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Understanding Cultural Diversity and Diverse Identities

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Synonyms

Cross-cultural communication; Dialogue; Multi-culturalism; Pluralism

Definitions

Cultural diversity is a debatable, open-ended term, which generally refers to a reality of coexistence of diverse knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, customs, religions, languages, abilities and disabilities, genders, ethnicities, races, nationalities, sexual orientations, etc., of human beings. It could extend to the way people react to this reality and the way people choose to live together with this reality.

Cultural Diversity and Identity

Introduction

People are divided by several factitious categories and partitions, such as identity politics, around the world where all cultural groups feel their members are to some extent being attacked, bullied, persecuted, and discriminated against. Whether people admit it or not, and whether government hide it or not, it is a fact that people are full of diversity in terms of gender, social class, ethnicity, race, language, abilities and disabilities, religion, sexual orientation, needs, nationality, political ideology, citizenship status, family composition, cultural background, income, occupation, etc. (Banks 2008b; Lin and Jackson 2019a). The human condition has itself become multicultural and interactive. For example, over 500 groups which the group population is more than 100,000 are commonly identified as ethnic groups across the world, let alone those groups which the group population is less than 100,000. Nearly about 5000 to 8000 distinct languages are spoken today (Evans and Levinson 2009). There are more than 4300 religions around the world, though over 70% of the world's population practices one of the five most influential religions of the world: Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism.

This situation promotes the reflection from institutions, scholars, and the public on how to bring people together and cooperate to solve the problems that all human beings are facing. UNESCO lists "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" as sustainable development goal 4. Cultural diversity brings both opportunities and challenges to the achievement of this

goal. Although many noble terms (e.g., equity and social justice) in relation to cultural diversity have been widely used and adopted in policies across the world as a politically correct way to deal with cultural diversity and people from different backgrounds, many cultures and people are still on the margin of society due to historical injustices, prejudices, fears, and misunderstandings. Over the past years, considerable progress on education access and participation has been made. However, 262 million children and youth aged 6 to 17 were still out of school in 2017, and more than half of children and adolescents are not meeting minimum proficiency standards in reading and mathematics (United Nations Economic and Social Council 2019).

In addition, people from marginalized countries, cultures, and backgrounds are more inclined to lack equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities. Among 750 million adults who remained illiterate in 2016, two thirds of them are women (United Nations Economic and Social Council 2019). Half of the global illiterate population lives in South Asia, and a quarter live in sub-Saharan Africa (United Nations Economic and Social Council 2019). Many developing countries still short of basic infrastructure and facilities to provide effective learning environments. Sub-Saharan Africa faces the biggest challenges: at the primary and lower secondary levels, less than half of schools have access to electricity, the Internet, computers, and basic drinking water (United Nations Economic and Social Council 2019). Therefore, it is time for people to rethink what cultural diversity could bring to this world and how people can work together to make good use of this opportunity, which is also the targets of sustainable development goals, especially goal 4.

Two Perspectives of Understanding Culture

Culture is mentioned and discussed by theorists, policy makers, educators, and the public when they examine and explain many issues, but various stakeholders do not always refer to the same thing. Culture can be used to label "other" people, but it also can serve the purpose of respecting people's differences and avoiding assimilation and coercion. Thus it is necessary to distinguish

what aspects of culture are referred to in different situations. In many situations culture can exist in a society at both superficial and substantial levels. "Superficial" means easily observable things that do not necessarily have an important impact on people's fundamental identities and sense of belonging, in contrast with substantial level of culture. However, a spectrum view of the concepts should be employed rather than a binary view here. For example, festivals can be superficial, but they can also relate to people's identities, such as a gay rights parade or a religious festival.

