

Diversity in Education: Initial Explorations of Ethnocentrism, Uncertainty Tolerance, and Phenomenological Perspectives

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Concepts within ethnocentrism (Baylor, 2012), uncertainty tolerance (Cargile & Bolkan, 2013), and phenomenology may offer educators a greater level of cross-cultural understanding, together with an enhanced appreciation of other aspects of diversity. Since a full explication of phenomenology is beyond the scope of this paper, an initial inquiry into the concepts of thrownness at birth, death and the temporality of life, history and cultural conditioning, deconstruction of what is culturally presented, reconstruction to one's own understanding, authenticity, and inauthenticity (Heidegger, 1953; Moran, 2000) will be explored.

Diversity considerations include “the equal protection and benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability” (Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 1982, Section 15). Educators, therefore, have a legal responsibility to uphold diversity. Educators in their complexity of roles also have a moral responsibility to be role models of human respect, while upholding the dignity of all; a social responsibility to inspire students to be caring and responsible citizens; a spiritual responsibility to impassion students to imbue meaning and purpose from their learnings; a physical responsibility to create school as a safe space for all students; and to contribute to the development of human minds. Notwithstanding these responsibilities, educators are mere humans susceptible to varied human failings, and amenable to cultural and historical ideologies

and prejudices, which may evoke challenges within the *self* and challenges with the *other*. Ethnocentrism, a term coined by Ludwig Gumplowicz in 1879, and made popular by William Graham Sumner in 1906 (Bizumic, 2014) is one such challenge. Cooper (2012) has described ethnocentrism as:

A term applied to the cultural or ethnic bias—whether conscious or unconscious—in which an individual views the world from the perspective of his or her own group, establishing the in-group as archetypal and rating all other groups with reference to this ideal. This form of tunnel vision often results in: (1) an inability to adequately understand cultures that are different from one’s own and (2) value judgments that preference the in-group and assert its inherent superiority, thus linking the concept of ethnocentrism to multiple forms of chauvinism and prejudice, including nationalism, tribalism, racism, and even sexism and disability discrimination (para 1).

Bizumic (2014) traced the root of recorded ethnocentric thinking to the ancient Greeks, who felt that all other groups were barbaric. Although ethnocentrism may engender patriotic views, pathological forms of ethnocentrism allow for the view that one’s group is superior and this “dangerous thinking can result in prejudice, discrimination, and even ethnic cleansing (Neuliep & Speten-Hansen, 2013, p. 170).

To mitigate ethnocentric bias, Cargile and Bolkan (2012) embarked on a study, which included uncertainty tolerance. They surveyed 318 undergraduate students enrolled in an intercultural communication course and found that while cultural intelligence had no effect on either inter or intra group ethnocentric views, “training people to tolerate uncertainty led to diminished levels of both inter-and-intragroup ethnocentrism” (p. 351). In fact, they argued that the didactic learning of another culture may itself

reinforce ethnocentric views. Within the construct of uncertainty tolerance, humans view *the other* either as a threat or as a challenge. If one views another culture as a threat, then protective measures and avoidance will be demonstrated. There will be hindrances, which are described as “anything that prevents either literal or symbolic contact with someone of another culture” (Cargile & Bolkan, 2012, p. 345). If one sees *the other* as a challenge to understand the difference(s) then members will reach out to deconstruct differences from a position of human connectivity (Cargile & Bolkan, 2012). To illustrate, a recent international news item featured a Sikh, Mr. Harmon Singh, going against strict religious rules by removing his headwear to save a six-year old Caucasian boy, who, on his way to school, was hit by a car (Leask, 2015). Within the construct of uncertainty tolerance, Mr. Singh could have conjured up any number of cultural hindrances and translate those hindrances into barriers against helping the boy; instead, he did a “hugely significant act of humanity by breaking strict religious protocol to help a stranger” (Leask, 2015, para 3). Similarly, the adults featured around the child, could have conjured up any number of cultural hindrances and used them as barriers to prevent Mr. Singh, or his orange headwear, from getting close to the child; instead, they seemed to have welcomed Mr. Singh’s gesture of human connectivity. Notwithstanding the possibility of conjuring up hindrances, Noddings (2013) posited that:

There are moments for all of us when we care quite naturally. We just do care; no ethical effort is required. ... An inner voice saying "I must do something," in response to the need of the cared-for. This impulse arises naturally, at least occasionally, in the absence of pathology. We cannot demand that one have this impulse, but we shrink from

one who never has it ... one who never feels the pain of another (Noddings, 2013, p. 81).

