Aspects Of Social Identity, Self Concept, Self Esteem, Self Functioning And Gender Aspects (Part 1)

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1.0 What is identity?

Erickson (1968) described identity as involving a subjective feeling of self-sameness and continuity over time. In different places and in different social situations, one still has a sense of being the same person. In addition, others recognize this continuity of character and respond accordingly to the person "they know". Thus, identity for the holder as well as the beholder ensures a reasonably predictable sense of continuity and social order across multiple contexts. Erickson (1969) also spoke of identity as both a conscious and unconscious process. As a conscious sense of individual identity as well as unconscious striving for continuity of personal character. Erickson also used the term identity to refer to the silent doing of ego synthesis as well as that sense of inner solidarity with the ideals and values of a significant social group.

Erickson(1968) further noted how one's sense of ego identity is shaped by three interacting elements:

a.   one's biological characteristics

b.   one's own unique psychological needs, interests and defenses

c.   the cultural milieu in which one resides.

Psychological characteristics such as an individual's gender, physical appearance, physical capacities and a sense of "bodily self". The social and cultural milieus provide opportunities for expression as well as recognition of biological and psychological needs and interests. For Erikson, **optimal identity development** involves finding **social roles within the larger community** that provide a good 'fit' for one's biological and psychological capacities and interests. According to Erickson identity reformulations will continue throughout the life span as one's biological, psychological and societal circumstances change.

2.0 SOCIAL IDENTITY

Social identity is a theory formed by **Henri Tajfel** and **John Turner** to understand the psychological basis of intergroup discrimination. It is composed of four elements:

- Categorization: We often put others and ourselves into categories. Labeling someone Muslim, Indian, a soccer players are ways of saying other things about these people.
- Identification: We also associate with certain groups, which serves to bolster our self-esteem.
- Comparison: We compare our groups with other groups, seeing a favorable bias toward the group to which we belong.
- Psychological Distinctiveness: We desire our identity to be both distinct from and positively compared with other groups. (Wikipedia, social identity)

Social identity is the self that is shown to other people. This is the part of ourselves that we use to create an impression, to let other people know who we are and what they can expect from us. Social identity is different from self-concept because identity contains elements that are socially observable, publicly available outward expressions of the self. Gender and ethnicity are aspects of social identity.

Identity has an element of continuity because many of its aspects such as gender and ethnicity are constant. Identity has two important features: continuity and contrast. Continuity means that people can count on you to be the same person tomorrow as you are today. Obviously, people change but many important aspects of social identity remain relatively stable such as gender, surname, language and ethnicity.

Contrast means that your social identity differentiates you from other people. An identity is what makes you unique in the eyes of others.

Identity develops over time through relations with others. For many people, the development of an identity follows a period of experimentation, but for others it happens more easily by adopting ready-made social roles. There are periods in life when some people undergo identity crises and have to redefine their social identities.

Erickson(1968) coined the phrase identity crisis meaning the feeling of anxiety that accompany efforts to define or redefine one's own individuality and social reputation. For most people, the process of going through an identity crisis is an important and memorable phase of life. Psychologist Roy Baumeister suggests that there are two distinct types of identity crisis that is identity deficit and identity conflict (Baumeister, 1986).

Identity deficit arises when a person has not formed an adequate identity and thus has trouble making major decisions because he or she has no inner foundation. Identity deficits often occur when a person discards old values or goals. But rejecting old beliefs and assumptions creates a void or an identity deficit, which is accompanied by feelings of emptiness and uncertainty. Such feelings prompt people to search for new beliefs, for new values and goals. People who are trying to fill this identity deficit may try on new belief systems, explore new relationships and investigate new ideas and values.

People in identity deficit are particularly vulnerable to the propaganda of various groups. They are often very curious about other belief systems and are easily influenced by others. This is because of their feelings of emptiness and their search for new values and ideas. As Baumeister (1997) points out, recruiters for cults are often done to people who are undergoing identity deficit crises.

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