

A Stable Identity in a World of Shifting Values

If the child is to attain a stable identity in a world of shifting values, we must examine these values—the premises on which we are operating in our child-rearing practices at home and in our curriculum-constructing in the school.

GROWING UP successfully involves the acquisition of a satisfactory set of values to live by and attaining a stable self-identity. This cannot be left to chance or to time alone—it takes some doing on the child's part and on society's part. For the child is not born into the world with a ready-made pattern of socially appropriate behavior and values. Instead, he must inevitably learn to put the question to himself: May I yield to the immediate impulse, or will I by doing so endanger the highest values of my society and my own place within it? The child learns on the one hand to inhibit or to modify certain of his drives; he learns on the other hand to acquire certain socially adaptive values and attitudes.

The word learning is a euphemism here, however. For it is not the same kind of learning as say memorizing the multiplication tables, or the capitals of the states, or the pledge of allegiance for one perfect recitation. The child's learning, or perhaps better here interiorizing, of social values is a much more intimate and complex process. Learning, imitation, conscious emulation play a part, to be sure. But as Miller and Hutt among others have shown, the fundamental mechanism by which we interiorize values

is *identification*.¹ As the child struggles to integrate a stable self-image from among the piecemeal perceptions of who he is and where he fits, he is led to view himself as at one with another person. He wears daddy's hat and coat not only to look like daddy but in some wise *to be* daddy; and he helps mother cook and clean not only to act like mother but again in some wise *to be* mother. The parents are the child's earliest objects of identification. Later he adds older siblings, favorite neighbors, community heroes, school personnel and others, not excluding of course fictional characters.²

¹ Miller and Hutt, "Value Interiorization and Personality Development," and Hutt and Miller, "Value Interiorization and Democratic Education," *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 5, No. 4, 1949. Also, Eric H. Ericson, *Childhood and Society*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1950.

² For one account of the effect of fictional characters on children's values, see Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*, New York: Rinehart, 1953. "Ethical development of children, so intimately bound up with their mental development, has to do not only with relations with an individual but also with integration in groups. The development of the superego, of conscience or, more simply, the sense of decency, takes place not only on the basis of *identification* with parents but also with successive parent-substitutes who are at the same time representatives and symbols of group demands and group responsibilities. In this sphere, comic books are most pernicious." (p. 100)

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In making these identifications, the child not only assumes the outward trappings and expressive movements of his "significant figures" but attempts also to incorporate their values and attitudes.

But with what values should the child identify? The fact is that he is exposed from the very first not only to a variety of values but to a variety of *conflicting* values. He may be required at once to be "individualistic" but also to "conform," to be "honest and aboveboard" but also to "cover his hand," to "work hard" but also to "get to know the right people," to be "educated in the pure arts and sciences" but also never to forget that "ultimately it is the practical things in life that get you anywhere."³ These value-dilemmas pose for the child an extraordinarily difficult task in adaptation. And of course the matter is complicated even further, depending on the child's sex, community, social class, occupation of parents, place of residence, and so on.

To understand these value-dilemmas to which the child is liable it is necessary to understand the possible differences in values he faces as a function of two general features in the dynamics of our society: *social cleavage* and *social change*. What, for example, do the Western farmer and the Eastern businessman, the member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the supporter of the White Citizens Protective League, the subscriber to *Fortune* and the reader of *True Romances*, the self-made man of our father's time and his more recent offspring, the man in the

grey flannel suit, have in common? The nature of the question—the very fact that we can ask such a question at all—suggests some of the cleavages and variations in our value system.⁴ Among the more notable of these cleavages and variations are:

1. *Regional*. Regionalism in America is readily observable in customs, foods, politics, arts, literature, and of course in values. From this point of view we are not so much, as some would have it, a *melting pot* as a *mosaic*. When we go from Maine to Southern California, from Miami to Marblehead, from a shack in Mississippi to a tenement in Chicago, we are not only moving from one place to another but from one way of life to another.

2. *Rural-urban*. The values of the city-dweller and his country-cousin are not the same. The farmer is said to be typically "individualistic, conservative, and possessed of deep convictions." The urbanite in contrast is said to be "group-oriented, liberal, and superficial in his convictions." Now of course such generalizations are caricatures—and with recent increases in mass communication probably even less valid than usual. Nonetheless, the child who grows up in the country acquires a different set of criteria of social desiderata and personal worth from the child who grows up in the city.

3. *Social class*. This is the major source of differentiation in values for such observers as Lloyd Warner and Allison Davis. The data are well-established, and we may cite the following contrasts as instances of the different values to which a lower-class and a middle-class child are

³ R. S. Lynd, *Knowledge for What*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946. See especially p. 54-62.

