Psychosocial - Political Perception of Identity Among Palestinian Youth

By

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Although the topic of identity development in children received extensive attention by psychologists, it remains fertile ground for social scientists who wish to liberate themselves from traditional theory of child psychosocial development. There is ample conceptual, constructual, theoretical, and empirical evidence available to psychologists to predict the global course of development in children. Sociologists, political scientists, and other social scientists also have delineated many of the variables and factors that influence the course of change which takes place naturally within societies. This plethora of "scientific" evidence, however, was accumulated mainly by Westerners on Western societies. The relatively sparse, available, and accumulated knowledge on Asian, African, and Latin American societies, unfortunately, also was either conducted by Western researchers or interpreted within the context of Western theories and constructs (Khalefa, 1997; Kim & Berry, 1993; Probst, 1996). Native researchers in the developing countries are cognizant of the fact that a substantial amount of the information, data, and artifacts collected on their societies and cultures is held in "trust" in the archives and data banks of the developed nations. In essence, I argue that developed nations are far superior to the developing nations not only economically, militarily, and technologically, but far more ominously, in their knowledge of the developing nations. We (developing nations) are studied, examined, and analyzed by the other (developed nations) more than we study, examine, and analyze our selves. Any analysis on the development of identity within transitional societies we present today is to some extent "hostage" to this epistemological "bondage." Furthermore, the expansive nature of the topic dictates that we delineate the limits of our argument prior to delving into our presentation.

First of all, I would like to make it clear that it is not my intention to present, argue, or expound on the natural development of identity in youth. Any deserving textbook on psychosocial and child development can outperform my effort. Nor do I intend to focus on the nature of individual identity development in youth. The purpose of my presentation will be to examine analytically the course of collective national identity in transitional societies. More specifically, I will focus on the manner in which the collective identity a society develops within the context of the conflict it finds itself embroiled in between the "image" it draws for itself and the "image" the other wishes to impose on it. In other words, the first gist of my argument will be that development of identity in transitional societies (developing societies) is inherently one of conflict.

Second, it is not the intention of this presentation to focus on societies undergoing natural social change. Instead, my thrust will be on societies that are

undergoing a transition from being politically liberated from colonialism or occupation to being liberated from cultural hegemony. The struggle of liberation in these societies, I argue, has a profound effect on how the collective identity develops. Finally, being most familiar with a society (Palestinian) which is in the midst of the clutches of this transitional process, I will utilize this experience to shed light on the arguments I propose for illustrative purposes only.

The Concept of Identity in Non-Western Societies

Although the term "identity" is the object of our discourse and analysis in this session, I am uncertain how alien this term is to non-Western societies, especially those in Asia and Africa. The modern Arabic term for identity (howiyya) seems to be a recent phenomenon. Barghouthi (1995), for example, could not find the term mentioned in Arabic lexicons prior to the mid nineteenth century. He cites Bustani (1819-1883) showing that the term has both philosophic and linguistic roots. Linguistically, it is derived from the singular pronoun "howa" (he) denoting "the absolute truth that enfolds all truths of the unknown just as a kernel unfolds its own potential tree" (p. 150). Furthermore, the term also could be derived from the "union with the self"; i.e., complete personal identity. Hence, the term identity in Arabic juxtaposes, derives, and unites the individual with the collective. The diffusion between the individual and the collective also appears to be true in African societies. For example, there are no comparable terms for "uncle", "aunt", or "niece" in Xhosa. No linguistic differentiation is made between father and uncle, mother and aunt, daughter and niece. Personal identity is derived from the collective one. The former unfolds only within the realm of the latter. Hence, personal identity is also derived from the historic development of collective identity. Palestinian identity, as an example, is a product of Arab, Muslim-Christian, and national legacies. Its origin, as is the case in many African and Asian societies, is tribal. Consequently, one cannot address a people's collective identity divorced from its legacy and culture. Heritage provides the ligature which maintains the integrity of identity. The destruction of a people's culture is tantamount to the destruction of its identity.

