

Multiculturalism

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Increases in global migration have created unprecedented diversity in many countries, and the issue of national identity has become a hotly debated topic across the globe, spurring research in the social sciences, especially in political science and psychology. In most countries, national identity can be defined in terms of common language, religion, and/or phenotypic characteristics. However, in historically immigrant nations such as the United States and Canada, and in countries with recent increases in diversity due to migration, defining and maintaining a cohesive national identity in order to integrate the various subgroups within society poses a challenge. Within these contexts, several competing approaches or ideological solutions have emerged, including multiculturalism and assimilation.

From the perspective of assimilation, immigrants and ethnic minorities should adopt the mainstream or superordinate culture (i.e., the nation becomes a melting pot), and intergroup differences should be downplayed or ignored (i.e., there is an emphasis on colorblindness). Proponents of assimilation theory argue that this approach is best for a diverse nation and its members because it creates a sense of unity among all group members, particularly because intergroup differences are de-emphasized. Opponents of assimilation, on the other hand, argue that the theory is outdated and should be replaced with multiculturalism as societies become more diverse and heterogeneous. From the multicultural perspective, people from different cultures can coexist within one society and adopt values of the different cultures within that society. Thus, this view is typically described using a salad bowl analogy:

there is a harmonious mixture of different groups within society, and each group is able to maintain its unique identity, like the ingredients in a salad. Multiculturalism advocates for the importance of understanding and recognizing differences among cultures within a society. In addition, multiculturalism allows for the maintenance of distinct cultural traditions and beliefs for the psychological wellbeing of all members of the society. In a multicultural society, people do not have to give up their heritage culture in order to adopt the culture of the larger society.

Multiculturalism and assimilation are important constructs in cross-cultural research because these two competing ideologies create different settings for cultural adaptation (i.e., acculturation and enculturation), a core topic within cross-cultural psychology. During the process of cultural adaptation, immigrant and ethnic minority individuals must answer two major questions: to what extent do they want to or are they allowed to maintain their cultural beliefs and values, and to what extent do they want to or are they allowed to adopt the mainstream culture? At the institutional and societal level, the prevailing ideology regarding diversity (i.e., multiculturalism or assimilation) sets the boundaries for appropriate cultural adaptation. That is, within a society that values assimilation, individual maintenance of heritage cultures may be difficult or sometimes impossible, whereas within a society that values multiculturalism, individuals may be provided with opportunities to be bicultural (i.e., participate in and identify with both heritage and mainstream groups).

Research on these ideologies has suggested that there are individual differences in endorsement of multiculturalism and assimilation as a function of personality and group membership, and in turn, these ideologies have been correlated with different intergroup outcomes, such as in-group and out-group bias, stereo-

types about out-group members, attitudes regarding immigration, and intergroup interactions. Regarding endorsement of these ideologies, studies have shown that endorsement of assimilation or multiculturalism varies as a function of ethnicity, such that ethnic minority group members endorsed multiculturalism more than majority group members (Ryan, Hunt, Weible, Peterson, & Casas, 2007; Wolsko, Park, & Judd, 2006). In another study, researchers examined social dominance orientation as it relates to assimilation and multiculturalism among White American students (Levin et al., 2012). They found that those who endorsed assimilation ideology also reported higher social dominance orientation than those who endorsed multiculturalism ideology. Multiculturalism and assimilation, in turn, are related to a variety of intergroup phenomena. For instance, regardless of ethnicity, participants who more strongly endorsed multiculturalism relative to assimilation also tended to exhibit less ethnocentrism (i.e., less likely to judge the in-group more positively than the out-group; Ryan et al., 2007), show stronger support for affirmative action and immigrant rights, and show weaker support for English-only policies in various public domains (Wolsko et al., 2006). Further, individuals who had a tendency to de-emphasize intergroup differences (i.e., adopt a colorblind vs. multicultural approach to intergroup interactions) also were more likely to display unfriendly non-verbal behavior (e.g., less friendly, less likely to make eye contact; Norton, Sommers, Apfelbaum, Pura, & Ariely, 2006).

In summary, understanding multiculturalism (and assimilation) is important in cross-cultural psychology. These ideologies may contribute to the cultural adaptation process of immigrants and ethnic minority groups. Empirical work on these topics has demonstrated that they are also related to intergroup relations and group perceptions within diverse societies. Despite the relatively large body of

work on multiculturalism (and assimilation), further work is needed to understand precisely how these ideologies, at both institutional and individual levels, contribute to immigrant adaptation, a central topic within cross-cultural psychology.

SEE ALSO: Acculturation; Assimilation; Immigrants

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Further Reading

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