Language is another example of cultural differences which can be seen as superficial or substantial. For many people, language (especially languages other than mother language) is just a tool for people to communicate. However, behind the noticeable superficial differences, languages reflect more substantial aspects in relation to psychology, linguistics, culture, politics, etc. Literature in psychology and linguistics demonstrates that languages (especially mother language) shape ways of interpreting, understanding, and communicating with the world; once people established a linkage between heritage languages and themselves at a young age, protecting instead of depriving this attachment is crucial for people's mental health. Language is essential for a culture to survive as it reflects the way that people see the world. Many essential meanings of a culture are embedded in the language that it uses. Additionally, language connects with power and resources. In many societies, social status, a sense of belonging, and access to resources are largely influenced by people's competence in the dominant language in the society, such as Cantonese in Hong Kong, Mandarin in mainland China, and English in many western countries (Lin and Jackson 2019b, c). In this sense, language is not just a personal matter but also ties with politics taken in the form of identity politics, such as is the case with French in Quebec, Cantonese in Hong Kong, and Scottish English in the United Kingdom.

Thus, a distinction should be made between an oversimplified perspective and a more comprehensive perspective to understanding culture. The first perspective associates easily observed cultural items to a particular group, but less easily

observed differences are overlooked, to promote substantial homogenization and justify assimilation. Assimilation continues to play its role until substantial homogenization becomes a fact of the society. The idea of assimilation takes it for granted that society has a coherent and unified cultural and moral structure, social cohesion and stability are more important than other things, and only traditional values that reflect the prevailing norms and values of the society can hold people together. These assumptions create a sense that homogeneity among people is normal and valuable and that once people give up their minority cultures, they can be accepted and welcomed as a part of majority without discrimination or prejudice. Noticing that this perspective leads to the situation wherein stereotypes and biases toward minorities are reinforced, scholars argue for a more comprehensive perspective to understanding culture (Levinson 2016; Banks 2008a).

The second perspective tries to transcend oversimplified understanding of culture, particularly in relation to those cultures and people who have been historically marginalized. As a way of being, culture shapes people in a way through passing down from one generation to the next. People start to learn everything around them at the very beginning through their cultures, such as having a basic understanding of what is right/wrong, proper/improper, and normal/abnormal. After growing up in a culture, it is natural for people to judge other cultures by using their own culture as the standard. Therefore, people would feel shocked, confused, disoriented, and disgusted when they start to experience or even immersed in other cultures. When peoples' needs for proper recognition are ignored, and when endeavors are made to label and other them, it is natural for them to suffer and feel anger.

Humankind need recognition from others to live with dignity, especially in a world where cultural diversity is a fact, rather than something one can choose to believe in or not. People's understanding of a culture and people associated with this culture influences how people treat the culture and the people (Taylor and Gutmann 1994). This perspective not only requires changes in policies, attitudes of people, and teaching materials but also demands empowering all people with more accurate understanding of each other and their cultures.

Identity Issues in Education

Culture links closely to identity, such as the way people see themselves and others. Diverse cultures lead to diverse identities which bring both opportunities and challenges to education and the society. Nowadays, different countries, workplaces, and schools increasingly consist of people from various cultural, racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. People need to have a level of understanding about each other in order to live together and collaborate with each other, which require learning about other cultures and identities. This situation demands people to understand different perspectives within the world in which they live and to diminish misunderstandings, stereotypes, biases, and discriminations about different cultures and people. In addition, cultural diversity provides people an opportunity to transcend their own ways of being and interact with others to understand and experience different ways of being. It makes countries, workplaces, and schools become more interesting places.

Difficulties arise when different identities are not necessarily compatible and have to compete with each other. This can be a challenge to overcome, especially when there are underlying prejudices and misconceptions about different cultures, making people with different identities refuse to live together, let alone cooperate together. For people who have spent many years fighting any form of exclusion (e.g., sectionalism and racism), teaching the values of social justice and human rights and bringing equity and inclusion from classroom to society, wars, and conflicts fueled by misunderstandings, fears, and hatreds toward different cultures and identities are disorienting, confusing, and heartrending.

Different Approaches Toward Cultural Diversity

As a term with multiple meanings, cultural diversity is sometimes used in sociology and everyday

life as a synonym of ethnic pluralism, but most times it is used in philosophy, politics, and education as a theory, a policy, and a curriculum. In the last few decades, no matter what form cultural diversity takes, the core theme of discussing it always is equity and justice, whose meanings vary widely, ranging from showing equal respect for all cultures to maintaining cultural diversity, to recognizing all identities associated with cultures, and to transforming social systems. As cultural diversity is not just a reality of coexistence of diverse knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, customs, religions, languages, abilities and disabilities, genders, ethnicities, races, nationalities, sexual orientations, etc., of human beings, it also extends to the way people react to this reality and the way people choose to live together with this reality. Therefore, it is necessary to summarize current approaches that people react to cultural diversity and the way they believe would be better for living together with cultural diversity.

