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Research on multiculturalism in Canada

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This article is dedicated to the memory of my friend and colleague Rudy Kalin (1938–2011).

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ABSTRACT

Canada announced a policy of multiculturalism in 1971. The goal of the policy was to improve the quality of intercultural relations. Two main elements of the policy were proposed as steps towards achieving this goal: support for the maintenance and development of cultural communities (the *cultural* component); and promotion of intercultural contact along with the reduction of barriers to such participation (the *intercultural* component). Research on these issues can provide a basis for the development and implementation of multiculturalism policies and programmes. A review of psychological research on multiculturalism over the past 40 years is summarised. Topics include: knowledge about the multiculturalism policy; acceptance of multiculturalism; acceptance of ethnocultural groups; acceptance of immigrants; discrimination and exclusion; and attachment and identity. Research assessing three hypotheses derived from the policy is also briefly reviewed. Current evidence is that there is widespread support for these features of the multicultural way of living in Canada. Of particular importance for the success of multiculturalism is the issue of social cohesion: is the first component (the promotion of cultural diversity) compatible with the second component (the full and equitable participation and inclusion of all ethnocultural groups in civic society)? If they are compatible, together do they lead to the attainment of the fundamental goal of attaining positive intercultural relations? Current psychological evidence suggests that these two components are indeed compatible, and that when present, they are associated with mutual acceptance among ethnocultural groups in Canada. I conclude that research in Canada supports the continuation of the multiculturalism policy and programmes that are intended to improve intercultural relations.

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1. Introduction

Diversity has always been a hallmark of the population and society of Canada (Lower, 1964). Canada was a culturally diverse region prior to the arrival of European settlers, with 50 distinct Aboriginal cultures and more than a dozen distinct language groups in the Aboriginal population (Burnet, 1981; see note ¹). With respect to immigration, Canada ranks fifth in the world in terms of the largest foreign born population (World Migration Report, 2010). At present, there are 6.2 million

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¹ While Aboriginal Peoples in Canada constitute an important element of our historical and contemporary cultural diversity, they are generally not enamoured of multiculturalism policy and its programmes, and remain largely outside of its focus (Fleras & Elliot, 1992). In part, this is because Aboriginal Peoples perceive the policy to be relevant to 'settlers' rather than to themselves as indigenous peoples. In terms of Jenson's (1998) conception of social cohesion (which includes the components of belonging, inclusion, participation, recognition, and legitimacy), Lambertus (2002) has argued that Aboriginal Peoples have experienced "isolation, exclusion, non-involvement, rejection, and illegitimacy". Because of this situation, the present paper does not seek to incorporate Aboriginal Peoples further into the general discussion of multiculturalism in Canada.

foreign-born people in Canada (representing 20% of the population) who have come from over 200 countries, and who speak 94 different languages (Statistics Canada, 2006). In recent years, the majority of immigrants (over 65%) have come from East and Southeast Asia, adding to the extant diversity. Along with this cultural diversity, the existence of geographic, historical, linguistic and social diversity has meant that there has probably never been a realistic option to forge a uniform people or society in Canada. In recognition of this, over the past half century, Federal Governments of Canada have declared their intention to pursue a multicultural vision for Canadian society. This course was made concrete by the announcement of a policy of multiculturalism in 1971, and its formalisation as the Multiculturalism Act in 1988. Most recently, Canada was the first to ratify (in 2005) the United Nations Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions.

The concept of *multiculturalism* has acquired many meanings in the past 40 years. In the 1970s, Berry, Kalin and Taylor (1977) made the distinction among three different meanings: multiculturalism as demographic fact (the presence of cultural diversity in the Canadian population); multiculturalism as an ideology (the general desirability among Canadians for maintaining and sharing this diversity); and as a public policy (governmental orientation and action towards this fact). Of course, these three features are closely related: without the first, there is no need to be concerned with what Canadians might think about it; and there would be no need for governmental policy or action to deal with it. At the psychological core of the meaning of multiculturalism lies the notion of individuals having and sharing a collective identity as Canadians, and who also have particular identities as members of various ethnocultural communities (Cameron & Berry, 2008).

