

MULTICULTURALISM

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INTRODUCTION

Multiculturalism has been described as a “movement...whose goal is to elevate and celebrate diverse ethnic backgrounds” (Johnson, 2000). Multiculturalism as a concept is both challenging and provocative. Responses to multiculturalism vary, depending on socioeconomic factors, political environments, and individual orientation to cultural pluralism. The reactions to multiculturalism range from valuing it for its contributions to society, acceptance as a de facto status of development within our society, suspicion of its roots and its intention, to outright rejection by those who find it a threat. Factors that affect an individual’s response to multiculturalism include, but are not limited to, concerns about empowerment, social status and placement within society, availability and distribution of resources, and political

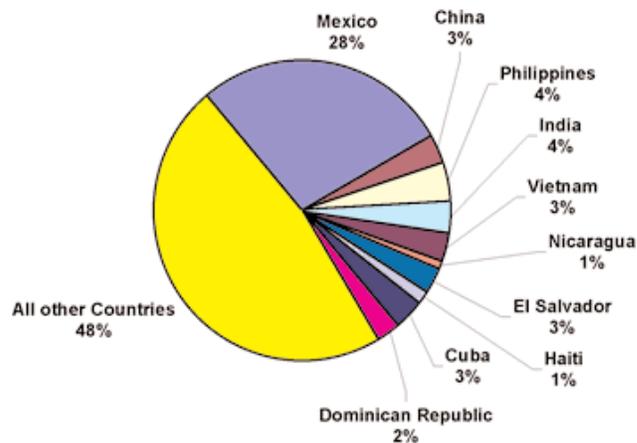
acceptance or rejection of the concept. For social workers, multiculturalism is a reality within which the profession is practiced and always offers an opportunity for personal and professional growth.

Currently, the challenge to understand and accept cultural differences in the United States is more difficult due to misconceptions and xenophobia created by fear of terrorism and immigration of people from countries in which English is not the national language and its people are predominantly of color. In contrast to the European immigration in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the majority of the foreign-born population in the United States in 2000 came from Mexico, the Asia-Pacific countries (India, Philippines, China, and Vietnam), Central America, and the Caribbean islands.

Social workers seeking to practice with clients from ethnic and racial groups that are a numeric minority, religious minorities, or recent immigrant communities need to develop an:

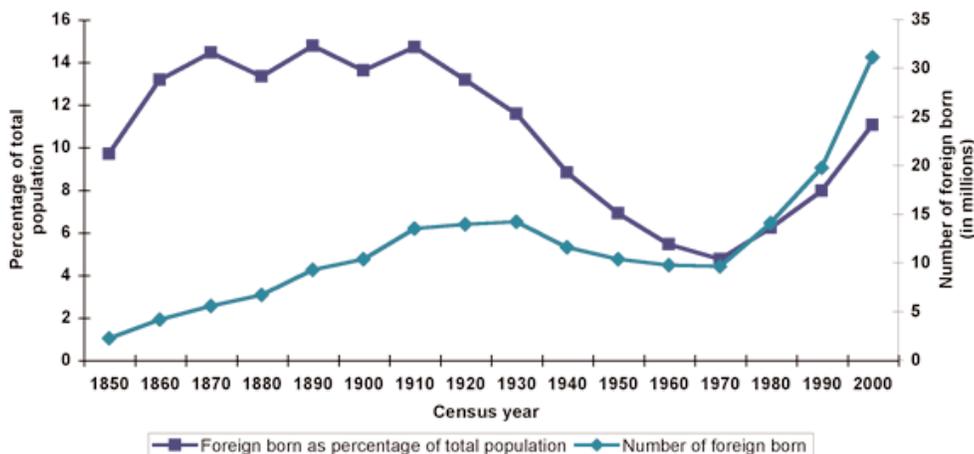
- Understanding of the underlying ambitions of individuals from marginalized groups seeking recognition, especially their symbolic features, such as language
- Understanding of the political context and possible areas of activism vis-à-vis facilitating communications and collaborative work
- Understanding of the basis of the fears of the “majority”
- Understanding of social work within a multicultural context

TEN SOURCE COUNTRIES WITH THE LARGEST POPULATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES AS PERCENTAGES OF THE TOTAL FOREIGN-BORN POPULATION: 2000



Note: According to the U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey, the size of the foreign-born population in 2000 was 28,337,384. Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, March Supplement, 2000.

