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Multiculturalism: An Asset or a Problem? Implications for Intercultural Education



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Abstract

In the present article, I will examine the discourse and practices of multiculturalism as an alleged emancipatory aspect of contemporary social life. I will argue why a “one world, many peoples” doctrine has proved to be a far-fetched dream on many occasions. To do so, I will first review the ideals of multiculturalism and then will discuss how these very ideals are, at times, violated through a discriminatory treatment and representation of multicultural “others” in the Western communication media and organizations. The article, however, does not intend to depict a dystopia. Rather, the possibilities to arrive at tolerant heterogeneous communities will also be explored and ideas to promote successful intercultural communication and education will be put forward.

Keywords: multiculturalism, equal treatment, intercultural communication, othering, minority empowerment, intercultural education

Introduction

Multiculturalism, on paper, seems to be a decent notion. As defined by Colombo (2015), “multiculturalism refers to situations in which people who hold “different” habits, customs, traditions, languages and/or religions live alongside each other in the same social space, willing to maintain relevant aspects of their own difference and to have it publicly recognized” (p. 810, emphasis in the original). The ideals of multiculturalism are quite humane and liberating: “individuals have legitimate interests in their culture, language and identity, and [...] public institutions must fairly take those interests into account” (Kymlicka, 2018, p. 81). Multiculturalism is said to be “an inclusive process where no one is left out. Diversity, in its essence, then is a ‘safeguard against idolatry’—the making of one group as the norm for all groups” (Rosado, 1996, p. 9, emphasis in the original). As such, resisting and/or criticizing this benign phenomenon might seem an irrational obsession. However, the very mission of multiculturalism as well as its feasibility has been questioned from its early days (Green, 1994; Barry, 2001; Coulthard, 2007, 2014; among others; see Song, 2017, for an exhaustive

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summary). Discussing the philosophical and political arguments for and against multiculturalism is beyond the scope of the current paper. In what follows, then, I will attempt to briefly examine the discourse and practice of multiculturalism as an alleged emancipatory aspect of social life, and then discuss possibilities for intercultural education to promote healthy communication among people of different linguistic, cultural and religious backgrounds. The point of departure, for the paper, is foregrounding the dilemma of identity for the members of minority groups in relation to the demands of the dominant societies since central to the discussion of multiculturalism is how the minorities are to preserve and reveal their identities, rather than become unrecognizable in a social “melting pot” (cf., Song, 2017).

The Question of Identity for the “Others”

“Who am I?,” a personal question which at the first glance belongs in the realm of philosophy of existence, has to travel to the social domains to find its answer. For, who I am, partly depends on who you are! In other words, identity construction is not a stable, once-for-all process; in fact, people tend to re-construct their dynamic, multidimensional identities in response to perceived and/or actual changes in the characteristics of their interlocutors and other contextual factors (see Ethier & Deaux, 1994; Bosma & Kunnen, 2001; Reicher, 2004). Identity re-construction is not necessarily a smooth, painless mechanism. Harrison (2000) speaks of “dialectic tensions” between individual and collective identities. One of the most noteworthy instances of such tensions can be experienced by the minorities with the status of “others” in multicultural communities, especially where an assimilatory “melting pot” approach to culture may be still in vogue. Mey (2004) provides a genuine example of bare acculturation which might appear fictional today: the case of “Jacob Sementery,” a Russian Jewish immigrant, registered and naturalized as “Jake Smith,” “who left behind not only his native country [...] but also his ‘native’ name” (p. 34).

In Western democracies, nowadays, such cases are rare, but it seems that multicultural morals and philosophy are not as deep-seated as Banting and Kymlicka (2006) believe. In fact, there are notable and non-negligible counter-examples to their claim. Richardson (2004), for instance, documents the ambivalent position toward multiculturalism adopted by the British press. To them, it is praiseworthy to make children of other backgrounds feel at home; however, this kind of pluralism is also considered threatening to the British national identity and its cultural integrity. Richardson also demonstrates that the majority of broadsheet English newspapers tend to portray a negative picture of Muslim people in the UK, depicting them as unwanted “others” in the community.

Advocating a de-essentialized, post-structuralist perspective to identity, Block (2006) problematizes the 2001 UK national census’ definition of ethnic identity types in terms of race which generates five major categories of White, Mixed, Asian or Asian British, Black or Black British, and Chinese or other ethnic group. One wonders if such a classification can capture the ethnic diversity in a modern democratic community without any negative, discriminatory overtone.

Schierup and Ålund (2011) discuss the gradual demise of the Swedish model of multicultural citizenship, due to populist anti-immigration rhetoric of the governments, along with marginalization, segregation and labor discrimination practices addressed to the first- and second-generation immigrants. They argue how integration policies supported by both Left and Right parties have destroyed what they call “the golden” decades of liberal pluralism following the mid-1970s Swedish reforms (p. 48).