Recognizing Cultural Diversity

Started from pioneering movements in the name of fighting for cultural diversity, such as the civil rights movements, recognizing different cultures and identities is a major approach to acknowledge and rectify past injustices as contributions of some groups and individuals are denied or ignored in many societies, alongside with denial of their cultures and identities (Banks 2008b). Denying the contribution of some groups and individuals and their cultures and identities is dishonest to histories of those countries full of immigrants, such as the United States, Australia, and Canada. This also delivers a message that the shared past of all citizens of a nation-state is not valued by the society. However, without admitting past wrongs, it would be difficult to rectify past injustices, let alone create a just and an inclusive environment for all. Human beings need recognition from one another to live with dignity, especially in a society where cultural diversity is a fact, rather than something one can choose to believe in or not (Bingham 2001). In this sense, recognition is about how people should treat each other (Taylor and Gutmann 1994). This approach views recognizing different cultures and identities associated with

them as the first step to teaching about cultural diversity. To better understand it, what *recognition* means should be explained here.

As a fundamental human need, recognition should be seen as a courtesy (Taylor and Gutmann 1994). In a society where people with different cultures mix together both in private and public areas, it is crucial to provide everyone with a sense of belonging. A recognized culture is an indispensable element for cultivating a sense of belonging (Taylor and Gutmann 1994). However, just like any concept, even if recognition is agreed upon as a desirable element for teaching about cultural diversity, there is no universal agreement on what recognition actually means. It could be elementary recognition, respect, esteem, love, friendship, an action of acknowledging and being acknowledged, and allowing coexistence and interplay (Bingham 2001). Given these many meanings, recognition is not a concept that can be well defined and carried out accordingly. People should expand its potential functions (Bingham 2001).

This approach basically argues for political recognition, social recognition, curricular recognition, and personal recognition (at individual and psychological levels). These four categories have some overlap with each other while differing in some ways. Political recognition refers to recognition of cultures in legal and political areas, such as citizenship and the right to vote. It emphasizes combining recognition and redistribution to provide for equal participation in public life (Fraser 2003). However, it does not have to be supported by the majority in everyday life. This distinguishes it from social recognition, which requires that different groups of people recognize and respect each other's cultures and identities in the public sphere of a society (Taylor and Gutmann 1994).

By pointing out the limitations of a single national narrative which is problematic in practice as sometimes different cultures and identities are irreconcilable and some textbooks are used to denigrate minority cultures and identities, curricular recognition favors an inclusive national narrative in curricula to help bond people with different cultures and identities together

(Levinson 2012). Curriculum changes are necessary because students need to be at home in the class and have nowhere to go and no power to put themselves in a more inclusive and relaxed place if they don't feel included or comfortable (Bingham 2001). Thus, curricular recognition insists that fundamental diverse cultures and identities should be reflected in the curricula.

Personal recognition means that an individual can see and feel himself or herself in another's eyes as an individual with dignity, rather than as a tool to attain a goal, or a representative of a group or a culture. Personal recognition emphasizes recognition in relation to individual relationships and psychological feelings and matters in a private relationship. It requires people to acknowledge and understand each other's histories, cultures, and identities associated with them, because without this, people are more inclined to feel fear or hatred to other people, feel uncomfortable with other people, and think and act based on bias and stereotype (Dilg 1999).

Critics of this approach note that recognition is intertwined with power, and people with power possess the criterion of recognition. Many cultures and identities are not predetermined at birth, but constructed and normalized by compulsory reiteration and repetition of a set of social norms (Moon 2011). Take black racial identity as an example: many "cultural" features of a black racial group in society (e.g., hairstyle) are constructed and propagandized by people with power, which facilitates and reinforces the prejudice it wishes to reduce (Ford 2005). Sometimes this exercise of power in relation to recognition is invisible to those people who wield it as they take it for granted.