SIZE OF THE FOREIGN-BORN POPULATION AND FOREIGN BORN AS A PERCENTAGE OF THE TOTAL POPULATION, FOR THE UNITED STATES: 1850 TO 2000



Source: *The Migration Information Source*. <http://www.migrationinformation.org/GlobalData/charts/final.fb.shtml> The 2000 data are from *Census 2000* (see www.census.gov). All other data are from Gibson, Campbell and Emily Lennon, U.S. Census Bureau, Working Paper No. 29, *Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 1850 to 1990*, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 1999.

BACKGROUND

In recent years, the United States has been attracting over a million immigrants annually. This has resulted in a country that is religiously, racially, and linguistically increasingly more diverse. Additionally, intermarriage among different racial, ethnic, and religious groups has added complexity to categorizing groups or identifying cultural characteristics. International and cross-cultural adoptions add another nuance to the multicultural layers of society. Together, the cultural tapestry of the United States has increased the need to understand how society at large has changed and how these changes enrich, challenge, and strain society, and concomitantly the need for services, political awareness, and tolerance. American society has tended to be very precise about racial divisions and identification, and mixed-race people complicate this framework. For example, Hispanics are not a racial category and may, in fact, be of many—usually mixed—racial backgrounds. The United States won't have any categorized racial or ethnic majority at some point between 2050 and 2100. This trend is bound to aggravate tensions over issues like immigration, affirmative action, political power, and competition for resources. "They are simmering now in disputes over what government benefits to allow legal immigrants, whether to make English the country's official language, and how to ensure opportunities for minority Americans without discriminating against others" (Lawrence, 1997).

INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE WITH MULTICULTURALISM

Diversity characterizes the great majority of the countries in the world. With the end of the cold war and the dominance of two world powers, claims for recognition based on ethnicity, religion, or cultural background have become increasingly stronger. Tragedies such as the genocides in Bosnia and Rwanda have heightened individual country concerns regarding the power relationships among its various ethnic and religious subgroups. A few countries, notably Australia, Canada, and Sweden, have adopted multiculturalism as its response to cultural and ethnic diversity. The position of these three countries is that "multiculturalism emphasizes that acknowledging the existence of ethnic diversity and ensuring the rights of individuals to retain their culture should go hand in hand with enjoying full access to, participation in, and adhesion to, constitutional principles and commonly shared values prevailing in the society. By acknowledging the rights of individuals and groups and ensuring their equitable access to society, advocates of multiculturalism also maintain that such a policy benefits both individuals and the larger society by reducing pressures, and ultimately, social conflicts based on disadvantage and inequality. In Australia, there is a further contention that cultural diversity actually provides an important national resource for foreign economic, political and cultural relations" (UNESCO, 1995).

MULTICULTURALISM IN THE UNITED STATES

Historically, “multiculturalism” came into public use in the United States during the 1980s in the context of public school curricula reform. Specifically, the argument was made that the content of classes in history, literature, social studies, and other areas reflected what came to be called a “Euro-centric” bias. Few, if any, women or people of color, or people from outside the Western European traditions appeared prominently in the curricula of schools in the United States. This material absence was also interpreted as a value judgment that reinforced unhealthy ethnocentric and racist attitudes. Multiculturalism, in response to these criticisms, has evolved as a movement with the goal to elevate and celebrate diverse ethnic backgrounds. It is reflected in educational programs that include historical contributions by people of color; in the use of multiple languages in public life, including prevalent and visible use of sign language (as on voting ballots, public announcements, all official public meetings, televised events, and religious services); and in corporate programs designed to work more effectively with workers from diverse backgrounds.

Multiculturalism has been seen by some as part of a solution to a long history of ethnic and racial oppression in the United States. The increasing demands by minority groups for recognition and equality, often linked to the concept of multiculturalism, has led to an expansion of diversity from traditional racial and ethnic divisions to include gender, social class, religion, and spiritual belief, sexual orientation, age, and physical and mental ability. Social conservatives have criticized the movement as a devaluation of what they regard as an essential core of standards and wisdom traced to Western white civilization. Concerns have been raised that the movement will lead to societal chaos and loss of control as well as provide more options for aberrant behavior and non-conformity. Other critics are concerned that the movement diminishes patriotism, inhibits national identity, corrupts the country’s language base, and undermines the moral standards that regulate behavior.

