**The Concept of Interaction**

Social interaction entails interpersonal contact, reciprocal response and inner adjustment of behaviour to the action of others (Wood Ward 1991). Social interaction which assumes a repetitive pattern becomes a social process. Park and Burgress( 1981) defined the social process as those “respective forms of behaviour commonly found in social life.” Commonly identified in this category are the processes of cooperation, competition, conflict, accommodation, assimilation and acculturation. This may be grouped further as **associative and antagonistic** social processes. The associative types include co-operation, accommodation and assimilation while the antagonistic types include competition and conflict. It is however, necessary to note that in practice, these social processes are not strictly mutually exclusive but exist as reciprocal aspects of the same social experience. When some cultures coexist in a society through mutual adaptation, they are able to do this through the process o accommodation. One culture may absorb the other through assimilation, when two cultures are blended, the process involved is acculturation. When all the components of a culture are uniformly distributed throughout a society, the process involved is homogenisation. It is thus important that a student of rural sociology should understand how these and other rural social processes are operating.

**Types of Social Interactions**

**Cooperation** As a result of human limitations in respect of time, energy, expert knowledge and other resources, both individual as well as group goals can be more efficiently and less strenuously attained via combined efforts of two or more individuals. This form of social interaction in which two or more people work together as a team to achieve a common goal(s) is termed cooperation. People cooperate for different reasons. Among these is the need to obtain personal advantage of benefit as a result of working with others which the individual would otherwise have found difficult to attain working all by himself. Cooperation can also arise due to the need to attain group goals e.g. in community development activities and village improvement unions. Situations or circumstances may call for cooperation even among otherwise antagonistic groups or individuals, e.g. families, village groups and clans have been known to corporate. They abandon their differences temporarily in order to jointly fight a common cause.

Physical hazards like flood, landslide, locust infestation or menance of wild beasts affecting contiguous villages who are otherwise at war with each other, may call for temporary cooperative action to eradicate the common annoyance. Cooperation is thus an interaction which is oriented towards specific goal(s). This goal may be a shared goal in which case the ultimate reward is a joint reward and there is a solitary relationship between the cooperators as in the case of communal land clearing for joint cultivation. The goals may just be convenient while the rewards are purely personal in which case the relationship between the cooperators would be symbolic in nature. The relationship between the doctors and patients typify this kind of cooperation. The patient needs cure or relief from pain and disease while the doctor wants the enhancement of his personal prestige, that of the hospital organisation he works and that of his profession. These two need each other in order to realise their individual rewards. Symbiotic cooperation exists in human interaction.

Cooperation is usually classified as either formal or informal pending upon the level of spontaneity or deliberate plan involved. Formal cooperation involves deliberate and rational interaction between persons or groups. The cooperators may not necessarily be acquired intimately but cooperate on contractual basis with the expected mutual obligations being spelt out in advance. In some instances of formal cooperation, other elements of compulsion or coercion may be involved. For example in such communal labour as village road maintenance, village members are supposed to cooperate but anyone who fails to turn up for the work may be fined. Informal cooperation is more or less spontaneous solidarity behaviour among members of such primary groups as the family and neighbourhood. It entails no formal compulsion or contract but may grow out of the need to give assistance, strengthen filial bonds or for mere companionship. Generally the cooperators in this case are known to one another on an intimate, face-to-face basis and can lay claims on each others assistance at any time. In Nigeria, among the Ibibio of the south western part, young girls may combine to do weeding on their parents’ farms. Men also cooperate in supplementary labour such as house building. Rural people in Nigeria cherish cooperation and practice it in various forms.

**Competition** Competition is that form of social interaction in which people struggle for the possession of material and non-material rewards which are in limited or scarce supply. In polygamous families, the wives compete for the affection of the husband and children often compete for the attention of their parents. In village, people compete for offices and recognition and occasionally also compete for fame through organised sports and games. In Nigeria today, the number of people requiring place in schools and universities far outnumbered the existing facilities thereby leading to competition for admission. Therefore, entrance examinations, aptitude tests, interviews, and payment of non-refundable deposits are all methods of eliminating competitors to the barest minimum. Competition thus serves to allocate scarce resources. It also sharpens individual initiative and may enhance productivity. In its ideal form, competition should be impersonal. That is, the major focus of attention should be the scarce reward rather than other competitors. When the reward is very limited in quantity however, competition tends to be keen thereby engendering hostility between competitors. This personalised form of competition is often known as rivalry. The negative aspect of competition is that it may breed hostility and animosity on the part of the loser towards the winner. Thus rather than foster systemic linkage, competition, may lead to systemic isolation. Systems that must work together must therefore minimise competition. People generally do not like competition. Monopoly, division of market, price fixing and “fair-trade” laws are techniques for reducing business competition. In some bureaucratic organisations, promotion on the basis of seniority rather than productivity has been utilised to limit competition. In some cases, these anti-competitive practices are supported by governmental action while in some others, they are opposed.

