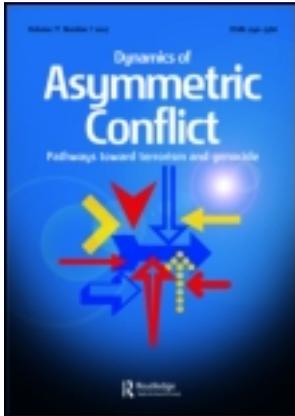


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IDEA PAPER

The challenges of ethno-cultural diversity in an era of asymmetric globalization

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The reflexive tendency to rely on unchallenged ethnocentrism – especially when combined with Western military, economic, and political power – is creating an asymmetric cultural homogeneity across the world. For many non-Western minority groups and nations, Western cultural hegemony is considered a destructive force. The article argues that the persistence of ethno-cultural diversity as a survival resource is to be found in reducing hegemonic globalization and creating equalities in opportunity. This will result in all members of a society valuing and preserving societal unity, even as ethno-cultural diversity is maintained as a source for alternative choices.

Keywords: diversity; ethnocultural; hegemonic; globalization; culture; conflict

Introduction

How much ethno-cultural diversity can a society take before it becomes unable to function for the benefit of its members because of the conflicts and confusion wrought by differences? This is a critical question in an era of globalization that brings increased and – in the minds of many – intolerable levels of political, economic, cultural, and moral interdependency. However, our interdependency cannot be ignored, denied, or changed. It is now a permanent and defining characteristic of life in a global era. Thus, we are compelled to find ways to live together, and to understand that the same ethno-cultural diversity that produces conflict can, at the same time, be the greatest resource for our survival. The reality that ethno-cultural diversity is both a source of conflict and a source for survival is a bewildering truth. How can that be? And how is the reality of ethno-cultural diversity connected to the processes of globalization that are now shaping our daily lives?

Globalization and diversity

Globalization can be defined as the following:

Globalization is both a social, cultural, economic, and political reciprocally determined *process* and *product*; the primary drivers of globalization are all those events, forces, and

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changes that are transnational, transcultural, and transborder, especially, (1) capital flow, (2) ownership, (3) trade, (4) telecommunications, (5) transportation, (6) political and military alliances, and (7) international agencies. A major product of globalization is increased interdependency, connection, and interaction among individuals, societies, and nations requiring accommodations in values, behaviors, and life styles. (Marsella, 2011, submitted for publication)

Globalization has changed all of our lives by revising our past, complicating our present, and confusing our future. And at the heart of this new reality is ethno-cultural diversity. Ethno-cultural diversity refers to both the number and the variation among groups defined by their cultural backgrounds and heritages. Different ethno-cultural groups create different constructions of realities – different templates for describing, understanding, and predicting the world about them.

The sources of increased contact and interdependency throughout the world are now widely apparent, and include both natural disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis and desertification, and human-made disasters such as wars, nuclear accidents, recessions, epidemics, and criminal cartels. The result of these many events and forces has been massive waves of migration, refugees and internally displaced people, which have brought serious demographic and population changes to preferred destination countries including the USA, Australia, Canada, and many European countries. Today, many of these countries are facing serious conflicts as a result of the encounters among different ethnocultural groups, especially as these countries are finding themselves in social upheaval from economic challenges.

The crucible of the USA

The USA has long prided itself as prizing and encouraging ethno-cultural diversity, even though the facts clearly indicate a long history of intolerance and abuse toward non-white and non-Anglo groups. Globalization has increased these problems because of the perceptions that many of the newcomer groups are the sources or causes of economic and societal problems. Reflexive reliance on racial, ethnic, and religious scapegoating, stereotypes, and rationalizations by previously dominant groups has targeted successive minority groups: Blacks, Hispanics, and Muslims.

