ACADEMIA | Letters

Othering and marginalization of minorities: A Synopsis of Identity and Social Rejection

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Abstract

Othering refers to the classification of groups and individuals into categories that set them aside as less important than others. It is an age-old practice that transcends physical boundaries and occurs without regard to its potential impact on the individuals and groups that are the "other." Discussions about "othering", or "other," often focus on identifying characteristics such as race, ethnicity and gender but not on the ability of "othering" to create or impose a new, negative identity that fosters the social rejection of the "other." In its application, the category of the "other" conveys implied messages of strangeness while it imposes on the "other" understandable experiences of social rejection. This article explores the othering and social rejection of marginalized groups and examines the impact of these factors on group and individual identity.

Keywords: Identity, "other", "othering", fear, social rejection, marginalization

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social identity theory

Social identity theory focuses on a person's awareness that he or she belongs to a specific social category or group (Hogg and Abrams, 1988). The theory suggests a somewhat predictive

journey: An individual undergoes a self-comparison process by which he/she analyzes others, identifies those who are like self, and then categorizes them accordingly as members of his/her in-group. Persons that are perceived to be different from self are then placed in the out-group. The impact of the social comparison process on an individual's self-esteem is enhanced by the individual's recognition of the standards by which members of his/her in-group are judged negatively (Stets & Burke, 2000).

Furthermore, studies have shown that group identification influences the view of the self as an extension of the group (Hogg and Hardie, 1992). The Doll Experiment employed by Dr. Kenneth Clark in the 1954 Plessy v Ferguson (Brown v Board of Education) Separate but Equal case is a remarkable illustration of this point. In that experiment, African American children who have undergone the social comparison process, are aware of their social group and of the negative judgment of their in-group, each selects a white doll as the symbol of beauty and prefers that doll to the black dolls that look more like him/her.

Studies have shown that group identification influences the view of the self as an extension of the group (Hogg and Hardie, 1992) and that in-group homogeneity is especially strong when there are no identifiable factors that distinguish the self from others within the group. This may partly explain why even when society considers a group's status to be relatively low, in-group members maintain commitment to the group without any desire to leave it, even if they could (Ellemers, Spears & Doosje, 1997).

While dominant groups may tend at times to blame members of minority groups for self-categorization, the reality is that the social categories by which individuals identify themselves exist as part of a structured society and only in relation to other contrasting categories (Hogg & Abrams, 1988).

Erikson's Psychosocial Stages

Erikson (1968) emphasized the value of identity by asserting that identity provides a sense of well-being and direction regarding one's life, and showing that an individual's identity is formed and shaped through the context of interaction with others. His work on identity development and formation is crucial in trying to understand the connections between identity and social rejection.

In Erikson's formulation, identity begins to develop prior to adolescence, when a child recognizes that he/she is separate from his/her parents. That is the point when a child engages in the task of picking admirable qualities from each parent. As this phase ends, a child moves into adolescence where the main task is identity formation. This process requires the child to negotiate the developmental task and associated conflict of identity versus role confusion.

In this state, some individuals may question how they perceive of themselves and how other people perceive of them. For a child from a marginalized group, especially one who lacks strong support systems and socially appropriate guidance, the tasks associated with this phase can be more challenging.

Young adulthood, which Erikson puts at age 20 to 39, with the developmental task being intimacy versus isolation, is a time when individuals are focused on developing and consolidating their personal goals. The demands of this phase bring individuals in closer contact with the world and raise new issues for many young adults. With more exposure comes more challenges to identity. For many people from marginalized groups, the challenges often include elements of social rejection that they may experience as they navigate the new important tasks of career development, family and expanded social interactions.

Social rejection

Social rejection refers to a situation in which a person or group is denied opportunities to interact with others in society. At a group level, the seeds of social rejection are sown and nurtured through stigmatization, which Link & Phelan (2001) described as the co-occurrence of interrelated components of labeling, stereotyping, separation, loss of status and discrimination. Social stigma involves attribution of negative characteristics to a person or group based on features that others perceive as undesirable (Goldbach et al., 2015). Acts of group stigmatization often arise out of the desire of a dominant group to establish, exercise and maintain its dominance over less powerful or marginalized groups. The elements of stigmatization include negative labeling, social separation of groups, establishment of social disadvantage, inadequate or denial of access to opportunities, stereotyping of groups based on generalizations, often-deliberate misinformation, attitudes and beliefs. The resulting stigma produces and is fostered by blame, stereotypes and prejudice against the stigmatized groups and is manifested in words, actions and policies.