⁴ I am indebted for a number of the formulations in this section to an unpublished memorandum by Kaspar Naegle, who very kindly permitted me to make use of the material here.

likely to be exposed, in the same region and even in the same community:⁵

Value	Middle Class Tendency	Lower Class Tendency
a. Property	a. Great stress on the piling up of capital goods.	a. Immediate spending of material goods is important.
b. Family	b. The family is likely to be child-centered.	b. The home is not child-centered.
c. Cleanliness	c. Stressed.	c. Unstressed.
d. Law and order	d. Respect for law and order is inculcated.	d. Opportunism is a characteristic attitude toward law and order.
e. Aggression	e. The control of aggression is stressed.	e. Prowess in aggressive techniques is stressed.
f. Education	f. A good education—especially related to success—is emphasized.	f. There is a vague notion that education is helpful in improving one's status, but the person who is "too educated" is a misfit in the community.

Regional, urban-rural, and social class are not the only cleavages, of course. We may cite, in addition to these, occupational, ethnic, religious and others. But we have said enough to illustrate the point we are making. Our society is discontinuous along many dimensions, and the child is inevitably faced not only with different values but with conflicting values, so that to conform to one set of expectations means not to conform to

⁵ For a fuller account of class differences in values, see Clyde Kluckhohn and Florence Kluckhohn, "American Culture: Generalized Orientations and Class Patterns" in *Conflicts of Power in Modern Culture, Symposium of the Conference in Science, Philosophy, and Religion*, New York: Harper, 1947. p. 106-28.

another set. As every perceptive teacher and parent knows, for the lower-class child to conform to his familial values, for example, may mean for him *not* to conform to school values.

4. *Social change.* Without in any way minimizing the significance of the preceding cleavages, we may suggest that the most significant cleavage at this time is the crucial transformation the dominant values themselves are currently undergoing. Riesman called our attention to this phenomenon most trenchantly in his distinction between our former inner-directed values and our prevailing other-directed values.⁶ And more recently, Spindler remarked upon this transformation as being from *traditional* to *emergent* values.⁷ In any case, what we may observe is that instead of values that stress the work-success ethic of our fathers there is now an over-riding value of sociability and frictionless interpersonal relations. The hard-working Horatio Alger hero as a national model is giving way to the affable young junior executive with the "sincere" necktie. Instead of independence and the autonomous self, there is compliance and conformity to the group. As Riesman has observed, we have replaced our inner gyroscope with a built-in radar that alerts us to the feelings of others. We are more concerned with group harmony than with self-expression. Instead of Puritan morality, there is a relativistic moral attitude—absolutes of right and wrong are questionable.

These values in flux are held in various degree by the different persons in our society, and of course in our school sys-

⁶ David Riesman *et al.*, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950.

⁷ George D. Spindler, "Education in a Transforming American Culture," *Harvard Educational Review*, Vol. 25, No. 3, 1955, p. 145-56.

tems. The younger teachers, for example, are more likely to be emergent in their values than the older teachers, the superintendents and principals more emergent than the parents and public they serve, the parents and public more emergent than the school board members they select.⁸ So we have side by side in the community and in the educational institutions a kaleidoscope of shifting and confusing, if not absolutely conflicting, assumptions about life and about the values that are really ours.

Under these circumstances, the various significant figures provide the child with uncertain and inconsistent models for identification. Identification, if it occurs at all, results in conflict and anxiety, for to incorporate one model means to reject another. As we have remarked, to incorporate the parent's values may mean to reject the teacher's values, to accept the teacher's values may mean to reject the community hero's values, to accept the community hero's values may mean to reject the religious leader's values, etc.

The solution may be either inflexible incorporation of one model or renunciation of all models. In one case we have

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

over-identification and consequent neurotic restriction, and in the other we have *under-identification* and consequent delinquent license. Both represent a serious inadequacy in personal growth and development, and both the individual and society will suffer for it.

The community and the school must be aware of these complexities in values and the consequences for the child. We cannot just do nothing, for if we close the *front door* to these dilemmas—and they are dilemmas—they will sneak in by the *back door*. We need as citizens, parents and teachers to examine our values—the premises on which we are operating in our child-rearing practices at home and in our curriculum-constructing in the school. It seems to me that the danger is not in complexities and differences which are in the open and understood but in complexities and differences which are underground and misunderstood. It is out of communication and understanding of complexities—in free discussion, not denial—that we can provide the child with a realistic model for identification and growth, a model that is consistent with his own personality and the values of the world of which he is a part.

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