



The Continuing Search for Identity: The New Culture

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A BURGEONING new minority group has materialized in our schools. Its unique value system has led its proponents readily to proclaim it as a new culture. Its skeptics, however, point to the youthfulness of the phenomenon and just as readily brand it as simply the latest variation on the age-old theme of adolescent rebellion.

Whether we are experiencing the birth of a lasting movement or the brief life of yet another fad will be answered by time, but there is already formidable support arguing that the new culture is decidedly more than a *now* culture. For example, that most astute culture watcher, Margaret Mead, sees us entering "a period, new in history" in which the elders in even the most remote and simple societies of the world do not know all that their children know.¹

The new culture's premises are basically moral, encouraging an allegiance to self that requires an *internal* control system to monitor behavior. The old culture's premises are basically social, encouraging an allegiance to social convention and institutionalization, and implying a dependence on an *external* control system to monitor behavior.

The moral, non-social (but not antiso-

cial) character of the new culture, contrasted with the social, non-moral (but not immoral) character of the old culture, delineates the area in which the two cultures most desperately conflict. They are not opposites any more than social is the opposite of moral. In actuality, each has qualities attractive to the other, which manifest themselves in a kind of mutual seductiveness between the two cultures.² They *are* at odds on motives, though, and because of this crucial difference, identity in the new culture takes on new dimensions and the quest for it dictates new strategies. Furthermore, this different motivational base for the new culture raises questions concerning the appropriateness, perhaps even the validity vis-à-vis the new culture, of the theories of personality attempted by Western man to date.

An attempt to explain the search for identity of each culture using one of the currently popular theoretical systems should help clarify this point. Chickering's system of seven developmental vectors was selected for the task because it represents an attempt

² Philip Slater. *The Pursuit of Loneliness: American Culture at the Breaking Point*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1970.

¹ Margaret Mead. *Culture and Commitment*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1970. pp. 1, 60-61.

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to synthesize the work of several important personality theorists; it is a contemporary formulation; and it focuses on personality development from middle adolescence through early adulthood, the age range most representative of the new culture.³

In Chickering's system, establishing identity (vector 4) requires the individual to have made substantial progress toward achieving a sense of competence, managing his own emotions, and gaining a degree of autonomy (vectors 1, 2, and 3). Once this basic framework for his identity has been constructed, he then may begin trying to free his interpersonal relationships, clarify his purposes, and develop integrity (vectors 5, 6, and 7). A closer look at each vector is in order.

Achieving Competence. Achieving intellectual, physical, and social competencies is integral to this task. In the old culture, achieving competence is often associated with competing, and requires finding the areas in which one excels over a significant number of his peers. Some kinds of competence, such as athletic ability, are more valuable than others because society places higher value on them. Competence may come to be viewed as a kind of intellectual materialism. Education's current fetish with instructional objectives is one aspect of this materialism.

Competence in the new culture is seldom other-defined and often carries humanistic overtones, as in relating, for example. Because people are accepted for what they are, social competence is easily achieved. Competence seldom involves competition, and when it does, it often is viewed as being "not me" and therefore contributes little to identity formation. Nontechnical, concrete, artisan-like tasks take on personal value because they have low social value especially in the old culture and therefore are not other-defined.

Managing Emotions. Managing emotions requires one to develop self-control over

³ Arthur W. Chickering. *Education and Identity*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers, 1969.

two major impulses: aggression and sex. In the old culture, managing emotions translates to expressing yourself in socially acceptable ways. Individuality is compromised when it conflicts with social convention.

"Managing" connotes repression much more than does a term like "expressing," which more appropriately describes the new culture's task. A person's emotions are his; they are an important part of him. When he hides them from others he hides himself. Genuineness is paramount.

Becoming Autonomous. This task involves becoming emotionally and instrumentally independent. Gaining autonomy in the old culture is a difficult task since most prior training has involved external controls. Internal controls may not develop, and seeking autonomy may become the immature action of simply resisting further external control. As a result, seeking autonomy may include experimenting with asocial actions (delinquency). Mastery of this task includes a concomitant responsibility to society.

The existential framework of the new culture makes autonomy a relatively natural state ("Do your own thing"). Like the black culture, the new culture has a wider range of options from which to choose because of the bicultural background it has at its disposal. This experience with two cultures translates into increased independence of action. Autonomy can also be a by-product of the generation gap.

Establishing Identity. This task requires the individual to marshal the skills developed in the first three vectors to begin experimenting with various actions and settings in order to determine which ones seem most compatible with his general personality makeup. Clarification of concerns relating to physical needs, personal characteristics and appearance, sexual identification, and sex role also plays an important part in this task.

