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Identity in Ecological Settings. The Theory of Multidimensional Identity

ABSTRACT

The identity development takes place during the process of integrating the past to the present with anticipated future. Additionally, it occurs in ecological context which concerns relations and interactions at the individual, group and institutional levels, as well as changes related to the revitalization of regional cultures, the integration of states into transnational structures or the progressive processes of globalization. In the paper, the Authors mostly pay attention to ecological determinants that influence the process of identity development, which takes place in multicultural environment. The purpose of the paper is to present a new theoretical approach – Theory of Multidimensional Identity (TMI) by Jerzy Nikitorowicz. It is based on the fact that a child is located in a diverse cultural environment under the influence of traditional multiculturalism, having existed for several generations, for example, on the borderland. During different stages of identity development (from the past to the future), three groups of dimensions have been distinguished: dimensions in the context of inherited (given, taken over) identity; dimensions in the context of individually shaped and realised identity and dimensions which are socially determined. This theoretical approach allows for the analysis of dependence and relations between the different stages and dimensions of identity development. It highlights with which stages those three dimensions form the identity system, how it changes, what are the reasons for those changes and modifications.

Keywords:

identity, ecological approach, multicultural environment, the Theory of Multidimensional Identity (TMI)

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INTRODUCTION

The process of shaping the identity of currently living people is held in an extremely complex reality. An attempt to answer the question “Who am I?” is due to the functioning and development of the individual in specific circumstances of time and space. On the one hand, the context of time refers to the certain historical period in which the processes of integration of the past to the presence with the anticipated future take place (Nikitorowicz, 2003, p. 63). As a result of a progressive development and gained experience of human beings, individual stages of identity overlap and identification dimensions expand. On the other hand, the socio-cultural context concerns relations and interactions at the individual, group and institutional levels, as well as changes related to the revitalization of regional cultures, the integration of states into transnational structures or the progressive processes of globalization. The result of the individual’s functioning in diverse spaces, from the local to the global aspect, is the experience of further widening of identity dimensions. Taking into account the context of time and socio-cultural space shows how much the identity of an individual is related to the past, present and anticipated future events in our immediate environment as well as in the global space. In the paper, we assume that the process of shaping identity takes place and is influenced by different educational environments as well as by the culture(s) in which the individual develops. In other words, identity is perceived in ecological (socio-cultural) settings. The purpose of the paper is to present a new theoretical approach towards identity – the Theory of Multidimensional Identity by Jerzy Nikitorowicz. Identity is perceived as a process in which integration of the elements and experiences from the past, present and imagined future takes place. Moreover, in those chronologically arranged spaces we can distinguish different dimensions in the context of inherited, individually shaped and realized and socially determined identity. In the article, we mostly pay attention to the social and cultural determinants that influence the process of identity development, which takes place in multicultural environment.

IDENTITY FROM ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Forming and developing one’s identity not only sees people define how they, as individuals, are unique from everyone else, but also defines how they are connected to the social groups that surround them (Borrero & Yeh, 2011; Marcia, 1980). Identity is a difficult developmental task, being who I feel (subjective aspect) as

well as qualification – attribution by others on the basis of significantly distinguishing traits and behaviour (objective aspect). Moreover, it is continuous and dynamic process of becoming, the process of experiencing variability and identity modifications in the context of time and space, occupied social positions and roles. Erving Goffman (1990) notices the dependence of social identity on social interaction is a well-established insight in terms of identity in general. We recognise that identity is a complex phenomenon as a result of relations with others and being raised and socialized in different educational environments immersed in cultural settings; no doubt it is and should be seen from many perspectives.

The social dimension of human identity development is also recognized by James Marcia (1966, 1980), who indicates that a specific identity status is the result of a sequence of two successive social processes. The first one involves exploring by the individual the nearest physical and social surroundings, by taking various social roles, as well as experimenting with chosen lifestyles and checking own and others limits. The second one concerns making choices and taking decisions on the acceptance of certain obligations arising from the played roles and taking action and engaging in their implementation. In the analysed perspective, an individual is perceived as an active experimenter, as well as a conscious and consistent developer of a dynamic and constantly updated identity plan.

