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## **Commentary: Omniculturalism: Policy Solutions to Fundamentalism in the Era of Fractured Globalization**

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**Abstract** Cultural researchers need to pay more attention to religious fundamentalism, which has persisted and even increased, against expectations raised by modernization theories. This discussion represents a preliminary exploration of fractured globalization and global conditions associated with religious fundamentalism. Continuing intergroup conflicts, fundamentalism, and terrorism suggest a need to rethink traditional policies for managing diversity. The alternative policy of omniculturalism is put forward as a longer term solution to fundamentalism and intergroup conflict. Omniculturalism is based, first, on universals and a primary identity consisting of the superordinate category 'human', but also on distinctiveness and a secondary identity formed through affiliation with religious, ethnic, and other such groupings.

**Key Words** culture and policy, diversity, fundamentalism, globalization, threatened identity

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## Omniculturalism: Policy Solutions to Fundamentalism in the Era of Fractured Globalization

There is general agreement that religious fundamentalism has continued to defy expectations and is surviving modernization, and perhaps even gaining strength, as reflected, for example, by growing Christian, Jewish, and Muslim fundamentalism (Antoun, 2008; New, 2002), as well as Hindu fundamentalism (Sen & Wagner, 2009). Although there are certain differences between fundamentalist movements of major religions, there are also important similarities (Antoun, 2008; Moghaddam, 2008a), such as closed-mindedness, intolerance of ambiguity, and dogmatic rejection of alternative world views (some of these characteristics are shared with rightwing authoritarians; Altemeyer, 1988). The attitudinal extremism of religious fundamentalists has become coupled with a rise in aggression and terrorism, such as the repeated terrorist attacks taking place in India in the 21st century (see, for example, the report by Kumar & Sengupta, 2008). The continued impact of fundamentalism in the 21st century raises major

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challenges for cultural researchers, two of which I tentatively explore in this article: first, what is it about the present world conditions that gives rise to fundamentalism and terrorism; and, second, what is the most effective policy for managing cultural, religious, and other important forms of diversity in the context of globalization?

The two traditional policies for managing diversity are *assimilation*, the 'washing away' of intergroup differences to achieve a more homogeneous society, and *multiculturalism*, the highlighting, strengthening, and celebration of intergroup differences. Both of these policies are founded on psychological assumptions that have been shown to be in large part invalid, a topic already addressed in some detail (see chapters 7 and 8 in Moghaddam, 2008b). Rather than reviewing the shortcomings of the existing policies again, in the second part of this discussion I briefly present a promising alternative policy. I begin, then, with a preliminary exploration of the global context of fundamentalism and terrorism.

### **Fractured Globalization: The Larger Context**

Contemporary globalization is characterized by enormous migrations of people around the world, which needs to be understood in evolutionary context. Migration has been an integral part of human evolution (Cavalli-Sforza, Menozzi, & Piazza, 1994). Genetic research involving the tracking of Y-chromosome lineages has shown that by 10,000 years ago, humans had emerged out of Africa and reached all the major land masses on earth (Wells, 2002). After having reached the major land masses, large numbers of humans continued to migrate, and particularly in recent centuries, this movement has involved contact between people with different ethnic, religious, cultural, linguistic, and other such characteristics (Rodriguez & Grafton, 2007). The intermingling of human groups over the last few thousand years has had important biological and cultural benefits, not least of which is the beneficial outcome of crossbreeding (discussed by Darwin, 1993, pp. 385–386). Thus, migration has had some important benefits for humankind.

Because of the nature of transportation and communication technology, the migration of human groups took place at a relatively slow speed until very recently. The first humans arrived in North America by foot and by slow-moving rafts. Today, over 1 million people annually migrate to the USA, arriving in their adopted land mostly using rapid air transportation. The sheer speed at which large numbers of people move from place to place in the 21st century can create *sudden*

*contact*, the coming together of different groups with low preadaptive-ness (after Ehrlich, 2000), meaning that there is a high probability that a life form will experience rapid decline or even extinction after contact. In the North American context, this translates into the decline and extinction of immigrant cultures and languages. For example, millions of German-speaking immigrants came to America in the 19th century (see discussions in Miller, 1984) and lived in settlements that were almost completely German speaking, but by the 21st century, these immigrants had 'melted away' into the English-speaking American mainstream. The classic theme of American immigration has been one of new groups occupying segregated sectors of society and retaining their heritage lifestyle, but subsequent generations disappearing into the American mainstream 'melting pot' (Park, 1950).

