

## ETHNIC SOCIALIZATION AND ETHNIC AWARENESS IN NIGERIA: IMPLICATION FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE.

By

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### *Abstract*

Nigeria by its composition is undoubtedly a nation comprising of multi-ethnic groups and, therefore in the face of competition for scarce resource, ethnicity obviously is going to be encountered. Ethnicity in Nigeria is rooted in the fact that Nigerians have since the amalgamation in 1914 been forced out of their familiar linguistic, social, political, and cultural units, and brought face to face, with others whose ways of life appear to constitute mutual threat. The root of ethnicity is fear, that is fear of the unknown; fear of losing the predictability of one's way of behaving which one's already acquired attitudes and values have guaranteed; fear of having one's established and cherished values changed or destroyed; fear of competition for scarce resources; fear of domination by privileged

groups/minorities; fear of loss of control, etc. these fears keep social and psychological distances wide, too wide for a feeling of Nigerianness to be easily created. Nevertheless, Nigerians can derive formidable social, political, economic and psychological strength from this collection of ethnic groups if their perceptions are not dominated by prejudice. One group that can have a significant role in this is social workers. Social work is described as the profession that helps society work better for people and helps them function better within society. This paper argues that treating citizens unequally on the basis of ethnicity is anti-developmental and a major problem in Nigeria. It has caused resentment among marginalized ethnic groups, fuelled conflicts and sometimes wars, and discouraged investments, retarding growth and development prospects.

**Key words:** ethnicity, Ethnic group, Socialization, Ethnic Awareness.

## **Introduction**

Ethnic socialization involves the ways in which group membership affects development and the development processes by which we acquire the behaviors, perceptions, values, and attitudes of an ethnic group to come to see ourselves and others as members of such groups. The developmental processes shape our self-concept and play a role in shaping our self-esteem, our

attitudes and behavior toward our own and other groups, as well as the way we are evaluated by others. Understanding of such processes will help the social workers facilitate the personal development and cross-ethnic interactions of those they work with.

Most definitions of ethnic groups focus on a number of themes, including a common religion, culture, physical appearance or some combination of these. Gordon (1988) defines an ethnic group as

a population entity which considers itself to have a common historical ancestry and identity- a sense of people hood, of constituting a “people”- and is so regarded by others. It may be co-extensive with a particular nation, or it may be based on a common religion, a common racial ancestry or frequency, or some combination of several of these factors.

Ethnicity and ethnic group membership/ socialization are among major concerns to society and to the social work profession. The roots of social work in United States are closely tied to meeting the needs of diverse groups (Cox & Ephross, 2018). Ethnicity is a complex term that involves objective and subjective attributes and both social and psychological identity. Ethnicity is not a constant; its saliency alters with the life course. It is not the same as race although the terms are frequently

interchanged; a plethora of ethnic groups can be subsumed within one racial group. The person-in-environment framework may not be fundamental object of interaction, and thus social Workers must be knowledgeable about the group's emphasis on individuals, family, or past generations. Cox and Ephross (2018) therefore said that ethnic identity provides lenses through which persons perceive, attributes meaning to experiences, and decide actions. The Social worker's lens must be free of distortion if interactions with ethnic groups are to be effective.

### **The Concept of Ethnicity**

The concept of ethnicity is associated with culture and is often used interchangeably with culture as well as race, or nationality. Usually, ethnicity is used in reference to groups that are characterized in terms of common nationality, culture, or language(Fenton,2010). Members of ethnic groups may see themselves as culturally distinct from other groups, but the most usual are language, history or ancestry (real or imagined), religion, and styles of dress or adornment (Giddens & Sutton, 2013). The concept of ethnicity is related to the Greek concept of *ethnos*, which refers to the people of a nation or tribe, and *ethnikos*, which stands for national. Hence, ethnicity refers to the ethnic quality or affiliation of a

group, which is normally characterized in terms of culture (Bentacourt & Lopez, 1993). Although cultural background can be a determinant of ethnic identity or affiliation, being part of an ethnic group can also determine culture. As members of an ethnic group interact with each other, ethnicity becomes a means by which culture is transmitted. According to Berry (1985), because an ethnic group is likely to interact with other ethnic groups, such interactions should not be ignored as possible sources of cultural influences.