Investigating the definition of culture in a multilingual Canadian ESL setting, Lee (2015) complains of a built-in association of Canadian culture with Whiteness, concluding that in such a context “doing

culture in the classroom is likely to become synonymous to drawing a racial line between Whiteness (Canadianness) and otherness (non-Canadianness)” (p. 84).

As I have argued elsewhere (Babai, 2010), even academia is not a completely safe place for practicing multiculturalism. In my discourse analytic study, Asian periphery scholars were found to highlight their connection with the Western institutions and people while, at the same time, they tended to background or even hide their local affinities in their bio-data. These strategies, as far as I understand, are telltale signs of the fear of rejection in case their non-Western identities and belongings are disclosed.

In her critique of neoliberal multiculturalism, Kubota (2014) cleverly reminds that not all kinds of diversity are celebrated: there is “good” and “bad” diversity among immigrants, say, according to their social class, as in Australia, where “good” immigrants are those who can make economical contribution to the society while the “bad” immigrants are those who need social services. This way, multiculturalism can perpetuate long-lasting inequities in terms of race and class differences. In other words, there are groups of minorities who are doubly marginalized in the multicultural community which claims to be difference-blind. Kubota’s conviction is in line with Richardson (2004) who maintains that in the British media “in its “natural state,” Britain and the British public sphere are “White” and “Christian”; the values and practices of “ethnic minorities” should be studied and vetted, and only the “acceptable” ones admitted into this public sphere” (p. 138, emphasis in the original). Both of these scholars, in a way, reiterate the fact that for host communities, minorities are equal but—to adopt Orwellian wording—some are more equal than others!

“Othering,” that is, the discriminatory dichotomy of “us vs. them,” is not solely an organizational practice; it is also performed at the individual level. In her analysis of a number of narratives provided by Western women, Scharff (2011) describes how the participants attempted to dissociate themselves from “oppressed Muslim women” in their construction of independent and strong self. Interestingly, the stereotyped image they referred to was informed by the hearsay and the media, rather than by personal investigation.

In a nutshell, it seems that, despite the promises of multiculturalism, many Western organizations and individuals tend to represent and treat non-Westerns as unwanted “others.” In response to this “unwantedness,” the “others” may resort to self-marginalization and conformity if they desperately need acceptance by the West, or they might adopt an aggressive and/or defiant behavior to ease the pain of rejection. None of these strategies seem normal and self-fulfilling and can lead to further detrimental consequences for the minority groups as well as the members of the host community.

Racial inequality is not simply an imaginary “us vs. them” line, resulting in identity dilemmas for the minorities. It can also act as a gate-keeping mechanism to prevent others’ access to high social status. Tracing the history of standardized, high-stake tests in the United States, Au (2015), contends that tests such as IQ and national educational attainment are racial projects masqueraded as meritocracy and that they are at the service of structural, racial inequalities to the disadvantage of the people of color. So, the question of identity for the minorities is beyond a personal emotive issue and it needs to be handled as social crisis.

...And Justice for All

To deal with the dilemmas faced by minorities, the responsible parties need to investigate what the minorities want, and determine whether the host community is willing and able to accommodate for their needs. The first demand of an ethnic, cultural, or religious minority, perhaps, is visibility; the

desire to be seen and noticed as active social participants rather than being pushed into the background or even excluded in the dominant community. According to Bloemraad, de Graauw, and Hamlin (2015) “civic visibility” of immigrants on American and Canadian local media is very limited and the newspaper coverage fails to reflect the demographic features of the areas they studied. They call for greater visibility and agency of immigrants in domestic politics. For, as Winders (2012) rightly reminds us, “if immigrants are not institutionally visible to government or nongovernmental organizations, immigrants’ abilities to make claims to or on the city as urban residents are diminished” (p. 58). Visibility is also found effective in reducing anti-immigrant attitudes within the host community (Hjerm, 2009).

The second relevant demand is to be seen in a fair light. This is even more important than the first demand since being represented as uncivilized, reckless and unintelligent seems worse than not being staged at all. Critics of multiculturalism believe that minority groups are mostly exoticized and represented through some superficial cultural stereotypes (cf. Watson, 2000) which thwart a deeper understanding of their cultures by members of the host communities. Despite admirable efforts by most modern Western democracies to increase racial tolerance in society, in some places the media still exhibit problems such as: (a) traditional minority groups are constantly accused of violent maltreatment of women; (b) religions, especially Islam, are shown as a threat to freedom and security; and (c) many cultural values of non-White people are depicted as barbarian (see Gozdecka, Ercan, & Kmak, 2014).

