

## Box 1 The effects of extreme isolation

Over the years, there have been several cases of 'feral' (wild) children found in forests and elsewhere who had apparently been reared by wolves or other animals. There is no way of knowing for sure if such children really had been nurtured by animals, but it is certain they had had little contact with other humans. One case was that of Shamdev, an Indian boy aged about five found in a forest playing with wolf cubs. When first found:

'Shamdev cowered from people and would only play with dogs. He hated the sun and used to curl up in shadowy places. After dark he grew restless and they had to tie him up to stop him following the jackals which howled around the village at night. If anyone cut themselves, he could smell the scent of blood and would scamper towards it. He caught chickens and ate them alive, including the entrails. Later, when he had evolved a sign language of his own, he would cross his thumbs and flap his hands: this meant "chicken" or "food".' (The Observer, 30 August 1978)

Of course, it is possible that parents abandon children like Shamdev precisely because they are abnormal, and such children may not have developed normally even if they had been raised in human company. However, the case of Isabelle suggests otherwise. Discovered at the age of six, Isabelle was the child of a deaf mute single mother. Both mother and child had been kept shut up by the family in a darkened room for most of the time.

According to Kingsley Davis (1970), 'Her behaviour towards strangers was almost that of a wild animal, manifesting much fear and hostility. In place of speech she made a strange croaking sound. In many ways she acted like an infant... At first it was even hard to tell whether or not she could hear, so unused were her senses.' She was also unable to walk properly, and at first it was thought she might have severe learning difficulties. However; in two years of intensive training, Isabelle was able to cover the stages of learning that normally take six years and she went on to develop normally. These examples show that basic human social characteristics are not inborn or instinctive. We have to learn to be 'normal human beings' through contact with others in our early years.

Working alone or in small groups:

- 1 Make a list of all the characteristics of Shamdev and Isabelle that might be described as 'non-human'.
- 2 What 'human' characteristics, skills and abilities would you expect a normal five or six year old child to possess? Are any of these inborn?
- 3 What conclusions would you draw about the importance of nurture and nature in human development?

value on individuals fulfilling their duties to the group, including the duty to share their wealth rather than keep it for themselves.

While values lay down general principles or guidelines, **norms** are the specific rules that govern behaviour in particular situations. For example, cultures that place a high value on respect for elders usually have specific rules on how they are to be approached or addressed. It may not be

permissible to look directly at them when speaking to them, or openly disobey or disagree with them.

Each culture has detailed rules or norms governing every aspect of behaviour, from food and dress to how we perform our jobs or who we may marry. Some norms, such as written laws or rules, are formal. Other norms are informal, such as table manners.

If we fail to keep to a norm, others may punish us. For example, stealing may result in a fine or imprisonment. Likewise, when we uphold a norm, we may be rewarded. For example, obeying the norm that we should work hard at school may earn us a place at university.

Sociologists use the term **sanctions** to describe anything that encourages people to conform to norms. Rewards are positive sanctions, while punishments are negative sanctions. Sanctions are a form of **social control**. That is, they are a way of ensuring that society's members behave as others expect them to.

Cultures and their norms vary greatly. What one culture considers normal or desirable, another may see as unacceptable. For example, in some cultures it is permitted to have several spouses at the same time (polygamy),

### Activity What counts as food?

- 1 In small groups, discuss whether or not you would find it acceptable to eat the following: cats, dogs, rabbits, guinea pigs, horses, lambs, calves, swans, beefburgers.
- 2 In your groups, carry out research to find cultures where the following are:
  - a forbidden as food: beef; pork; shellfish. Explain why they are forbidden.
  - b acceptable as food: insects (e.g. grubs, grasshoppers); snakes; rats.
- 3 As well as the type of food that people may eat, many cultures have rules on the slaughtering of animals for food. Find an example of a rule from a particular culture that governs how animals must be slaughtered.
- 4 Which of your answers to 1, 2 and 3 are examples of formal norms, and which are examples of informal norms?
- 5 What does this activity as a whole tell us about what counts as food?

### Activity Research

Cannibalism as a norm

...go to [www.sociology.uk.net](http://www.sociology.uk.net)