In addition, although this approach arouses attention to different minority cultures and groups, it might risk diverting attention from collective cooperation to create a just environment for all people, as different theorists have different focus cultures and groups (i.e., it can be worse if they just focus on a particular culture and group without understanding other cultures and groups) (Yúdice 1995). For example, feminists value gender as the core theme, ethnic-studies scholars emphasize race and ethnicity, and Marxists

highlight class. Focusing on a single culture and group is crucial for arousing attention to a culture and group which has been long neglected. However, it might lapse into a group-centeredness and exclude concerns for other identity groups.

Treating People with Different Cultures Equally

Considering that many concepts (e.g., culture, ethnicity, race, and nation) and differences of people are human-made constructs to divide people and feed stereotypes and hatred, this approach points out that treating people with different cultures and identities differently by adopting these artificial concepts can be problematic. No one should be discriminated against or granted exemptions just because of his or her differences, and everyone should be entitled to participate equally in decision-making processes, especially when they can determine whether or not a minority group could be granted exemptions (Barry 2001). It can be counted as treating all people as free and equal beings as long as the following three conditions are met: (1) all people's basic rights are protected, (2) no one is induced to adopt the values the majority of people share, and (3) both in theory and in practice, the decision-makers are accountable (Taylor and Gutmann 1994).

Treating different cultures and identities as equal does not mean that people need to treat strangers as equally as they treat their family, or neglect that people are unequal in terms of many things, such as mentality and weakness. It just refers to the view that morally all people are fundamentally equal and worth being took seriously by others as persons who can be responsible for making decisions; "no citizen should be so opulent that he can buy another, and none so poor that he is constrained to sell himself" (Rousseau 1997, p. 78). For this approach, difference is neither the problem nor the solution, so laying stress on differences among people will be misplaced as it would hinder the most important causes of group disadvantage (Barry 2001). Focal points should be given to common demands, shared disadvantages, and free choice of individual, rather than special groups

prerogatives. Otherwise, it will serve as an anti-egalitarian approach and impede mobilization based on shared interests (Barry 2001).

Criticisms of this approach are threefold. First, it is unfair to treat all people with different cultures and identities equally when some cultures and people refuse to treat other cultures and people equally (Macedo 2004), and treating everyone equally risks falling into the pitfall of relativism. Relativism denies that there are universal truths, values, and standards in relation to diverse cultures and identities (Schmidt 1955). No person can legitimately judge others, because "[j]udgments are based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his own enculturation" (Herskovits 1972). By understanding people's different identities as influenced and shaped by people's distinct backgrounds, experiences, and values that may not be commensurable, or appropriately judged or well-understood by people from different backgrounds, relativism sees it as impracticable to affirm, reject, or compare identities. However, relativism in relation to culture and identity is not equal to skepticism, even though both mistrust absolute truth and criteria of judgment. Skepticism questions all notions of truth and criteria of judgment, while relativism replaces absolute truth and criteria of judgment with numerous equally valid relative truths and criteria of judgment. Every individual with distinct identities holds a fragment of truth and criterion of judgment. In this sense, critics of this approach warn that relativism risks (1) becoming an absolute approach that wipes out all absolute truths and criteria of judgment and thus violates the principle of *all is relative* (Dixon 1977) and (2) destroying the natural laws of the human world and obscuring the distinction between truth and personal belief, and if there is no absolutely truth or criteria of judgment which is beyond personal belief, no one can state that a person's belief is false or mistaken (Putnam 2012).

Second, it can lead to touching on everything superficially in education without going into anything deeply. In a diverse society, it is impractical and undesirable to teach children the full range of diverse cultures and identities as "[t]he effort to do so would lead to treating each [culture and identity] so fleetingly and so superficially as to contribute little to children's genuine understanding of other citizens' experiences and worldviews" (Williams 2004). Third, minorities are often invisible under the name of equality, and this approach risks maintaining the status quo as the equality position holds the belief that ethnic minority students should be treated the same as all students, no better and no worse (Kennedy and Hue 2011; Seglow 2003; Taylor and Gutmann 1994). In this sense, equality is a cold excuse for obstructing correction for historical injustices and lacking a warm and an inclusive embrace.

