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Problems of Cross-Cultural Social Character Research

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Abstract: The paper presents a study of the social character of 16 people with an adapted version of the social character questionnaires developed by Erich Fromm and Michael Maccoby (Fromm & Maccoby 1970b) and Rainer Funk and colleagues (Fromm-Gesellschaft 1995). The difficulties during the analysis of the responses are described and the main cultural differences that are responsible for these difficulties are analyzed.

Keywords: Erich Fromm; social character; empirical research; cultural differences; zadruga

The aim of the study is to apply Erich Fromm's method of studying the social character and to find what the social character orientation of the teachers is. We compare teachers from Bulgarian and Turkish origin (who were born and live in Bulgaria). There is also a comparison of the characters of the respondents by gender.

Social character is

»the nucleus of the character structure which is shared by most members of the same culture in contradistinction to the individual character in which people belonging to the same culture

differ from each other« (Fromm 1955a, p. 76).

Its function is to »mold and channel human energy within a given society for the purpose of the continued functioning of this society« (Fromm 1955a, p. 77). The social character is a mediator between the economic base and the superstructure (ideas and ideology in the society). It is not »statistical measure of the traits shared by a majority; rather, it is a functional concept to be understood in relationship to the socio-economic system, particularly the dominant methods of production« (Maccoby 1982, p. 75). The family acts as an »agent« of the society and the main social character traits are transmitted to the child by it: »Though the social character can be determined by many factors, its roots are built into the child by his parents; since their character conforms with the »social character,« they mould the child's character accordingly. In this way, »*the family becomes the psychological agent of society*« (Fromm 1958c, p. 4, Fromm's italics). And it is important »that what the child in the family experiences is the reflection of the life of the society, that the family is not »the reason« for the formation of character but represents the mechanism for transmission of socially given traits to the



individual« (Fromm 1992e, p. 37).

Methodology of the research

The basis of the study is »analogy between a social and a personal psychoanalytic interview« (Fromm & Maccoby 1970b, p. 25). The aim of the interviews is to find out the main motivational forces of the individuals, and the essence of their character structures. The researcher attempts to understand the unconscious meaning of the phrases and words used by the respondent and the »meaning which he did not intend to express or is not aware of expressing« (ibid., p. 26). The respondents are not analyzed on their own, that is, at an individual level, but in relation to the social environment of which they are an integral part and without which they cannot be fully understood.

Problems

- Neither of the existing questionnaires is entirely suitable for examining the social character of the Bulgarians and the Bulgarian Turks (Fromm & Maccoby 1970b; Fromm-Gesellschaft 1995).
- None of the existing questionnaires fit entirely for the purposes of study of teachers from Bulgaria (Fromm-Gesellschaft 1995).
- Another problem that needed to be solved was the difference between the Bulgarians and the Bulgarian Turks. Although they live in the same country both ethnicities have different culture, different religion and different social background, since most of the Bulgarian Turks are descendants of the Turkish population that remained after the restoration of the Bulgarian state in

1878. The Turks were formerly the ruling nation since Bulgaria was a part of the Ottoman Empire. After the restoration of the Bulgarian state most of the wealthy and ruling Turks left. The ones who stayed were poor and to one degree or another they shared the ubiquitous poverty of the Bulgarian population. Nevertheless, the Bulgarian population perceives them as descendants of the wealthy and ruling Turks and this creates specific attitudes toward them.

Solution of the problems

These three problems were solved after numerous discussions with Rainer Funk about how to fit the questions to the social conditions in Bulgaria. After that was created a modified version of the social character questionnaire used by Erich Fromm and Michael Maccoby in the study of the social character of Mexican villagers (Fromm & Maccoby 1970b) and the questionnaire used by the Fromm-Society in the study of teachers from East and West Germany (Fromm-Gesellschaft 1995). Some questions were added and others were removed in order to fit it better to the social conditions in Bulgaria and to the life of the Bulgarian Turks (mainly the questions concerning religion). We used the same stories that Fromm and Maccoby used in the end of the questionnaire but we changed the circumstances a little. The final version of the questionnaire contains 79 questions and six stories.

During the initial analysis the problem arose of how to analyze the answers of the respondents. The problem was resolved by creating a structure to analyze each person's response. This structure has to do with how the individual relates to the oth-



ers—relations with the parents, relations with the children (if they have any) and romantic relations.

The next problem arose when I was unable to determine the social character of 6 out of 16 respondents. There are a number of objective reasons for this. One reason is that in Bulgaria there is no other researcher who knows how to study the social character and the researcher had to do the analysis alone (at least most of the time).

To cope with this problem some of the answers from the interviews were discussed with Rainer Funk; others were discussed with my former academic advisor for my bachelor's thesis on Erich Fromm and Zen Buddhism, Assoc. Prof. Irena Levkova, PhD.

During the analysis there were difficulties with interpreting the answers from the interview according to the framework of the social character orientations described by Fromm. Rainer Funk advised me to consult the book *Social Character in a Mexican Village* (Fromm & Maccoby 1970b) because Fromm and Maccoby were faced with similar problems during the analysis.

