equal opportunities, equal pay and fair treatment is a constant justice battle for women.

Women in the workforce face inequalities of pay compared to men, less prestigious positions, sexist attitudes and discrimination. Even women that

are successful in the corporate world face discrimination on the 'proper roles' of women according to cultural beliefs (W. W. Norton & Company, 2005). The 'glass ceiling' refers to barriers that hinder promotion of women and minorities into higher ranks of management (Anderson, Taylor, 2005).

The media contributes to gender inequalities by their portrayal of men and women in films, television and magazines. Men are shown to be active and aggressive. They are not shown to do housework or care for children. Women are portrayed as being dominated by the man and are seen as helpless. They are seen as the carers and are told how to please men and look attractive for them.

Conclusion

Social positions and disadvantages are determined by influences such as class, status and power as well as demographic attributes such as age, ethnicity and gender. Ageism is one of the most pervasive prejudices in society and is considered as being a denial of basic human rights. Social forces and the media help create beliefs and attitudes that discriminate against the elderly. Stereotyping and prejudices continue to create inequalities in ethnic groups. Discriminations can result in poor opportunities for education, poor financial stability, which has an effect on their health, and a low standard of living. Gender is created from birth by gender socialisation. Gender stereotypes are reinforced and influenced through agencies like the family, peers, schools and the media.

The imbalances of wealth, power and prestige that exist is ironic as people continuously preach their cultural commitment to values of equality and

justice. Unfortunately, systems worldwide are setup to enhance the interests of the people that reside at the top of the stratification system.