

# ‘Has multiculturalism failed?’ The importance of lay knowledge and everyday practice

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## Abstract

Multiculturalism has been a heavily debated term within Western political discourse and academic discussions. In the British political sphere, multiculturalism is increasingly seen as a failed project that encourages inter-group segregation. By contrast, academic discussions have focused on the institutional frameworks to be employed in order to advance cultural equality, integration and positive intergroup relations. Against this background, this paper proposes a social psychological approach to multiculturalism that seeks to fill in a gap in current multiculturalism research by studying multiculturalism as a system of lay knowledge and as an everyday practice. Rather than assume or impose one particular definition of multiculturalism, we argue that successful social policy and public debate need to rest on a more in-depth understanding of how lay people construe and relate to multiculturalism in the context of their everyday lives. It is argued that a social psychological approach can enrich our understanding of multiculturalism by enabling us to study the very practice of inter-cultural interactions and inter-cultural identities in context.

## Introduction

Multiculturalism has been largely seen as a normative framework and a set of state policies which advance tolerance and advocate the recognition of cultural difference. In the United Kingdom, which has historically assumed a race relations approach to equality (Favell 2001), multiculturalism was adopted as an appropriate framework for dealing with cultural difference. Multiculturalism has indeed been a key term in British political discourse over the past few decades, especially during New Labour’s government. Parekh (2000), in his well-known and heavily cited report on the *Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain* affirmed this idea of Britishness as a plural identity that celebrates difference, as a ‘community of communities’.

However Britain, like other European countries, has recently experienced a ‘backlash’ against cultural difference (Grillo 2007; Vertovec & Wessendorf 2010). The rise of right-wing nationalist parties such as the BNP, the increasing stringency of immigration controls and the introduction of citizenship tests and ceremonies demonstrate this trend. Many would agree

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that there is overall a paradigm shift in British political discourse from multiculturalism to social cohesion, or from celebrating difference to affirming shared values. This shift began after the 2001 racial tensions in the north of England. The Cantle report (2001) at the time suggested that it was the lack of social cohesion that led to these tensions, paving the way for 'less multicultural' policies and increasing uneasiness regarding the supposed segregation of minority communities (McGhee 2005). For instance, echoing similar comments made by the German Chancellor in 2010, the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, early in 2011 argued that:

Under the doctrine of state multiculturalism, we have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and apart from the mainstream. We've failed to provide a vision of society to which they feel they want to belong. We've even tolerated these segregated communities behaving in ways that run completely counter to our values.

At the same time, public support for multiculturalism in Western countries appears moderate or even low (Verkuyten 2007). This trend in Britain and elsewhere in the West has been referred to in academic literature as the 'retreat of multiculturalism' (Joppke 2004) and even as the 'death of multiculturalism' (Kundnani 2002). While this view has been contested (e.g. Meer & Modood 2009; Modood 2011), there is an overall 'master narrative' in academic discussions of the rise and fall of multiculturalism (Kymlicka 2010).

In light of these academic and political debates, this paper argues that in order to properly understand both the claimed 'successes' and 'failures' of multiculturalism we need to study how multiculturalism is experienced 'on the ground' by lay people in their everyday lives. Otherwise, academic and political discussions are in danger of being disconnected from real life experiences and actual intergroup relations. With this in mind, we argue that a social psychological approach to multiculturalism has much to offer to contemporary philosophical and political discussions by drawing attention to the lived realities of cultural diversity and the tensions that are associated with it. The paper will first review some key challenges that multiculturalism raises for Western politics and then discuss how a social psychological approach to multiculturalism can contribute to these political and philosophical debates.

