

Multicultural psychology: a perception of minority groups

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Multicultural Psychology

In his seminal work “ Childhood and society”, Erikson appears as a former artist

dressed up in a scholar’s gown: “... this is a book on historical processes... a subjective book, conceptual itinerary” (Erikson, H. Erik, 1965, p. 14).

However, one should not underestimate his deep reflections on human nature and behaviour. Erikson puts plausibly his aim - not to conceptualise but to describe in full details his scientific observations of the clinical cases he worked on during his practice.

As a psychotherapist he is interested in the dynamics of society and personality

and the mechanisms of interaction between the two. His major concern is to describe, in all colours and shades, the process of socialization and all the stages human personality passes through. He distinguished eight phases, calling them " Eight ages of man." (p. 239)

I would be extremely focused on the fifth stage named “ Learning Identity vs Identity Diffusion”, because this is the period when the minority versus the majority social factors play important role in the human development and it is the stage when the image of the minority becomes transparently devaluated, according to Erikson, because they represent the weak and non-dominant culture. In the game of self-search one would either self ascertain or self-doubt himself. If he does the latter he would be categorized as acquiring a negative identity. However, I cannot agree completely with the minority’s negative affect on identify formation.

First of all Erikson claims universality of his study but all he ends up with is a psychological description of North American society. A model, which hardly could be applied to all humankind. According to him each community, regardless of its size, is represented via a certain cultural image. These are mostly known as cultural stereotypes (the American, the Nigger, etc.) and are mutually shared on the level of communal understanding and subconscious knowledge of the personality. However, when studying Erikson's theory we should take into consideration that the magnifying glass through which he looked was the American society, a geographically and culturally limited object:

Negro babies often receive sensual satisfactions, which provide them with enough oral and sensory surplus for a lifetime as clearly betrayed in the way they move, laugh, talk, sing. Their forced symbiosis with the South capitalized on this oral sensory treasure and helped to build a slave identity... (p. 234)

Nevertheless Erikson always drives at making universal conclusions like the race unequal status of the dominant white culture and the inferior culture of the coloured people "light-clean-clever-white and dark-dirty-dumb-nigger" (p. 234). The Negro case is of course the most extreme example of minority devaluation in American society. One cannot choose his racial belonging, colour of skin, family, etc, but to all this powerful image of exterior forces Erikson opposes the individual with his ego space-time (internal forces). And on the playground of externalisation and internalisation options the decisive role is assigned to the specific social and cultural dominant ideas (ideals), in the case the ideal of the self-reliant American with Anglo-Saxon temper.

Erikson considers that all minority members live a more sensual and rejoicing childhood but are forced by social environment to gradually Americanise and often strong individuals face the intolerance of the difference factor when refuse to join the crowd. I wonder what would have happened if Martin Luther King had accepted not to confront the social reality of his times?

The very author of this psychosocial theory, Erik Erikson, is a curious case. His biography can work par excellence for the above discussed issue. Erikson was half Jew (his mother and step father were Jews) but everybody thought of him a Dane for his features: tall, blond, blue-eyed. Among the Jewish boys he was called “ the goy ” (non-Jew). Did it have a negative affect on his identity formation? According to his biographer Robert Coles Erikson did not excel at school. Later when he graduated he felt lost and uncertain about his future. Erikson himself suffered to an extent the negative identity symptoms he deals with in his major work “ Childhood and society ”.

Reference list:

Erikson, H. Erik. (1965). Childhood and society. Penguin Books.