

Understanding What It Means to Be Human

By Jim Myers

What makes us like other things?

We share many qualities with other animals. We are mammals, which means we are warm-blooded, we give birth to live young, the female nurses the young, and we have hair covering parts of our body. We are also primates; mammals who are part of an order within nature that is characterized by increasing manual dexterity, intelligence, and the probability of some social organization.

What makes us different?

We are social and cultural creatures.

1. **Social**: *Our lives are linked to others and to society in many complex ways.*
2. **Cultural**: *What we become is not a result of instinct but of the ideas, values, and rules developed in our society.*

Without these two core qualities, we would not be human beings. Therefore, it is important to understand how these two core qualities enter into our lives. It is also important to recognize the complex interrelationship between the social and the cultural.

*Our culture arises from our social life,
and the continuation of our social life depends on our culture.*

What does it mean to be “social”?

On the simplest level, social means we need others for our very survival. Infants need adults for their physical survival: *for food, shelter, and protection*. Infants also need adults for: *emotional support, affection, love and to experience belonging*.

Adults also need other people. We depend on others for our physical survival (to grow and transport our food, to provide shelter and clothing, to provide protection from enemies, and almost all the things we take for granted). As adults we also depend on others for love, support, meaning, happiness, and belonging. *Human survival is a social affair.*

*Almost all of our needs -- physical and emotional --
are met through interaction with others.*

Other people are important not only for fulfilling our needs, but also for **teaching us how to survive**. We know how to do very little instinctively (suck, defecate, breathe, sweat, cry, see, hear, and other simple reflexes). **We are not born knowing how to deal with our environment**. We do not know how to:

- *Survive by instinct in nature.*
- *Get along in our world.*
- *Deal with humans, animals, the weather, injuries, sickness, etc.*
- *Find water and get food (grow it, hunt it, fish it, or buy it).*
- *Build a shelter, make and use tools and weapons, or make clothing.*

In fact, we must learn thousands of things if we are to survive today -- from learning the ABCs, to learning how to discourage others from robbing us, to learning how best to dress, and to communicate with others so we learn all of the other things. *Human beings live in a world where socialization is necessary for survival -- and that is a lifelong process.*

*Socialization is the process by which various representatives of society teach people the ways of society and, in so doing, form their basic qualities — parents, teachers, political leaders, religious leaders, coaches, social media, etc. Through socialization people learn the ways of society and how to internalize those ways — **that is, make them their own.***

Socialization is necessary for creating our individual qualities -- **talents, tastes, interests, personality traits, ideas, values, standards, and morals.** These are not qualities we have at birth but qualities we develop through socialization in the context of the family, the school, our peers, the community, and social media environment.

What we become is a complex mixture of whose DNA we inherit, the place we are born into, the beliefs of our family, and our society.

Since World War I societies around the world have changed dramatically. In America, sources of information about shared memories, wisdom, values, standards, and morals are declining. People are being socialized to use physical force to resolve conflicts with others, who have shared memories, wisdom, values, standards, and morals.

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