The pathological incapacity for caring may be alleviated by exploring Heidegger's (1953) philosophical concepts from an apolitical objective predisposition. Within the construct of Heidegger's philosophy is the concept of thrownness. Heidegger (1953) argued that humans are thrown into situations at birth. They learn about life in their place of birth and assume the cultural norms of that place of thrownness, as they must, for survival (Heidegger, 1953; Moran, 2000). To illustrate, a child who was born in China, may have a different perspective of the world from a child who was born in Yellowknife, or India, or North Korea, or Kenya, or Peru, or Haiti, or Manitoba, or Guatemala. None of these children, however, had any choice in where in this world they were, to be born; but, to survive in their places of birth they would have had to adopt and adapt to the mores, laws, and folkways of their respective environments. Heidegger (1953) added that whenever and wherever a person is born that place would have had a long history before the birth of the person, and would also have a futuristic existence long after that person dies. As such, in the long stream of existence, a human life span is not only a speck, it is also a temporary speck, and everything that happens within that speck, of a lifetime, is also temporary (Heidegger, 1953).

Heidegger (1953) further argued that humans may live through this relatively short and limited speck of a lifespan in an inauthentic way by merely accepting, without questioning, the cultural ideologies and prejudices of their place of birth. To illustrate, if one is born in a place where members of the LGBT community could be jailed or to another extreme, killed, and everyone accepts that that is the law, then members of the LGBT community may probably live an immured existence for survival. If, however, a member of that community questions the historical

injustice that has been meted out to the LGBT population that first social agitator may be subjected to any number of negative societal responses. With agitation, however, one person's voice may agitate the sensibilities of others to bring about some level of social justice. Education has a history of legal interventions, against educators, emanating from agitations to change the status quo. To illustrate, the ruling in *Meyer vs Nebraska* (1923) in favor of a 10-year old boy's request for instruction in German, is considered a landmark case for instruction in a foreign language (Cornell University Law School, 2015). Similarly, *Brown vs the Board of Education* is considered a landmark case for desegregation of schools in the United States (United States Courts, n.d.). In fact, during the 1970s and 1980s parents and other advocates for disability rights sought legislation to stop discrimination against their children as in some cases "children of normal intelligence with physical disabilities were placed in classes designed for children with mental retardation" (Martin., Martin., & Terman, 1996, p. 27). In the more recent case of *Moore vs British Columbia (Education)*, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that "the failure of the school district to meet Jeffrey Moore's needs as a student with a disability was discriminatory" (ARCH Disability Law Centre, 2012, para 1). As such, the question educators might ask is: *Am I an educator who enables or disables students' progress?* In reflecting on this question, educators may also be cautioned by Noddings (2013) observations that "I must do something ... [can quickly become] Something must be done ... [thereby] removing myself from the set of possible agents through whom the action should be accomplished" (p. 81).

Nevertheless, Heidegger (1953) admonished that one ought to question the inherited cultural norms to understand their historical roots; indeed, it is from this reflective questioning that one could then come to an authentic acceptance or rejection of

inherited historical ideologies and prejudices. Authenticity, however, must necessarily come from inauthenticity as humans cannot always exist in an authentic state of mind, whereby, the significance of every event is always uppermost in one's mind; rather, humans exist mostly in the inauthentic state of mind of the everydayness or everyday ordinariness of life (Heidegger, 1953; Moran, 2000). As such, inauthenticity and authenticity may be described as mind states for persons who have deconstructed their cultural norms, through questioning, and reconstructed a world view based on their own understandings (Heidegger, 1953; Moran, 2000).

Is it therefore possible that an understanding of human connectivity within the concepts of ethnocentrism, uncertainty tolerance, and Heidegger's phenomenology may explain, perhaps in part, why some students are disengaging? Is it possible that some LGBT or visible minority students may disengage because of a lack of human connectivity, which makes them more susceptible to being bullied either physically or in cyber space? Is it possible that others may be misunderstood because of their religious beliefs or because they do not speak with the native language or accent? Is it possible that some may disengage because of issues with their skin colour? Is it possible that others may disengage because they perceive that their teachers expect them to fail, only because they were born into a certain group? Is it possible that others may feel limited because of some stubbornly existing traditional gender ideologies, while others disengage because of ideologies around class and socioeconomic placements? Fortunately for students, there are educators who use religious and non-religious altruistic leanings, character traits, and moral and ethical markers to guide their interactions with students. These approaches are important because students may come to the schoolhouse enshrouded in indiscernible issues, including the stressors of school-life, and so

they do not need the additional burden of having to mentally struggle with forms of discrimination of any kind.

In closing, this initial exploration of concepts within ethnocentrism (Baylor, 2012), uncertainty tolerance (Cargile & Bolkan, 2013), and Heidegger's (1953) phenomenology, may offer educators some questions to reflect upon as they interact with students from different races, nationalities, ethnicities, religions, gender identities, sexual orientations, abilities, along with students who speak different languages or who speak with different accents. The historical legislative interventions may also act as reminders that educators are mere humans: susceptible to human frailties and working with changes and concepts that, in some cases, are still evolving. In their complexity of roles, perhaps the above discourse may also assist educators to work with a greater level of uncertainty tolerance, along with an enhanced appreciation of varied aspects of diversity.

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