Demands for visibility and fair representation, if fulfilled, can pave the way for the third want: equal treatment. The prospect, in this regard, does not appear so promising, either. Campbell and Roberts’ (2007) discourse analysis of job interviews in UK organizations unveils a tacit discriminatory practice addressed to foreign-born minority applicants. They reveal that employers confuse competence with personality and reject the minority applicants based on some subjective judgments about their personality which might have nothing to do with their ability to perform the required task. The situation is not so much better for those who get hired, even with supposedly high-status positions. In their interviews with female immigrant faculty members in the US academia, Lawless and Chen (2017) report the participants’ narratives of being marginalized because of race, gender and immigration, albeit in a more subtle, indirect manner.

The above-mentioned research is not cited to mask multicultural success stories such as minority mobilization in Germany (Trenz, 2007), successful multicultural marketplace in London (Watson, 2009), positive results of a progressive multicultural program called Grow Your Own Teachers in America (Madda & Schultz, 2009), Munna and Zenni’s (2010) relatively large sample of successful minorities in leadership roles, and Kymlicka’s (2012) evidence of successful multicultural citizenship and education in Canada (to mention but a few). Nor is it meant to downplay the financial and intellectual supports of certain well-meaning organizations like the Council of Europe in promoting inter-religions dialogue, increasing the life quality of migrants and expounding the rights of individuals and communities (Rey-von Allmen, 2011). These successful cases, however, should not prevent us from seeing that the realities of multiculturalism are somehow far from its ideals. There seems to be a wide gap between what minorities expect and what they get, and this, in the long run, could lead to further social complications which can be wisely prevented.

Before ending this section, one point of caution is in order. Although I have chosen to examine multiculturalism through the eyes of minorities, we should not forget that this social phenomenon is a two-way road. We need to understand the mentalities of host community members who may be under the influence of anti-immigration discourse in public sphere which depicts immigrants “as flooding the country, taking away the jobs of citizens, abusing the welfare system and undermining national

values (Green & Staerklé, 2013, p. 862, emphasis in original). They may feel threatened by multiculturalism and their insecure feelings can be intensified by the perceived essentialism of the migrant groups (Verkuyten & Brug, 2004). It follows that any systematic attempt to foster amicable intercultural dialogue in a multicultural society needs to recover the fading trust of the majority in the virtues of multiculturalism while, at the same time, is trying to reduce prejudices against the minorities.

Still No Room for “Hyphenated” Nationalities?

Facing with the fact of multicultural life, its advantages and disadvantages, many Western countries, including the USA, Canada, Australia, and immigration destinations in Europe launched an educational package in 1970s referred to as multicultural education (see Portera, 2008). In one of the early serious concerns about multicultural education, Tesconi (1984, p. 88) formulated its ideals (which he found difficult to implement) as follows:

- knowledge of cultures and subcultures with emphasis on significant minority groups;
- awareness of how specific cultures shape student responses to schooling;
- minimizing prejudice and maximizing tolerance for different others;
- adjustments in curricula aimed at promoting non-assimilationist strategies and values

In 2018, after decades of struggling with the concept, the ideals seem to be still more or less the same. Ironically, Tesconi’s prediction about their problematic application is also true. A major obstacle to successful multicultural education is the governments’ ambivalence toward the very concept of multiculturalism. Therefore, maybe the first step is an honest appraisal of the phenomenon which would be the answer to this article’s initial question: is multiculturalism an asset or a problem? If multiculturalism is considered a problem to be solved, the whole discussion on multicultural education and the like will be in vain. However, if multiculturalism is seen an asset, then, the minority groups and the members of host communities can start a constructive dialogue. It would make sense to ask whether or not the governments want a multicultural society where equal opportunities are provided for all, not just a select few groups. As long as officials are paying lip service to multicultural morals only to gain the support of minorities but in their heart are afraid of the influence of minority cultures, no significant improvement in multicultural communication can be envisaged. The sincere intention to foster social pluralism would endorse “intercultural education” whose scope is not limited to schools. All members of multicultural societies need to learn respect for and tolerance of others’ cultural values.

In line with Portera (2008), I believe that intercultural education “transcends” the notion of “respect for differences” and “peaceful coexistence” as the principles of multicultural education and necessitates “reciprocity” and “interaction” between cultures (p. 489). The contributing parameters to a felicitous intercultural education have been studied and proposed in numerous works. In a synthesis of literature on intercultural education, Perry and Southwell (2011) highlight the importance of developing “intercultural competence,” roughly defined as “the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with people from other cultures” (p. 455), and including four dimensions of knowledge, attitudes, skills and behaviors. They remind us that acquiring cultural knowledge per se does not lead to intercultural competence. They believe that more interdisciplinary research informed by the tenets of diverse fields such as cultural anthropology, cross-cultural psychology, sociolinguistics, multiculturalism, etc. are needed to conceptualize this phenomenon and find practical ways for its development.