When individual or group behaviours are perceived as manifesting elements of distinctiveness, separateness, and exclusivity (Desmet, Ortuno=Ortin, & Wacziarg, 2015), the adjective “ethnic” tends to be used to describe such perceived manifestations. Ethnicity, on the other hand, is a noun which Hoffneyer-zlotnik and Warner (2010) defines as discriminations and strife based on differences in inter-ethnic symbols. Ethnocentrism (i.e group/race centeredness) is defined as the exaggerated tendency to think that the characteristics of one’s own group or race are superior to those of other groups or races. Ethnocentrism (Njoroge & Kirori, 2014) is a tendency to view one’s own group as the centre of everything and to rate all other people with reference to it. Adetiba, and Rahim (2012) defined ethnicity in a more expanded way by regarding it as an attitude and/or ideology concerning the relationship between an

individual's own group and other groups, whereby positive characteristics of the individual's own group are strongly emphasized while features and members of other group are denigrated. Thus, easy rejection of unfamiliar things is characteristics of ethnocentrism which therefore becomes a component of general prejudice. Hence, both concepts of ethnicity and ethnocentrism convey notions of negative inter group perceptions and relationships. It has been observed that ethnicity has always been important to people because it not only locates them in group, but also helps them to answer the question, "who am I?" (Gordon, 1988). The nature of an ethnic group's relationship with the society as a whole and with other groups in it constitutes one of the main problems in describing and analyzing such societies. In contemporary Nigerian society, people has been expected to subordinate their particular ethnic identity to national identity (e.g Ogoni), and in the process experience problems in assimilation, in asserting their unique ethnic identity and tradition. Such problems are compounded by the past historical neglect of these groups as recognized contributing members of Nigerian society which in turn, lead to social, psychological, economic, and recently political problems of disadvantaged Nigerian minorities.

### **The Concept of Socialization and Ethnic Socialization**

Every society has its own codes and conducts, rules and regulations, and norms and values. Infact, human beings as cultural animals have to figure out ways to adapts to their world and pass those ways to their children (Owoeye, 2012). Every human groups passes to their children what they believe would enable them adapt to their world. Therefore, Osuji (2005 in Owoeye,2012) stated that all human beings intervene to help their children learn appropriate behaviors, ignoring the adults because they are more amenable. However, socialization occurs throughout an individual life which means that socialization is a means of passing culture from one generation to another.

During socialization, humans learn the language of the culture they are born into as well as the roles to be played in life, on addition, they learn about the occupational roles that their society has in stock for them. This process of socialization is not limited to languages only but also the learning and adoption of cultural norms which are conceptions of appropriate and expected behavior that are held by mist member of the society. Socialization is a learning process that begins shortly after birth, and each society has its own socialization culture and process. This is mostly referred to as the rite of passage. Socialization processes are therefore shown in the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria. According to Owoeye (2012), socialization

process in Hausa land usually begins about a week after a child is born, when the child is given a name, during an Islamic naming ceremony. In their mid- to- late-teens, young men and women may become engaged. The marriage ceremony may take as long as several days. Music and art are important in their everyday life. From a young age, Hausa children participate in dancing, which are held in meeting places such as the market. Again, Hausa society has a strong division of labor according to age and sex. The main activity in towns is thread while in rural areas, it is agriculture. The Yoruba's are not left out. The family is the most sacred as significant institution to the Yoruba, who are child centered, rule by the elderly, and controlled by adults. Yoruba culture places extremely high value on children, it is safe to say that children are the highest good of the Yoruba. Therefore the value of children seems to show nature of immortality of the soul which flows which flows cyclically in the lineage through the birth of children. Among the Igbo, an Igbo offspring is a product of his father's lineage. The Igbo culture perceives socialization primarily as rite of passage. One of the highest occasions in the life of Igbo girls and boys is the initiation into adulthood through the rite of passage. Also, it is essential to point out that when one attains the age of puberty in most Igbo society, one is introduced to both the mother's mother's lineage and the father's father's lineage.

Ethnic socialization is the ways in which group membership affect development and development and development processes by which we acquire the behaviours, perceptions, values and attitudes of an ethnic group to come to see ourselves and others as members of such group. These developmental processes shape our self-concepts and play a role in shaping our self-esteem, our attitudes, and behaviours towards our own and other groups as well as the way we are evaluated by others. Understanding of such processes will help us facilitate the personal development and cross-ethnic interactions of those we work with. Ethnic socialization is widely practiced in Nigeria. It has been identified as one of the critical task of Nigerian people particularly the social workers. Family ethnic socialization refers to parents' and other family members' efforts to expose young ones (youths) to the values and behaviors of their ethnic culture (umana-Taylor et al. 2009). Also Umana Taylor and Guimond, (2010) supports the notion that family ethnic socialization is positively associated with youths' ethnic identity exploration (i.e the degree to which youth have explored their ethnicity) and ethnic identity resolution (i.e the degree to which they are clear about the meaning that their ethnic group membership has in their lives).

