Cultural Identity of Migrants in USA and Canada

GOLAM M. MATHBOR

Introduction

"Race" refers to physical characteristics, and "ethnicity" usually refers to a way of life-custom, beliefs, and values of people. Immigration and multiculturalism are two elements that have played a role in creating a culturally pluralistic society that is composed of various racial and ethnic communities. In effect, immigration and multiculturalism are inextricably related and imperative. Gandhi's stance on multiculturalism: "I do not want my house to be walled in all sides and my windows to be stuck. I want the culture of all lands to be blown about my house, by my house, as freely as possible but I refuse to be blown off my feet."

Since the colonization of aboriginal people, North America (USA and Canada) has evolved as a nation of immigrants. Liberal immigration policies and the multicultural policy have contributed to the development of culturally pluralistic societies. US State Department reports that "there are more than 175 million migrants in the world today. People leave their countries for many reasons, including war and civil conflict, the desire for economic improvement, family reunification and environmental degradation".[1]

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[1]   U. S. Department of State, Population and migration, at: www.state.gov/g/prm/mig.

Multiculturalism in Canada

The multiculturalism policy promotes maintenance of heritage cultures: "The underlying assumption is that by retaining own group culture, cultural security will prevail. As a result of attaining cultural security one is likely to be accepting of diverse ethnic groups".[2] (See Table 1).

Table 1. Difference between multiculturalism and assimilation models

Type of Model	Example of countries adopting policy	Assumptions of the model
Assimilation	United States, developing countries, communist countries	Assimilation will lead to greater similarity between diverse ethnic groups. Distinct cultural identities pose a threat to national unity and identity. Increased contact with other cultural groups will lead to shared experiences, norms and values; this in turn will reduce inter-group tensions.
Multiculturalism	Canada, Australia	Individuals are positively motivated toward the maintenance of their heritage culture. Ethnic groups are more likely to accept cultural groups if they feel secure in their own ethnic identity.

Source: Harjeet Lamba, 1997

According to Statistics Canada, there is 3,983,845 (13.4%) million visible minority of a total populations of 29,639,035 millions in Canada in 2001.[3] Of them 662,210 Black (16.6%); 216,975 Latin American (5.4%); and 2,931,865 are Asian (73.6% including South Asian, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Southeast Asian, Filipino, West Asia) populations. Visible minorities, as designated in the Employment Equity Act of Canada, are "persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in color." Demographers predicted that with current immigration trends, the visible minority population will double in the next ten years, by 2016; visible minority population

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2   See Winterdyk & King, Diversity Justice in Canada.
3   Census of Population, 2001.

will comprise 20% of adult population and 25% of child population.[4] The largest and ever growing visible minority group in Canada is Asian population (9.9%) compared to fast growing Hispanic population (14.4%) in USA.

African statesman Nkrumah remarked that "all people of African descent whether they live in North or South America, the Caribbean or in any other part of the world are Africans and belong to the African nations." Keeping this strong quote in mind helps us to view how Black people see themselves when it comes to race and ethnicity. A study conducted in Toronto, Canada a few years ago, shows views of some Black teenagers as they answer the following questions: a) What do you prefer to be called: Black, Colored, or Negro? b) How do you see yourself: as American, as African, as Canadian, or as West Indian? The respondents answered:

i)   I see myself as Black. I see myself as West Indian. I was born in the West Indies, and my parents are West Indians.
ii) I am not Black, I'm not Negro. I see myself as a colored person because I was born here. My parents are from U.S.
iii) I am Black. I am African. I am a Nigerian first, but I am an African too. My little sister is African and Canadian because she was born here.
iv) Me? I'm Black, I'm Negro, I'm colored, I'm whatever they want to call me. I suppose I'm Canadian. I was born here, and my parents born here too.
v)   My mother is white, but I am Black. I was born in U.S., but I think of myself as Canadian now.

The above noted replies indicate that the 'context' where people are born and grow plays an important role with regards to identification of their ethnic origin.