We perceive man as being active, creative, transforming the natural, social and cultural environment in the context of the community needs in which socialization and enculturation take place, but also own needs and the needs of groups he identifies with. Additionally, we notice man as conscious of his development, open to external information about himself, on the one hand absorbing values and norms of culture, on the other having the ability to question them. Also we see him as being reflective, constantly shaping own identity, which is something that is not given, but should be accomplished, a task to do (Giddens, 1991; Bauman, 2000). Also, as a man who is willing to dialogue, able to negotiate and compromise, between what is inherited, what is individual and what is socially expected and defined (Tischner, 2004; Buber, 1993).

According to the ecological model by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986), human development (as well as identity development – added by J.N & E.Ż-P) is determined by the environment, defined as a set of connections with family, neighbourhood, peer groups, but also the quality of the relationship with school and available forms for self-realisation. The author formulates hypothesis that human development is facilitated through interaction with persons who occupy a variety of roles and through participation in an ever-broadening role repertoire (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 104). Additionally, it is important to emphasise that

different environments in which individuals participate are immersed in cultural settings from local to global dimension.

Similarly, Anthony Giddens points out that in the period of late modernity man is exposed to challenge in a form of searching for own identity that can be done discursively or performed in everyday social behaviour. „What to do? How to act? Who to be? These are focal questions for everyone living in circumstances of late modernity” (1991, p. 70). The assumption is that people have to make a variety of choices connected not only to appearance and lifestyle, but also their life plans and relationships in social context. According to the author, late modernity delivers many options and choices, but at the same time does not provide any support which options should be considered as worth to select. In such circumstances searching for own identity can be complicated, chaotic, difficult and a vague task.

Globalization processes affect human identity development. “Our world and our lives, are being shaped by the conflicting trends of globalization and identity” (Castells, 2010, p. 1). Thereby, the author indicates that the current changes in the global space (in the form of, e.g., the information technology revolution, restructuring of capitalism, enlargement of network societies, demise of statism) do not remain unimportant for individual development, they further affect or threaten a certain sense of identity consistency, because of its rapid and unpredictable changes. Additionally, we have recently experienced “the widespread surge of powerful expressions of collective identity that challenge globalization and cosmopolitanism on behalf of cultural singularity and people’s control over their lives and environment” (Castells, 2010, p. 2).

Considering current ecological settings where the development of people takes place, we perceive identity as a set of characteristic features of different quality in the form of overlapping dimensions. In the presented Theory of Multidimensional Identity (TMI), the author refers to the basic assumptions of anthropology. It is considered that the essential characteristic of human existence is to communicate with other people and be in the relationships with others. In this approach, what is also worth noticing is the concept of symbolic interactionism in which the individual shapes his or her identity by reference to the group in which he or she is a member.

George Herbert Mead claims that self, similarly to the mind, is a social emergent. “The self is something which has a development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process” (1934, p. 135). The author argues that individual selves are the results of social interactions. George Herbert Mead con-

trasts his social theory of the self with individualistic theories of the self (the theories in which the priority of selves is more important than social process). He perceives society as set of individuals who are related to the social processes. The importance of dialogue and social interactions for the development of human identity can be seen in hermeneutics and in the sociology for understanding, where attention is drawn not to possession, attainment, but to the process. A man naturally “submerges” in his native culture, inherits it unconsciously, but that determines the ways of perceiving and understanding the world, analysing and selecting different contents, searching for diverse interpretation, giving meaning and understanding. Understanding seems to be important for hermeneutics, and this is achieved through a dialogue, which determines human being in the world (Gadamer, 2004).