Protecting Minority People and Their Cultures

To understand the roots of this approach, it is worth first understanding the critique of assimilation from the cultural diversity perspective. Assimilation leads to the extinction of minority cultures and identities. For example, Fillmore (2005) shows how schools reflect the lopsided power relationship in a society by enabling minority students to dismiss their home language and become estranged from their heritage. If students hope to succeed in schools or the society by abandoning the connection with themselves, their families, and communities, this kind of losing of their past is a high price they cannot bear (Banks 2008a). Spring (2012) and Valenzuela (1999) call this process "deculturation" and "subtractive schooling." The idea of assimilation takes it for granted that society has a coherent and unified cultural and moral structure, social cohesion and stability are more important than other things, and only traditional values that have proved their worth by socializing many generations of children into the prevailing norms and values of the society can hold people together. These assumptions create an illusion that homogeneousness among people is a normal and valuable condition, once people give up their minority cultures, they can be accepted and welcomed as a part of majority without discrimination and prejudice. As Banks (2012) illustrates, the illusion created by assimilation makes immigrants and minority people experience hope and shame in schools.

In this context, cultural diversity is seen by this approach as vital for the long-term survival of humanity. By linking cultural diversity to biodiversity, the protection of diverse cultures thus is as crucial to humankind as the protection of diverse species and ecosystems is to nature (UNESCO 2002). It advocates that many minorities are on the margins of society due to the historical injustice, and policymakers and educators need to take this into account and enact different polices to redress the historical injustice. Therefore, special treatments for people whose cultures and identities are in danger are necessary to redress historical injustice, and special treatments should be seen as a permanent feature of a just society instead of a temporary compensation for historical wrongs (Kymlicka 1995; Taylor and Gutmann 1994). Here, the main difference between this approach and the second approach is that the former acknowledges that the principle of equality can be sacrificed to protect culture and identity, while the latter refuses. For defenders of this approach, special treatments will not conflict with the principle of equality or freedom of choice, as the inequalities and potential options for minorities were produced before they even made their choices. And the survival of a culture is not just for the current people who value that culture but also for the indefinite future generations to be able to experience that culture (Taylor and Gutmann 1994).

This approach has two recipients: individual identity and group identity. The focal point of protecting individual identity is individual's rights to choose, form, and revise the cultures and identities, which cannot be sacrificed for the sake of the general good, such as protecting and maintaining the survival of a culture or a group. If different individual members are representing and voicing as a single group, different interests and demands among members of a group will be simplified and neglected (Modood 2007; Parekh 2006). A person has several identities, speaks several voices, and values different rights in different situations (Jackson 2014). In this sense, how a society reacts to these identities will largely determine the way people perform in the society and influence people for developing a full sense of self and a sense of shared community (Jackson 2014).

The idea of protecting group identity started from the situation that many societies have a history and a present of excluding some particular cultures and groups, and social norms and values are defined by the majority (Kymlicka 1989). Thus, external preservations, which protect the identity from outsiders' destruction, and elimination of internal constraints which aim to perpetuate the group's crucial features are necessary (Taylor and Gutmann 1994; Kymlicka and Banting 2006).

Critics of this approach come from three aspects. First, it is hard to define to what extent and which protection needs to be applied to different cultures. Respecting and publicly supporting a culture, recognizing and using a language in the public sphere, expressing a religion in the public sphere freely, and self-governing can all be on the list. In different contexts culture protection may mean different things. For example, the measures include exclusively using French in all schools, in all commercial signage, and in federal courts that where attended by Francophones and immigrants in Taylor's assessment of the situation in Quebec (Taylor and Gutmann 1994), while it refers to special hunting and fishing, along with governing themselves for indigenous peoples and original tribes in some parts of Canada and the United States.

Second, protecting cultures should not be an excuse for violating basic values or human rights. For example, some cultures (e.g., religious fundamentalists) reject the basic values of a society, such as the idea of inclusiveness and gender equality. The foundation of a society would be destroyed if these groups' cultures are protected to exercise their actions. In this case, these groups' cultures should not be protected. Third, this approach has an internal tension: protecting group cultures and identities might conflict with or obstruct individual identities. The identities that members of a group would like to have are plural and open-ended, as each member is the author of his or her own multiple meanings and desires. Each member of a group should have the power to decide whether or not a culture should be

protected and which facets of the culture should be protected.

