2.2: Anthropological Perspectives

Anthropology is not just the study of how man and society evolved but profoundly interested in explaining and understanding the holistic aspects of man’s experiences that makes man human. According to Meijl (2008), the interest of early anthropology in a person is centered on the concept of personality and culture emerging from Freud and Sullivan’s psychoanalysis.  Personality and culture are co-influenced, i.e. personality was considered to be resulting from the internalization of culture, whereas culture was regarded as the projection of personality.

Eventually, the work of Erikson in the ‘50s on ego identity replaced the notion of personality and became a key term in anthropology. Identity referred to a well-adjusted personality that emerges from the same, or identical, identification of self by self and other (Erikson, 1950 as mentioned by Meijl, 2008). Hence, the concept of identity connotes sameness and stability which ran across many disciplines like sociology, psychology, philosophy, and anthropology in its earlier stage.

“Marcel Mauss (1938) used the concept of self (moi) but prefer the concept of persona (personne). Implicitly he focussed on the notion of person as a cultural category while he seemed to reserve the conception of self for the psychological dimension of personhood” (Meijl, 2008 p. 176). The concept of person is basically a cultural conception of a specific community while the concept of self was understood as a self-conscious agent that was constituted socially and psychologically.

In the contention of Morris (1994) “the self is not an entity but a process that orchestrates an individual’s personal experience as a result of which he or she becomes self-aware and self-reflective about her or his place in the surrounding world. The concept of self may accordingly be defined as an individual’s mental representation of her or his own person, as a self-representation, while the concept of other refers to the mental representation of other persons. Indeed, the most crucial form of interaction and exchange takes place between the self and her or his cultural environment as mediated in social practices” ( Meijl, 2008 p. 176).

In a postmodern perspective, the self is no longer considered as the source of all reflection, but it is reduced to a mere function of social practice. The self is never unified but increasingly disunited, while it is never singular but always constituted in manifold manners in different domains of society (Hall, 1996). Hence, the self is currently understood as a pluralist, fragmented, emergent, dialogical, relational, inconsistent, and culturally determined (Murray, 1993).

The cognitive dissonance theory by Leon Festinger (1957) hypothesized that any person experiences the existence of dissonance between cognitive elements as uncomfortable and therefore everyone will always try to reduce a discrepancy between conflicting cognitions and attempt to achieve consonance, consistency, and coherence. This theory contends that people attempt to preserve a consistent and stable sense of self.

Cognitive anthropologists refer to cognitive schemata and cultural models that are shared by members of a society and internalized into the self. This implies that people have no choice but to accommodate diverging cultural identifications within a relatively stable and coherent self. In order to maintain a cohesive whole, the self rejects or suppresses identifications that may conflict with other types of cognitive information and self-representations (Meijl, 2008).

Katherine Ewing’s (1990) paper ‘The Illusion of Wholeness’ tried to show how individual selves throughout the world continuously reconstitute themselves into new selves in response to internal and external stimuli. The self is generally not aware of these shifts in self-representation, which do not therefore thwart individual experiences of wholeness and continuity. The shifting selves can only be observed by others, who are generally also unable to identify an overarching, cohesive self. In Ewing’s perspective, this implies that the experience of personal continuity and wholeness by self is illusory.