The USA long embraced the belief that it had a “manifest destiny” to shape the world according to American values, practices, and institutions. This sense of destiny – and the exceptionalism it fostered – was forged by (1) military victories, (2) endless technological developments, and (3) a capitalist economy that generated endless wealth. However, the realities of globalization have raised doubts about America’s role. Silber (2010) wrote:

When we believe that America and Americans are unique and uniquely good in all of history, we will also believe that there is no problem we cannot overcome. Our political leaders tell us this fable time and again; many Americans are eager to believe it, in the manner of a damaged child who appeals to mysterious powers to vanquish the dangers lurking in the shadows of his room. We witness this mechanism in connection with a wide range of problems, even when those problems reach the catastrophic level. . . . We can appeal all we want to “American exceptionalism,” but any “exceptionalism” that remains ours is that of a mass murderer without a soul, and without a conscience. . . . It is useless to appeal to any “American” sense of morality: we have none. It does not matter how immense the pile of corpses grows: we will not surrender or even question our delusion that we are right, and that nothing we do can be profoundly, unforgivably wrong.

Hegemonic globalization

A particular challenge to peace and justice in our times is that globalization has morphed into a “hegemonic” process imposed on the world by the US and a few wealthy and powerful nations (e.g. G-8 and G-20). Domination of the globalization process has resulted in a destructive tendency to promote cultural homogeneity, and to resist or destroy the reality of ethno-cultural and racial diversity. Marsella (2005b) wrote:

A serious concern is the hegemonic imposition of values associated with North American (i.e., United States) popular culture, (e.g., individualism, materialism, competition, hedonism, rapid change, profit, greed, consumerism, commodification, reductionism, celebrization, privatization, English-language preference). These values carry with them a way-of-life that is alien and offensive to many people throughout the world, even residents in Western cultures. They are powerful values, generated and sustained by institutions and organizations with self-serving agendas. Of special concern is the fact that American popular- culture values are becoming the preferences of youth around the world. . . . While all societies seek economic growth and stability, there is, in my opinion, a justifiable and widespread angst regarding hegemonic globalization. . . . Thus, we are compelled to ask: do the fruits of hegemonic globalization constitute local and global improvements? Are we building a better world for all, or only for a small select group? Are the values and actions of the powerful who support hegemonic globalization the values we would choose given the opportunity to control our choices? (p. 16)

Life in a global era

Scores of nations across the world are unable or unwilling to prevent the cultural homogenization from abroad – a Western “colonization” of their minds and identities. The social upheaval from this imposition has resulted in scores of individual and societal problems around the world.

Resistance to diversity and homogenization

It all seemed to happen so quickly. Within two decades, a new world was upon us pressing demands for new values, new work and social skills sets, and new identities. In the US, accusations flowed across political party lines with escalating charges of blame. No one seemed to be willing to accept responsibility for what had occurred. Within a short time, xenophobia emerged in futile efforts to recover a familiar past in which ethno-cultural variations were fewer and less consequential.

Across the US, citizen groups (e.g. Tea Party) consisting largely of older, white-Anglo conservative people – frustrated and angry amidst their perceptions of the dangers associated with the growing ethno-cultural diversity – have voiced cries for a return to “their” past. Yet the reality of “their” past is a myth, because the US has always been a nation of differences encouraged by new immigrant waves. Further, world population growth is headed toward seven billion people within a decade, and 90% of this growth will be occurring in non-Western developing countries, while population growth among Northern European white groups is diminishing in both number and percentage.

In the developing world, resistance to Western cultural homogenization has been especially present across many Middle-Eastern Muslim nations who are witnessing a steady encroachment of Western popular cultural forms that are in

conflict with Islamic religious traditions. The historic abuses of colonialism in the Middle East, and the penetration of Western cultural life styles (e.g. individualism, materialism, changing gender roles, secularism) are encouraging resistance to this creeping Western hegemonic globalization. Indeed, there is evidence that terrorism acts associated with Muslim extremists may be a function of resistance against Western cultural homogenization and its associated destruction of Islam (Bodansky, 2001).

