SECOND GENERATION YOUTH IN TORONTO

Are We All Multicultural?

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The term "second generation" youth is broadly applied to children of immigrants. Some scholars use the term to mean children with either one or two foreign-born parents, others require at least one adult in the household to be foreign born; some include children who immigrated at a very early age, while others insist the country of birth is an important signifier. Most scholars, however, are interested in the acculturation processes and outcomes, based on concerns about the person's integration in the receiving society. In Canada, as elsewhere, the concern itself is indicative of uncertainty that second generation youth may not see themselves, and may not be seen by others, as "fully" Canadian. This is despite the policy, official discourse and ideology of multiculturalism, which suggests that various cultural groups are equally valued in this country.

Culture is usually theorized in two distinct ways: as a set of distinctive, relatively stable attributes associated with a group and the more fluid relationships between individuals, groups and their representations. The former is used to signal group identity, associated with race, region, nationality, religion or primary language. The latter creates the space in which these attributes are claimed, contested or modified. So, how do second generation Canadian youth see themselves?

Data from Toronto collected as a part of a tri-city project[1] provided us with some insight into how second generation youth identify themselves in the most multicultural city in the world. For three years, we collected data from the same cohort of 32 youth in two schools, in a variety of textual and graphic forms. The schools were located in neighbourhoods characterized by a high immigrant population, lots of highrise apartment buildings and low mean incomes.

The data showed that the youth had a remarkable sense of self and confidence in who they were. Blue Flag Baron's[2] statement, "I would like to be nobody because I am me," was quite typical of both his male and female peers in tenth grade. In almost every case, the youth had positive self-images and did not want to change anything about themselves. "I am a unique butterfly…I do not want to be anybody other than myself," said Dorissa. The youth were given a form on which they were asked to name their ethnicity, along with other demographic data. They did so in a wide variety of ways, based on one or both parents' national (Portuguese), sub-national (Chaldean), or pan-national (Latino) origins; religion (Catholic); race (Black); their own place of birth and residence (Canadian); hybridity (Italian-Canadian) or rejected an ethnic label altogether. Given the ethnic diversity in their schools and neighbourhoods, it was "normal" to have such differences and understandable that they claimed their ethnicity in multiple ways (Hoerder et al. 2005, Sicakkan 2005). These identifications allowed them not only to claim commonalities with other groups through race, religion or place of birth, but also to establish their unique group memberships. In choosing their ethnicity in many different ways, they were able to subvert the imposition of binary terms, such as mainstream/ethnic or White majority/visible minority, still widely used in Canada to distinguish racialized immigrants and European origin populations.

For the youth in this study, multiculturalism was an everyday lived reality, and they extolled its virtues for three main reasons. First was their understanding that Canada's policy of multiculturalism had enabled their parents to come here from countries where they had lacked economic opportunities, political freedom or personal safety. Having visited or heard stories about their parents' countries of origin, the youth figured that Canada had improved their life chances by accepting their parents as a part of its multicultural mosaic. Recalling a visit to her parents' country of origin, Shana said:

> I was scared to sleep because I was afraid that someone would come in the house and steal something. And, I remember years before when my dad used to live there, they had a store and people came in the store and they shot my uncle and they stole all the money.

The second reason youth valued multiculturalism was because of the opportunities it created for them to engage with people and artefacts from many different cultures. Home Slice, a Catholic

of Italian heritage, said he liked his multicultural neighbourhood because "we have mosques, temples, churches here. We have everything." He was intrigued by Bollywood films and the strange script he could not read at the Indian store that he visited with his friend. Similarly, Shana claimed all her friends had different cultural backgrounds and said, "I'm in favour of multiculturalism because you can eat other people's food and if the whole country was just one culture, it would be very boring."

The third, and possibly the most important reason for the youth's appreciation of multiculturalism, was a structure of feeling that they were not judged by their peers on the basis of their race, religion or ethnicity and that diverse people got along fairly well in Canada. Shana said:

> Well, in my neighbourhood, everybody treats everybody fairly. You are not judged because of the colour of your skin. There are a lot of different cultures in our neighbourhood – not just one specific culture. Our neighbourhood is pretty multicultural and the kids in the summertime, they usually, we all come together and play.