In the global context, sudden contact has been taking place between colonial, and later imperial, powers and indigenous non-western peoples. The outcome of western powers expanding their influence, as colonists and later as imperialists, around the globe has been a sharp decline in cultural and linguistic diversity. Of course, the decline in linguistic diversity is easier to quantify (compared to changes in 'woolly' culture): over the last 500 years or so, the number of living languages has declined from about 15,000 to about 6000 and by the end of the 21st century, the number is likely to reach about 2000 (Crystal, 2000; Dalby, 2003). These transformations can best be understood in relation to the 'fractured' manner in which globalization is taking place.

### **The Main Characteristics of Fractured Globalization**

From a psychological perspective, globalization is taking place in a fractured manner, so that individuals and groups are confronted with new contradictions and stresses. Some traditional communities (fundamentalist Muslims being a prime example) fear being overwhelmed by a secular western culture that seems to be becoming the dominant global culture, particularly among the young. In the West, also, there are perceived threats about identity, both in the expanding European Union (EU; it is not at all clear what a 'European identity' is) and in North America (for example, as reflected in immigration debates in the US and Canada and controversies such as the 'English only movement'). The following features of fractured globalization are particularly associated with the new global insecurity (Moghaddam, 2008a, 2008b).

- (1) *Identity Threats*: Globalization is often perceived as westernization and, more specifically, as Americanization. Some non-western

cultures perceive this trend as threatening to their continuation as a distinct group. Threats to collective identity are central to the radicalization we are witnessing in Islamic communities around the world and the terrorism emanating from these societies (Moghaddam, 2006).

- (2) *Local Identities, Global Economies*: Whereas traditional identity ties are to family and other local groups (for example, neighborhoods, local social and cultural groups, religious groups), moving out to nationality and other larger units, economic forces are pushing to strengthen far larger units based on trade and commerce, such as the EU and North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). But there is some resistance to shifting identity allegiances from local to more global units, for example as reflected in the backlash against 'European identity' in many EU countries.
- (3) *Rising Expectations*: Globalization is associated with rising expectations, particularly at the international level among 1 billion 'new consumers' (Myers & Kent, 2004). Rapidly expanding communications and transportation systems mean that images of prosperity reach even the most impoverished people in the most remote parts of the globe, not only helping to raise expectations for a higher standard of living, but also to change ideas about one's right to a higher standard of living.
- (4) *Macro-Micro Change Disparities*: Globalization is fueled by economic, technological, and political changes at the macro level. Such changes have a very high maximum speed. For example, governments can change overnight and new governments can instantly put into effect new economic policies. Technological changes can be very fast paced (for example, witness the phenomenal growth and impact of electronic communications). However, some psychological changes at the micro level of intrapersonal and interpersonal processes tend to require longer time periods and are often far more difficult to change (Moghaddam, 2002). This disparity often results in people feeling overwhelmed by large-scale economic, political, and cultural changes that seem out of their control and not synchronized with changes in their individual styles of thinking and acting.
- (5) *Global Radical Networks*: Global electronic communications have allowed extremist individuals and small groups to connect with one another to form radical networks. A fundamentalist individual or small group that previously would have remained isolated, without support, and only a minor threat, can now become connected (for example, through electronic communications and

vastly expanded transportation networks) to support systems spread around the globe and grow into a far larger threat.

- (6) *Virtual Collective Movements*: Global electronic communications systems have enabled people to participate in new types of collective movements, such as *eswarm* (when large numbers of people mobilize and take collective action through electronic communications). These new collective movements are less dependent on traditional leadership and can evolve 'from the bottom up', an example being the massive demonstrations that took place in major US cities against the proposed immigration bill in 2007.
- (7) *Widening Wealth Gap*: Another tension concerns the widening gap between the richest and poorest groups in the era of fractured globalization; while almost 3 billion people live on less than \$2 per day, an average billionaire could hire 2 million of these poor workers (Homer-Dixon, 2006, p. 186). Thus, in some respects, we have not progressed beyond the era of the Pharaohs, when a few individuals could harness the labor of millions.

Fractured globalization is associated with new tensions, contradictions, and identity threats that go well beyond national boundaries. Religious fundamentalism is in part a response to these global trends and particularly perceived threats to collective identity against the onslaught of western secularism. Tensions inherent in fractured globalization make it particularly challenging to manage diversity and group-based inequalities and to meet new global security challenges. Growth in areas such as sociocultural psychology (Valsiner & Rosa, 2007) shows that researchers are paying attention to some of these emerging global trends, but a greater effort is needed to develop more effective policies for managing diversity.