1. Diversity is about differences

Diversity is about differences – differences that occur across boundaries of ethnicity, race, culture, religion, gender, age, and generations. Because of globalization, the profound diversities we are encountering today are requiring us to negotiate strange and unfamiliar landscapes. A bewildering array of cultures is leading to widespread frustrations and a felt need to retreat or regression to the familiar. Especially as economies turned down, cultural differences became a ready target for accusations (“China is the cause of our problems.” “Mexicans are taking away our jobs.” “Muslims are terrorists.”).

In today’s world, in which the availability and ease-of-use of computers and information technology have brought all of our lives together with an often stressful and threatening immediacy, we are faced with the challenge of frequent and complex interactions for which we are often unprepared, and, more often, to accept as the new reality. The situation is made even more demanding because of the many contexts in which differences are present – neighborhoods, schools, work – because of the coming together of diverse populations. This is especially true in urban settings where many groups come together. The problem is that we do not revere these differences as sources of perceiving the world from different points of view, but as the source of all the individual and societal problems we face. Indeed, some writers have suggested that we are involved in a clash of civilizations (Huntington, 1993).

2. Negotiating diversity: a demanding process

The ethno-cultural diversity we face today all too often looms before us as a source of readily identifiable social problems fueled by stereotyping, scape-goating, and reflexive rationalizations. It is easier that way! The human brain does not respond to differences easily. When faced with unfamiliar stimuli, such as those associated with national, ethnic, and racial, differences, the brain attempts to accommodate to the differences through simplifying categorizations and classifications. Unfortunately cognitive shortcuts can lead to problems.

At the heart of much of our resentment and resistance to engaging the virtues of ethno-cultural diversity is the problem of “ethnocentrism” – the tendency to see the world about us through the limited lens of our culturally constructed realities. However, ethnocentrism is more than simply viewing the world through a limited lens, it is the implicit assumption that the lens is the only justifiable and correct lens to know, describe, and predict the world, with a resulting sense of moral superiority and arrogance. Foreign people and cultures thus become evaluated in terms of the standards of one’s own culture. The result, all too often, is a negative judgment in which others are seen as inferior.

However, it is not necessarily “ethnocentricity” in and of itself that is the problem we face, but rather the presence of “ethnocentricity” with military, political, and economic power. All individuals and all groups are ethnocentric – none can escape the natural tendency of the brain to process reality (i.e. to describe, understand, predict, control) from their socialized templates or cultural constructions of reality. While efforts can be made to broaden these constructions through culture learning, foreign language training, travel, and so forth, it is still reflexive to view reality through more limited lens. However, when ethnocentric inclinations are joined with “exceptionalism,” then we have the conditions for aggression and violence in the name of defending one’s worldview and bringing its benefits to others.

3. Diversity: a source of conflict – a source of survival

How can ethno-cultural diversity be both a source of conflict and discord, and simultaneously a source of for promoting and sustaining life? That is the dilemma we face. That is the paradox. While the discord may seem more apparent than the resource value, both are nonetheless critical to the world’s survival. Consider what is occurring in biology today as biologists strive to preserve millions of seeds from different plants, and even insects. These are being stored in high-security protected vaults because the importance of biological diversity is recognized to be essential for human survival.

In contrast, the importance of “cultural” diversity is generally ignored. Indeed, the pressures of hegemonic globalization serve to promote cultural “homogenization” rather than cultural “heterogeneity.” And, it is clear that the particular Western popular culture being imposed across the world has some downside, especially from the perspective of developing countries.

Ethno-cultural diversity represents our human capacity to respond to the milieus in which we live with a diverse array of adaptive and adjusting behavior patterns which serve to promote survival and growth and development. Each way-of-life represents an alternative for dealing with the world in which we live, and each way of life offers unique and special insights for understanding our meaning, purpose, and future. These variations in culture are to be valued, and not suppressed, diminished, or denied in favor of monolithic structures and processes which limit the human potential for response.

