



# Differences Cultural Differences

**T**ODAY, many are recognizing that the melting pot ideal is just another ethnocentric concept. The image of the melting pot implies that there is a “consensus culture,” a way of life which all Americans can learn, subscribe to, and live by. In theory, this culture of “mainstream America” is a conglomerate of the lifeways of all of the groups who have entered into the building of America—and in many ways this is true.

Yet what this perspective does not take into account is that, though consensus culture has indeed borrowed elements from various European groups, and from Indians, from Blacks, and from Chicanos, there remain many groups in our midst who live by a different culture. That is, though Euro-American culture has borrowed heavily from Afro-American, Mexican American, and Native American lifeways, these other groups have remained culturally distinct as they have remained socially apart. The continuing existence of such distinct ethnic enclaves puts the lie to those who would argue that the melting pot has really worked.

Consensus culture cannot be taught to these other groups as long as what is being purveyed is only in the realm of ideals. For culture to be taught, there must be institutions which support cultural ideals, and members of these so-called minorities have never been allowed equal access to the main-

stream institutions, especially on the economic and political levels.

However, the alternative being proposed, *pluralism*, asks us to do the very same thing—to accept an ideology on the value level without indicating how this is to operate on the institutional or the interactional levels. By this I simply mean that we are given as an alternative to the “One Great American Culture” idea the “Many Great American Subcultures” program of pluralism, without any indication of how we are going to provide equal access to the sources of power for all, or how we are going even to learn each other’s ways of interacting and communicating.

Education for pluralism is as great a bowl of mush as melting pot education if we do not take into consideration that pluralism means the full recognition of cultural differences (on *all* levels of culture) and the devising of educational strategies whereby a cultural equality can be made meaningful.

This means, among other things, that we must recognize that our present classroom procedures are an intensification of our own middle class ideals and institutions and therefore operate in many ways as exclusionary devices against those who come from other cultures. What do we know of the ways in which the poor, the Black, the Chicano, the many Indians learn and interact?

# and the Melting Pot Ideology Melting Pot

ROGER D. ABRAHAMS \*

Have we, as teachers, bothered even to learn the ways in which we embarrass our students by not understanding these cultural differences—much less the reasons that we cannot teach them effectively?

What I am arguing is that if we are (and I hope we are) really committed to a pluralistic ideal of education, then we have to recognize ahead of time what we are up against in engineering change. And the one fact that we must contend with is that there is no case on record in the past in which cultural pluralism of the sort we are discussing has ever existed. That is, there is no country that we know of which has a cultural mix which does not have one dominant culture, the others subordinate—at least as far as access to the major economic and governmental institutions. So if we are to devise such a system it would be a unique social experiment. The United States has, however, engaged in such enterprises before.

## What Happened to the Melting Pot?

One way of beginning is to see what was wrong with the melting pot image. From our contemporary perspective, the melting pot implied a racist ideology because it never included as part of the formula for the proper mix the truly culturally different—Afro-Americans, Chicanos, Indians, etc. These

groups were never accorded status as full human beings, so they were not considered as fit candidates for the melting process. The idea of the melting pot was a reaction to the massive introduction of non-Anglo-Saxon European immigrants to America in the last half of the 19th century. Though aimed ostensibly at extending American beneficence and the American ideals hinging on individualism and rationalism, in retrospect the melting pot argument looks suspiciously like a knee-jerk reaction to the forming of Irish and Southern and Eastern European ethnic communities within the East Coast cities. Such ethnic communities, through their maintenance of community and language and cultural differences, threatened the fragile unity of the nation. The melting pot ideology then has always been an essentially nationalistic one, and thus an argument subject to uses by any group, benevolent or malevolent, which preaches Americanism at the expense of ethnic, regional, or even social class identification.

Yet even with this nationalistic thrust, used as an argument against the continuation of linguistically and culturally different European-Americans in the cities and towns,

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the practice of melting for the pot never included the other (and darker) Americans until the Civil Rights movement began. And then it happened only because the members of these ethnic communities suddenly demanded to be recognized as human beings. Before that time they were relegated to animal status.

The reader will be saying at this, "Now wait a minute! That is going too far." Perhaps it is, but let me demonstrate what I mean. I do not mean that slavery and its attendant chattel status continued to operate. Rather, the dehumanization process functioned on a less legalistic plane, one we know best through the operation of stereotyping.