Identity Development Within An Occupation Relationship

Fanon (1965) elucidated the relationship between the colonized/occupied and the colonizer/occupier as one of continued conflict. The colonizer/occupier does not relinquish his dream of subjugating the native, who, in turn, refuses to relinquish his aspiration of gaining independence from his colonizer/occupier. Physical subjugation, the occupier learns, however, cannot be maintained indefinitely and without great cost. Unfortunately, his dream of subjugating the native does not extinguish itself as he relinquishes his physical control over him. His aspiration finds its expression in the colonization of the native's culture, and ultimately the colonization of his mind and identity. The native, on the other hand, tries desperately to rediscover his identity by navigating the pages of his history and culture. The occupier, aware of this need, craftily tries to provide him with a map whose landmarks were not etched by the native's ancestors. The quest for the indigenous landmarks becomes of crucial importance. The emerging collective identity of this nation in transition thus becomes contingent on the landmarks it assimilates. It is within this context I postulate that the development of identity within occupied societies is inherently one of conflict. The image the colonizer/occupier desires for the native to formulate for himself (i.e., identity) is essentially that of the colonizer/occupier, but packaged in native clothing. It is this identity which Steve Biko referred to as "Whites walking in Black skin".   This process can be achieved only through colonization of the mind, culture, and historical

legacy. Identity thus becomes the battleground between national assertion on the one hand, and domination and subjugation by the occupying power on the other hand.

Children and youth develop their identity in a series of ever increasing-decreasing and expanding-contracting concentric cultural circles. The number of circles dictates only the extent to which identity becomes constricted or global. True identity, however, is defined by the cultural images the child or youth assimilates. One process is quantitative; the other, qualitative. Although I will touch upon the quantitative aspect of this process, my main thrust will be on its qualitative aspects. It is this aspect of identity development which becomes the target of occupational manipulation versus national will.

The term identity, as we have seen, may be a relatively nascent phenomenon in developing countries. Its coining in the mid nineteenth century in the Arab world, however, may not have been a capricious event. The advent of the modern collective Arab identity is highly correlated with the advent of Arab nationalism during that period. Prior to that, the concentric circles encompassing Arab identity were limited to the religious (primarily Muslim) and the tribal. Palestinian identity became crystallized and strengthened in direct proportion to the strength of Palestinian nationalism. The collective identity of those inhabiting Palestine prior to World War I was primarily Muslim-Arab-tribal. Arab identity superseded Palestinian collective identity only prior to the disintegration of Palestine in 1948 and the rise of the Palestinian national resistance movement in the early sixties. Recent studies conducted by myself and other psychologists show that Palestinian national identity is a direct function of the contiguity between the Palestinian national resistance movement and the population it influences directly. For example, Mahjoub and his colleagues (1989) found that Palestinian youth living in Palestine (West Bank and Gaza Strip), Syria and Lebanon identify themselves as Palestinian in word and social representation. When requested to respond to the stimulus "I am...", most of the respondents identified themselves as Palestinian, Palestinian-Arab, or Arab-Palestinian. Few perceived their identity to be only Arab or Muslim. Furthermore, when the subjects were asked to complete drawings using crayons of variant colors (brown, white, black, red, green, yellow, blue), they invariably chose Palestinian colors (red, green, black, white) more than the other colors. The themes they also drew were Palestinian in essence. The most prominent themes emanating from the drawings were also Palestinian in essence(e.g., Palestinian flag, scenes of resistance, etc.). On the other hand, my research on Palestinian youth born and living in Israel does not support the assumption that they identify themselves primarily as Palestinian in word or social representation. While Palestinian children and youth living in Israeli occupied Palestine and Palestinian refugee camps in Syria and Lebanon identified themselves as Palestinian, Palestinian children and youth living in Israel identified themselves as Israeli-Arabs or "Arabs of the inside". Furthermore, while the national colors of Palestine (red, green, black, and white) dominated the drawings of the former group, the national colors of Israel (blue and white) dominated the drawings of the latter group. Hence, we can detect the battle here between the assertion and repression of national identity. Although Arabs living in Israel are ethnically Palestinian, Israel adamantly resists and combats such a development by fragmenting the collective national identity of Palestinians living in Israel into sub-collective identities such as Muslims, Christians, Druze, and Bedouins encapsulated within a larger and incongruent structure called Israeli-Arabs. In essence, Israeli policy reverts the collective identity of the Palestinians under its rule to mid nineteenth century levels. The collective identity of Palestinians in Israel, Mi'ari (1986,

1992) found, also was closely correlated with the rise of Palestinian and Arab nationalism. He shows that the identity of Palestinians who came under Israeli rule in 1948 shifted from primarily being "Arab-Israeli" between 1948-1973 to primarily "Arab" and Arab-Palestinian" between 1973 and 1986. It is interesting to note here that this shift came following the 1973 October War between Israel on the one hand and Egypt and Syria on the other, but did not take place following the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. This finding is quite understandable given that Arabs in general, and Palestinian Arabs living in Israel in particular, found it psychologically difficult to identify with the performance of the Arab armies in 1967 in comparison with their admirable performance in the 1973 October War. Recent evidence seems to suggest that a third shift took place in the identity development of Palestinians in Israel. While they identified themselves more as "Arab-Palestinian" between 1973-1986, they identified themselves as "Palestinian Arabs" between 1986-1992. This shift, it is believed, is attributable to the rise of Palestinian nationalism following the onset of the popular Palestinian uprising (intifada) in the occupied territories at the end of 1987. To what extent the legitimacy Palestinian identity achieved internationally and from Israel following the Oslo Agreements in 1993 had on the identity of Palestinians in Israel is not known yet.