When we speak of ethno-cultural diversity, we are speaking of the human potential to adapt rather than to fall before demands that exceed a particular lifestyle’s capacity. To the extent that a way of life becomes so rigid it denies or closes further opportunity for change, that way of life will ultimately fail and be forced to yield to new ways of life. When we insist on uniformity, when we insist on conformity, we may, for the short time, increase survival through order, but, ultimately, we suppress the essence of our human capacity to survive.

4. Octavio Paz: “life is diversity, death is uniformity”

We need now – at this moment in time – to grasp the importance of prizing and preserving ethno-cultural differences. The wise words of Octavio Paz, Mexican

Nobel Prize Laureate in Literature, written decades ago, should be required reading for everyone, especially our national leaders:

What sets worlds in motion is the interplay of difference, their attractions and repulsions. Life is plurality, death is uniformity. By suppressing differences and peculiarities, by eliminating different civilizations and cultures, progress weakens life and favors death. The ideal of a single civilization for everyone, implicit in the cult of progress and technique, impoverishes and mutilates us. Every view of the world that becomes extinct, every culture that disappears, diminishes a possibility of life. (Paz, 1987, p. 117. Variations in translation)

Differences offer us choices, choices offer us freedoms, and freedoms offer us the possibility to move beyond limited views of who we are, and what we can become, to new horizons of thought and being.

5. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

At the heart of the negotiating diversity resides a document that reminds us of what is possible if we live according to principles of justice. That document is the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) adopted on 10 December 1948 by the General Assembly of the United Nations. Following this historic declaration, the General Assembly called upon all member countries to publicize the text of the Declaration and “to cause it to be disseminated, displayed, read and expounded principally in schools and other educational institutions, without distinction based on the political status of countries or territories”.

Eloquent words on human rights have been spoken before, and both the words and their intent are usually present in national constitutions. However, the words of the UDHR assume an even greater significance in our global era because they speak to the realities of our times – they refer to all people, not to specific national groups. They speak to everyone, about everyone, and for everyone, and in doing so, they remind us of our connections and responsibilities as human beings to one another. They demand a respect for the differences that are present, because they recognize that the reckless pursuit of individual and cultural homogeneity can only result in the closing of alternative thoughts and actions, and with this, the elimination of choice.

Back to the beginning: how much ethno-cultural diversity ...

In the opening line of this article, I asked: “How much ethno-cultural diversity can a society take before it becomes unable to function because of the conflicts and confusion wrought by differences?” Indeed, ethno-cultural diversity is a major source of conflict and violence in the world today. But perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it is not ethno-cultural diversity that is the source of the problem, but rather the scape-goating, prejudice, intolerance, stereotypic bias, and hostility that coping with ethno-cultural diversity generates among those unable to accommodate to differences.

It is in fact the dream of America that somehow the ethno-cultural diversity that abounded from the earliest days of the nation would be understood as a unique source of survival, growth, and development. Assimilationists saw the need for establishing a cultural homogeneity, but this was never successful. Older ethnic, cultural, and racial roots were never lost. Heritages were changed in some ways as they encountered one another, but always there was the pride associated with

origins. When advocates of assimilation worry about the “disuniting of America,” they need to be reminded that pluralism and unity are two sides of the American coin. Identity politics ignores the fact that survival today requires we move beyond individual, group, societal, and national identities, to an identity with life itself, a position I have termed “lifeism” (Marsella, in press).

A society can tolerate extensive ethno-cultural diversity if it is willing to provide members from different ethno-cultural traditions with equal opportunity and freedom. Within this society, diversity will thrive, but so will a commitment to national unity. The commitment will occur because members will recognize that the nation must be supported and defended because it ensures their own survival.

How much ethno-cultural diversity can a society take before it ceases to function as whole? My answer is simple. Ethno-cultural diversity can exist in proportion to the society’s commitment to guarantee equality, justice, and opportunity to all its citizens. The citizens will then act to preserve the unity of the society because it then helps maintain their diversity!

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