

THE SOCIOLOGY OF MULTICULTURALISM: Evidence from Canada

In the debate over multiculturalism policy, there is much attention to its philosophical basis, and there are widely divergent claims about the effects of such policies, some positive and some negative. Canada is sometimes cited as a case where multiculturalism has had positive effects.

Research by Professor **Jeffery Reitz**, to be presented to the NORFACE migration conference at University College London this week, examines sociological aspects of multiculturalism in Canada, and draws implications for the international debate.

He notes that Canadians are actually fairly 'assimilationist': their main concern is that immigrants adapt to mainstream society and culture. For them, multiculturalism seems to represent an expression of goodwill toward the entire subject of diversity and immigration.

What's more, the relative success that Canada has had in integrating immigrants owes much to the careful selection of immigrants and to efforts to support their integration into the mainstream: instruction in an official language, settlement services and assistance in acquiring citizenship.

Understanding multiculturalism in Canada includes at least three sociologically interesting aspects. One concerns multicultural policy and its impact on the successful integration of minorities in society. This is sociologically challenging because of the need to identify distinctively multicultural aspects of the array of possible policies for integrating immigrant minorities.

The second aspect concerns the fact that the underlying philosophy of multiculturalism includes certain assumptions about human behaviour, which can be stated as sociological propositions and studied empirically.

One key proposition would be that successful integration of minority groups can occur while group members to some extent maintain their own distinct identity and community life. One can ask whether this is empirically the case in Canada or any other immigration country, and what conditions allow that to happen.

There is a third sociologically interesting aspect, less often discussed. This is the impact of popular support for 'multiculturalism' in Canada, as that concept is understood by the Canadian public.

Evidence from Canada suggests the following. First, actual policy impacts of multicultural policies if any are likely very small. The relative success that Canada has had in integrating immigrants owes much to the careful selection of immigrants and to efforts to support their integration into the mainstream: instruction in an official language, settlement services and assistance in acquiring citizenship. Direct effects of the distinctively multicultural component of policy on these outcomes, positive or negative, appear to be quite limited, if not entirely negligible.

Second, regarding the underlying principles, research shows that the formation of distinct ethnic communities and neighbourhoods in Canada has both positive and

negative impacts on social integration of minorities, depending on specific aspects of that diversity. So the story is rather mixed.

But regarding popular support for multiculturalism, research suggests that this may have been quite important beyond the question of support for multicultural policy itself, to encompass all policies related to immigration, including support for large numbers of immigrants, and support for policies and programs providing all manner of assistance for immigrants to integrate into society.

In effect, in the Canadian case, popular support for multiculturalism is the source of the most important effects of multiculturalism, more than the impact of multicultural policies, and whatever the validity of the underlying behavioural theories. Understanding its impact depends on the meaning ascribed to 'multiculturalism' in popular views.

One cannot assume popular support for any particular set of principles, let alone an endorsement of political or sociological theories such as advanced by philosophers such as Will Kymlicka, the renowned Canadian theorist of multiculturalism and its recognition for minority cultures.

In fact, the data suggest that Canadians are actually fairly assimilationist; their main concern is that immigrants adapt to mainstream society and culture. For them, multiculturalism seems to represent an expression of goodwill toward the entire subject of diversity and immigration.

The celebration of 'multicultural Canada' as a popular ideal is not a mandate for governments to undertake any particular efforts in support of minority cultures; nor do governments see it that way.

Instead, the popularity of 'multiculturalism' as an aspect of the Canadian national identity may create a positive political environment for the entire issue of immigration, allowing governments to formulate policies to assist immigrants to integrate in society.

In this way, popular multiculturalism may assist in the development of Canada's expansionist immigration policy. It constitutes a political resource enabling policy-makers to develop programs to assist immigrant integration and to address emerging problems.

In effect, this positive political environment represents social capital playing an important role in the development of Canadian immigration. This social-capital effect of popular multiculturalism deserves attention internationally. In this context, the philosophical and theoretical discourses 'multiculturalism' may be largely irrelevant.

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