## **Multiculturalism: Debates and challenges**

Multiculturalism is a heavily debated concept. It has been studied in numerous ways by many social science disciplines, including sociology (e.g. Modood 2005; Hall 2000), political philosophy (e.g. Taylor 1992; Kymlicka 1995), anthropology (e.g. Vertovec 2007a) and psychology (e.g. Berry 2011; Fowers & Richardson 1996). In its simplest form, multiculturalism can be seen as a demographic condition, as the result of increased human mobility and inter-cultural contact. While many scholars recognise that managing inter-cultural relations and multi-group governance have been social and political realities since before the Ottoman and Roman empires (Vertovec 2010) and therefore that multiculturalism is as old as humanity (Kymlicka 2010), we have to recognise the rapid intensification of such mobility, intercultural exchange and 'super-diversity' as the result of globalisation (Vertovec 2007b).

Undeniably, multiculturalism is not only a demographic issue (Harris 2001) as the way that cultural diversity is framed and addressed on a political level has a direct impact on

intergroup relations and the very nature of political participation in contemporary democracies. Hall captures eloquently the core of the ‘multicultural question’: ‘How then can the particular and the universal, the claims of both difference and equality, be recognised? This is the dilemma, the conundrum –the multi-cultural question– at the heart of the multi-cultural’s transruptive and reconfigurative impact’ (2000 p. 235).

Following from Hall’s (2000) observation, it can be argued that the increasing diversity within national societies and the need to accommodate different sets of demands by various cultural groups pose challenging questions regarding the meaning of equality. In particular, this is a question of whether cultural difference should be restricted to the private sphere or whether it should be publicly recognised and have a place in political life. A key argument that has been put forward is that we need to progress from an equality of sameness to an equality of difference (Taylor 1992). The ‘liberal’ neutrality of the state, which conflates equality and sameness, has been criticised because it implies an ideal of assimilation and thereby oppresses historically excluded groups. Against that, Young (1990) advocates the politics of difference whereby equality is conceptualised not as sameness, but as public respect of difference, as a type of democratic cultural pluralism.

Similarly, Taylor (1992) argues in favour of the politics of recognition on the basis that identities are constructed intersubjectively and thus, misrecognition and non-recognition of people’s identities are forms of oppression. Taylor draws on the work of Mead (1934) who conceptualised the development of the self as a process of seeing oneself through the perspective of others. It follows that lack of recognition from others can have detrimental effects on one’s well-being; it can severely damage one’s self-esteem, self-confidence and self-respect (Honneth 1995).

Such conceptualisations of ‘multicultural justice’ have significant implications for the nature of political participation. Political participation in modern democracies is based on universalism; in the idea, that is, that every citizen is the same and thus equal in the eyes of the state. Several scholars have argued against this idea and have instead put forward a conceptualisation of ‘differentiated’, rather than universal, citizenship whereby group rights would be recognised (Young 1989). Thus, whereas citizenship has traditionally been linked with political, civil and social rights (Marshall 1964), there is nowadays a strong claim that citizenship be extended to include cultural rights of groups (Pakulski 1997). Religion is another challenging point, the question being how far secularism can allow for the participation of religious minorities in the public sphere (Habermas 2005; Sen et al under review). Modood, for example, writing in the context of British multiculturalism, has extensively argued for a ‘moderate secularism’ which would ‘be treated as a potential *public good* or *national resource* (not just a private benefit), which the state can in some circumstances assist to realise’ (2010 p. 6, original emphasis).

However, multiculturalism is not without its critics. It has been argued that multiculturalism as a policy and as a philosophy essentialises culture and reifies cultural difference. This can ultimately have perverse outcomes, leading to exclusion and to the reinforcement of cultural conservatism and fundamentalist identities rather than innovation and exchange (Benhabib 2002). Amartya Sen (2006) thus notes that ‘locking’ people in rigid identities denies the dynamic and agentic dimension of identity construction. Moreover, multiculturalism policies may mask other types of social inequality among different social groups, namely economic

inequality. Furthermore, feminist scholars have considered the impact of multiculturalism on the rights of women and have argued that multiculturalism may lead to tolerating cultural practices which undermine women's rights (e.g., Phillips 2007). In the context of such critiques there is a recent claim to shift to new models of 'post-multiculturalism' in both academic and political discussions (see Vertovec 2010).

