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CHANGES IN AFRICAN AMERICAN IDENTITY IN THE 1960S: SOCIAL MIND TRANSSTRUCTURAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The article is devoted to the analysis of changes in African American ethnic cultural identity as being one of the socio-conceptual phenomena of the American social mind in the 1960s. Numerous studies on identity formation show that a set of changing characteristics forms the concept of identity. Various complicated processes influence the way cultures, nations, and communities see themselves. The authors assume that identity has a multilayered dynamic structure (transstructural characteristic features). The authors' goal is to focus attention on the analysis of the development and changes of different layers and aspects of African American cultural identity under the influence of certain factors in the 1960s the way it is depicted in the movie "The Help". The movie shows the process of forming a growing community of Black Americans with different self-esteem and self-vision which subsequently triggers some structural changes in their social consciousness. The events presented in the movie have had a dual influence over the American mentality – while triggering distrust of the government and the tendency of revisionism, they have also served as a ground for rethinking and changing the established sociocultural patterns, in particular, the stereotypes associated with the African American community.

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Keywords: African American community, cultural identity, ethnic consciousness, national mentality, social mind, transstructural analysis



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1. Introduction

Since the second half of the XX century linguists, sociologists and politologists have shown a deep interest in cultural and sociocultural interactions. Such interactions are influenced by the historic time-period, social and political events and form a multilayered structure of a culture. Culture, for the purpose of this article, is understood, after Hofstede, as a collective programming of mind. Thus, it is possible to distinguish the phenomenon of a social mind which depicts the aspects of a national mentality. The social mind is a dynamic complex sociocultural phenomenon which has a layered structure. The driving force behind the scholars' interest in sociotransstructural studies is considered to be the result of globalization and integration processes that lead to increasing the number of language and sociocultural contacts in the world by many researchers.

2. Problem Statement

The analysis of changes in the structure of a social mind of various ethnocultural groups is considered in this article on the example of gradual and progressive transformation of African American ethnic community mentality in the 1960s. This time was a great time of social changes in the American society, which almost by half consisted of African Americans (the black people). The basic moments of the process of these changes are perpetuated in the book "The Help" by Kathryn Stockett and its screen adaptation under the same name. Since this work provides a deep view onto the worries, concerns, sufferings, and hardships of the black community, as well as changes of their mentality that occurred against the background of the crucial sociopolitical events of the 1960s, "The Help" has been chosen as a source of the example of social mind transformations. Within the framework of this article, the screen version of the novel is taken as a more concise and dynamic form of the analyzed discourse.

3. Research Questions

In this study, the following research questions are set:

- 3.1. What are the basic changes in the American national mentality of the 1960s?
- 3.2. How does the ethnic African American sociocultural community change its social attitudes within the American mentality influencing the American social mind of the 1960s?

4. Purpose of the Study

The basic purpose of the study is to make an analysis of changes in the African American ethnic cultural identity as being one of the socio-conceptual phenomena of the American social mind in the 1960s. Focusing attention on the analysis of the development and changes of different layers and aspects of the African American cultural identity under the influence of certain factors in the 1960s the way it is depicted in the movie "The Help" has an important priority for the authors as well.

5. Research Methods

The basic research method is the holistic multidisciplinary complex approach which includes the methods of linguacultural, sociopolitical and historical studies combining the methods of such academic disciplines as History, Sociology, Regional Studies, and Cross-Cultural Linguistics. Besides, such methods of Linguistics as conceptual analysis, the analysis of dictionary definitions, comparative and descriptive analyses have also been used.

6. Findings

What Hofstede (1991) called “collective programming of the mind” (p. 11) takes place within each culture and is specific to a given ethnic group. A person is submerged into culturally specific values and beliefs, brought up according to the culturally specific traditions and practices which are characteristic of the ethno-social environment. The personality is formed under the influence of such factors as family upbringing, social circle, received education, conditions of living, general socio-political environment. With the person’s growing up, these aspects set the structure of the mind, form the person’s cultural identity.

Metaphorically, it may be compared to the geological structure of the earth crust, where the deepest layers remain comparatively steady, unless some powerful geological outbreaks occur, taking forms of earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, when lava comes out of the earth’s interior getting over several upper layers and spilling over the surface changing the structure of the land piece forever.

Despite its metaphorical nature, the same process is observed in the structural changes of human minds. Serious events in people’s lives are capable of making the same drastic changes in ethnic consciousness that remained seemingly invariable for hundreds of years. Self-consciousness and self-identification of African Americans started to undergo significant changes in the 1960s.

