Identity: Globalization, culture and psychological functioning

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Abstract

This paper examines the influence of globalization on psychological functioning. It noted that globalization is somehow a vital step toward both a more stable world and better lives for people in it. However, human lives are increasingly being challenged and integrated into larger global networks of relationships. The forces of globalization are taxing the youth, families, and cultural systems worldwide. All social systems are contaminated by the need to borrow values, morals, skills, and competencies from the next regions or nations. The process of globalization and its attendant consequences may lead to a stripping away of culture identity. It will lead to a break down in social interaction within a local context, a vital means that used to build a great sense of cultural identity and belongingness. This is because globalization is speeding up social and cultural processes such that time and space are no longer constrain on human activities. Conditions and social interactions are now organized so as to connect presence and absent others. Then also most people in the world now develop a bicultural identity, in which part of their identity is rooted in their local culture while another part stems from an awareness of their relation to the global culture. Furthermore, there is pervasiveness of identity confusion as local cultures change in response to globalization, some young people find themselves at home in neither the local culture nor the global culture.

Key Words: globalization, psychological functioning, culture

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INTRODUCTION

The process by which cultures influence one another and become more alike through trade, immigration, and the exchange of information and ideas is termed Globalization (Giddens, 2000). It has existed for many centuries. However, in the last few years, there has been dramatic acceleration in the degree and intensity of the connections among different cultures and different regions. This is mainly due to advances in telecommunication and a rapid increase in economic and financial interdependence worldwide. Hence for the first time in history, virtually every individual at every level of society can sense the impact of international changes. We can see and hear it in our media, taste it in our food, and sense it in the products that we buy. Globalization is a vital step toward both a more stable world and better lives for the people in it. But is that all?

Globalization has become one of the most widely used terms to describe the current state of the world. It entails a wide range of issues and phenomena. Many discussions of globalization have focused mainly on economics and politics. Others, thus in many ways, see business as the primary engine driving globalization (eg. Appadurai, 2000), but it would be a mistake to conclude that the implications of globalization will be limited primarily to the commercial and political arena. That globalization has economic roots and political consequences is a fact, but it has brought into focus the power of culture in this global environment-the power to bind and to divide in a time when the tension between integration and separation tug at every issue is relevant to international relations The homogenizing influences of globalization that are most often condemned by new nationalists and by cultural romanticists are actually positive: globalization promotes integration and the removal not only of cultural barriers but of many of the negative dimensions of culture. The impact of globalization on culture and the impact of culture on globalization merit discussion. Then also the contribution of psychology to an understanding of globalization, and the impact of globalization on psychological functioning has been largely neglected. Psychological theories on culture borrowing, identity, and other psychological functions have implications for the effects of globalization, but thus far these implications have also not been discussed. It is in this light that in this essay, I discuss the implications of globalization on culture and psychological functioning.

GLOBALIZATION AND CULTURE

Culture is defined as the total pattern of human behaviour and its products embodied in speech, action, and artifacts and dependent upon man's capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations (Tomlinson, 1999). Thus culture entails a set of values, ideas, beliefs and attitudes. It establishes relationships between social being and even between the living and the dead (especially in Africa). In Ghana, for example it is believed that the dead are still "alive" but in a different form (spirit) from where they now have "super control" over what goes on in their absence. They can reward the faithful and punish the unfaithful. Libations are poured to them for their hand in almost everything that is to be done by a family. Even at dining tables their presence are expected and respected by reserving chair or space for them. These beliefs explain why the dead are buried with rich ornaments and regalia; they go with all that is needed to start life. However, culture is not static; it grows out of a systematically encouraged relevance for selected customs and habits. Culture is used by the organizers of society- politicians, theologians, and academics, and families- to impose and ensure order, and rudiments of which change over time as need dictates.

Throughout most human prehistory and history, the themes that organized and gave meaning to human lives and human imaginaries were structured primarily by local geography and topology, local kinship and social organization, local worldviews and religions. Even a few hundred years ago, a minute in human evolutionary time, the lives of our ancestors were largely shaped by local economies, local social relations, and local knowledge. Prior to this recent explorations and conquests- globalization; villagers were likely to be born, raised, and schooled (however shortly), to work, marry, reproduce, and be buried in the same locality. They were largely oblivious to changes taking place even a few hundred miles away. Then "the village was practically the beginning and end of his or her world: visitors were rare, few travelers passed by, and excursions from the village would, in all likelihood, have only been to the nearest market town. . . . contact with the outside world would have been the exception rather than the rule" (Held 2000).

