

Chapter 25


Impacts of Culture and Cultural Differences on Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding in Multicultural Societies

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ABSTRACT

Multicultural societies have become sites of violent conflicts following predictions at the end of the Cold War that culture would be a causative of future conflict. However, conflicts have not necessarily been caused by the presence of the different cultures that inhabit these communities, but cultural differences in these societies is observed to become embedded in conflict dynamics inducing escalation, aiding the easy mobilisation and motivation of conflict parties to utilise violence, eventually inducing intractability. Cultural differences impact conflict prevention and peacebuilding in multicultural settings by constituting a barrier and a times instigating failures of these processes. At the same time, it is a culture resource that can be harnessed for conflict prevention and peacebuilding if it is well understood, but its impacts seems less well understood. Successful conflict prevention and peacebuilding in multicultural societies is tied to in-depth understanding of cultural differences.

INTRODUCTION

A society is described as multicultural when it is composed of people from different cultures, colours, nationalities and languages living together in one community. It is characterised by the existence of cultural diversities, identities and differences in propinquity, frequently interacting within and across cultures on an everyday basis. Culture on the other hand may be described as socially inherited, shared and learned ways of living possessed by persons by virtue of their membership of social groups (Avruch, 1998) and confers on individuals and collectives, a social identity (Haralambos & Holborn, 2008). Multicultural societies are supposedly viewed as realms of cultural freedoms, expressed in values, norms, religion, beliefs, language, dress, food and customs without fear of persecution, discrimination, exclusion, conflict and violence. And there is evidence in history that multicultural societies embodied tolerance, unity, trade and wealth (Vadim, 2010). It is also where many believe a homogenisation of what people do, think and value around the world (Kaarbo & Lee Ray, 2011) is occurring, underpinned by tolerance of diverse cultures. Nevertheless, this is not the reality for many multicultural societies in the 21st century. These societies since the end of the Cold War have become riddled with exclusion, marginalisation and discrimination, owing to differences mediated by culture, and oftentimes leading to deadly violent conflicts with severe wide spread destruction of human lives and properties.

Multicultural societies began evolving early in prehistoric times as ethnic groups migrated to regions and integrated into existing societies (Waters, 2014; Yarsatir & Arberry, 1983). History provides ample evidence of multicultural societies; the Persian Achaemenid, Seleucids, Parthians, Dura Europos and Sassanian empires were all multicultural societies (Yarsartir, 1983; Reid, 1987; Brant, 2005). The most visible multicultural societies were the empires that emerged covering huge tracts of lands inhabited by people of different cultures. In the 6th century BCE, the Achaemenid Empire stretched from Egypt to Asia, at times pushing into the northern shores of the Black Sea and southeast Europe to the Danube (Yarsartir, 1983).

Contemporary multicultural societies seem to have witnessed an exponential rise with the industrial revolution in mid-sixteenth century Great Britain which drew different people from diverse rural communities to various metropolises where the revolution was unfolding. However, the exponential rise of multicultural societies in the last century is a consequence of globalisation. Globalisation is an evolutionary phenomenon that makes the world appears smaller because of increase in intensity of interactions and integration aided by ease of migration transportation, communication, trade and over great distances and in little time. In the last decade, the world has been experiencing an unprecedented level of migration mostly from developing countries in the global south to the advanced and more developed countries of the global north as a consequence of not only globalisation, but violent conflicts and poor socioeconomic development conditions in Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

Multicultural societies have also become theatres of violent conflicts with culture and cultural differences being seen as fundamental thespians in these violent conflicts. With the demise of the Cold War, Jacques Delor, 8th President of the European Commission (EC) in 1993 stated that future conflicts were going to be caused by cultural factors rather than economics and ideology and Havel, Czech Republic's first President in 1994 posited that these were on the increase more than at any time in history (Huntington, 1996). Some scholars have long identified culture as a cause of conflicts and a key difficulty encountered in resolving some conflicts (Avruch, 1998; Brigg, 2008). Huntington (1996) observed that, "culture and cultural identities were shaping the patterns of cohesion, disintegration and conflict in the post-Cold War world" (p. 20), he therefore envisaged that conflicts driven by cultural differences were

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