1. Numerous studies on identity formation issues show that a set of changing characteristics forms the concept of identity. Thus, we can say that identity has a multilayered dynamic structure (transstructural characteristic features). According to Thompson (1995), the African American racial identity can be divided into four parameters: physical (i.e., acceptance and comfort with the physical attributes of African Americans); cultural (i.e., awareness, knowledge of, and commitment to the cultural traditions of African Americans); sociopolitical (i.e., commitment to resolving the economic, social and political issues facing the Black community); and psychological (i.e., concern for pride in the racial group) (Sullivan & Esmail, 2016). Therefore, in this article, the analysis is focused on the development and changes of different layers and aspects of African American cultural identity under the influence of certain factors in the 1960s as depicted in the movie “The Help”.

The way the American society views the African American community is intertwined with the social events that took place in the historical period under consideration. In the 1960s, the USA saw significant shifts in the mentality and in cultural values fed on the social events. The decade is characterized by a growth in the social movements of the wide spectrum: antiwar movement (in particular, against the war in Vietnam), movements for the rights of ethnic and sexual minorities,

ecological movements, etc. The link between the growth in the social movements and the shift in cultural values is reciprocal: the social movements reflect the spirit present in the society – the spirit of demilitarization, tolerance, equality; on the other hand, the movements form tendencies in the collective system of values.

The social movements feed on a singular American cultural feature – questioning of values. Americans are inclined to questioning trends, facts, events of sociopolitical life. It is well known that the community (civil society), not the government, played the main role in making of America. Since then, the government has been held accountable to the civil society. Questioning of values was highlighted in the 1960s by such dramatic events as the Kennedy assassination, the murder of Martin Luther King (as well as Watergate scandal in the next decade). In general, the social trends and events that took place in the USA in the 1960s provided an advantageous background to the shift in the national mentality, identification, attitudes.

Specifically, the important social trend of the 1960s was yet another stage of the development of the movement for the rights of African Americans. For instance, in August 1963, the Great March on Washington – a large political protest aimed to reach economic and political freedoms for African Americans – took place. In the late 1960s, the US saw the rise of the Black Power. Although heavily criticized for promoting “black supremacy”, this heterogeneous movement became a symbol and a tool of active, somewhat aggressive, searching for the new identity for African Americans. The means that the movement used were very demonstrative, eye-catching, and decisive. One of the most memorable examples is the incident that took place at the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City. Two African American medal-winners raised fists as the US anthem played, to show loyalty to the Black Power movement. The movement, controversial as it is, has contributed to the emerging political identity of African Americans, providing them with a chance to view themselves as agents of social change. Another example of the movement that drastically changed the landscape for the African American political and social identity is the Black Panther Party founded in 1966. The organization initially positioned itself as self-defense and claimed resistance to police brutality as its main goal. It is important to note that over the development of the organization, Black women finally came to play important roles in it, seen as equal members and active participants of the group. Such members as Kathleen Cleaver, Angela Davis and others became role models and icons of the African American political movement, which was an opportunity for black women to reconsider their status in the society and embrace the renewed, emerging ethnic identity.

Thus, the period of the 1960s was the time period favorable for significant shifts in the national mentality and social attitudes in a number of important spheres, including the attitudes of the society toward the African American community. The reasons behind this relate to two levels: at a more specific level, black movements and organizations changed the sociopolitical landscape with their active, demanding agenda. At a wider level, the general spirit of questioning values and doubting governmental policies, the challenge to shift social patterns, the desire for freedom and tolerance provided the basis for a new (self)identification of African Americans in the American society.

The process of social patterns shift is perfectly described in the movie “The Help”. The events of the movie “The Help” take place in one of the most racist states, Mississippi, during the 1960s. African American maids spend their lives in hard and monotonous work serving rich southern families bringing

their children up. One southern society girl, Skeeter, who unlike her peers does not share racist views, decides to interview some maids about their lives secretly. First frightened, they finally tell numerous stories about arrogant, unfair treatment of their white masters, who consider them second-class citizens. The more blatant cases happen, including humiliations, calumnies, murders of innocent African Americans, the more decisive the main African American heroines become, forming a growing black community with different self-esteem and self-vision, which subsequently triggers structural changes in socioethnic consciousness of African Americans and, as a result, in the American social mind.

The basis of any identity is formed by the place / time / conditions of a person's birth, his or her gender, race, nationality. The childhood experience, "a child's relationship with his or her parental figure" (Kroger, 2004), becomes a crucial factor for the construction of one's identity. Aibileen (an African American maid), speaking about her formation of "vocational identity", says that she knew from the childhood she was going to be a maid.

From this example, it is evident that in the 1960s most African American women in the USA identified themselves only as domestic servants due to certain mental programs they acquired as a result of their experience within their family.

Taking into consideration the fact that "The sources of one's mental programs lie within the social environment in which one grew up and collected one's life experiences... It starts with a family... it continues within the neighbourhood... in youth groups... at the workplace, and in the living community" (Hofstede, 1991, p. 4), it must be said that one's identity is socially constructed and can be transformed as people interact with the others and experience different challenges and struggles.