THE THEORY OF MULTIDIMENSIONAL IDENTITY

The Theory of Multidimensional Identity (TMI) is based on the fact that the child is located either directly or indirectly in a diverse cultural environment under the influence of traditional multiculturalism, having existed for several generations, e.g., on the borderland. In those places, at least two cultural codes are present (differences in language, religion, ethnicity or nationality) (Nikitorowicz, 1992). From one side, this territorial settlement can lead to the formation of a closed identity, while on the other, it promotes the creation of multidimensional (multicultural and intercultural) identity. This is determined by number of factors that lead to the development of a – closed or open – multidimensional identity.

Conducting the research on the eastern borderland in Poland, western Belarus and Ukraine, it was stated that despite the broadening youth social and cultural identity of further dimensions, such as vision of themselves as a citizen of the state, Europe and the world, the family and local identification is not weakening, and even the declaration of rooting in the private homeland is reinforced (Nikitorowicz, 2000). Moreover, on the basis of the international comparative research done in Belgium, Lithuania and Poland by Emilia Żyłkiewicz-Płońska (2016), young people who participated in international mobility declared high level of national, European and global identity, simultaneously with high feeling of being connected with local and regional spheres. This points to the fact that the development of identities by further dimensions (related to the broad spheres such as European or global) does not pose a threat to local or regional identity. It has been noted that the processes of globalization can increase and expand sense of

local and regional belongings, and at the same time cause the universality of many loyalties (cf. Donati, 1999, pp. 39–64).

As it was indicated above, the main assumption of the presented theory is due to symbolic interactionism, where interactions with others, formation of communities and social ties are the basis of human development and identity. Hence, the basis of the TMI is the perception of human being in interactions with others, in the context of multiculturalism, where identity is treated as a life task, a dynamic and developing phenomenon, shaping itself in the context of social, political and economic conditions, recognition that the life process is a constant process of searching for and discovering oneself, in which identity becomes. It is an existential problem, linked to the process of self needs and individual development, which is influenced by group ties, inherited norms and values, the development of consumer society and numerous offers of the contemporary global world. As a result of current changes we are condemned to continually identify ourselves in the present, on the basis of transmitting values from the past, while at the same time defining future prospects so that there is no memory loss and transmission of tradition.

The process of identity development is dynamic and differs in time. Integration of the past to the presence with the anticipated future are the key elements that interact to each other while identity development (those stages of identity are: inherited, shaped and implemented). They can take different forms and occur both as phases as well as to exist independently or to take different hierarchical systems in the process of identity development.

In the process of shaping identity, different ranges and dimensions arise next to each other or overlap, but they are somehow interconnected and constitute more or less integrated identity system. They are the result of self-perception and the way of being perceived by others in the context of belonging to different social groups (e.g., family, racial, local, regional, ethnic, religious, national, continental), additionally, in the context of individual needs and values (e.g., biological, health, intellectual, existential, mental, social, cultural, economic), but also in the context of occupied positions and social roles (roles connected with gender, family, profession, interests and passions, social life, etc.). In a certain period, the dimension connected with inherited element may dominate and does not have to be related to the period of childhood and youth, in different life period an individually shaped and realized area or socially determined dimensions can play the most important role.

Dimensions in the context of inherited (given, taken over) identity – this kind of identity is perceived by the individual as a gift and it relates to natural belonging to different groups (e.g., family, parish, racial, local, regional, ethnic,

religious, national, or continental). Ones receive information about whom he or she is from other people, e.g., members of the family, peers, teachers and educators, as a result of communication with others.

Dimensions in the context of individually shaped and realised identity – a person responsible for his or her own growth, carrying out deliberate development tasks that are related to health, intellect, existence, mental, social, cultural and economic aspects, etc. In these dimensions, there is a validation and evaluation of one's self in the context of a heritage that can be regarded as a developmental gift or a stigmatization, which may result in development problems. There are so many questions in this regard, which refer to: who am I; in what extend am I similar or how do I differ to others; what are those similarities and differences; do I accept them; what does help or disturb me from developing and realizing myself; do I perceive differences as a value or as a kind of a stigma, which can result in social rejection and marginalization in own development and feeling shamed, etc. These dimensions seem to dominate in adolescence. Young people analyse, value, contradict, use patterns, formulate judgments about others in the context of self-perception. It is believed that in this case the most important is the problem of youth self-confidence and self-perception, so that one can open up to others, is willing to know and understand others, express the will to cooperate and to dialogue.

