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INST 6260 – Recker
Reflexive Paper 3
10/26/03

What to Think and How to Think It: Social Cognition

Setting the Stage

Due to a later-in-life career change of my father, I am the only child, of four in my family, who grew up entirely in an urban setting. My siblings didn't experience urban life until at least their teenage years. During my life we lived as a family of displaced farmers in central Salt Lake City which was a fairly ethnically diverse community that was lower on the socio-economic scale. It wasn't until I was in middle school that I began to understand, though primitively, that my socialization to that point was specific to my situation. The middle school boundary, which was much larger than my small elementary school, included a number of other communities ranging from those similar to my central-city location to those which were much more affluent and less diverse in the northern avenues.

It began with me seeing a difference in familiarities and tastes between others and myself whether it be music, clothing, or friendships. At the risk of digression I will mention here that it took me a while (a few months) to realize that the reason I noticed these differences was because I was being made fun of in regard to these differences. It took a number of difficult years to be able to separate the cruelty of some individuals from everyone of a particular location or socioeconomic status.

An Example

I continued to see differences over time. During course discussions (especially in early high school) I began to be a bit intimidated because of some of the things being said

by other students. These comments were not out of line or off color, they were simply beyond my understanding of life. It was clear that these students from more affluent situations had expectations and goals different than my own. They were taught to prepare for college and I was taught to go to work. I had no intention of furthering my education and was not expected to do so. When “college visit days” came around I did not go. I was not invited to go. Instead, I was taken, with a group of other students from similar, blue-collar situations as my own, on tours of places like the auto shop, metal and wood shops and ROTC. Though I had no problem with this at the time, I am now a bit incensed with the fact that no one ever asked me what I was interested in or gave me the option to attend the college presentations. Obviously school officials were aware of what was typical for people from my background. One problem...I didn't like any of those things. I went because it was what I knew. It was a part of me due to my upbringing. But, I would rather have been writing a poem or reading a book or learning how to influence people for good.

Basically I learned stereotypes when I was young. I learned, just by living where I lived and with who I lived, how to categorize people places and things according to what my family and community considered truth. I learned prejudices and, while young, never really had occasion to test those prejudices and naturally accepted them. Then, later in life, toward the end of high school and a few years later, I began to test them more. I rebelled against what was simply expected (which caused no small stir in my family and school) and began to acquire belief systems in a more active way with discussion, evaluation, more discussion and re-evaluation before making decisions about what was going to be true to me.

Still, I followed what I was conditioned to do and I went to work. Though fully engaged in my work, I hoped for the opportunity to go to college and finally was able to do so.

While studying sociology (to which I was undoubtedly drawn because of my conflicted social upbringing) I realized that if I had been raised on the farm like my siblings I would have undoubtedly had little difficulty with what was considered normal in my family. But, since *my* personal culture included not only my family and neighborhood but also additional communities whose norms were different, my choices were influenced accordingly. I learned to look at education as the beginnings of a lifelong learning experience rather than just a drilling required for basic life. However, while studying subjects such as history or English, I was more concerned with events and topics relevant to my blue collar upbringing than with other points of view. To some extent this is still true today.

Another Example

Another example of how my culture influenced my learning comes in my transition from working at a community college to working at a research university. I learned about higher education from a community college perspective. I learned about universities from the perspective of students transferring to them. While the topics affecting each type of institution were the same, I soon learned that the way they were considered was completely different. Though I had a number of years of experience, and thought I was pretty well versed, I was limited to seeing things through the “community college lens.”

I was shocked at just how autonomous departments were at the University. Going from one department to another was almost like going from one institution to another. I was used to a more centralized focus for the institution and had a difficult time reconciling the new reality with my past experience. It was easy for me to even consider what I found at the new institution as wrong. Again, I had to test my prejudices and was able to broaden my culture.

Conclusion

I have discovered that it is important to understand how the lens of my socialization affects my learning. This discovery has shown me on numerous occasions that while I may have many things to share I also have many things to learn. A different perspective has often broadened my culture and I believe that I am finally getting to a place that I have a healthier understanding in regard to the effect of socialization. The reality that socialization affects learning is there, and it is something to be considered, but should it determine what we are expected to do or to what we are exposed? Perhaps I would have liked auto shop or ROTC but hey...I would rather write a poem.