Overall, multiculturalism, as a philosophical concept and as a policy, is seen as both a solution and a problem. On the one hand, it is praised for advancing equality and social recognition and on the other hand, it is criticised for creating inequality and social fragmentation. While philosophical and normative approaches, such as the ones briefly sketched above, are significant in outlining the institutional frameworks that can 'reconcile' difference and equality in the public sphere, this paper argues that these need to be complemented by a grounded empirical approach to multiculturalism. We need in other words an understanding of how multiculturalism is experienced 'on the ground' by lay people in their everyday lives. Gilroy (2005), for example, makes reference to ordinary 'convivial' forms of multiculturalism in which differences are actively negotiated. Multiculturalism is thus not just a framework that formally regulates inter-cultural relations but can be also seen as an everyday practice (Harris 2009; Wise 2010; Wise & Velayutham 2009). It is argued here that this empirical level of intergroup interactions and people's engagement with multiculturalism in the context of their everyday lives need to be studied alongside macro-level theorisation of multicultural justice and citizenship.

## **Towards a dynamic social psychological approach to multiculturalism**

Social psychology has a long history of studying how groups are constructed and how they develop relations with other groups (e.g. Allport 1954; Sherif, & Sherif 1969; Tajfel & Turner 1986). Culture is also a key field of study among social psychologists (Valsiner & Rosa 2007; Franks 2011). It is therefore not surprising that alongside philosophical discussions of multiculturalism there has also been a strong interest in studying multiculturalism among social psychologists (e.g. Chrysochoou 2004; Crisp 2010; Moghaddam 2008).

For the most part, social and cross-cultural psychology has studied multiculturalism as an ideology that has an impact on the acculturation of migrant communities. This ideology refers to the 'acceptance of, and support for, the culturally heterogeneous composition of the population of a society' (Van de Vijver et al 2008 p. 93). In order to study the spread of this ideology across different populations, researchers have developed attitude scales which assess the extent to which individuals endorse multiculturalism. Among these, the Multicultural Ideology Scale (constructed by Berry and colleagues) and the more comprehensive Multicultural Attitude Scale (developed by Breugelmans and Van de Vijver) are commonly used measures of multicultural ideology (Van de Vijver et al 2008). On the whole studies using such scales show moderate and sometimes low support for multiculturalism among majority groups in Western countries (Verkuyten 2007) while minority group members tend to hold more positive attitudes (e.g. Arends-Toth & Van de Vijver 2002; Verkuyten & Martinovic 2006). At the same time, endorsement of multiculturalism is related to more positive attitudes towards ethnic out-groups (Wolsko et al. 2006). Ethnic identity seems to be a factor impacting on multicultural attitudes. High ethnic identification is associated with lower endorsement of multiculturalism among majority group

members and to higher endorsement of multiculturalism among minority group members (Verkuyten 2005, 2007; Verkuyten & Martinovic 2006).

Parallel to this field of research, psychological literature on acculturation has focused on the ways in which majority attitudes towards multiculturalism impact on the acculturation strategies of migrants. The most widely cited model of acculturation has been developed by Berry (e.g. 1997, 2001, 2005, 2008, 2011). According to Berry's model, when migrants enter a new cultural environment they are faced with two questions: a) whether they wish to maintain their affiliation with the culture of their country of origin and b) whether they wish to forge relations with the dominant culture of the society they are entering. Depending on how migrants respond to these two issues, they are said to employ one of four acculturation strategies: assimilation refers to completely adopting the dominant culture and disassociating oneself from one's heritage culture; separation refers to maintaining one's heritage culture without adopting elements from the dominant culture; marginalisation refers to separating oneself from both one's heritage culture and the dominant culture of the society he or she is migrating to; finally, integration, which is for Berry the most efficient strategy in terms of adaptation outcomes, refers to forging or maintaining relations with both one's country of origin and with the dominant culture.