### The Operation of Stereotyping

What is stereotyping? It is primarily the imposition of traits on a group which are purported to be characteristic of the group. Now occasionally these traits may be the result of real observations on the part of the stereotypers. Blacks *do* have more rhythm, for instance, because they have more complicated and overlapping rhythms in their dances and songs. Yet even when these cultural differences are observed, the question is what we do with them. With Black rhythm, for instance, we tie this in with a certain earthiness and by extension to a basically immoral (or amoral) and childlike perspective.

The other stereotype traits imposed on Blacks (and other "minorities" and groups of poor people) all revolve around these primary traits of childishness and immorality. Laziness, thievery, inability to contain sexual urges, strange eating habits, having too many children and raising them without any sense of proper family life—all of these and more emphasize the inability of members of the group to live by the proper rules.

The implication (sometimes it becomes an explication) is that people from these groups have no sense of order. Now *culture* is, if nothing else, the agreed upon ways in which a group orders things—the rules and manners of the group. If members of a group have no sense of order, then they have no

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culture, and the acquisition of culture is what divides adults from children and human beings from animals. So when the stereotype is involved, it means that the stereotypers are assuming that the stereotyped are a group of children or animals without actually always saying so. And defining a group as *culturally deprived* or *disadvantaged* does exactly the same thing—it defines the culturally different by our own norms and finds them lacking.

Any time members of a group are derogated in regard to where they depart from another group's norms and practices, they are being stereotyped. Until very recently, this was the only approach to Blacks and other culturally different groups by an overwhelming majority of Euro-Americans, an approach institutionalized in our educational system (except in rare cases). This is what I meant when I said that non-Euro-Americans have been treated as animals—not wild ones, but the kind we like to keep around the house and yard.

Today suddenly the bases of stereotyping are eliminated and we can no longer generalize on such groups (at least officially). And so now the old melting pot ideology is trotted out, for if these others *are* human beings they must be assimilable. The ethnic Euro-Americans that have been thus assimilated now preach, "We have done it; why can't you?" The answer, of course, is why should they have to? By any standard of equality, being forced to adhere to an alien cultural mold is both iniquitous and, without structural changes in national institutions and goals, clearly impossible.

### Cultural Relativism in the Schools

This position of cultural relativism which I am espousing for the schools is a difficult one to accept at best, for it means

questioning the absoluteness of our own values and practices. In the task of devising a pluralistic perspective, it is equally as important to maintain one's own cultural sense as it is to recognize that of others.

One of the major by-products of adopting the relativistic position is that one begins to question the values of one's own culture, when one sees that one's values and practices are not immutable and the only right solutions to our human problems. To reject out of hand one's own values is folly indeed. One cannot educate effectively without a firm knowledge of oneself. The task, then, is to question and investigate cultures without totally rejecting one's own and developing a defeating sense of self-doubt.

A procedure which my colleagues, Mary Galvan and Rudolph Troike, and I (of the Texas Education Agency's East Texas Dialect and Culture Project) have found meaningful is to teach other cultural ways by making teachers more conscious of their own culture. First of all, this means that we must demonstrate how deep stereotyping goes, and that this is just one way people with culture project and protect their own sense of groupness and sharing. Then, however, it is necessary to show that we live by a lot of other unexamined ordering processes, especially by rules of interaction—those ways in which we make haphazard behavior into ordered manners or decorum.

To show how deeply rule-involved we are and how much of our sense of personal worth depends on living by these rules, we attempt to embarrass each other. It is only in

embarrassment situations that we can demonstrate how we have learned and internalized certain practices, developing expectations for a wide range of interactions, and how much we are threatened when these expectations and orders are broken.

Then, because we are dealing with teachers who minister to both Afro- and Euro-American students, we demonstrate how patterned and predictable the ways are in which the two cultures do not fit, producing the same embarrassment situations repeatedly. To get this message through, however, we must convince the teachers that their students, no matter what age or color, have culture and can therefore be embarrassed. To do this, we describe Black language use, both in terms of phonological and morphological differences and in the ways language is utilized in personal exchanges. We also cover what is known about Afro-American culture, not only in speech use but in child-rearing and family patterns, peer grouping, religion, allocation of time and money, and so on. To do this we give over a large part of our in-service programs to teaching teachers how to observe, notate, and use language and cultural differences.

Our aim throughout is to permit recognitions of differences at all levels of culture. Only by developing the powers of observation about oneself and others will it be possible to regard the culturally different as culturally different and nothing more. In this sense a truly pluralistic education will provide the most profound American Revolution in 200 years. □

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