Dimensions which are socially determined – these dimensions are determined by circumstances, conditions, socio-cultural situations, social positions, given and chosen social roles. It seems to be mostly associated with adulthood. The adult realises, modifies, chooses and continually shapes the identity in a sense of duty and responsibility, not only for himself but for others, not only for his own, but also for the human race. Those roles have been extended to many areas of life. “My identity is developed in case of what I have brought and bring to life” (Witkowski, 2009, p. 131).

In the context of the Theory of Multidimensional Identity, we may claim that human development is a process of assuming, shaping and realising identity. This theoretical approach allows for the analysis of dependence and relations between the different stages and dimensions of identity development. It highlights with which stages those three dimensions form the identity system, how it changes, what are the reasons for those changes and modifications, etc.

Distinguished stages and dimensions of identity development may be perceived as derived from adaptation of sociocultural approach to cognitive development by Lev S. Vygotsky (1982–84, vol. 4): “[...] each instance of semiotic behaviour by the child originated as a form of social collaboration, which is why semiotic behav-

our, even in the more advanced stages of development, remains a social mode of functioning. The history of the development of higher mental functions is thus seen to be the history of the process by which the tools of social behaviour are transformed into instruments of individual psychological organization” (p. 56). As it was emphasized by Nikolai Veresov (2009), in the child’s development, first, there are social relationships between people (interpsychic) and then intrapsychic system of self-organization occurs. So at the beginning as a collective, social activity and then as an individual activity. Vygotsky (1982–84, vol. 4): claimed that “absolutely everything in the behaviour of the child is merged and rooted in social relations. Thus, the child’s relations with reality are from the start social relations, so that the new born baby could be said to be in the highest degree a social being” (p. 281).

Naturally inscribed in culture, cultural designation begins with the moment of child birth. It has an adaptive character, and embraces every human individual. It is accomplished through natural participation, imitation and becoming similar to other members of society that surround a child. We become a member of a complex and certain culture that encompasses such elements as: knowledge, symbols, beliefs, art, morality and a whole range of customs and habits that are shaped by socialization, enculturation and education. Cultural content, such as moral, legal, aesthetic norms, religious beliefs, magical thinking, scientific concepts, piece of work, exist either in the memory of individuals, or in material elements of culture, such as books, tools, and other material pieces of work. First and foremost, there is a social welcoming and acceptance in the family, when an individual launches the endless process of shaping the personal consciousness and independence of “I” and additionally the process of social inclusion in many other “we” and as a result gaining consciousness of belonging to many different groups. In this process, important is an external and internal dialogue of a person with the inherited culture. This inscription, on the one hand, allows for the realisation of many personal, individual identities, which can be a valuable source of human survival, but on the other hand can be a heavy burden in confrontation with numerous offers. It could be a torment, in case of willingness to pursue different than expected visions of development and the manifested willingness to depart from tradition or inherited values. Being included into own “little homeland” through the mother tongue, familiarised territory, space of life, religious values, symbols and meanings, customs and habits enables dialogue with this heritage, to determine what to preserve and cultivate and what to question and reject. In the context of the above, Simone Weil (1961, p. 194) points to the basic human need related to the feeling of belonging to someone, the security of being at home and active participation in the life of the community, which are the necessary elements of each person’s life.

