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Ethnicity and Identity Formation

May 12, 2006

Defining identity is not simple as it is; it is a complex task that even the most famous psychologists such as Eriksson, Piaget and others cannot give a specific description for it. Developing one's identity can last for a long period; during this phase of identity formation, adolescents are especially confused because they are looking for themselves, trying to follow their peers, and wanting to reflect a positive image to the society. According to Eriksson (1968), "adolescence is known to be a period of exploratory self-analysis and self-evaluation ideally culminating in the establishment of a cohesive and integrative sense of self or identity." (Erikson, 1968). Therefore, teenagers are affected by many factors that contribute to build their identity. Those factors that influence the development of an adolescent identity are; peer pressure, social expectations, religion, spirituality, ethnicity and other contributors that help adolescents to develop their identity.

In the domain of identity formation, many researches have been done by several psychologists in order to explore deeply this subject matter, and know more about the factors that influence identity development. However, ethnic identity has been neglected for a long time by psychologists who have focused mainly on other components of the self, such as religion, peer pressure, family, social expectations, and appearance. Therefore, there is no common and approved definition of ethnic identity, which might confuse people who are interested in doing further studies in the field of ethnicity and identity formation. According to Joane Nagel (1994), "ethnicity is the product of actions undertaken by ethnic groups as they shape and reshape their self-definition and culture; however, ethnicity is also constructed by external social, economic, and political processes and actors as they shape and reshape ethnic categories and definitions." (p.152)

Indeed, ethnicity plays an important role in forming a strong identity of adolescents, even if it is more difficult for them than other adolescents to develop an identity since they belong to an ethnic group. Carter (1995) and Phinney (1992) (as cited in Mark. H. Chae) argued “Adolescents from ethnic minority groups will be forced to confront issues of prejudice, discrimination, and structural barriers against opportunity.” (p.19)

Ethnic identity is complicated for adolescents for whose parents are immigrants. Immigrant parents want to save their ethnic culture, beliefs, and customs especially when they immigrate, for the reason that they miss their country, their ethnic culture. Therefore, they try to inculcate to their children the basics components of their ethnic identity. For instance, their ethnic language, their ethnic customs, and other things that are important to know a little bit about where they come from. Usually, immigrant parents are not adapted easily to their new style of life easily as their children do because they are born in another country; get accustomed to another culture, another style of life. Consequently, it is hard for immigrant parents to accept those changes rapidly, and it is reflected on their children’s behavior. McCoy (1992) (as cited in Phinney, Romero, Nava, Huang) argued “these young people have grown up with, and been socialized by, parents carry with them the language, values, and customs from their country of origin and are likely to retain these characteristics throughout their lives.” (p.136).

Developing an identity is very complex for adolescents, and especially for youngsters fitting into an ethnic group because they are sharing their values and beliefs between their ethnic culture and the mainstream society. However, not all the ethnic minorities develop their ethnic identity in the same way as all the ethnic groups do. For

instance, Black Americans are known to have difficulties to integrate the White society because of their skin color, their history, and customs. Therefore, issues such as prejudice, discrimination become a part of their daily lives. According to Dubois (as cited in Mark. H. Chae) (1969), “one ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body.” (p.5). Hence, developing their identity in a “normal” way reveals to be extremely difficult and can lead to many social problems and behave in a bad manner. Since those adolescents see themselves as a social failure; the society does not give them job opportunities, and offer them a “real” social status, they derive from the good road, and take a way where violence, school failure, and early pregnancy are predominant problems in their social lives.

Many factors are influencing ethnic identity among adolescents from immigrant families. According to Phinney, Romero, Nava, Huang (1977), “ethnic language proficiency, cultural maintenance by parents, and social interaction with peers from the same ethnic group.” (p. 136).

Language affects directly the ethnic identity of immigrant adolescents. According to Giles and Al (as cited in Phinney, Romero, Nava, Huang) (1977), “in-group speech can serve as a symbol of ethnic identity and cultural solidarity. It is used for reminding the group about its cultural heritage, for transmitting group feelings, and for excluding members of the out-group from its internal transactions.” (p.307). Indeed, the maintenance of the ethnic language by adolescents help them to be more socialized with their ethnic group; they are adopted easily by their peers, and also the preservation of their ethnic tongue creates a sense of solidarity between those adolescents. It reminds

them their culture, their country. Hence, language can contribute positively to the identity development of adolescents in immigrants' families. However, keeping one's ethnic language can be seen negatively by the dominant culture leading to the rejection of the society, and all kinds of discrimination. In fact, it is difficult for immigrant adolescents to integrate the mainstream society without talking, understanding, and reading its language which could lead to them to a social failure. However, most of the immigrant adolescents were born and educated since they were little kids in a new country where they learnt a new language (English, French, Spanish, etc) that is used by their peers, their teachers, by the society in general.

