

Jean Phinney's Ethnic Identity Theory

Jean Phinney developed a model of Ethnic Identity based on Erikson's theory of development, following Marcia's ego-identity theory (please read Shaun Diehl's summary) and other models of ethnic identity, and applied it among high school and college students from a diverse ethnic background born in America (Bernal & Knight, 1993).

Based on Erikson's work, identity is achieved during adolescence through exploration and commitment, but his framework did not study culture or ethnicity. His research was expanded by James Marcia, but social identities (race, class, ethnicity, etc.) have not been included either (Phinney & Alipuria, 1990).

Phinney identified three stages of ethnic identity development, focusing on the process of ethnic identity formation.

Stage 1: Unexamined Ethnic Identity

In this stage individuals have not explored their ethnicity. Some minority students may initially accept values and attitudes of the majority culture. This level might be compared to the diffusion state from Marcia's theory where there is a lack of interest with ethnicity (no commitment and no exploration) or the foreclosure state, where individuals have not observed the issues by themselves and taken values and others' opinions without questioning (commitment without exploration)(Bernal & Knight, 1993; Phinney, 1989).

Stage 2: Ethnic Identity Search/Moratorium

This stage is central to ethnic identity development (period of exploration). Individuals reach this level when they come across to a situation that causes them to explore their ethnic identity. It's not known for sure what initiates this stage. Cross observed that it may be caused by "a shocking personal or social event that temporarily dislodges the person from his old world view, making the person receptive to a new interpretation of his identity" (as cited in Phinney, 1989, p.37).

Stage 3: Ethnic Identity Achievement

This stage is characterized by acceptance, internalization, and clear understanding of one's ethnicity. This is the stage where individuals come to terms with cultural differences between one's ethnic group and the majority culture.

This stage represents the ideal outcome of the identity process. (Bernal & Knight, 1993; Phinney, 1989).

Strengths

Before Phinney's work, previous research on ethnic identity had focus on particular ethnic groups, whereas Phinney's studies examine ethnic identity across three ethnic groups (Asian-American, Black, Mexican-American). As Phinney and Alipuria (1990) noted, "In order to gain an understanding of ethnic identity that can be widely applied, it is important to study

more than one group.” (p.173). She also applied her ethnic identity studies to adolescent and college students, which before her was not well studied. This is an important variable since based on Erikson research identity formation is achieved during adolescence (as cited in Phinney & Alipuria 1990).

Phinney’s model offers a good understanding of the process of ethnic identity formation, and she developed later the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) to measure the process of ethnic identity development in adolescents and young adults. The MEIM consists of a questionnaire measure of ethnic identity that can be used with all ethnic groups.

Weakness

Phinney’s empirical research was conducted using relatively small samples. Her studies of ethnic identity were done among American-born high school and college students. A total of 48 eighth graders, 91 tenth graders, and 196 college students of diverse ethnic backgrounds participated in the studies (. Phinney (1993) also noted that there are many other variables that could influence ethnic identity formation, such as gender, socioeconomic status, contextual factors, etc. To be able to study the role of these variables larger samples are needed. Phinney (1993) also pointed out that more research is needed across all years of adolescence if an understanding of how stages are related to age wants to be achieved.

Even though her research studies the field of ethnic identity across different ethnic groups, there are only three ethnic groups included in the studies (minority groups and white as comparison group) and it doesn’t include people of mixed ethnic background.

Lastly, even though her theory focuses on the process of ethnic identity formation (how individuals resolve identity conflicts), there is no study that follows the process throughout time.

Application

Stage 2, Ethnic Identity Search, shows the importance of exploration if an individual is to become aware of ethnic issues. Higher education should create an environment that not only encourages exploration through a range of activities but also awakes the need for such exploration when students are still in the previous stage. Such activities could be reading and talking about ethnic issues, offering ethnic studies courses, learning about their cultural heritage, attending cultural events. The role of the institution is central at offering these activities, and the role of the educator (counselor, advisor, instructor) is also important because they are the one interacting directly with the students, identifying the students need, and directing them to those activities that will help with their exploration process.

Being college student population so diverse, it is important for educators to understand the ethnic identity theory to help their students gain a clear understanding of their ethnicity. Phinney’s model and research may help educators understand how different ethnic groups members deal with being part of a group, how they struggle to conserve their customs and traditions, etc.

References

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