LANGUAGE

Language is a central issue of contention among proponents and opponents of multiculturalism, and increasingly, religion is coming into this sphere. Language is a very important component of culture since it provides a sense of unity. There is no official status granted to English in the

United States, although it is unquestionably the dominant language. Attempts to render English official and restrict use of other languages in public services, including education, have been declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, as infringing on the civil rights of citizens (Law V. Nichols, 414 U.S. 563). Supporters of English as the national language are opposed to publicly supported bilingual education or bilingual communication on the basis of the latter’s undermining influence on national identity and acculturation. Supporters of bilingual or multi-lingual communication contend that support of foreign language communication enhances, rather than diminishes, understanding and acceptance of American values and participation in political discourse. In education, bilingual communication supporters also contend that it ensures that children are helped to keep pace with their English-speaking peers in educational achievement while mastering English, rather than becoming victims of a learning gap. NASW recognizes the potential broad negative impact of English-only legislation and considers the use of a variety of languages as a right and a resource that is closely aligned with the ethical principles of service and social justice (NASW, 1999).

CULTURAL PRACTICES, RELIGIOUS BELIEFS, AND SECULARISM

The United States, as an industrial society, is highly secularized, although also characterized by strong religious power in public discourse and actions. Science has replaced religion as the primary approach to understanding the natural world, and religion has become a source of social control. However, substantial numbers of the established population and new immigrants retain cultural and religious beliefs that are fundamental to their lives and wish to see them reflected in public law and public display. The separation of state and church is a heatedly contested topic and a politically charged issue reflected in the debate over prayer in school, abortion rights, and display of religious symbols on public lands and buildings.

Cultural characteristics such as religious practices or distinctive style of dress identify members of particular ethnic or religious communities. Dress codes associated with particular religions, (e.g., Islam or Orthodox Judaism), have sparked a movement to curtail their use in public schools. Requests to celebrate Islamic, Jewish, or Christian cultural observances at work sites have met with resistance and raise charges of non-observance of the separation of church and state. Cultural identifiers also include rules that govern marriage and other forms of social connection that affect the boundaries that separate peoples of different ethnicities.

Cultural identifiers are important because as they decline in number and effectiveness, so does the ethnic identity associated with them. Social workers who work with immigrants from distinctly non-European ethnic backgrounds are abundantly aware of the “push-pull” and often conflictive family relationships that arise as children learn the language of their new country, customs, and styles of dress that are different from the ones practiced at home.

Religion also creates controversies regarding science and authority. One of the concepts, fundamentalism, has been described as “the struggle against modernism by religious groups who claim the continued relevancy of earlier time periods for models of truth and value and reject what they perceive as forms of secularism. Such groups are often characterized by a strict authoritarianism that disallows individual variations from the defined (scriptural) norm of faith” (Johnson, 2000). Within Christianity, fundamentalism is a Protestant view that affirms the absolute and unerring authority of the Bible, rules out scientific or critical study of the scriptures, denies the theory of evolution, and holds that alternate religious views within or outside Christianity are false. Within Islam, fundamentalists advocate a mythic view of Islamic values and seek to restore the primacy of religious-based law. They oppose the secular ethos that, in their view, characterizes not only non-Muslim West but also Muslim nation-states. They seek a community in which religion and politics are intertwined, and seek official recognition of Islamic Law as the source of social control and authority.

ISSUES FOR SOCIAL WORKERS

Social work has had extensive experience relating to issues associated with diversity and multiculturalism. While the arguments for and against acceptance of multiculturalism as an organizing and systemic principle for our society continue to be debated, social work values diversity and promotes cultural competence as important social work tools. The profession has been taught to understand and respect various cultures, and provide culturally relevant programs and services. The *NASW Code of Ethics*, intended to serve as a guide to the everyday professional conduct of social workers, includes the principle that “social workers should have a knowledge base of their clients’ cultures and be able to demonstrate competence in the provision of services that are sensitive to clients’ cultures and differences among people and cultural groups” (NASW, 1999). In 2001, NASW expanded further on its commitment to the issues of diversity and cultural competence by developing the *Standards of Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice*. In 2002, NASW’s Practice Update on Cultural Competence (NASW, August 2002) summarized the

Association’s policies and guidance regarding culturally competent social work practice and described the efforts being made to help social workers become more effective in their practices.

Social workers are particularly tasked with facilitating the interactive social processes between societies’ status quo populations and those groups seeking acceptance and recognition. The effectiveness of social workers seeking to facilitate relevant social interactions among groups, between groups, between individuals and communities, and between individuals and the social systems and structures requires constant self-evaluation and active efforts to keep their professional knowledge and skills current. The concept of multiculturalism is complex and fraught with controversies regarding American identity, acceptance of differences, and individual rights. The projected acceleration of the diverse make-up of the United States requires sensitivity, self-awareness, and excellent cross-cultural skills to help resolve controversies and achieve positive transformations of communities and society.

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