Cultural Pluralism

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What is it?

Pluralism recognizes that it is legitimate to hold a diversity of beliefs. In contrast, monism holds that there is only one right view or way of life. More specifically, cultural pluralism has been proposed as both a goal, and a set of social practices, for responding positively to our increasingly multicultural and interdependent societies. Cultural pluralism results when the practices of that society's social, political and legal institutions are orientated to respect difference and value diversity in such a way that social cohesion is enhanced, rather than threatened. Cultural pluralism goes beyond cultural diversity: the latter merely acknowledges and tolerates cultural differences, whereas cultural pluralism involves the active seeking of understanding across difference.

Who uses the concept?

The concept of pluralism is used across the humanities and the social sciences. Along with cultural pluralism—usually used in a sociology or political science context—there is also political, liberal, legal, media, and religious pluralism. The very ubiquity of the concept of pluralism means that there is both disagreement with, and confusion between related terms. The coinage of the specific concept of cultural pluralism is attributed to Horace Kallen who proposed it as a transcendent solution to the problems of assimilation arising in the 1910-20s. Since then it has been proposed as a policy solution to multiculturalism by international bodies and government policy analysts who link it directly with the pursuit of the democratic ideal.

Fit with intercultural dialogue?

Intercultural dialogue can be seen as both a precondition to, and a sustaining feature of, cultural pluralism. Indeed, it could be suggested that pluralism has to be based on the practice of dialogue given that intercultural dialogue is the active encounter with others across difference.

What work remains?

As with intercultural dialogue proposals used in the same policy and human rights contexts, there is little practical research, as yet, to back up the proposal for cultural pluralism. What work has been done on this linkage between pluralism policy and practice, especially the practice of dialogue, can be found in interreligious contexts but, while clearly relevant to cultural issues, does not cover the gamut of social institutions. It is notable that the communication discipline *per se* has offered little, to date, on the workings of cultural pluralism and intercultural dialogue and this lack needs redress. A communication perspective in particular could make a valuable contribution to understanding the dialogic practices necessary to sustain a pluralistic society.

Resources

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