**Conflict** Conflict is a form of social interaction in which the actors seek to obtain scarce rewards by eliminating or weakening other contenders (Ekong 1988). This may take the form of a fist fight, threats, legistilation or total annihilation. In Nigerian village communities conflict may arise where there is difference of opinion between group leaders or in situations where one group tends to be exploiting the other. Conflict between personalities may lead to group quarrel and the division of the village into several fractions. Challenge to the security of the village may also engender conflict, for example land dispute. This often triggers off a strong group defence reaction resulting in the reappearance of old alignments with each group trying to obtain dominant position over the other. Relationship to a single act by an individual if followed with a rebuttal may soon grow into group conflict e.g. quarrels between children often bring the mothers into conflict. In community work, proposed changes or innovation may be viewed apprehensively and as a challenge to the status quo thereby engendering conflict. Similarly, the use of pressure group by a certain part of the community to gain an advantage over the rest may result in conflict. The change agency may be regarded by the disadvantaged section or part of the community in such a case as biased. Individual conflicts may entail intensive feeling of animosity towards each other. Conflicting individuals may refuse to greet each other or do anything together.

However in group conflict, there may not be ill feelings against any particular individual. The interest of the group as a whole rather than individual relationship determines conflict alignment. Conflict has both negative and positive effects. Its negative effects include the disruption of social unity; generation of bitterness which may lead to destruction and bloodshed, generation of inter-group tension; disruption of normal channels of cooperation and the diversion of members’ attention from group goals. Until there is an overt conflict, people may not know that certain wrongs or nagging issues exist. Therefore, conflict leads to a clear definition of issues. Once such issues have been identified they can then be amicably resolved. During conflict, group cohesion and solidarity increase and this positive effect can be directed for a more efficient attainment of group goals. In addition, conflict keeps the group alert to members’ interest and such awareness helps to prevent future conflicts.

**Conflict Resolution** Persons and groups who must work together must minimise conflict between them. There is no specific formula for resolving conflict but there are certain general procedures and approaches which might be used either by themselves or in combination. Generally, the first aim in conflict resolution is to minimise the feeling of difference and calm down the contending parties thereby creating a conducive atmosphere for the parties to coexist or work together until a more permanent solution could be found for their difference. This temporary working agreement between parties in conflict is the process of accommodation. It enables two strangers or parties to live together and form a family. Accommodation may take different forms depending upon the circumstances and the qualities of the group involved. Gupta (1989) identified eight major forms. These include the truce, displacement, institutionalised release of hostility, compromise, super ordination, segregation, third party roles in compromise and toleration.

1. **Truce** This is a term used to describe a temporary cessation of hostilities without the issues being settled so as to give the conflicting parties time to either re-group, attend to certain religious rites or observance or for solution to the conflict to be ironed out. Therefore, a truce may be declared for a specific number of days or for an indefinite period. For example, during the Nigerian Civil War, a truce period was often kept whenever a major peace conference was to be held.

2. **Displacement** This is a process of ending one conflict by replacing it with another – usually via a process of scapegoating. For example, a woman may pick a quarrel with her husband or man friend for infidelity or unfaithfulness only to later make up by blaming a third party for peddling unfounded stories which led to the misunderstanding in the first place. By so doing they transfer the hostility between them to a third party, who now is the scapegoat. Scapegoating results in immediate redirection of hostilities and may lead to a more lasting resolution of the conflict if the contending parties are firmly convinced of the culpability of the scapegoat.

3. **Institutionalised Release of Hostilities** This is a process whereby parties in conflict are given the opportunity to release their hostilities either on each other or on other objects. Usually, the process is either formally arranged and or guided by certain expressed or implicitly understood norms. Among many ethnic groups in Nigeria, wrestling matches are organised both for entertainment and as occasions for formal release of hostilities. Disputants in some cases may engage in the use of abusive language on each other. However, in all instances, the disputants are bound by societal norms. Similarly in wrestling and boxing, the rules of the game must be observed.

4**. Compromise** When domination or complete defeat is unlikely to be attained by either of the parties in conflict, they may want to accept less than the full goals they had originally aimed at in order to end the conflict. This is the case of compromise. Compromise often occurs between equally powerful, antagonists. When one party is more powerful but continued conflict seems disadvantageous, compromise can still be reached but with the more powerful party conceding less to the weaker party.

5. **Super-ordination** This involves the ending of conflict through the total defeat and submission of one group by another. Institutionalised methods of releasing hostilities may lead to super ordination as one party may be declared the champion. However, super ordination may or may not on its own, involve fighting according to rules (i.e. it is not institutionalised). When people are given the chance to release their hostilities, the immediate objective may not be that of establishing speaking order among them but that of giving vent to their annoyance.