Diversity Initiative in USA-Latino/as

Winterdyk and King note that despite increasing use in social science literature, "diversity" has yet to assume a formal definition.[5] The authors also

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[4]   See L. Dredger, Multi-ethnic Canada: Identities and Inequalities.
[5]   See Winterdyk & King, op. cit.

report that "its sociological usage typically infers that diversity is a characteristic of an organization, group, or community. When used in a more political context, it frequently becomes an attribute of political systems and nations. The informal use of the term 'diversity' within social science literature routinely carries with it an implied value statement, which suggests that diversity is a positive attribute. Organizations, communities, and nations are somehow better off, it is implied, when they are more diverse."

U.S Census Bureau reports there are 34,962,569 (12.1%) Black or African American; Hispanic or Latino of any race constitutes 41,870,703 (14.4%); Asian 12,471,815 (4.3%) of a total population of 288,378,137 millions in USA in 2005.[6] Latinos or Native Spanish-speaking Americans, make up about 14.4% of population in the United States. Some of the major groups are: a) Families of Mexican origin, b) Puerto Rican Families, and c) Cuban Families. In terms of their heritage, Mexican origin accounts for 62% of the entire Hispanic population, about 7 million are of Puerto Rican origin, and approximately 1 million people of Cuban descent living in USA. (See Table 2).

Table 2. The experience and reasons for migrations
for three Hispanic groups in USA

Mexican	Puerto Rican	Cuban
Existed in the south-west part of USA. Large number came after World War II.	Jones Act of 1917 granted US citizenship to native residents of Puerto Rican, and massive migration after World War II.	Traced back as the mid-1800s, prior to Cuban Revolution in the 1959 there were 50,000 living in USA. In 1961, Fidel Castro declared Marxist-Leninist ideologies for his government.
Reasons: Political disturbances in Mexico and during 1920s economic prosperity in USA.	Reasons: Economic prosperity, need for labor in US after World War II	Reasons: Political dissident and refugees.

Source: Dr. Pauline Gonzales lecture in the Social Work Department at Monmouth

Though a common term Hispanic/Latino is being used for the above noted three major groups but they separate each other in terms of their

6   U.S Census Bureau, 2005 American Community Survey Data Profile Highlights, at: http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet.

geographic origin i.e. the context, where they were born, brought up, or can be identified with.

Kirst-Ashman and Hull have identified the following barriers to effective multicultural Social Work practice:[7]

i) Melting pot myth and stereotypes;
ii) Assumption that all who come to this country will be overjoyed to be here;
iii) Tendency to explain all of a person's behavior by reference to his or her culture;
iv) Attempts to color blind;
v) Tendency to assume that words mean the same thing to everyone;
vi) Assume that client thinks as you do;
vii) Expecting that clients will understand the social workers role;
viii) Insufficient self-awareness;
    a. Lack of understanding of your own culture
    b. Lack sensitivity to your own biases
ix) Absence of a repertoire of effective multicultural intervention techniques;
x) Lack of knowledge of a culture and experiences of specific groups with whom you are likely to work.

Miller has provided a sound list of strategies that can be used across all cultural groups when doing assessments:[8]

i) Consider all clients as individual first as members of minority status next and then members of a specific ethnic group.
ii) Never assume that a person's ethnic identity tells you anything about his/her cultural values or patterns of behavior.
iii) Treat all facts and hypotheses.
iv) Remember that all minority groups are bicultural.

7   Kirst-Ashman & Hull, "Ethnically and Racially Sensitive Social Work Practice", in Understanding Generalist Practice.
8   Miller, 1982, in Ibid.

v) Remember that some aspects of clients' cultural history, values, and life style are relevant to your social work practice.

vi) Identify strengths in the client's cultural orientation so that you can build upon it.

vii) Be aware of your own attitude about cultural pluralism.

viii) Engage your client actively in the process of learning.

ix) No substitutes for good clinical skills, empathy, caring, and sense of humor.

Conclusion

Ignorance, prejudice, bigotry and other stereotypes are socially constructed problems that continuously threaten our human rights and social and economic justice until addressed. Social Work education prepares students not only by acquiring the necessary knowledge base but also by learning the skills to become advocates for the vulnerable constituents of our global population. It is evident that context plays an important role in cultural identity of migrants. Social workers must take into consideration the contextual issues while doing cultural assessment of their clients.

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