Assertion of a national identity, as we have seen, is the first step in the development of an indigenous identity. Although the assertion of the national indigenous identity is a necessary condition for the development of a truly native identity, it is not sufficient. The characteristics of the newly adopted identity must be indigenous. The crucial battle for dominance or liberation is fought on this front. Identity will be determined by the culture which ultimately dominates.

The history of Palestinians under Israeli occupation taught us that the aim of the Israeli military rule was not only to occupy territories, but also to destroy all authentic characteristics of Palestinians. The power of occupation aimed not only to destroy the individual in the Palestinian child, but also his/her culture, identity and social authenticity. At the risk of sounding radical, I shall refer to this strategy as cultural genocide. I posit here that the occupier's aspiration of hegemony can only be achieved through the annihilation or denial of the indigenous culture in order to replace it with that of the occupier. This is accomplished through a series of steps. Palestinians in Israel faced the worst means of destruction of the self and identity. Palestinian children in Israel often were referred to by Israeli Jewish children as "Dirty Arabs". They were taught Jewish history, while their legacy and heritage were either ignored or denied. Palestinians in the West Bank faced harsher experiences, youth being the most affected and vulnerable ones.

It is difficult for a child to develop a deep sense of his native history and culture if the sources (s)he must rely on are considered to be primitive. It is this weakness that occupation takes advantage of in order to perpetuate its culture. Not only the information we feed our minds is culture coated, the manner in which we begin to think is not native. As we become accustomed to a mode of thought, we find it difficult to be at ease with another system. In essence, insidiously and unconsciously, we become the agents of our former rulers. The native culture is described as primitive, outmoded, or simplistic. As Fanon stated, European colonists could not envisage an African as having a "culture" other than being primitive or savage. In order for the native to achieve success, he must refute his native values and practices, even dress. In preuniversity education the books used by our pupils and students not only do not have Palestinian role models, but portray the Israeli as more advanced and sophisticated. A

Palestinian educator in Israel analyzed the curriculum taught to "Israeli-Arab" children. Not only did she find that Palestinian and Arab culture and history were completely ignored in the curriculum, Israeli and Jewish history were portrayed as superior. Arab names of geographic locations were replaced with Hebrew ones. Arab dishes like falafel and humos become Israeli national dishes. In the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip the display of the Palestinian flag or colors was a security offense prior to the Oslo Agreements. Parents faced insurmountable difficulties to register their children if their names in Arabic meant liberation (Tahreer), holy war (Jihad), or Palestine (Filistin). It should be noted here that such names are common amongst Arabs. Furthermore, children, youth, and adults were forbidden to sing national songs or recite patriotic poetry.

Irrespective of the method or practice used, the ultimate goal of occupation is either to deny, reject, or obliterate the native's indigenous heritage and culture. Depriving children and youth from their cultural heritage leads to their psychological unteathering from their native culture and anchored to the culture of their oppressor. In other words, the identity model which the youth begins to adopt is not her native one. Leiser (1991) has defined such practices as a form of genocide. He states:

"One of the most insidious forms of genocide consists of the destruction of a people's culture by depriving it of its work of art, its literature, its language, or the land to which it is rooted. By tearing children away from their parents and communities, compelling them to be raised in a foreign environment where they will be deprived of their own culture and required to assimilate to that of their captors."

The human story behind the occupation of the Palestinian mind and the cultural genocide associated with it was missed amid the political and military turmoil. As DuBois stated in his book: "The Soul of Black Folks":

"So he grew and brought within his wide influence all that was best of those who walk within the Veil. They who live without knew not nor dreamed of that full power within, that mighty inspiration which the dull gauze of caste decreed that men should not know...He did his work; he did it nobly and well, and yet I sorrow that here he worked alone, with so little human sympathy...And herein lies the tragedy of the age: Not that men are poor, - all men know something of poverty; not that men are wicked, - who is good? Not that men are ignorant, - what is truth? Nay, but that men know so little of men."

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