Identity, Intersections of Diversity and the Multiculturalism Program

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ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of the Multiculturalism Program, Ian Donaldson describes the need to get to know Canadian diversity in a more profound way. He advocates for a better definition of identity, one that would allow the federal government to create superior policy and programming. This means conducting not only accurate statistical study, but open-ended, partnership-based discussions at the institutional level that will lend a more progressive meaning to the term 'multiculturalism.'

The Multiculturalism Program, at the Department of Canadian Heritage, is interested in enhancing the influence of its policy objectives across government and society. This is a challenge that the program continues to face for a number of reasons. The most obvious reason is that the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* (1988) is not prescriptive enough. In other words, the Multiculturalism Program is not invested with a mandate to impose any framework of accountability across government on specific policy issues, the way other programs and departments do, as is the case, for example, with official languages or employment equity policy. Instead, the Multiculturalism Policy must be implemented through less formalized processes. Working within such a context for policy implementation requires that Multiculturalism Program representatives find new ways to make connections between individuals, groups, and organizations across government and civil society. This type of work is best understood as building partnerships and networks.

Within this somewhat open-ended approach, the Multiculturalism Program is designed to develop its projects in a number of ways. The four main avenues of program delivery include research, community initiatives, influencing institutional development where possible, and public education. Since 1997, the Multiculturalism Program's policy framework has included the following key goals:

Civic Participation	Developing, among Canada's diverse people, active citizens with both the opportunity and the capacity to participate in shaping the future of their communities and their country.
Social Justice	Building a society that ensures fair and equitable treatment and that respects the dignity of people of all origins.
Identity	Fostering a society that recognizes, respects, and reflects a diversity of cultures such that people of all backgrounds feel a sense of belonging and attachment to Canada.

In recent years, the Multiculturalism Program has partnered with the Association for Canadian Studies (ACS) and the Metropolis Project - Citizenship and Immigration (Metropolis), to hold policy-research seminars that are set-up to examine the link between multiculturalism issues and the concept of identity, as this concept may be explored within a progressive framework for diversity and social change.

In 2001, the partnership between the Multiculturalism Program, the ACS, and Metropolis led to an Identity Seminar and, more recently, in April 2003 it organized an Intersections of Diversity Seminar. A number of interesting papers have come out of this seminar series process, some of which appear in this magazine. But the significance of exploring the concept of identity, for the Multiculturalism Program specifically, is that the 'identity goal' is the most elusive of our policy goals at the same time that it may be one of the most important, especially in terms of connecting more Canadians to the ever-evolving ethos of multiculturalism in our country. In this article, I will discuss, briefly, the challenge that the Multiculturalism Program faces regarding the identity goal and in doing so I will provide some thoughts on the significance of intersections of *identity,* or intersections of *diversity,* as these approaches may be articulated somewhat interchangeably. One key message that I will try to communicate is that expanding our understanding and use of the identity goal should be seen as a tool for continuing the type of work that the Program is called upon to do; namely, helping to build partnerships and networks of Canadians around issues of social justice and participation in the context of multiculturalism.

A Shift in the Identity Goal

The question of identity, so often discussed in Canada, has a unique influence within the Multiculturalism Program and with respect to public perceptions of the Multiculturalism Policy. I should start by emphasizing that an important shift

has taken place in our approach to the idea of multiculturalism as it relates to diverse Canadian identities. In the 1970s and early 1980s, the identity goal was understood in terms of assisting groups to retain and foster their traditional cultural identities. Although this approach to identity remains part of our way of thinking about multiculturalism, it no longer dominates the meaning of multiculturalism. An early concern for the traditional folkloric and artistic elements of cultural diversity has given way to an approach that takes into consideration race relations, issues of discrimination, access to services and opportunities, civic and political participation, public awareness of diversity issues, institutional inclusion, media representation of ethno-cultural minorities, and so much more.

This shift is often characterized as a shift toward integration. The idea of multiculturalism is now associated with encouraging participation in the mainstream social, economic, and political life of the country at the same time that differences in race, ethnicity, and religion are increasingly valued and celebrated in this same, so-called, mainstream. However, what this shift represents, in terms of the long-term implications for citizenship, is frequently under-appreciated and in the 1990s the Multiculturalism Policy was received in a polarized way. Certain critics characterized official multiculturalism as a patronizing and divisive policy (early 1990s) while others interpreted it as a policy promoting unity at the expense of cultural difference (late 1990s).[1] Although constructive criticism is always welcome, circumscribing multiculturalism within narrow categories of policy intent should not be encouraged. We must move forward if we are going to enhance the scope and effectiveness of the Multiculturalism Policy. It is important, now and in the future, that we embrace an open-ended approach to multiculturalism, for the sake of infusing multicultural citizenship with a more robust and progressive meaning.