6. **Segregation** In situations, where parties in dispute stubbornly refuse to yield to any conciliatory moves by third parties, they may be segregated or placed far apart from each other either to allow tempers cool down or place a permanent distance between them in order to maintain peace in a social system. In the past, segregation in most traditional Nigeria communities used to take the form of banishment or exile, or selling of the unyielding party to slavery.

7. **Third Party Roles in Compromise** In rural areas generally, whenever there is quarrel, other members of the family compound and neighbours would intervene to bring peace between the disputants. The third party may be an individual, usually an elderly person than either of the disputants or a group of people, who have some influence over them. In marital disputes for instance, extended family members on either side may play the third party.

8. **Toleration** In this case, the contending parties agree to disagree knowing that neither of them can or should win. People accept each other’s right to differ because certain values may be too much cherished to be compromised or victory may be too costly to bear. Most social systems maintain their identities because of the willingness of people to tolerate each other.

**Accommodation** This is the adjustment by a person or group to a conflict or threat, resulting in the recognition and acceptance of the relations which define the status of a person or persons in the groups or a larger social organisation. Subordination and super-ordination accompany accommodation when people mix up or mingle. In the rural family, the father is the superior. He normally controls the actions of others. In his absence, the mother steps into his shoes. In her absence, the eldest child takes over the mantle of family leadership. When the culturally acknowledged leader speaks, others accept his authority, listen and obey his instruction. The existing pattern of accommodation has enabled each person to accept his status in the group. The share-cropping system is that in which a farm is given temporarily for a share cropper to maintain on behalf of the farm owner. Each has accepted his position in the process of accommodation involved. This process is still practised in many rural areas of the world. It was widely practised in the United States rural areas immediately after the civil war, but has been abandoned since the world war after widespread mechanisation began (Jibowo 192).

Another form of accommodation between the labourers and the farm owners was to receive cash wages from the farm owners for labours carried out on the field. This form of accommodation is widely in use in many developing countries. In Nigeria, hired labourers are frequently paid agreed-upon wages on daily basis. Such a rate differs slightly from one community to another depending on economic situation of each place. In general, the nearer a rural area is to a large city, the higher the labour wage rate. Also, the nearer a rural community is to an industrial community, the higher the rate of hiring labourers.

**Assimilation** This is the process by which people of diverse cultural and racial origins achieve enough social solidarity in the same geographical territory to maintain a nation. An immigrant has been assimilated when he has acquired enough cultural traits with others. Assimilation involves a socio-political connotation as well. A person may acquire all the cultural traits of the new society, but may not be accepted or assimilated for socio-political reasons. According to Smith and Sopf (1990), some black people have acquired all the while people’s culture in the United States, yet they have not been assimilated into the society. Similarly, the share cropping system in the southern United States about 3-4 decades ago assimilated the white share croppers into the share-cropping culture. The social class, expectations, labour and other features which characterised the black share-croppers also characterise the white share-croppers.

In Nigeria, many people of the Ibo origin from states such as Imo and Anambra have been assimilated into the Yoruba subculture. They were born in Lagos, spent most of their lives there, except that they occasionally visit their home towns for Easter and Christmas celebrations. They went to school and picked up employment among the Yoruba people in Lagos. When they speak Yoruba, wear Yoruba dress and interact with Yoruba people, it is not easy to know that they are of Ibo parentage. Some of them have also been assimilated into the Hausa subcultures. These were the children of those who went to the north to trade. The rate of assimilation of Ibo into Hausa culture was reduced by the Nigerian Civil War of 1967-1970 and religious crises of the 1990s, which made many Ibo people to leave the north for their homes. Assimilation of Yoruba into Ibo and Hausa subcultures as well as Hausa into Ibo and Ibo subcultures is also going on, but at a slow pace.

**Acculturation** This is the acquisition of new cultural traits by individuals or groups and the use of these in their new patterns of living. Acculturation has no biological connotation involved in it. However to some sociologists, assimilation involves some biological mixing of people with the new culture. Introduction and diffusion of new agricultural innovations (technologies) is a form of acculturation in many societies because it involves blending the culture of the country from where the technology was developed with that of the recipient society, in relation to the specific farm practice. An example is the introduction of the hybrid maize into Nigeria through the Institute of International Tropical Agriculture (IITA). IITA is expected to have a widespread impact on the maize production culture in Nigeria. The techniques of producing this maize is expected to influence the cutlass-hoe system of maize production by many farmers in Nigeria. Acculturation also refers to changes in culture arising from constant contact with other cultures. In Nigeria today, European modes of dressing and a number of other forms of foreign culture have greatly changed the indigenous culture due to constant contact.