Intersections of Diversity:

The Case for Policy Intervention

Meyer Burstein

Meyer Burstein was responsible for Canada's strategic planning and research programs during a formative period in the development of Canada's present immigration regime. He is the founder, in collaboration with Demetrios Papademetriou, a leading American thinker on immigration issues, of the international Metropolis Project, which seeks to strengthen the role of science in public policy and practice.

ABSTRACT

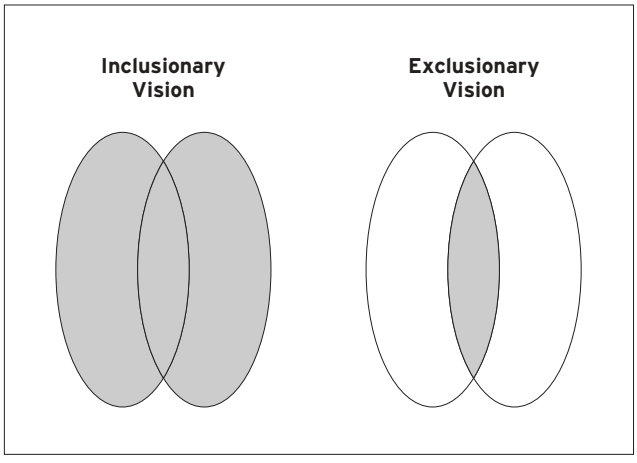
The author comments on some of the issues addressed during a workshop on intersections of diversity conducted in Niagara Falls in the spring of 2003. While conversations about diversity typically revolve around the issues of exclusion and disadvantage, which are indeed important issues, Meyer Burstein points to the fact that diversity could also be discussed in terms of what it can bring to the Canadian political, business, and cultural sectors.

The Intersections of Diversity project began with two objectives: (i) to contribute to a better understanding of intersecting diversities; and (ii) to "build a horizontal, cross-government policy framework … [that is] … inclusive of, and responsive to, the intersecting nature of diversity". This article focuses on the latter policy objective and examines the lessons that emerged from a two-day workshop conducted in Niagara Falls in April of 2003. The majority of workshop participants were academics, with a smaller number of government researchers and policymakers, and a sprinkling of NGOs.

At the start of the Niagara Falls workshop, participants were challenged to think of intersecting diversities from the perspective of membership and inclusion in multiple diversity groups. Unfortunately, this optimistic notion of inclusion did not find fertile ground and stood in stark opposition to the near total focus of the workshop on exclusion and disadvantage.

This dominance of the exclusionary vision led participants to focus virtually all of their attention on remedial government policies. As a result, the prevailing dialogue centered on rights, on measures to enhance access, and on ways to redistribute income and privilege. There was very little discussion of the actual or potential contributions that groups characterized by multiple identity markers could make towards strategic policy goals such as enhanced trade or regional development.

To some extent, the focus on remedial policy interventions can be explained by the choice of identity markers and by the language of the conference which referred to the need for policies that are "…inclusive, sensitive and responsive to marginalized groups …". This was not inappropriate given that many of the identity characteristics have long been associated with disadvantage and discrimination. The unipolar nature of the discussion did, however, clash with another idea that has been gaining currency, namely that diversity is a valuable resource and one that Canada is uniquely well positioned to exploit. After all, if a little diversity or a single marker of identity is a good thing, why should more diversity and multiple identity markers not be even better?



This is not to say that the workshop did not treat serious issues in a serious way. In particular, the organizers of the conference were successful in drawing attention to a set of issues that have heretofore been largely ignored. As well, a variety of creative and, oftentimes, speculative ideas were advanced for dealing with concerns that frequently fall outside the domain of federal policy development and program implementation. The challenge now is to follow on this initiative in a sophisticated, but practical, way. Here too the workshop offered some important lessons. Six key points are elaborated below to serve as a guide in the event that the organizers or, better yet, members of the policy community decide to move this initiative forward.

Key lessons and next steps:

(a) It is important to situate *different circumstances* at the core of any arguments regarding the need for incremental policy measures to deal with multiple identity markers. This is necessary in order to distinguish such claims from other, straightforward calls for additional resources (whether or not additional resources are needed is not in dispute here). Two general circumstances requiring special intervention by government can be identified. The first circumstance occurs when separate, overlapping identity markers *interact* to produce needs that are qualitatively or quantitatively different from those produced by simple aggregation of the needs associated with the individual markers. The second occurs when there are no interactive effects but the burden of accessing multiple services proves too great for clients with multiple needs originating in multiple diversities. Under such circumstances, the onus for obtaining services cannot rest with the recipients but must, instead, be assumed by governments who need to reach out and to bundle services.

(b) As might be expected, there was too much enthusiasm at the workshop for creating multiple, overlapping identities and then calling for special interventions. This risks turning a good idea into a risible one. Rigorous and extensive pruning will be needed. A good place to begin would be with the identity markers themselves. The current selection lumps together personal characteristics and ascribed features (some of them time and situation-dependent) with outcome measures. A smaller set of identity markers most closely aligned with strategic policy concerns would stand a greater chance of attracting support from government agencies. This initial reduction should be followed closely by statistical analyses aimed at clarifying the size of various populations and the conditions under which they live. Service providers and NGOs could play a very useful role in helping to focus this analysis. As well, members of the affected groups should be given a voice in the process since they are the real experts. Ultimately, hard choices will need to be made. Only where numbers warrant – and subject to the conditions identified in step number one above – can a legitimate case be made for government intervention.

(c) Some situations are best dealt with institutionally at the level of practice and not at the level of policy or program reform. This is particularly true of small, physically dispersed populations requiring complex, one-off interventions. In such circumstances, the answer may lie not in the services but in how they are delivered, with NGOs likely being the preferred delivery vehicle. A deeper analysis of how NGOs and non-government service providers respond to persons characterized by multiple identity markers would produce a better understanding of the issues and of the organizational and financial implications of addressing them.

(d) For the intersections project to move forward, the buy-in of several key communities will be needed. This can only occur after the pruning exercise described above has taken place. The key communities that will need to be engaged, and who were underrepresented at the Niagara seminar, are policymakers, service providers (both government agents as well as NGOs) and members of the target communities. These groups will need to be brought together. A threefold goal should be established for such a gathering: (i) to initiate a small number of action research projects; (ii) to establish a 'board' to evaluate the research results and recommendations; and (iii) to seek commitment for implementing a series of pilot experiments to address the issues identified by the research.

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(e) Finally, an effort should be made to identify instances where overlapping identities constitute a resource that can be tapped to the advantage of all concerned. There is a pronounced tendency, especially prevalent among academics and the non-governmental sector, to equate diversity with need. This single-minded focus narrows the appeal of diversity by aligning its support exclusively with altruist motives and ignoring the broader constituency that responds to national self-interest. If diversity is to be viewed as a good thing and public policy is to be based on honesty and liberal democratic principles, then the advantages of diversity, and not only the costs, will need to be enunciated with far greater clarity and proclaimed.