Indeed, the Program's identity goal should be seen as encouraging 'unity' on particular grounds only, grounds that encourage open dialogue as well as critical thought. The identity goal encourages unity, or attachment to Canada, only insofar as Canadians are able to build "a society that **recognizes, respects and reflects a diversity of cultures so that citizens of all backgrounds** feel a sense of belonging and attachment to Canada." According to this goal, the cause of multicultural integration is not unity *per se* but rather something much more interesting and plausible. The cause is one of linking different identities to a common dialogue on what recognition and respect for diversity requires in the Canadian context, so that people of all backgrounds feel that they are included and in a position to help bring about change. An articulation of this goal may be found in the words of two young Muslim Canadian women, interviewed for a *Toronto Star* feature marking the second anniversary of 9/11:

> One good outcome of Sept.11 was that Muslims started to relate more to their Canadian identity and started to speak openly about some of the violence committed in the name of Islam.
>
> What is multiculturalism? Is it simply about going to restaurants and holding cultural festivals once in a while? Tolerance is a big part of multiculturalism but it is not the end. What you need is direct contact between cultures.[2]

In the words of these Canadians, the identity goal that stems from multiculturalism ought to be about bringing people of different backgrounds together to advance a common framework, a shared terms of reference perhaps, for issues of respect, equality and diversity. The vision at work here is directed at expanding the meaning of multiculturalism, to transform the idea of multiculturalism into an open-ended process, a discourse that all Canadians can and should participate in. It is based on a new approach to identity that is self-critical yet evolving. It is based on a new approach to community that encourages 'direct contact.'

Social Capital, Policy-Relevant Research and the Purpose of "Intersections"

The term social capital, popularized in recent decades by Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman and Robert Putnam, has been defined in different ways. Hence, there is no single, commonly accepted, approach to the theory and measurement of the concept let alone one clear set of guidelines for generating greater degrees of what might be considered social capital, amongst members of a society. Nevertheless, the concept has garnered much attention within academic and government circles worldwide. At the federal government level here in Canada, the Policy Research Initiative (PRI) recently released a draft discussion paper on approaches to social capital as a public policy tool. In this paper, the following tentative definitions were provided, as a point of departure for government policy-research that might be thought to touch on social capital issues:

> *Social capital* refers to the networks of social relations that provide access to needed resources and supports.
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> A *social capital framework* to support research and policy analysis uses the core network concept but is multi-dimensional. Depending on the particular research and policy application, social capital studies should encompass, for example, the investments that individuals and collectivities make in the establishment and maintenance of social networks, the various characteristics of the networks and of transactions, the norms and institutional frameworks in which such networks operate, the resources that can be potentially accessed through participation in the networks, and the returns to those investments in the form of economic, social and health outcomes for individuals, communities and societies.[3]

According to these definitions, the open-ended, partnership-based mandate that I introduced above appears to be a good fit for what social capital initiatives require, at least in a generalized context. Given this overlap, it is important that the Multiculturalism Program maximize the opportunities that this current interest provides, in terms of contributing to a collaborative policy-research agenda across government.

Recently, the Multiculturalism Program/Canadian Heritage partnered with Statistics Canada on the *Ethnic Diversity Survey.* The survey data was released in September 2003. The data from the *Ethnic Diversity Survey* will provide researchers with a great resource in terms of the questions that are tied to social capital. The survey provides researchers with a variety of questions on trust, the number of friends individuals have from other ethnic groups, as well as a series of questions that measure their sense of belonging to their family, ethnic group, city, and to Canada itself. For the first time, researchers will be able to compare the responses of different ethnic groups to these questions, given the large sample size. Moreover, the survey will allow researchers to study the relationship between social capital and other phenomena such as religion, discrimination, and life satisfaction.

However, it is important to understand that survey research does not always provide us with neatly packaged policy directions. In fact, the analysis of survey results can often lead to ambiguous or inconclusive findings, leaving policy-makers to implement initiatives that are not necessarily supported by crystal clear data. Consequently, policy must be informed by theory, analytic concepts, qualitative research, institutional experience, and input from community groups as much as it is informed by statistical data.