Teaching About Cultural Diversity by Dialogue

In many societies, people with different cultures are excluded from the mainstream society, categorized by different labels, lived with segregation, and lead parallel lives (Girishkumar 2015). By arguing that dialogue is indispensable to teach about cultural diversity, this approach emphasizes that diverse cultures should be seen as a treasure for human beings to have a more complete and comprehensive view of this world and preserve human culture. All people should be included in the process of dialogue to attain cooperation (Servaes 2005). In a world which is full of mobility and diversity, dialogue from the vantage points of people's diverse cultures is essential to explore what human beings have in common (Darling-Hammond et al. 2002). No culture or person can claim holding the whole truth or all valuable things of human beings. Welcoming different thoughts and views can be a remedy to people's parochialism, as otherness reminds people that the value of a culture is independent of whether outsiders like it or not (Parekh 2006).

Living in a diverse society requires students to become citizens who are willing to show tolerance and mutual respect to others, as every voice matters in a society (Hess 2011). In many diverse societies where the classroom is monologic, there is no place for students to express or receive diverse cultures and identities (English 2016). Students would not know why cultural diversity is worth being respected and tolerated initiatively, which requires educators to facilitate dialogue among students. Many studies have proved that dialogue among different perspectives and discussion of controversial issues (including culture and identity) could be very helpful for students to cultivate tolerance and mutual respect (English 2016; Hess 2011). Thus, Kazepides states that "[w]hen educational institutions function as centres of dialogue they become genuine human communities of openness, respect, trust, and cooperation that motivate the students and

promote long-lasting and transformative learning" (2010, p. 110):

Dialogue can take many forms to teach about cultural diversity. For example, it could be

> religious communion (Martin Buber); philosophical hermeneutics (Gadamer); rational deliberation (Habermas); radical pedagogy (Freire); dialogism and 'dialogical imagination' (Bakhtin); dialogue as the 'awakening of consciousness' (Bohm); and dialogue as conversation and the medium of liberal learning (Oakeshott and Rorty). (Besley et al. 2011, pp. 3–4)

However, agreement is not always guaranteed by dialogue:

> [c]ommon ground, or moral consensus, is not the pre-requisite but the product of an ideal dialogue. [dialogue] is not a matter of arriving at the truth, or a matter of explaining to others how they are wrong, or even an appeal to a person's moral autonomy, but the mutual exchange of public reasons. (Seglow 2003, p. 94)

It should be seen as a progress of understanding each other.

Major critique of this approach is that dialogue can still be controlled by the majority, which is not an equal dialogue (Sensoy and DiAngelo 2017). It faces a challenge as:

> speaking outside of the dominant meaning system risks losing the ability to communicate altogether. At the same time, speaking only inside the dominant meaning system risks reproducing the language of the dominant discourse itself. (Langmann 2016, p. 236)

For minority students, dialogue does not necessarily seem like a good thing if they have to adopt majority's language (which has already predefined the meaning of justice and other fundamental values) in order to join the dialogue. However, minority students "do not wish either to be silenced or to be recognized and constrained to speak within the institutions of interpretation of the imperial [modern liberal] constitutions that have been imposed over them" (Tully 1995, p. 24).

Conclusion

By exploring different approaches of understanding cultural diversity, and the relationship

between culture and identity, this entry shows that cultural diversity is a vast pool where different (and sometimes contradictory) approaches toward it coexist together. There is no unconditionally good or bad, unconditionally effective or non-effective, approach of understanding and teaching about cultural diversity. Rather, it is a question of what kind of approach better fits a specific context and to what extent cultural diversity is understood or misunderstood in the context. By grasping the idiosyncrasy of a context, local understanding of cultural diversity, and the particular form(s) that cultural diversity takes and could take in the specific context, it could bring hope to the society to bring people from different cultures together and cooperate to solve the problems that all human beings are facing.

Cross-References

▶ Multi-/Inter-/Mono-Cultural Education Perspectives
▶ Inclusive/Exclusive Education
▶ Indigenous People's Education

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