

The Problem of Sociocultural Adaptation to the New Environment: Theoretical Approach

Social adaptation is a process of active settling of individual or group in the new social environment. The term of adaptation that was originally one of the main biology concepts nowadays is used on a large scale in lots of natural, technical and social sciences. In the history of sociology the first to refer to the problem of adaptation is considered to be Herbert Spencer who expanded rules of biological adaptation on society in his theory of balance. Later research of questions of social adaptation was accomplished by representatives of the functionalist perspective like T. Parsons and R. Merton; in psychoanalysis this problem was described by E. Fromm who suggested differentiating static and dynamic kinds of adaptation. Also we can find some ideas related to this issue in the works of Weber and Sorokin. Significant contribution in developing the term of social adaptation was made by sociologists of Chicago School, particularly by W. Thomas and F. Znaniecki who had investigated processes of migration and adaptation to the new ethnic environment in their research “The Polish Peasant in Europe and America” in which methods of analyzing personal documents such as letters and diaries were used for the first time. R. Park viewed adaptation in the light of terms of marginal person and social distance.

Nowadays the necessity of problem is determined by world phenomena of globalization and rising sociocultural exchange among the countries. Acculturation is a complicated process owing to the fact of which individual achieves correspondence with other cultural environment not only through adjusting to it by passive adoption of new norms but also through enriching by the values of new culture while creating a synthesis of two cultures – his own and stranger’s one. This problem is inevitably experienced by migrants, refugees, members of cultural exchange programs, and also by people who work abroad.

After the World War II main concepts that dealt with adaptive strategies of the personality were generated – cultural shock concept and V-concept of adaptation which described main stages of adjusting to new culture (optimism, frustration, satisfaction).

The term of socially mature personality (that covers acting according to role-set theory, awareness of belonging to the society and feeling of solidarity) is also an important criteria in judging about social adaptation. From the point of view of social psychology, referent indicators of normal level of adaptation are: positive emotions in relations with the surroundings, satisfactory state of health and sense of mental comfort.

American sociologist N. Smelser claims that adaptive approach is an idea of socialization according to which adult life is presented as series of crises to which it’s necessary to adjust. Based on this notion we can name specific set of “challenges” in the routine practices of the foreign students: the so-called language barrier, entrance to the university, selection of specialty, communicating to surroundings, feeling of independence, establishing relations with students and teachers, new climatic conditions, collision with norms and values of a new environment. So on the fact of how foreign students perceive those “challenges” and thus react on them, depends final result of their adaptation. Consequently, adaptation as a large-scale phenomenon includes several spheres of personal being (social, psychological, cultural etc.) and with the help of their analysis we can make conclusions about levels of adjusting of individuals or social groups to a different ethnic environment.