It is important to consider the cognitive layer of the African American identity which concerns a set of shared mental structures like cultural norms, moral principles, values and beliefs. The African American maids show that they try to teach white kids some important values that are not shared by their white mothers, and to instill in them something more important on the basis of their own experience. For example, Aibileen is constantly repeating this to her beloved white baby girl: *You is kind, you is smart.....you is important.*

Here she expresses resistance to the white women's standard of beauty. The baby girl's mother does not take care of her because she is not beautiful enough for her. Instead, Aibileen teaches the girl some more important values: to be kind, smart and important.

Constantine teaches Skeeter not to pay attention to what the society says in order to maintain self-esteem as she knows what it means to feel ugly and rejected by others. She says that real ugliness is something inside a person, not outside; it is not about appearance.

One of the key factors in the construction and transformation of the African American cultural identity is the status of the Black Americans as a minority group in the social structure during the era of segregation. As shown in the movie, social distance and physical separation between the black population and the white population are ensured by institutionalized practices (rules and regulations) and are being reproduced in everyday interactions.

The most vivid examples of the influence of everyday interactions on the evaluation of Self and the construction of identity are observed within the personal relationships between African American domestic maids and white female employers. In the movie, they are represented as a paradoxical

situation. The maids raise the children, and as they grow up, they become their bosses. Despite their mutual love and affection, there are still strict rules and restrictions in their behavior.

On the one hand, African American women are employed as cleaning ladies, nannies and maids for the white families. They cook food for them, clean their houses, raise their children with love and affection and the latter love them in return:

*You're my **real** mama, Aibee.*

On the other hand, they are stereotyped as dirty or contaminated, carriers of diseases and, thus, not allowed to use the whites' bathrooms.

The whites represent their African American maids as something they want to protect themselves from, but in fact we see that the blacks have to seek protection from them because they experience racial discrimination, violence and injustice. Erikson (1968) described the Negro identity as an adaptive coping technique in which African Americans have learned to protect themselves from potentially troublesome circumstances (Brittian, 2012).

Let us consider different forms of the white employers' discrimination against Black Americans as represented in the movie. In terms of employment African American women are given only hard, low-paid jobs: they do cooking, cleaning, grocery shopping, taking care of babies. Some of them say they never had paid vacation in their life.

They are treated not only as second-class people, but also as some objects or a property.

As a result of their low economic status, African Americans portrayed in the movie can hardly make ends meet, and their children have to leave school to help them:

*Leroy had made Sugar **quit school to help** him with the bills.*

*I **dropped out of school to help** Mama with the bills.*

Moreover, as a tool of manipulation and humiliation, the white ladies often use the idea of representing their African American maids as thieves. Minnie, one of the black maid characters, was dismissed because she had used the toilet designed for the white family. It happened on a stormy night, it was dangerous for her to go out. But her white employer explained her dismissal by another reason, saying that she had stolen something. She wanted that nobody would ever hire her:

*She done told every white woman in town I'm a **thief**. Said I stole a candelabra.*

*Nobody wanted to hire a **sass-mouthing, thieving nigra**.*

Being falsely accused of theft is really devastating and humiliating for this African American woman's self-image as she tried hard to prove herself honest and hard-working.

Among other negative feelings and emotions African American women have to cope with, it is necessary to name their constant fear of being killed or arrested. They say that their life is always under the threat only because of their skin color.

As depicted in the movie, the constant struggle with external factors may serve as a driving force for a change. As African American women have to constantly cope with such negative feelings and experiences as the lack of respect, some hatred toward them, humiliation, brutality and violence; it makes them realize that they need a change and they try to find some strength to fight discrimination.

They want to overcome negative stereotypes, reshape their role and create a positive self-image; thus, restructure their identity as such. That is why they accept Skeeter's offer to write a book about their lives.

One more factor that may transform one's identity is an individual experience. Aibileen's son death made her reconsider the position of the African American people in the American society and think about possible changes in their lives.

Our analysis proves that "being Black in the USA is a resistance identity which is constructed through negative experiences of bigotry, discrimination, and, for some, a lower economic status, and also through positive experiences of Black culture, history and family" (Castells, 1997, p. 62). Moreover, it shows that in the 1960s certain layers of African American identity underwent a series of transformations under the influence of different factors.

The movie shows how ideas of white supremacy in the southern American society, stiffening of Jim Crow laws, and violence of KKK members finally bring African Americans to the point of no return in their set scheme of life and mind.

7. Conclusion

The method of transstructural analysis may be applied as an effective means to studying some changes in national mentality expressed in social mind. Numerous studies on identity formation issues show that a set of changing characteristics forms the concept of identity. Different complicated processes affect the way cultures, nations and communities perceive themselves. The authors of the article argue that identity has a multilayered dynamic structure (transstructural characteristic features) and focus their attention on the analysis of the development and changes of different layers and aspects of African American cultural identity under the influence of the historic events of the 1960s showing the process of forming a growing community of the Black Americans with different self-esteem and self-vision, which subsequently triggers certain structural changes in social consciousness of African Americans.

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