Knowles, Green & Weidel (2012) found in their study that social rejection motivates people to distance themselves from the sources of their rejection and brings them closer to those who are accepting of them. The individual may develop a sense of belonging and loyalty to the accepting group and further away from the dominant group. In that context, fear and distrust of the dominant group are enhanced and a sense of commitment to national identity diminishes.

CONCLUSION

Severe conflicts often evolve through phases of disagreement, then labeling and then stigmatization followed by greater misunderstanding and disengagement in social interactions. Interpersonal social interactions that end up in severe conflicts also usually follow a similar process. Indeed, since man has always engaged in defining the other (Capetillo-Ponce, 2004), people who get labeled or stigmatized are also often considered as the "other.

In all societies, the leading voices in dominant groups always have the ability to create opportunities and resources to label or stigmatize individuals or specific groups as the "other." Activating that ability often helps to ensure that the labeling or stigmatization of the other can be more easily rationalized and maintained. Doing so then assures that the labeling or stigmatization can be legitimized if not by order of law, but at least in tradition, custom or in the minds of people who constitute the dominant group.

Therefore, the "other" is one whom society has marginalized or made a stranger even in his/her homeland. There is indeed a strong impetus for society to do this. It is easier to dehumanize a stranger and render him/her beneath the standards acceptable to the dominant group. Such standards are often based on one or a combination of factors such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, age, language and other characteristics capable of setting people apart.

The term "dominant group" has not been used here to refer to population despite the realization that population is one of the characteristics that underlie and feed dominance. Instead, the term has been used here in relation to power. The history of apartheid in South Africa where the white population was by far in the minority is a reminder that population is not always synonymous with power despite the age-old belief that there is power in numbers. In any discussion of oppression, which is what the concepts of othering, the other, labeling and stigma connote, dominance is always located where the power is.

By relegating individuals and groups to the status of 'other', the tendency is to promote the idea that marginalized groups contributed very little or nothing to the nation and the nation can do without them. Triandfyllidou (1998) suggested that even most scholars who seek to define or explore national identity questions often make this error. An accurate review of the history of the United States and other culturally heterogeneous countries would reveal that this proposition is factually inaccurate and that hardly any nation exists that was built by a single group of people, all of whom came from a similar background.

At no time in modern world history have there been as many co-occurring intergroup and international conflicts driven by racism, anger, heterosexism, gender bias and other forms of bigotry as there now are. On micro and macro levels, individuals feel marginalized by

societies that they perceive as having no interest in their social groups. Therefore, they either disengage or react in ways that are contrary to socially acceptable norms (Weir, 2012). An understanding of otherism as a major contributory factor to these phenomena would be of benefit to policy makers interested in closing the window on conflict and developing much improved societies.

This discussion should also be of help to policy makers who wish to understand how to spot potential intergroup conflicts and micro aggressions before major crises occur. It is important to understand the nature and causes of social rejection among segments of any society, so that appropriate policies can be made to decrease potential incidence of marginalization. This discussion will also contribute to the available scholarship on the psychosocial states of marginalized groups. For behavioral scientists who work with marginalized individuals and families susceptible to fear due to social rejection, this work would contribute toward an understanding of the plight of those group members and thereby help to develop plans to help them overcome their struggles.

To address the experience of social rejection that marginalized groups face, societies must invest in the education of their citizenry around curricula that emphasize mutual acceptance and respect, as well as historical truth. It is also important to assist members of marginalized groups in developing and strengthening their social support systems. Emphasizing soft power to promote peace instead of war and educating the political electorate and office seekers would also be helpful in addressing the potential of social rejection. Societies must work to ensure that policy is made and implemented by those who understand the intersectionalities of the constructs discussed in this article, as well as the potential consequences of social rejection to any society. Finally, the implication of Goldbach et al's (2015) study is apt, for it finds that it is highly valuable for any society to promote equality intentionally by addressing society's tendency to marginalize individuals and groups.

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