Researchers at Canadian Heritage recently completed a report entitled "Ethnicity and Social Capital in Canada", with analysis based on data drawn from the *2000 Equality Security Community* survey. The authors (Aizlewood and Pendakur) examine visible ethnic differences as well as the specific attitudes and behaviours of twenty-two distinct ethnocultural groups. In doing so they consider social capital issues such as the impact of community-level diversity on civic attitudes and behaviours, the impact of individual ethnic attributes on civic attitudes and behaviours, and which, if any, holds greater explanatory power in the Canadian context.[4] What they find in their analysis is that increased diversity levels are inconsistent with negative indicators of social capital. Instead, they suggest that city size and individual characteristics such as age, education, and income may be more influential factors in determining degrees of social capital, assuming that uniform methods of measuring the concept remain constant.

What this suggests, for the Multiculturalism Program, is that it may be counter-productive to work from the assumption that so-called 'bridging' (inclusive) forms of social capital are more important than 'bonding' (exclusive) forms of social capital, as far as influencing levels of trust, opportunity or membership across society are concerned.[5] Bonding within ethnocultural groups is likely to be just as important as bridging across ethnocultural identities, in terms of increasing social networks and access to needed resources. For Multiculturalism Program community initiatives, this means that project funding and program delivery should be planned around bonding and bridging activities alike. Project funding that targets bonding issues within newer immigrant communities such as the Somali, Pakistani, or Vietnamese communities is just as important as developing projects that target bridging identities such as women, parents, gays and lesbians, youth, and others that are shared across ethnic, racial, and religious lines. The point, in general, is that choosing to target either bonding or bridging identities, or both, should depend on the context of the particular participation or social justice issue that needs to be addressed.

Beyond this, what is obvious is that we need to learn more about other factors of identity like age, class, education, gender, sexual orientation, language, region/city, or disability and how these factors intersect and overlap with ethnicity, race and religion, the traditional concerns of multiculturalism, to influence discrimination, barriers to participation, or access to services in different policy contexts like justice, health, or information technology, to name a few. Keeping in mind that empirical research can only do so much, and that there are methodological limitations to conducting research based on multiple and/or overlapping statistical variables, what is required is a greater consideration of the concepts that we work with in the realm of policy formulation and program delivery. Moreover, there will be jurisdictional limitations to making use of a collaborative, 'intersections' approach to policy-research, whether it is pursued across governments or across government departments. The opportunities and limitations, however, need to be explored and defined more clearly through inter-departmental and inter-governmental discussion. For the Multiculturalism Program, this is all part of making better sense of the identity goal, as I have described it above, and part of fulfilling the Program's mandate to increase partnerships and social networks that bring Canadians together to discuss issues of social justice and participation in the ever-evolving context of multiculturalism.

The Multiculturalism Program Research Unit is supporting a special "Intersections of Diversity" policy-research monograph series to be published as a forthcoming edition of Canadian Ethnic Studies. *The special edition will feature new explorations of the intersections of diversity from conceptual and theoretical perspectives as well as within the specific policy areas of labour markets, capital markets, information and knowledge, culture, health, justice, and political processes.*

Notes

1 In 1994 author Neil Bissoondath released his *Selling Illusions: the Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada.* The book advanced the thesis that official multiculturalism is a divisive, or "ghettoizing", policy. Another critique of the Multiculturalism Program's policy framework came in the form of an academic article written by a spokesperson for the *Canadian Ethnocultural Council* who targeted the 1997 changes to the multiculturalism policy objectives as representing an extreme shift toward the goals of unity and assimilation over and against the goal of preserving cultural differences. See Bohdan S. Kordan, "Multiculturalism, Citizenship and the Canadian Nation: A Critique of the Proposed Design for Program Renewal," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 29, No. 2 (1997): 136-143.

2 These quotes are from interviews with Nabila Munawar and Hanadi Loubani respectively. See *Toronto Star,* Thursday, September 11, 2003: B3.

3 See "Social Capital: Building on a Network-Based Approach", Policy Research Initiative Draft Discussion Paper, October 2003: 2 (available on PRI website).

4 I have paraphrased the goals of the report from the introduction section of the report. See Amanda Aizlewood and Ravi Pendakur, "Ethnicity and Social Capital in Canada", Strategic Research and Analysis – Department of Canadian Heritage, June 27, 2003 (For PDF copies contact sradoc_docras@pch.gc.ca; Reference – SRA-657).

5 For an introductory explanation of bonding and bridging forms of social capital see Robert Putnam, *Bowling alone: the collapse and revival of American community.* Touchstone, New York, 2000: 18-23.