Another factor that affects ethnic identity among adolescents is the cultural maintenance by parents. Often, parents try to inculcate to their children some aspects of their ethnic culture with the purpose to not forget where they came from. Phinney and Chavira (as cited in Mark. H. Chae) (1995) discovered that "African Americans were found to provide the most extensive ethnic socialization among three ethnic groups (African Americans, Japanese Americans, and Mexican American)" (p.19). According to Bowman and Howard (as cited in Mark. H. Chae) (1985), "a significant number of African Americans participants reported that their parents taught them about African history, culture, ethnic pride, and commitment to the African American community". (p.19). Likewise Thornton, Chatters, Taylor, and Allen (as cited in Mark. H. Chae) (1990) reported that "approximately 30% of African Americans subjects were taught the historical traditions of African Americans as well as ethnic pride. In actual fact, parents are the source of influence that helps in a positive or negative way their children to be socialized in their new country; they can either be rejected or accepted by the society

depending on how they were educated by their parents”.(p.19). Also, it is difficult for immigrant parents to forget about their origins, and their traditions when they are in the new country as they were habituated to. They try to celebrate all the feasts as more as they can, watch their ethnic channels, and listen to their favorite music. Thus, they are trying to maintain their ethnic culture in their new country, by that; they affect the ethnic identity of their children.

Social interaction with peers from the same ethnic group plays also an important role in forming an ethnic identity among adolescents. In fact, when adolescents are frequenting peers from the same ethnic group, their ethnic friendship might increase because of the cultural background and the heritage that they are sharing; they form a united group where comprehension and solidarity emphasizes the relationship between those adolescents. They make plan, study, play, and grow together. Moreover, communicating with youngsters from the same ethnic group by the ethnic language contributes a lot to the development of their identity and creates alchemy between those adolescents that feel love toward their country of origin.

Researchers also tried to find out the relationship between gender, ethnicity and identity formation. Indeed, both males and females have different ways to develop their identity even if they have similar attitudes when they were babies. In two studies that employed similar methodologies, Rubin et al. and Karraker et al. (as cited in Mark. H. Chae) (1995) “interviewed parents of newborn babies that were 24 hours old. When parents from both studies were asked to describe their babies, the parents of girls reported that their babies were softer, more delicate, and finely featured. The parents of males described boys as stronger, larger, and more masculine. Although these studies were

conducted 20 years apart from each other, they both revealed that gender stereotype perceptions continue to persist” (p.18). This stereotype continues to exist through the lives of males and females and be more obvious to detect especially when the identity of both genders begins to be easily identified. As adolescents grow males and females conception of ethnic identity differs. Concerning males, they attach more importance to equality than females, and that is because they face the problems of discrimination and racism often than females, either in their jobs or simply in the street. While males are sensitive to being equal within the society, females are more emotionally involved in their ethnic culture and customs. This personal attachment to their ethnic background makes them forget about the difficulties that encounter those immigrant families.

According to Spencer, Swanson, Cunningham (1991), “given the broadening social contexts and peer relations that characterize the present period, aspects of ethnicity and ethnic identity have profound implications for the ongoing experiences of minority youth. These aspects become increasingly salient during adolescence because this period represents the developmental stage wherein insecurity about the self characterizes the normative state of feelings and associated experiences for all adolescent, independent of their group’s unique cultural experiences or social status”. (p.368). This quote expressed in a broad sense the effect of ethnicity on identity formation of adolescents. Indeed, various factors such as, ethnic language proficiency, cultural maintenance by parents, and social interaction with peers from the same ethnic group contributes to the development of the identity of those adolescents. It is difficult for adolescents to build a strong identity based on their personal experiences since at this age they face problems with themselves

trying to find out who they are. For immigrant adolescents, their effort is doubled, and their pain is worsening.

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