Blue Flag Baron, who had been in a different school earlier, persuaded his family to send his younger brother to a school that was more multicultural. He said:

> I think it's because the Catholic school I went to wasn't really multicultural. It was a lot of Italian and Caucasian people, so I was brought up in basically a White society until I came here. So, I kind of felt weird, like, it's not like I'm racist or anything but I felt weird, like, I didn't, it was like they're brown and black and it was like cool, but what kind of people are they? Like, I didn't really have that much exposure to them. But for my little brother, I, you know, said why not send him there where you know he's got that multicultural school thing, and what not, and that school is pretty much well known for their multiculturalism.

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Within the confines of their schools and neighbourhoods, and in relation to their peers, multiculturalism seemed to serve the youth quite well. Bourdieu refers to this as the field, or context, in which the value of cultural capital is assessed (1990). However, beyond the limitations of this field, a cultural heritage that was different from the dominant culture did not take them very far. Speaking of immigrants in his workplace, Home Slice said, "At my job, we have plenty of people that don't speak English and we're welcoming to them. But, perhaps higher levels jobs…if you don't speak English it would be very tough."

Dorrissa talked about how she was often viewed with suspicion at the shopping mall she loved to visit. She said:

> One of the security guards that works there, he'll be like standing near the window and we'll be like walking around and every aisle we are in he'll pass by, or he'll walk in that aisle, or I'll turn a corner and he'll be right there.

Blue Flag Baron pointed out that the police regarded youth in his neighbourhood with similar suspicion and often harassed them. He explained:

> Maybe we're, like, we look like we're under suspicion or something. Like my 18-year-old friend, he smokes, he smokes marijuana and he smokes cigarettes. But it was kind of weird because he was smoking a cigarette and they had thought it was something else, and they all rushed into the skate park and "Please nobody move!" This and that, and it was retarded. And they've done it to us several times.

Defending the residents of his multicultural neighbourhood and decrying the stereotypes associated with them, he said:

> I don't think it's the people. I think it's the bigger people, I mean the bigger picture, what people think they should be, and how people portray [the neighbourhood]. I've talked to people that are like my friends, living in [a suburb], and they just give me this awkward look, when they're like, yeah, where do you live again? I'm like, [the neighbourhood] and they're just like, their jaw drops completely and they're like, "You come from that area?" And then they totally get a different perspective of you, they think that you're this gangster person and you're going to shoot everybody.

These data show that the youth were beginning to develop an understanding of the limits of multiculturalism through their increasing awareness of how immigrants, especially those who lived in low-income neighbourhoods, who looked like people from "Third-World" countries or who did not speak English, were regarded in the dominant White society. Razack (1999) calls this the "culturalization of racism," which in effect invites minorities to keep their culture but enjoy no greater access to power and resources. Referring to Essad, she says, "If we live in a tolerant and

pluralistic society in which the fiction of equality within ethnic diversity is maintained, then we need not accept responsibility for racism." Writing about Australia, Hage (1998: 60) suggests that the *inclusion* of immigrants in the national narrative keeps them coming, but their *exclusion* from the privileged social, political and cultural spheres of society keeps them available exclusively as providers of cheap labour.

For the Toronto second generation youth in this study, their multicultural schools and neighbourhoods largely provided them with the field in which they could claim their multiple identifications with a sense of confidence. But cracks in the façade of multiculturalism were already beginning to appear as they considered their location in the wider social context, even as Canadian-born children of immigrants. Their realization of how immigrants who did not speak English were confined to lower level jobs afforded them insights on how their parents were treated upon their migration to Canada. They were themselves viewed with suspicion by people in authority, and their multicultural neighbourhoods were considered ghettos associated with criminality.

As policy-makers contemplate their choices in selecting types of immigrants permitted to migrate to Canada and creating structures that include or exclude them and their children from positions of power and privilege, they need to consider whether they want a just and equitable multicultural society, or one that is divided into an underclass of immigrants and their children and a privileged group of aging European-descent people.

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Notes

[1] This project, entitled *Negotiating Difference and Democracy: Identity as Social Capital among Canadian Youth*, was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), with Yvonne Hébert (University of Calgary) as principal researcher and Lori A. Wilkinson (University of Manitoba) and Mehrunnisa Ali (Ryerson University) as co-researchers. Research assistants in Toronto were Charity-Ann Hannan and Carolina Greco.

[2] The youth are identified by their self-selected pseudonyms.

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