This model has been very influential and has been widely used as a framework for studying migrant identities and acculturation process. However, this typological approach has been heavily challenged on three key points by scholars who propose a more contextualised and dynamic approach to acculturation processes. Firstly, the model is criticised for defining acculturation as a series of relatively stable outcomes, not as a process (Ward 2008). As Hermans (2001a p. 272) argues, we need to 'shift from a focus on developmental end-states (like "integration" and "competence") towards a more process-oriented notion of acculturation that can account for situated, negotiated and often contested developmental trajectories'. Secondly, the idea that acculturation strategies are distinct and mutually exclusive has been contested on the basis that migrants can change strategies in different periods of time or even adopt several strategies at the same time but in different contexts (Bhatia & Ram 2009). Thirdly, the assumed universality of acculturation processes across different populations and regions has been critiqued for offering a de-contextualised, apolitical and a-cultural account of acculturation (Boski, Lyons & Coyle 2007; Bhatia 2002; Bhatia & Ram 2004, 2009; Boski 2008; Chirkov 2009; Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga & Szapocznik 2010).

Against this background, we propose a contextualised and dynamic approach to cultural diversity, acculturation and multiculturalism which highlights the socio-political context of inter-cultural relations and the multiple ways that people construct their cultural realities and are positioned within them. Such an approach requires methodologies that can capture the complexity of people's experiences in the everyday (Howarth et al. under review). Attitude scales are generally based on pre-existing and somewhat narrow definitions of multiculturalism (see Van de Vijver et al 2008) and so are not sensitive to the multiple ways in which people may understand multiculturalism. It is important that we use methods and theories which can illuminate the potential tensions and dilemmas that may be part of people's ways of thinking about multiculturalism (Verkuyten 2004) and of the ideology of multiculturalism itself (Billig et al. 1988).

We propose that multiculturalism, from a social psychological perspective, cannot simply be studied in terms of attitudinal preferences, but needs to be seen as a more complex system of knowledge and practice. We propose that multiculturalism is studied as a social representation, that is, a collectively shared system of 'values, ideas and practices' (Moscovici 1973 p. xiii; see also Moscovici 2000; Jovchelovitch 2007; Wagner & Hayes 2005). Social representations as systems of lay knowledge are constructed through communicative practices and as such are always subject to further elaboration and potential contestation. Following this social psychological approach, we should not only study how people make sense of multiculturalism in the everyday but also how such meanings can be negotiated, maintained or transformed in the process of social interaction. This highlights the polyphasic nature of social knowledge and social identities (Provencher 2011; Gergen 1991) and allows us to explain 'inconsistencies' or 'contradictions' in the ways that lay people experience issues related to multiculturalism. As discussed above, multiculturalism is fraught with tensions and dilemmas about the meaning of equality, freedom, participation, cultural identity, belonging and difference. Social psychology has theorised tensions and dilemmas as part of common-sense thinking (Billig 1987; Billig et al. 1988; Marková 2003). It is in fact such dilemmas and challenges that provide the impetus for innovation, creative thinking and ultimately, social change (Marková 2003).

Social representations related to multiculturalism and cultural difference mediate the relations and communicative practices of social and cultural groups as they provide the lens through which to construct other groups. Moscovici and Perez (1997) have shown for example that social representations of society provide people with a model of social relations. In this sense, representations are embedded in actual practice, in the very practical ways that we engage with other people and groups. For instance, stigmatising representations about 'others' and about 'difference' pose constraints on inter-cultural exchange and dialogue (Jovchelovitch 2007). They function as barriers between groups (Gillespie, Kadianaki & O'Sullivan-Lago 2012) which may become institutionalised in systems of communication and education (Howarth 2004). Lack of recognition is therefore not only a matter of policy-making but also an issue of lay representations and everyday inter-cultural encounters (Howarth 2002). By the same token, semantic or symbolic barriers can be equally constraining as institutional boundaries (Jodelet 1991).