## **Omniculturalist Policy: Primary and Secondary Identities**

What policies should we adopt to manage diversity in the context of fractured globalization? Whereas assimilation policy aims to wash away group-based differences and arrive at a more homogeneous society and multiculturalism aims to highlight and celebrate group-based differences, the goal of omniculturalism is achieved in two stages: first, arriving at a society in which intergroup relations and diversity are organized around scientifically established human universals; and, at a second stage, celebrating distinct collective identities. Omniculturalist policy requires that in schools and other

institutions of socialization, the emphasis be placed initially upon scientifically established human commonalities, so that children begin by learning the important ways in which human beings are similar. The issue of group-based differences is addressed only after children have achieved a solid grounding in human similarities. The question, 'What is it to be human?' guides education and socialization, and questions of 'differentness' are addressed at a secondary level.

The intended goal of omniculturalist policy is to achieve a citizenry that perceives all humans as part of an ingroup with important similarities. Thus, all humans develop a *primary identity* that includes all other humans, as part of a superordinate category. At a second stage in their development in an omnicultural society, individuals form a *secondary identity*, based on membership in subgroups, such as religious, ethnic, professional, and other categories. However, the thrust of omniculturalist policy is to ensure that through socialization mechanisms (such as schools), the primary 'superordinate' identity is always given priority.

The practical goal of omniculturalist policy is to ensure that the correct investment is made in socializing primary and secondary identities, so that the outcome is a citizenry that feels loyalty first and foremost to the primary identity, the human category. This does not mean that omniculturalist policy will be working to eradicate the allegiances that people feel to ethnic, religious, national, and other such groupings. Rather, omniculturalist policy will bring all such affiliations under the broader superordinate umbrella of affiliation with the human category. The message of omniculturalism is that we are human first and we share important characteristics as humans, prior to our membership in secondary groups such as nation and ethnicity. This approach places an enormous burden on the superordinate category 'human' and on the assumption that all humans share certain foundational psychological characteristics.

Of course, cultural researchers have been particularly critical of traditional research on the issue of avowed universals (for example, Moghaddam & Studer, 1997; for a broader discussion of psychological universals, see Norenzayan & Heine, 2005). What are claimed to be universals in traditional psychology are often simply findings from research and theoretical exploration conducted within very limited cultural domains. A great deal of traditional theorizing is undertaken within the limited context of middle-class white western societies, and traditional research is conducted exclusively with undergraduate student samples recruited from (typically the psychology classes of) western universities or from non-western universities modeled on

western ideals. Often, so-called 'cross-cultural' research involving samples from non-western societies is only 'cross-cultural' on the surface because the 'non-western' samples are simply psychology undergraduates who are in important respects just like undergraduate psychology students in western universities.

Electronic communications mean that a researcher sitting in London, Hong Kong, Sydney, or Boston can now email questionnaires to fellow academics in 50 other nations and ask them to distribute the questionnaires in their undergraduate classes and, within a week, receive return emails providing 'data' for a so-called '50-nation study'. The major psychology journals now routinely publish such 'cross-cultural' studies, which are not cross-cultural in a deeper sense. The lifestyle of undergraduates in the modern universities of non-western societies—in terms of the books they study, the clothes they wear, the music they listen to, the fast food they eat, the films they watch, and so on—is very similar to the lifestyle of undergraduate students in western societies. The lives of undergraduates in non-western societies are typically characterized by an imported western culture, and studies involving samples from this population serve to 'doubly reify' findings from western psychology by 'discovering' styles of thinking and doing that, in the first place, were exported from the West to the modern sectors of non-western societies (Moghaddam & Lee, 2006).

Given the severe limitations of much of what is claimed to be cross-cultural research, is there justification for the claim that there are human universals in thought and action? I believe that the justification for this claim becomes clear when we view human thought and action from an evolutionary perspective. My focus is particularly on cultural evolution and the continuation of styles of thought and action that increase the possibility of survival of a human group.

### **Primitive Social Relations**

Since bipedalism began among our ancestors about 5 million years ago, humans gradually evolved behaviors that enabled survival in small social groups. *Primitive social relations* are types of behavior that proved to be essential for the survival of human life forms. My claim is *not* that humans consciously and explicitly developed primitive social relations, but, rather, that such functional behaviors evolved as part of a repertoire of characteristics that enabled humans to increase their survival chances. For example, there is impressive evidence to suggest that because of the characteristics of individual humans, the requirements of human social life, and the ecological challenges confronting humans, the optimal human group size is fairly small, perhaps around



several hundred. Some researchers have attempted to estimate the 'optimal' group size for humans more precisely, and Dunbar (1993, 1996, 1998) puts the figure at 148 group members. Until human settlements evolved around 10,000–15,000 years ago, humans lived in hunter-gatherer groups numbering several hundred, and surviving hunter-gatherer communities are also about this size (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1989, p. 100). Within the context of hunter-gatherer societies, a number of primitive social relations emerged that continue to play an important part in the lives of humans in the 21st century.