In the past 40 years, Canada came to recognise, celebrate and seek to manage this diversity. According to Yalden (2009, p. 33), the first use of the concept in public policy anywhere was in the Canadian “Policy of Multiculturalism within a Bilingual Framework” (see note ²). The multiculturalism policy was advanced by the Government of Canada in 1971, stating that:

“A policy of multiculturalism within a bilingual framework. . . (is) the most suitable means of assuring the cultural freedom of all Canadians. Such a policy should help to break down discriminatory attitudes and cultural jealousies. National unity, if it is to mean anything in the deeply personal sense, must be founded on confidence in one’s own individual identity; out of this can grow respect for that of others, and a willingness to share ideas, attitudes and assumptions. . . . The Government will support and encourage the various cultural and ethnic groups that give structure and vitality to our society. They will be encouraged to share their cultural expression and values with other Canadians and so contribute to a richer life for all” (Government of Canada, 1971).

In essence, this policy advocated support for: (i) the maintenance and development of heritage cultures; (ii) intercultural sharing, and the reduction of barriers to full and equitable participation of all Canadians in the life of the larger society; and (iii) the learning of official languages as a basis for such participation.

However, the basic notion that cultural communities living in plural societies need not ‘assimilate’ into some kind of ‘mainstream’ had an earlier history in Canadian discourse. For example, at the UNESCO conference in 1956 in Havana on “The Cultural Integration of Immigrants” (Borrie, 1959), there was a beginning shift away from assimilation. The presentation to the conference by the Canadian Government (Department of Citizenship and Immigration, 1956, p. 1) argued that their policy towards immigrants should reflect the political and cultural patterns of Canadian society. This pattern includes “. . . a society built on the ideas of individual worth and cultural differences. . . . The pressure of one dominant group to assimilate, that is to absorb others, is therefore impracticable as a general theory.” (quoted in Borrie, 1959, p. 51).

The Multiculturalism Act (1988) gave formal and concrete meaning to these general ideas. The Act declared that the policy of the Government of Canada is to “recognize and promote the understanding that multiculturalism reflects the cultural and racial diversity of Canadian society and acknowledges the freedom of all members of Canadian society to preserve, enhance and share their cultural heritage”. It also recognised that “multiculturalism is a fundamental characteristic of the Canadian heritage and identity and that it provides an invaluable resource in the shaping of Canada’s future”. At the same time, the Act sought “to promote the full and equitable participation of individuals and communities of all origins in the continuing evolution and shaping of all aspects of Canadian society and assist them in the elimination of any barrier to that participation”, and to “ensure that all individuals receive equal treatment and equal protection under the law, while respecting and valuing their diversity”. The then Director of Multiculturalism (Gauld, 1992), reiterated three points: (i) Multiculturalism is here to stay, both as social fact and as public policy and programmes; (ii) it is more than a cultural policy; it is also an equity policy, designed not only “to preserve and enhance the multicultural heritage of Canadians”. . . but also “working to achieve the equality of all Canadians in the economic, cultural, social and political life of Canada”; and (iii) he noted that the policy “is addressed to all Canadians, not just to ethnocultural minority communities”. This necessary conjunction of the diversity and equity features of the policy has been repeatedly emphasised, and has been at the forefront of debate about multiculturalism for many years. For example, Kymlicka, opined that “. . .accommodating diversity is in fact central to achieving true equality” (2004, p. 167).

² The notion of bilingualism in Canada refers to the presence and widespread use of two ‘Official languages’ (English and French). It may appear as anomalous to have multiculturalism, but not also multilingualism. However, the country was founded by these two distinct linguistic communities, and their languages have been given official support (for example in laws, parliaments and federal government services). Other ‘heritage languages’ are also recognised, and are supported to some extent, but do not have the same status.

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