Generally, it is dominant groups who are seen to produce more 'legitimate' social knowledge (Moghaddam 2003), thus making it hard for minority groups to develop alternative forms of representation (Gillespie 2008). However, dominant representations can still be contested and resisted by less powerful groups (Elcherth Doise & Reicher 2011). As Berry observes, 'contact between cultures is a creative and reactive process, generating new customs and values, and stimulating resistance' (2011 p. 2). According to well-established social identity research in psychology, misrecognition can function as a motivation for social change because devalued social groups will seek to develop strategies to achieve a positive social identity (Tajfel 1981; Tajfel & Turner 1986; see also Reicher 2004). Attempting to change the negative representations of the ingroup, and thus achieving positive recognition, is one such strategy. This idea captures contemporary identity politics and the claims of minorities for public recognition of their particular identities:

...the contemporary trend towards differentiation represents an explicit rejection of one-sided definitions. It represents an attempt to create or preserve criteria of group definition which are

not imposed from the outside. Rather than consisting of departures from the 'norm', these newly developing criteria reflect attempts to develop a positively valued identity for the group in which its 'separateness' is not compounded of various stigmas of assumed inferiorities (Tajfel 1978 p. 7).

More recently, other studies have shown how people contest racialising and other type of stigmatising identities by resisting and transforming social representations (Howarth 2002, 2007). Therefore, the politics of identity construction (and also the power negotiations involved in this process) are crucial for understanding intergroup relations in conditions of cultural diversity (Reicher & Hopkins 2001; Hopkins 2008).

Social psychology has a long tradition of studying identity. However, even from the first uses of the term, the definition of identity was somewhat elusive. Erikson, who first used the term in psychology, argued that identity is a process 'located in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his (*sic*) communal culture, a process which establishes, in fact, the identity of those two identities' (Erikson 1950, cited in Gleason 1983 p. 914). Identity is, thus, an ambiguous term because it is located at the social/individual interface; it is neither just 'inside' nor 'outside' the individual. Precisely because of its multifacetedness, identity has been employed to explain a variety of phenomena and has been defined in various and often conflicting ways, leading some scholars to reject the use of this term altogether (Brubaker & Cooper 2000). This critique is well-founded, but it is argued here that identity maintains explanatory power as a term that links the individual to his or her social world in multiple ways and contexts. Identity is relational, dynamic and hard to fix in static categories. Like social representations, it is constructed, negotiated and argued upon through communicative processes (Howarth 2011). Identity is furthermore embedded in the historical socio-cultural context and this has an impact on how relations between the self and the other are constituted and negotiated. As Hall (1996 p. 4) observes, 'identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we came from', so much as what we might become'. Identity can be defined as a process of constructing a sense of 'who I am' and 'who we are' by appropriating social representations (Duveen & Lloyd 1986). This approach emphasises that identity is a process, not an outcome, and allows us to explain both how prevalent social representations pose constraints on the identity positions that are available to people and also how individuals and groups can negotiate these positions in their interactions with others. This perspective does not see culture as a group attribute (Gillespie et al. forthcoming) but rather as a symbolic resource, as a field of representations that people and communities can draw on to make sense of the world and of their place in it.

A dynamic approach to processes of identity also allows us to conceptualise the growing complexity and multiplicity of identity in conditions of 'super-diversity' (Vertovec 2010) which makes the boundaries between cultures increasingly permeable (Hermans & Kempen 1998). As Hermans notes, the 'enlarging complexity of society adds to the complexity of the self' (2002 p. 148). By drawing on different cultures and by being affiliated with several cultural groups, people develop multiple identities. Thus, from a social psychological perspective, multiculturalism is not just something 'out there' but is part of people's sense of self. This suggests that the dilemmas, tensions and challenges that characterise multicultural politics in the public sphere take also place within individuals. Therefore, there is no real distinction between individual and society, but the society or the culture becomes part of the

self (Hermans 2001a, 2002). When studying inter-cultural relations and multiculturalism, we need to account for this complexity of people's affiliations (Chryssochoou 2000). Otherwise, we fall into the trap of 'methodological nationalism' which sees identities as mutually exclusive (Beck 2006), thus essentialising cultures and overlooking internal diversity (Verkuyten 2007; Howarth 2009). It is imperative therefore that we conceptualise social categorisation and social identification as multiple, contested and 'in movement' (Hopkins & Blackwood 2011; Howarth et al. under review).