With globalization, today the world is different place. While human lives continue to be lived in local realities, these realities are increasingly being challenged and integrated into larger global networks of relationships. The forces of globalization are taxing the youth,

families, and cultural systems worldwide. All social systems are contaminated by the need to borrow values, morals, skills, and competencies from the next regions or nations. The process of globalization and its attendant consequences may lead to a stripping away of culture identity. It will lead to a break down in social interaction within a local context, a vital means that used to build a great sense of cultural identity and belongingness. This is because globalization is speeding up social and cultural processes such that time and space are no longer constrain on human activities. Conditions and social interactions are now organized so as to connect presence and absent others. Family members scattered all over the globe can hold meetings and take vital decisions through internet or telephone without converging at one place. Globalization's effect on language and communication is also far reaching. Ethnic and culture specific languages are no longer relevant as languages that can be understood by all are preferred. Obviously religion and race are other important components of a cultural that has not being spared by the engulfing hands of globalization. I think that the way these components, together with language are wired build a social network of ethnic trust. However globalization is gradually breaking this vital network leading to weak trust in this modern world even within members of an ethnic group. The summation of the effect of globalization on culture is that cultures are no longer very distinctive, and are losing their value to unite.

However, it is important to note that the decline of cultural distinctions may be a measure of the progress of civilization, a tangible sign of enhanced communications and understanding. Successful multicultural societies, be they nations or other groupings of closely interrelated states, discern those aspects of culture that do not threaten union, stability, or prosperity, and allow them to flourish. They then counteract or eradicate the more subversive elements of culture (exclusionary aspects of religion, language, and political/ideological beliefs). History, in cases such as the European Union, South Africa, and even among ethnic groupings in Ghana, shows that bridging the cultural gaps successfully and serving as a home to diverse peoples require certain social structures, laws, and institutions that transcend culture. Whiles integrative models exist, each is built on the idea that tolerance is crucial to social well-being, and at times has been threatened by both intolerance and a heightened emphasis on cultural distinctions. Thus, clearly, a realization of such integrative models on a global scale is impossible in the near future.

Neither can it be achieved purely through rational decisions geared towards implementing carefully considered policies and programs. It will take time.

GLOBALIZATION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL FUNCTIONING

Globalization has its primary psychological influence on issues of identity. The central psychological consequence of globalization is that it results in transformations in identity, that is, in how people think about themselves in relation to the social environment. Two aspects of identity stand out as issues related to globalization. First, as a consequence of globalization, most people in the world now develop a bi-cultural identity, in which part of their identity is rooted in their local culture while another part stems from an awareness of their relation to the global culture. Second, the pervasiveness of identity confusion may be increasing among young people in non-Western cultures. As local cultures change in response to globalization, some young people find themselves at home in neither the local culture nor the global culture.

Several writers have argued that many children and adolescents now grow up with a global consciousness. Robertson (1992) argued that children today gradually develop "the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole" (p. 8). Tomlinson (1999) wrote that the world as a whole "increasingly exists as a cultural horizon within which we (to varying degrees) frame our existence" (p. 30). From a psychological perspective, this consequence of globalization can be usefully conceptualized in terms of bicultural identities. The concept of bicultural identities has so far been discussed only in relation to the identities developed by immigrants and members of ethnic minority groups (Tomlinson, 1999), but it can also be applied to globalization. What it means in this context is that in addition to their local identity, young people develop a global identity that gives them a sense of belonging to a worldwide culture and includes an awareness of the events, practices, styles, and information that are part of the global culture. Our global identity allows us to communicate with people from diverse places when we travel from home, when others travel to where we live, and when we communicate with people in other places through media technology (such as e-mail). In this context, non-European students do not find their sudden living in European countries to be stressful.