Actually, some parts of Fromm and Maccoby's categorization of the villagers in the Mexican study were very helpful, particularly *parental fixations* and the *social-political mode* in regard to *authoritarianism* and *traditionalism*. The parental fixations are common for all people and in some societies in Southern Europe there is a specific fixation to the mother. To distinguish between authoritarianism and traditionalism was helpful because many of our interviewees were born and raised in villages and their parents were most likely also born and raised in villages. This fact is of the utmost importance because it gives a framework for interpreting the interviews.

Furthermore, the Bulgarian society is still authoritarian which is partly a legacy of the communist regime and partly because it carries some of the old patriarchal traditions that are older than the communist rule. One peculiarity is that the structure of the modern Bulgarian family is rooted in a particular form of the extended family common for the South Slavs (Bulgarians and Serbians) called *Zadruga* (Vakarelski 1977, Kolev 1987). The *Zadruga* is an

»extended family composed of ten to twenty small families, related by blood, who lived and worked together, owned property jointly, and recognized the authority of a single patriarch. The extended family most often included four generations of men, the wives whom those men brought into the household through marriage, and the children produced through those marriages. Once a girl married, she would leave the *Zadruga* of her parents for that of her husband. No member of the *Zadruga* had any personal property other than clothes or the women's dowries.« (Kolev 1987, pp. 52 f.)

Another peculiarity is that the patriarch's wife also had many rights:

»The ›old man's‹ wife (or the senior woman if he were widowed) had similar authority over traditional women's activities such as tending the garden, observing holiday rituals, and sewing. The senior woman commanded similar respect from *Zadruga* members, but she was never allowed to interfere in functions designated for men.« (Kolev, 1987, p. 53.)

Today the *Zadruga* no longer exists but some traditional relationships between the



members of the interviewees' families which come from the relationships between the Zadruga members continue to

exist. In the table below are given the findings from the study of the social character of the Bulgarians and the Bulgarian Turks.

#	sex	ethni-city	age	place of birth	social character orientation
1	m	B	29	city	Unclear with authoritarianism and productivity
2	m	B	33	town	Receptive social character with fixation to the mother
3	m	T	34	town	Traditional authoritarian character mixed with democratic traits
4	m	T	40	village	Receptive individual character, traditional authoritarian character
5	m	B	41	city	Authoritarian sadomasochistic character
6	f	T	36	village	Authoritarian sadomasochistic character
7	f	B	44	city	Unclear character with traditional elements
8	f	B	45	town	Unclear character with authoritarianism
9	f	T	50	city	Authoritarian traditional character with masochistic tendencies
10	m	T	61	village	Traditional authoritarian character
11	f	B	47	city	Unclear character with fixation to the mother
12	f	T	42	city	Productive character with conflict with traditional values
13	m	T	47	village	Traditional authoritarian character
14	f	T	44	town	Unclear character, strong anxiety
15	f	B	33	city	Unclear character with authoritarian tendencies
16	m	B	49	city	Authoritarian character with sadistic elements

Table 1: Results from the social character research



Summary

The respondents from both ethnicities have an authoritarian character which is similar to the character of some of the peasants studied in Mexico. However, when we consider the Bulgarian Turks only, this applies more to the men than to the women. The conclusion that was reached is that the individualization of the Bulgarian Turks is not as advanced as that of the Bulgarians, and that for the Bulgarian Turks »I« to a great extent still means »We,« the Others. In order for an adequate typology of the social character to be created the process of individualization needs to be more advanced than it is now with the Bulgarian Turks. In the Bulgarian Turkish women this traditional authoritarian character does not appear, but rather masochism or conflict and rebellion against the traditional values. It can be said that this is due to their role in Turkish culture. Since the Turkish community in Bulgaria is still predominantly patriarchal, men have the traditional authority, while women are seen mainly as mothers and wives.

As socio-economic conditions change, women gradually start protesting against their role as objects that have certain tasks in their lives and cannot deviate from them—to give birth and to raise children. They no longer want to listen to authority, which in this case is embodied in the father. The researcher finds also that the teachers are strongly attracted to authority. Most of the teachers from the Turkish ethnicity have an authoritarian character which contains no sadistic traits (according to Fromm & Maccoby's categorization) and the teachers from the Bulgarian ethnicity have an authoritarian character with sadistic traits. In both groups of respondents (in the group of the Bulgarian Turks it is more

clearly displayed) a patriarchal attitude to the family is found, especially regarding the role of women and child-rearing. Both men and women support, often consciously and more often unconsciously, the hierarchical structure of the family.

Many teachers lack faith in their own children and also in the children they teach at school. They raise their children in a very particular way that doesn't allow them to take responsibility for themselves and others, making them dependent: the boys are especially dependent on their mothers. When speaking about Bulgaria one must have in mind that there is a difference between what is patriarchal and matriarchal in Bulgaria and how these are understood in the US and Western Europe.

Precisely because of the fact that the contemporary Bulgarian families, especially in the villages, are descendants of the traditional relations in the Zadruga there is a difference in the father's and the mother's role. Whereas Fromm speaks about the favorite son who will inherit the whole property from the father if he obeys him, in Bulgaria in the Zadruga there was no individual property and the property was not divided between the brothers. In the Zadruga the father did not have a favorite son but there was the mother's favorite son (in most of the cases this was the youngest son). From here we can assume why most Bulgarian men are so symbiotically attached to their mothers. This is a psychological artifact which persists through the generations. Another characteristic of the Zadruga is that while the patriarch managed the work of the men, the oldest mother cared for the women and the children in the house.



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