We believe that shaping different dimensions at the initial stage of identity builds a unique and discrete personal identity in consequence. It is important that this building process is conducted with care in case of searching for and choosing the values by the person who is in charge of their own development (Heidegger, 1977). This allows to acquire the ability to function in a network of human dependencies, to take a position against universal phenomena, cultural standards, and to create a space for own lives and thereby to expand own identity by further dimensions. This problem is presented by Edward T. Hall, who coined the term ‘proxemics’. It can be defined as, “the interrelated observations and theories of man’s use of space as a specialized elaboration of culture” (Hall, 1966, p. 1). The main idea of this theory is that people from different cultures have different concepts of space in case of conversation, planning, use of interior spaces, spatial development of cities, etc. The way we use the space around us is generally determined by our culture. Space, a natural human environment, is created socially and is the result of collective and individual activity. Next to the physical space of the world is the subjective space, imagined, shaped in the inner dialogue. It can be said that this is a space that is constantly expanding identity with new dimensions.

The environment that we create can be supportive or not towards identity development. It enriches or limits to function in a certain space, in the context of identified needs, possibilities and many innumerable socio-cultural determinants. E.T. Hall (1966) points out that space plays a symbolic function in interpersonal communication; with one we feel intimacy in a psychological sense, to the other we are reserved or we dislike them, even we can follow the prejudices, etc. Thus, there may develop a fundamentalist kind of identity, in which the nucleus was *habitus* and socialisation. Gordon Mathews (2000), when analysing *habitus*, speaks of the level of truism, a situation in which we do not ask ourselves questions about the meaning of our culturally determined activities; E.T. Hall (1966) calls it a hidden dimension, and Alexis de Tocqueville (1985) names it as *habits of the heart*. The voice of the heart and socialisation are the results of conscious behaviour that is required. The behaviour is connected with life in a given community and the roles we play in it. Freedom of choice is limited; those limits are due from the normative social orders. The more cohesive the group is, the more it maintains its social order.

In the dimension of inherited identity, we should know and respect the significant people in the region, the authorities in the local community, observe and cultivate the content of native culture (language-dialect, religion-confession, history of the region, customs, fairy tales, legends, rituals, norms, values and symbols, etc.). The next level is related to the nation. It concerns learning and assimilating

such elements as: language, national culture in material and spiritual dimension, outstanding historical and contemporary figures, common fates and events that unify, traditions and customs, territorial bonds, etc. The third level is state culture, which involves the creation of relations and ties with the state. It concerns the recognition, learning, understanding and cooperation with other cultures as a result of functioning in developing multicultural society and as an empirical fact resulting from cultural primacy or migration, as well as ideological and political fact (citizens of a certain state-nation come from a different ethnic and national groups, simultaneously, they are citizens of this state). In this case, we can talk about passport, tax, legal or formal identity. It is particularly important in the context of shaping attitudes toward other people and their cultures. It is about attitudes of openness, tolerance and respect to other ethnic groups and nations, at the same time expecting respect for own cultural heritage. At this level, education undertakes important tasks related to the elimination of stereotypes and prejudices, the search for the causes of conflicts, the explanation of racism and fanaticism, ethnocentrism and nationalism, megalomania and xenophobia, adaptation and assimilation, acculturation and amalgamation, migration and communication between cultures, etc. The next level concerns cultural and civilization dialogue (internal and external). This dialogue is understood as imperative of creative and innovative human development, and it shapes and preserves local and world peace.

CONCLUSION

According to ecological approach in the Theory of Multidimensional Identity, three different dimensions of identity development have been presented. First, dimensions in the context of inherited (given, taken over) identity, when ones receive information about whom he or she is, as a result of communication with other people. Second, dimensions in the context of individually shaped and realised identity, when there is a validation and evaluation of one's self in different social and cultural contexts. Third, dimensions which are socially determined by circumstances, conditions, socio-cultural situations, social positions, given and chosen social roles. To summarise, it is worth emphasizing that during the identity shaping process the three distinguished dimensions form a system. The elements of this system, those dimensions, are interrelated, interdependent, but they do not have to stay in a dynamic relationship. What will be their arrangement? Whether they overlap, complement, or will they disperse, split, or be in conflict with each other, is the problem of every human and the environment in which he or she

functions. It is conscious and creative effort, constant work on own identity development.

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