### **The Growth of Ethnic Awareness**

One of the major personal and social needs of a young child is to be able to acquire an identity. He needs to be able to answer the question “who am I?”. He cannot answer that question until his society has answered the question “who he is.” The attitudes, values and behavior of his society towards him will act as a mirror for him to identify himself and distinguish it from other selves around him. This consequently led Cooley (1902) to conceptualize what he called “looking glass self”. Man’s dependent nature makes the existence of human societies necessary as sources of his learning and survival. This implies that the existence of ethnic groups is crucial since such groups enable the young child to acquire both personal and social identity. This means that the young child needs, not only to identify and distinguish himself from other individuals in his ethnic group but also to identify and distinguish his ethnic group from other ethnic or social groups. The question then is, how does the young child develop ethnic awareness/identity? Part of the answer is that in the course of his socialization, the agents of socialization reinforce in him the need to belong and adhere to the worldviews of a specific and identifiable, linguistic and cultural group in terms of which his personal identity can emerge. That group obviously has to be his ethnic group.

### **Socialization and Growth of Ethnic Awareness**

Socialization is the root of all forms of social behavior whether adaptive or maladaptive. Socialization is a complex process. It involves being “led” by more able people into the ways of a society. Therefore socialization maybe defined as the process of learning to think and to act like other members of one’s society. According to Thompson (1975), socialization refers to the organized social learning experiences through which the individual comes to acquire the conceptual and behavioral standard characteristic of the human aggregate in which he or she grows to adulthood. Unlike the instinctual emergence of behaviors in subhuman animals, socialization in human involves the development of thought and evaluative or judgmental processes. It covers a wide range of society, through the acquisition of language, gestures, symbols and communication media, to learning the traditions and accepting the attitudes and values of one’s own culture. Moreover, socialization spans the entire life span of every individual in the course of which the individual observes, learns, adopts and adapts the behaviours relevant or pertinent to every stage of his development.

Human beings even when tender in age, have very strong observation powers. The people from whom they learn by observation are called models. A model for example, a mother, father, teacher, or any significant other in the community, may have the objective of transmitting to the learner or young person, certain predetermined bits

of knowledge, information, skill, habit, value, attitude, etc. but in doing so, he or she often exhibits styles, mannerisms, uses of words, slangs or gesture which he or she may not be conscious of or consider important, but which the learner observed keenly and in many instances, practices and effectively and/or efficient acquires.

### **Implication of Social Work practice in Nigeria**

As a profession, social work's principal mission is to intervene and change human and social phenomena rather the solely to describe or explain them. Social workers must develop sensitivity towards ethnic populations. Sensitivity will ensure that assumption regarding the needs of the population are not entwined with those of majority population will be better equipped for clinical practice. There is a need for clinical practice to consider the impact of racial discrimination and racial identity development (zayas, 2001). Perhaps the most effective method of developing sensitivity is to become aware of the historical, cultural, societal, and familial differences that impact the group's social functioning and mental health. This strategy will be increasingly important as social workers encounter greater numbers of immigrant children who have relocated with their families to urban areas for employment opportunities. Once social workers have an understanding of the differences in socialization experiences, their practice

with groups can be sensitive to the hardships that these groups face in everyday life based on historical events. It is imperative for the social worker to understand the client's culture and perspectives on critical issues. In essence, the social worker is to have some adequate knowledge about clients' cultural background and world view in order to know how to approach issues presented by the client. Social workers should understand culture and its function in human behavior and society, recognizing the strengths that exist in all cultures. Since Nigeria is a multicultural society, the promotion of cultural diversity should be the ethos of Nigerian social workers. It behooves social workers to equip themselves with the right knowledge so that they can reconcile the different objectives of their service provision to different groups. In other words they need to have a knowledge base of their clients' cultures and be able to demonstrate competence in the provision of service that are sensitive to clients' cultures and to differences among people and cultural groups.

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