Television and the Internet are even more important, because they allow direct communication with other people worldwide (e.g., in e-mail chat rooms or through interactive games) and because they provides direct access to information about every part of the world. Parallel to our global identity, we continue to develop a local identity as well, one based on the local circumstances, local environment, and local traditions of the place where we grew up. This is the identity we use most in our daily interactions with family, friends, and community members. For example, among African students in Sweden, they may watch TV daily and learn about what is happening there and the rest of the world while they pursue education there. However, they also maintain a local identity that is distinctively African. This local identity is what is defined partly by their African environment in which they grew up. The local identity is also defined by their traditional values of reticence, modesty, and family obligations. Thus, they retain an African identity even as they also develop an identity as members of the global culture. For example, even as better educated young people, who have become full-fledged members of the global economy, most of them still prefer to have an arranged marriage, in accordance with their respective African traditions. They are also generally expected to care for their parents in old age, and to show a high level of respect to them (filial piety). Thus, they have one identity for participating in the global world and succeeding in the fast-paced world of high technology, and another identity, rooted in African traditions, that they maintain with respect to their families and personal lives.

Although developing a bi-cultural identity means that a local identity is retained alongside a global identity, there is no doubt that local cultures are being modified by globalization, specifically by the introduction of global media, free market economics, democratic institutions, increased length of formal schooling, and delayed entry into marriage and parenthood. These changes greatly alter traditional cultural practices and beliefs. Such changes as Hermans & Kempen (1998) noted may lead less to a bi-cultural identity than to a hybrid identity, combining local culture and elements of the global culture.

As local cultures change in response to globalization, most people manage to adapt to the changes and develop a bi-cultural or hybrid identity that provides the basis for living in their local culture and also participating in the global culture. However, for some people, adapting to the rapid changes taking place in their cultures is more difficult. The images,

values, and opportunities they perceive as being part of the global culture undermine their belief in the value of local cultural practices. At the same time, the ways of the global culture seem out of reach to them, too foreign to everything they know from their direct experience. Rather than becoming bicultural, they may experience themselves as excluded from both their local culture and the global culture, truly belonging to neither. In terms of Erikson's (1968) theory of identity formation, it could be said that in facing the issue of identity versus identity confusion in adolescence, globalization increases the proportion of young people in non- Western cultures who experience a state of identity confusion rather than successfully forming an identity. What this means is that as the young increasingly grow up with a global consciousness, they are likely to have diminished ties to the specific place they live in. Where a child grows up now matters less than in the past in determining what the child knows and experiences. Again, electronic media such as television and computers are at the heart of this transformation, because of the way they penetrate local experience and allow access to information and persons in many other places. For most young people, because they will grow up this way, it is likely that they will simply experience this sense of delocalization as the way life is, rather than having a sense of loss or deprivation (Tomlinson, 1999). For some young people, however, delocalization may result in an acute sense of alienation and impermanence as they grow up with a lack of cultural certainty, a lack of clear guidelines for how life is to be lived and how to interpret their experience. With globalization, it could be predicted that the people most likely to suffer identity confusion as a result of globalization are those in cultures with the greatest cultural distance from the global culture. However, for some youth rather than experiencing identity confusion they create their own ways of doing things (self selected cultures). Identity confusion among young people may be reflected in problems such as depression, suicide, and substance use.

CONCLUSION

Globalization, having economic and political origin, demanded that, whatever the nature of their economies, their level of development, and whatever their location in the global economy, all countries must pursue a common set of economic policies. In particular, they must permit the free and indiscriminate operation of transnational corporations in their economies: open their economies freely and indiscriminately to imports and concentrate on exporting what they are supposed to be good at; reduce the role of governments in the

economy to that of supporting the market and private enterprise; and leave the determination of prices of goods, currencies, labour, as well as the allocation of resources to the operation of the market. Seen in this way, globalization is primarily not an impersonal process driven by laws and factors of development - such as technology - operating outside human control and agency. Rather it is a conscious programme of reconstructing international economic and political relations in line with a particular set of interests (the profit motivations of the businesses, especially the transnational corporations of the advanced industrial countries) and vision (the dogma of the primacy of the free market and of private enterprise in all processes of human development). However, even if globalization promotes material prosperity, it comes with several cultural and psychological costs that have influential impacts on our daily functioning. As psychologists, these costs have great implications on psychological variables studied. Every conscious effort must be made to assess these implications on psychological functioning, from designing of psychological test, their administration to provision of intervention. Thus, globalization presents itself as a challenging, complex, and important area for psychological theory and research.

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