The Nature of the Theory of Ethnic Hybridity as Informed by Stuart Hall

Stuart Hall (b. 1932) is a cultural theorist and sociologist who along with other researchers including Homi Bhabha, (b. 1949) refer to the theory of cultural (ethnic) hybridity. The concept is used to describe the experience of people who have multiple ethnic identities. An example is Greek-Australian children who have one set of cultural experiences within their homes and communities and an entirely different identity within their schools. These multiple identities reflect the idea that the concept of ethnicity is both temporary and evolving.

These same theorists have different theories about why people form hybrid ethnic identities. Hall suggests that hybridity involves a process where individuals develop connections across cultural groups. People identify with and choose elements of more than one culture that then form a blended ethnic identity.

Bhabha’s theory is informed by the experiences of second-generation migrants. He describes ethnic hybridity as being a position of “in-between”. This period of “in-between” relates to the shift from identification with one culture until the complete assimilation into another (Bhabha 1990).

Experiences of Hybridity

Zuleyka Zevallos (2003) interviewed young Latin-American women living in Australia and observed that to some degree their ethnicity was selective. The young women had the option of seeing themselves as Latin-American or Australian, and at times both. Sometimes, expressions of their Latin-American selves were displayed, for example, through dance, food and dress. There were also times, however, when the women were happy to embrace their Australian identity, particularly when themes of gender relations or sexuality were involved. They preferred to engage with the Australian values of equality and independence.

It is important to note that not all ethnic groups are able to move freely between cultural identities. For example, Waters (1990) notes that while people of European descent in American society are able to celebrate their ethnic identities, others face a “socially enforced racial identity”. The implication is that often a society attaches a label to an ethnic group and that group then finds it very difficult, if not impossible to challenge.

Young Australian migrants face particular challenges as they adjust to a new culture and form adult identities. Some young people struggle to balance their parents’/communities’ expectations of them with the values of their peers and wider society. This has been described as being “caught between cultures”. The experience of cultural adjustment often generates conflict between young people and their families. This originates from families placing a great deal of importance on cultural maintenance, but at the same time, expecting young people to succeed in mainstream society.

According to Berry (2007), there are four common responses by young people to this pressure. They are:

1) Assimilation. They adopt the new culture and reject the old culture.
2) Withdrawal. They reject the new culture and preserve or exaggerate the old culture.
3) Marginalisation. Reject both old and new cultures.
4) Integration or biculturalism. Maintain important aspects of their old culture while also adopting parts of their new culture.