Primitive social relations first evolved to enhance survival chances. At much later stages in human evolution, such behaviors became interpreted and labeled (for example, as a 'right' or a 'duty'), depending on cultural conditions. Cultural context could influence how a particular primitive social relation is interpreted. For example, turn-taking behavior could be interpreted as involving the right to have a turn to speak or the duty to speak when it is one's turn. Thus, it was the practical experiences of humans, and the demands of functionality, that led to primitive social relations such as turn-taking, and at a much later stage there took place the cultural interpretation of such behaviors.

This functional perspective is in line with the 'experiential' interpretation of rights put forward by the legal scholar Dershowitz (2004). According to this view, the evolution of rights is rather similar to the 'punctuated equilibrium' evident in the evolution of the natural world: long periods during which nothing much changes, 'punctuated' by brief bursts of evolutionary transition (as expounded by Gould & Eldredge, 1977). Dershowitz argues that human inventions, such as rights, also progress in fits and starts, and it is in reaction to terrible wrongs that new rights are invented:

The history of rights shows long periods during which few changes seem to occur. Then a grievous human wrong, like the Holocaust, suddenly takes place. The world eventually acknowledges the wrong and responds with a burgeoning of rights, as occurred following the Second World War, when international human rights took a giant step forward. (2004, p. 94)

Next, I briefly note the illustrative example of turn-taking as a universal primitive social relation.

### **The Example of Turn-taking**

An example of primitive social relations is turn-taking, which can be found in elementary forms among lower animals, but which has evolved to take on far more complex forms in 21st-century human societies. Turn-taking has been recognized as playing an essential role

in human life as well as in the lives of at least some animals, so that turn-taking is a skill that even robots need to have in order to successfully function in human environments (Nehaniv & Dautenhahn, 2007). Without turn-taking, human communications quickly break down, but through turn-taking, communications become possible, even when two people do not speak the same language and have to rely mostly on non-verbal communications. The essential role that turn-taking plays in communications made it vital for the survival of human groups, and particularly communications between leaders and group members. A hunter-gatherer group that had poor communications was less likely to survive.

The primitive social relation of turn-taking came to be interpreted as a right and/or a duty, depending on cultural conditions. In some cultures, greater emphasis was placed on the rights of individuals in turn-taking, such as the 'right to speak freely', while in some other cultures, duties came to be emphasized more, as in 'the duty to obey leadership commands'. The larger cultural context has influenced the particular ways in which turn-taking takes shape in domains such as the legal system. For example, in countries with democratic traditions, turn-taking in openly presenting evidence and arguments, cross-examining witnesses, and so on, is seen to be an essential part of a fair legal trial.

The power of turn-taking becomes evident when we consider how modern technology has had to conform to the demands of this primitive social relation. For example, consider the role of turn-taking in city traffic. On the surface, the traffic in London in the UK looks very different from the traffic in Tehran in Iran. Anyone who learns to drive a car in London and then drives a car in Tehran (or vice versa) is likely to experience a culture shock. However, in one essential way, driving in these cities is exactly the same: turn-taking is practiced (despite variations across cities in the extent to which formal traffic signs are attended to). Moreover, in the context of traffic, the demands of turn-taking in some respects trump local cultural practices. For example, female drivers enjoy equality in turn-taking in Tehran traffic, even though local culture dictates that women do not have equality in many other domains (for example, women are assumed to be emotionally unsuitable to become judges, thus there are only male judges in Iranian courts).

## **Concluding Comment**

Cultural researchers need to give more attention to those aspects of fractured globalization that tend to be associated with potentially

destructive trends, such as the rise of religious fundamentalism. There is also an urgent need for cultural researchers to reconsider the policies available for managing diversity, particularly because we now know that the psychological assumptions underlying the traditional policies have major flaws. The alternative policy of omniculturalism shows promise, but is based on the assumption that universals exist in human thought and action, and such universals can help focus on human commonalities and the development of a primary or 'superordinate' human identity. Cultural researchers have been critical of claims by traditional psychology to have discovered universals, but it would be a fatal error to cast aside the idea of universals completely. Cultural evolution provides an avenue through which we can identify a small number of psychological universals.

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