In the old culture, identity often carries good-bad, worthy-unworthy connotations. Both adult and peer models can be emulated, allowing considerable selectivity, but experimentation in most realms of concern is lim-

ited considerably by social convention. The problem becomes finding "me" within given social constraints.

Good-bad, worthy-unworthy continua are less prevalent in the new culture. Valuing self is a prime goal. Few positive adult models exist and peer models therefore take on added importance. Experimentation is highly valued. Identity may be sought through drugs, music, and/or sexual experiences. Much introspection and even introspection of the act of introspecting are encouraged to the point where the term "conscious consciousness" has been coined to describe the phenomenon.⁴

Freeing Interpersonal Relationships. This task involves developing an increased tolerance of others. A second factor in it is the establishment of intimate relationships. The old culture's limited arena for experi-

⁴ Charles A. Reich. *The Greening of America*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1970.

mentation can make expanded tolerance fairly difficult to develop. Social convention may limit relationships to a fairly homogeneous population. Intimacy, too, is socially constrained.

This vector represents the focus of attention for the new culture. Striving for increased intimacy in all relationships, at least within the culture, is a central preoccupation of the new culture. Extended effort is made to increase sensuality and sensitivity and to seek out new ways of relating to others. Sexual relationships are expected to be casual and social pressure is placed on those who wish to view them in any other way. Experimentation is again used to increase intimacy, but it is also used as an excuse to avoid it. The basic cultural trappings of drugs, music, sex, and religion are all used as vehicles for quickly establishing relationships.

Clarifying Purposes. This task is self-



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explanatory; it requires the setting of goals which one can then direct his energy toward achieving. Setting goals is an important function in the ends-oriented old culture. The goals one achieves are an important determinant of one's social status. Goals often suggest material gain. Purposefulness is valued for its own sake.

The means-oriented new culture lives in the here-and-now. The overall goal is to become a happy, complete human being. The future is now. Setting goals in such a time of transience, to use Toffler's term, is a futile activity.

Developing Integrity. Developing integrity involves clarifying a personally valid set of beliefs that are internally consistent and provide a guide for behavior. In the old culture, congruence between word and deed is important, but so is being valued by others; and one is valued for what one has achieved as much as for who one has become.

Similarly the new culture's integrity is "getting it all together," by achieving a complete congruence between thought, word, and deed. Here the problem of integrity experienced by any minority culture begins to surface. The compromises one makes to maintain contact with the majority culture have a debilitating effect. What "ought to be" is so clear yet so unattainable that dissatisfaction with the weakness of man, ergo, the weakness of "me," inhibits integrity. The hypocrisy required to cope with the old culture is rationalized as game playing, and animosity toward the old culture for requiring such behavior of the new culture mounts.

To summarize, the two cultures encounter radically different problems in their respective searches for identity. The comparison between the cultures is striking; it appears almost as though the old culture were systematically contrived to make it as difficult as possible for a person to find out who he is and what he is about.

What can the school do to help the new culture in its continuing search for identity? At an institutional level, perhaps nothing. In large measure, the new culture has developed as an alternative to technocracy. It is,

as Roszak points out, a counter culture to it.⁵ Consequently, the institutionalized sector of the school may well be incapable of responding in any meaningful way to the new culture with its non-social allegiance, short of what Illich would describe as deschooling itself. The school, in a sense, stands directly on a collision course between the old culture that wishes to control and socialize its youth into the old culture, and the new culture which, through the courts, is quickly establishing its right to be, while simultaneously becoming aware of the political wallop it packs in its steadily increasing numbers.

Exploring the possibility of a meaningful *personal* response to the new culture is a much more productive enterprise since intercultural problems are ultimately interpersonal problems. Minimally, we can accept the new culture youth for what he is and avoid condemning him for what he is not just as we should do with a member of any subculture. Beyond this, we can seek to build a truly collaborative learning atmosphere in which we make it evident that we too are open to learning from our students.⁶

Social change is now occurring so rapidly that there is a growing need for all, regardless of age, to acknowledge that they have a need to continually relearn about their world. The first step in finding out what the new culture has to offer in this regard is to listen to what it is saying. There is a risk involved in this stance, though, for we cannot seriously ponder the possible impact of the new culture without reassessing our own identities in terms of it. The new culture will often make sense in our heads, if it does not make sense in our guts; it is, in that sense, seductive. Dare we reexamine our identities through it? Dare we try to reconcile the incongruity between our thoughts and our feelings? Dare we chance being seduced? □

⁵ Theodore Roszak. *The Making of a Counter Culture*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1968.

⁶ Kenneth D. Benne. "Authority in Education." *Harvard Educational Review* 40 (2): 385-410; August 1970.

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