Nevertheless, available scholarship on intercultural education can provide us with some helpful strategies. Williams (2005), for example, demonstrates that study abroad has a positive effect on

university students' intercultural adaptability and cultural sensitivity. Exposure to various cultures, she adds, is an important predictor for intercultural communication skills. In another study, Aboud (2009) suggests the use of media-based intercultural interventions, followed by post-exposure discussion to reduce children's racial biases. She reminds that simply reading a book or watching a TV program that directly gives anti-bias message is not going to be effective.

In an oft-cited work, Banks (2009, pp. 15-17) talks about five dimensions of multicultural education with the potential to be used in intercultural pedagogy: (a) content integration—including content from variety of cultures to illustrate key concepts in a given subject area; (b) the knowledge construction process—acknowledging that researchers' and textbook writers' cultural assumptions, perspectives and biases can affect the way knowledge is constructed; (c) prejudice reduction—attempts to help students develop democratic racial attitudes; (d) an equity pedagogy—encouraging teachers to modify their teaching in ways that will facilitate the academic achievement of students from diverse groups; and (e) an empowering school culture and social structure—creating different relationships among various groups based on reciprocal respect for cultural differences. Referring to several narratives about real-life intercultural encounters, Spiteri (2017) demonstrates how the model can effectively work. He also advocates cultural awareness and critical thinking for both teachers and students, adding that in the cases of people presented “with strong stereotypes at a young age, multicultural education has to thereby be dedicated to *unlearning what had been previously learned*, if equity is to be brought about” (Spiteri, 2017, p. 75, emphasis added). Of course, more research is needed to examine if the model can be prescribed as a guiding package for intercultural education.

Alongside intercultural education, some social changes are expected to happen as education is necessary, but not sufficient. That is, *talking about* equality does not make minority people feel they are normal citizens with equal rights. They need to see they are *treated* as equals. This means that more accountability and transparency are expected within the organizations that cater for employment, schooling and social welfare. Minority people need to be convinced that their lack of success in a particular case is due to some individual shortcomings, such as insufficient effort, knowledge or experience, etc., but not their ethnic, racial and religious backgrounds. In addition, minority empowerment initiatives should be taken more seriously. Empowerment, as defined by Andersen and Siim (2004), is “the process of awareness and capacity-building, which increases the participation and decision-making power of citizens and may potentially lead to transformative action which will change opportunity structures in an inclusive and equalizing direction” (p. 2).

It should be noted that the success of an empowerment program is not completely dependent on the cooperation and good will of the people and organizations belonging to the host community. Minority groups need to be willing to acquire the skills (linguistic, vocational and discursive) required for succeeding in a given communicative event. Campbell and Roberts (2007), for instance, find that a successful jobseeker in British organizations is the one who can synthesize personal and institutional discourse during a job interview. Otherwise, the misalignment between the interviewer(s) and the interviewee would lead to failure. Migrant applicants are more likely to suffer this kind of failure, due to their unfamiliarity with the cultural rules of the game and they need to receive guidance and instruction relevant to the situations they may encounter.

However, empowerment should not be offered in a form of patronage. It should not undermine self-respect and cultural identity of its recipients. Sharing a personal experience may help clarify the point. Once I met the representative of an educational publishing company, advertising the company's materials designed to teach “soft skills” for successful use of English as Lingua Franca in international settings. To illustrate, he mentioned the case of some East Asian job applications that seemed “flat” in the eyes of Western employers. As he explained, such applications were not competitive because the

applicants did not know how to use self-promotion and thought that the CV would speak for itself. He claimed that the company's materials would teach non-Western applicants how to increase their chance for employment through writing successful application letters and CVs. I inquired whether the company had any plan to familiarize Western employers with other people's cultural norms to understand that, for example, a so-called "flat" application might be due to resorting to the norm of "modesty" in some Asian cultures. He was visibly surprised, wondering why the employers would need any awareness of the kind. And I was surprised how a person in charge of international communication could deny the importance of reciprocal cultural understanding. By narrating this anecdote, I intend to emphasize that the attitude behind intercultural education matters. If intercultural education is based on genuine respect for all cultures and if the students of this school are not just the disadvantaged minorities, then, there would be a great number of good lessons to learn.

To conclude, although we relatively know what we should and shouldn't do in the realm of intercultural education and we have obtained some fragmented pieces of useful evidence, we need to reach a coherent model and attested set of guidelines through more vigorous empirical research on the effectiveness of the proposed ideas for the education of diverse groups of people, majority and minority alike.

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