REASONABLE ACCOMMODATION IN QUEBEC: LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE USA

Donald M. Taylor is professor of Psychology at McGill University, Montreal. He has conducted research in a variety of cultural settings including South Africa, Indonesia, Philippines, India and with Wallace Lambert in innercity Detroit and Miami. By far his longest term commitment has been with Aboriginal peoples with a special focus on the Inuit of Arctic Quebec (Nunavik). His most recent book is entitled "The Quest for Identity" and is published by Praeger.

ABSTRACT

Wally Lambert had an intellectual and social curiosity that never ceased. After making seminal contributions to bilingual education, he began focusing on the intergroup, community context that formed the back-drop for school-based language programs. This led him to multicultural innercity urban centres in the United States where we sought to assess the debate between the Canadian mosaic and the American melting pot. To our surprise every cultural group we studied had a multicultural vision, and a shared understanding that while the heritage culture might be appropriate for the home and in the ethnic community, mainstream American culture and English needed to dominate the wider public environment. These surprising findings may be instructive for the current debate in Quebec over "reasonable accommodation."

Twenty-five years before "reasonable accommodation" reared its controversial head in Quebec, Wally Lambert was contemplating the same issue in the United States. In the nineteen eighties, Wally was renowned for his seminal research on bilingual education, and his expertise was sought around the world. Inner city Detroit, a multilingual, multiethnic, very poor, academically underachieving, urban environment posed a special bilingual challenge for Wally. He quickly realized that any bilingual program in Detroit would have to be launched in the context of academic disengagement and intergroup conflict.

Wally ambled into my office, and as the intergroup "guy," approached me to join him on this linguistic mission, which he described as an intergroup context that focused on the very definition of "America." We travelled, lived in, worked with, studied, and ultimately implemented bilingual programs in inner-city Detroit, followed by inner-city Miami. But what the project brought was the opportunity to share Wally's profound intellect and creativity as we wrestled with the multicultural issues that he saw as the context for language.

We began with a naïve assumption. Canada was in the process of growing into its multiculturalism policy, a "mosaic" where cultural groups were encouraged to retain their heritage culture. The social psychological rationale was that only if a group is secure and confident in its own cultural identity, can it be open and welcoming of other cultural groups. The United States, by contrast was characterized as a "melting pot," a nation where people from every conceivable culture were required to jump in the pot, where the heat was turned up, and with vigorous stirring, heritage cultures would melt away, and everyone would leave the melting pot being an "American."

It made sense. Canada seemed to be a tolerant nation with little ethnic tension, whereas the United States seemed to be characterized by racial and cultural strife. On the other hand, Lambert wondered about this simple dichotomous stereotype, because he had noticed that the United States was very interested in bilingual education involving teaching in languages other than English. How did that fit with the "melting away" of cultural differences?

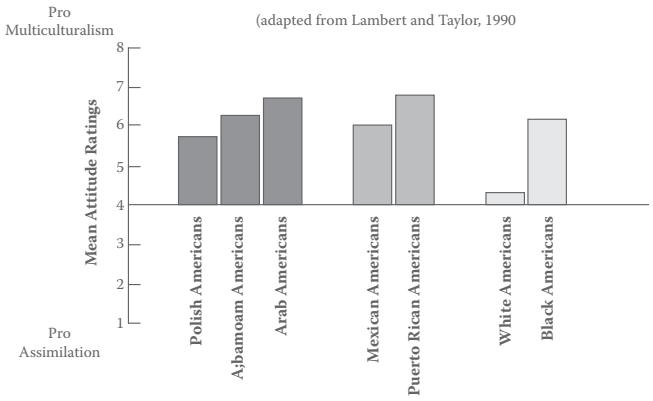
LESSONS FROM DETROIT

We were working in a poor community in Detroit that was defined by ethnic diversity, with established Black and Polish (White) groups, newer Latino groups, and very recently arrived Arabic groups and Albanians. For each group, we sampled 40 parents of children in the local school, and all the students participated in the "free lunch" program because of economic hardships in the home. Our initial focus was not language diversity per se, nor was it students' views in the school context, but rather how the

different cultural communities thought about the diversity that defined their wider community. Wally was particularly interested in what it meant to be "Un-American," and we began with the pivotal question about the extent to which members of the different groups endorsed a "mosaic" or "melting pot" philosophy for defining America.

The results are presented in the Figure below and were surprising to say the least. Across the board, regardless of ethnic background or recency of arrival in the United States, our parents endorsed a multicultural (Mosaic) view of America, and denounced an assimilationist (melting pot) ideology.

