The social and psychological benefits of multiculturalism

Professor Martha Augoustinos
School of Psychology
Co-Director Fay Gale Centre
University of Adelaide
Retreat from multiculturalism

- David Cameron, Prime Minister UK, Feb 2011
  “State multiculturalism has failed”

- Angela Merkel, German Chancellor, Oct 2010
  Multiculturalism has “utterly failed”
‘How I lost faith in multiculturalism’

Multiculturalism and social diversity have often been perceived by the dominant majority as threatening and potentially undermining of social unity.
The Australian government is unwavering in its commitment to a multicultural Australia. Australia’s multicultural composition is at the heart of our national identity and is intrinsic to our history and character.

Multiculturalism is in Australia’s national interest and speaks to fairness and inclusion. It enhances respect and support for cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity.”
Managing social diversity

- Increasing social and cultural diversity is typically presented as posing significant problems for social cohesion
- Prejudice, racism, and intergroup tensions/hostility tend to be emphasised at the expense of the significant psychological and social benefits associated with increasing diversity:
  - Reduction in intergroup differentiation and prejudice
  - Reduction in group stereotyping
  - Increases egalitarianism
  - Generates more complex and inclusive forms of shared national identity
Experiencing diversity characterised by multiple social categorisations can have a positive influence on attitudes towards minority groups.

The cross categorization model emphasises positive effects when shared identities that cut across existing intergroup dichotomies are made.

When categorisations cut across one another, this weakens the salience of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ distinction.

For example: Indigenous vs non-Indigenous Australians both have a common and shared identity as ‘Australians’

- ‘Australians’ becomes a superordinate identity with which both groups can identify
Categorisations that cut across categories have been shown to reliably reduce intergroup differentiation and intergroup bias (Crisp and Hewstone, 2007).

Likewise, multiple categorisations create a high level of category complexity which prompts a shift in thinking style from a simple categorical mode to a more complex and systematic mode of thinking.

Thus experiencing diversity can trigger less heuristic/simplistic perceptions of people.
Stereotypical Inconsistencies

- Stereotypical inconsistencies are made salient when surprising category combinations are experienced:
  - such as a female mechanic or Australian Muslim
  - African–American US President or Woman Prime Minister

- Such combinations can generate more emergent attributes rather than relying on existing stereotypes.

- Emergent attributes are ones ascribed to category combinations that are independent of those associated with traditional stereotypes.
Repeated exposure to stereotype-challenging diversity

- Stereotype inhibition and suppression. With increasing experience of stereotypically challenging diversity, individuals automatically regulate the suppression of rigid stereotypes.

- In turn this repeated experience of resolving inconsistencies encourages greater cognitive flexibility by stimulating generative thought.
The increasing ‘reality’ of multiculturalism does not guarantee more complex constructions of social identity, prevailing norms must be consistent with social diversity:

- **Political leadership** is critical in providing a political climate that values social diversity and inclusiveness.

- Political leaders must promote more inclusive and complex categories of national or civic identification that provide multiple groups inclusive shared (superordinate) identities.
However – the very superordinate categories that can unify and be inclusive can also be mobilised to marginalise and exclude ethnic minorities

- For example: The category ‘Australian’ – “we are all Australian despite our differences” (appeals to nationalism) can be mobilised flexibly to be inclusive

- BUT it can also be used in narrow and restricted ways to exclude and marginalise

- The category needs to be defined in ways that do not rely on outmoded stereotypes: emergent attributes need to be identified that are inclusive
Benefits of social diversity

1. Intergroup benefits: potential to decrease intergroup differentiations within society and increase ‘tolerance’ between groups
2. Psychological benefits: facilitates greater cognitive complexity, flexibility, and generative thought (creativity)
“The experience of social and cultural diversity may therefore not only help encourage greater egalitarianism in social attitudes and behaviour but also have broader significance for the psychological well-being of individuals, groups, organisations and social and political systems” (p. 243).