There has been much discussion in social psychology about how multiple identities can be conceptualised. Multiple social categorisation (Phinney & Alipuria 2006), intersectionality (Brah & Phoenix 2005), social identity complexity (Roccas & Brewer 2002) and hybridity (Wagner et al. 2010) are some of the terms that have been developed in the relevant literature. From our perspective, a dialogical approach is best suited for capturing the complexity and dynamism of inter-cultural phenomena. According to this approach, the self is multiple and dynamic; it can be conceptualised as a set of identity positions which are in dialectical relationship with each other and may become salient in different contexts (Hermans 1996, 2001a, 2001b, 2002; Hermans & Dimaggio 2007; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka 2010; Hermans & Kempen 1998). Each identity position is a means for engaging with different aspects of the social world. People are 'equipped' with a 'positioning repertoire' (Hermans 2001b), which enables them to situate themselves in various circumstances. This idea is especially useful for the study for migrant and diasporic identities whereby people need to negotiate their position towards different cultures (Bhatia 2002; Bhatia & Ram 2001, 2004, 2009).

Overall, we argue that multiculturalism as an everyday practice is about how people 'act through' the social knowledge they have of 'others', of 'themselves', of cultural difference and cultural commonalities. In this process social actors also enact, negotiate, contest and transform their identities vis-à-vis others. Hence a social psychological approach has much to offer: it highlights the contextual, dynamic and political aspects of intercultural relations and people's sense-making in relation to multiculturalism; it includes systems of communication, identification and social practices as part of the everyday realities of multiculturalism; it acknowledges the contradictory and multiple ways in which people develop knowledge, deal with difference and develop a sense of belonging.

## **Conclusions**

From discussions running in politics and the media around the world, it would seem that many agree that multiculturalism has failed – but this could be because of perceptions of increased racist hostilities and *decreased* cultural tolerance as much as perceptions of *increased* cultural tolerance, particularly towards Islamic values and practices. At the same time philosophical discussions debate whether multiculturalism is conducive to greater equality and cohesion or to greater inequality and segregation. Part of the problem is that there is an array of competing definitions of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism can mean many different things: a demographic condition, a set of institutional arrangements, objectives of a political movement or a set of state principles (Vertovec 1998, cited in Vertovec 2007a).

In order to assess how far the question 'has multiculturalism failed' resonates with everyday knowledge and practice, we need to start precisely here: with a bottom-up understanding of

how lay people in their everyday lives think about and ‘do’ multiculturalism. Therefore we propose an alternative conceptualisation of multiculturalism as a system of social knowledge embedded in everyday practice and ways of thinking. A dynamic social psychological approach is well-suited for exploring multiculturalism in these terms. Social psychology has developed tools for studying inter-group relations, identities and inter-cultural encounters as they are played out in everyday practices (Hodgetts et al. 2010). This approach does not exclude broader socio-political processes. Rather, social psychology can be combined with an everyday multiculturalism approach which seeks to ‘understand how these wider structures and discourses filter through to the realm of everyday practice, exchange and meaning making and vice versa’ (Wise & Velayutham 2009 p. 3).

Furthermore, a social psychological understanding of multiculturalism will have significant value for policy making. Efforts to translate national, local and educational policies related to cultural diversity into more positive inter-group relations in local contexts are likely to be most effective if they are rooted in systematic analyses of how people ‘in the everyday’ understand multiculturalism and what they see as its successes and failures.

To conclude: while normative and philosophical conceptualisations of multiculturalism help us develop frameworks for equal participation in culturally diverse societies, these conceptualisations are somewhat idealistic (in that they seek to develop frameworks of how things ‘should’ be) and tend to overlook the dynamics, tensions and meanings associated with multiculturalism as it is actually lived (Semi et al. 2009). Social psychology can help us relate these issues to people’s real experiences. In the context of growing uneasiness regarding multiculturalism across European and other Western states, it is imperative to develop a deeper understanding of how multiculturalism ‘works’ in practice in order to advance appropriate policies that are grounded in people’s actual experiences.

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