Figure 1 : Language convergence of Anglophone and Francophone pedestrians in downtown Montreal



MULTICULTURALISM IN MIAMI

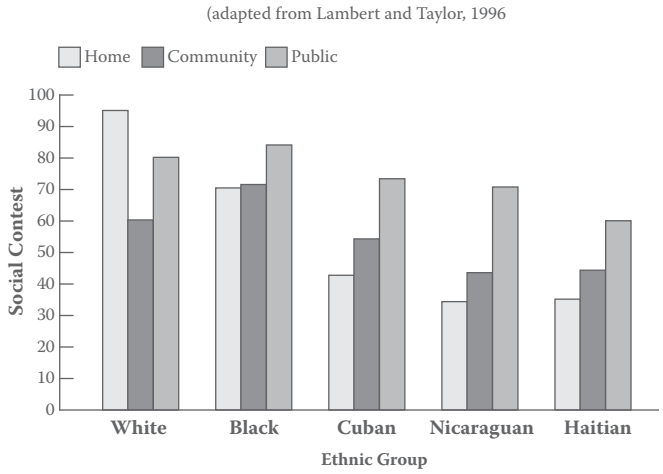
The Detroit experience led to an invitation to extend our work into Miami, specifically in Liberty City, the cite of the Miami race riots of 1980. Miami was a city where ethnic tensions were in a heightened state. Whites, Blacks and Cubans competed for political and economic resources, and to this mix came the influx of large numbers of Nicaraguans and Haitians.

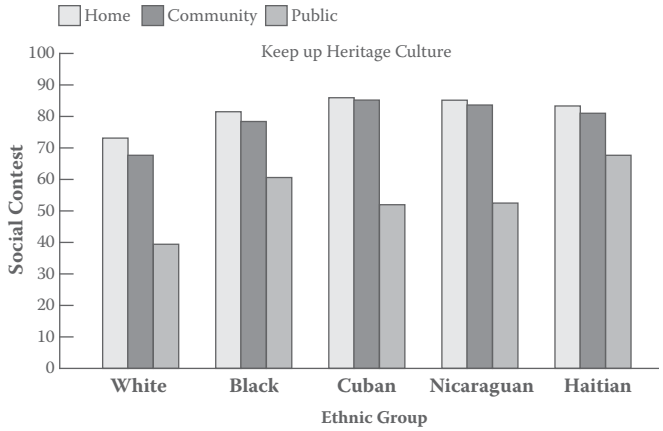
Our plan was to focus on a representative sample from each of these five groups in this very poor urban area and further pursue the theme of cultural diversity. Wally Lambert was visibly moved by what confronted us, especially in terms of the economic hardships confronting the Black community. Wally had attended graduate school in North Carolina where he had championed racial equality, and all these years later he was frustrated that conditions had not seemed to improve. In fact, our formal interviews were conducted in homes where the rate of absent fathers was so high that it was impossible to achieve a representative sample.

We anticipated that our results would mirror those of Detroit, so we extended our focus to the followup question: If every cultural group retains it's cultural identity, how do they work together, what form would "reasonable accommodation" take?

There were three clear social domains of operation for people, regardless of their cultural identity. There was the privacy of people's homes where interactions focused on family and friends. There were also clearly defined ethnic neighbourhoods where places of worship, ethnic restaurants, shops and small places of business were culturally and linguistically unique. Finally, there were public domains including places of work, public schools and government organizations. We, therefore, asked our respondents about where they stood on the debate about the extent to which cultural groups should keep their own language and ways of life as opposed to taking on the American way of life; they answered the above question for each of the three domains: home, ethnic neighbourhood, public domains.

Figure 2 : The Cultural Debate in Each of Three Social Classes for Whites, Blacks, Cubans, Nicaraguans, and Haitians





The results are presented in the Figure below, where a surprising degree of consensus arose. For all five groups there was a consensus that in the home, and to some extent in ethnic neighbourhoods, the heritage culture and language should predominate. Conversely, all five groups agreed that in public domains American culture and the English language should be the norm.

That the newly arrived groups such as Nicaraguans and Haitians would espouse such a view is perhaps not surprising. But their views are shared completely by members of the long-standing Cuban community, and indeed by the established White and Black American groups. These results are compelling because they seem to suggest the key elements for defining "reasonable accommodation". Every group seems respectful of other cultures and languages if they manifest themselves in the home environment and in culturally specific neighbourhoods and institutions. However, all groups are equally demanding that mainstream culture and language needs to be the norm in the public domain.

CONCLUSIONS

Wally Lambert's intellectual curiosity and quest for justice never ceased. So, its not surprising that even when he had established the benefits of bilingual education, he did not stop there. His desire to focus on the intergroup context that formed the back-drop for bilingual education led him to issues of reasonable accommodation. It is what made him refine his ideas and make distinctions between additive and subtractive bilingualism. There is no doubt his experiences in Detroit and Miami would have informed his forward thinking views on Quebec's current dilemma with "reasonable accommodation."

REFERENCES

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