



Happy Talk about Diversity Avoids Difficult Racial Issues

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Few words in the current American lexicon are as widespread and seemingly optimistic as “diversity.” Everyone from school administrators and business leaders to political activists, marketing gurus, and Supreme Court Justices praises diversity these days. But what do people really mean? Along with a colleague, I conducted in-depth interviews with more than 150 Americans in four major metropolitan areas: Atlanta, Boston, Los Angeles, and the Twin Cities of Minnesota. Our findings suggest that talk of diversity often obscures knotty issues and difficult challenges in U.S. race relations. Above all, happy talk about diversity makes it almost impossible for people to consider troubling social inequalities in a meaningful way.

Upbeat, yet Superficial and Conflicted

Americans are relentlessly optimistic about “diversity.” A nationally representative telephone survey found that nearly half of Americans claim that diversity is “mostly a strength” for the country. Not everyone went this far; just over half characterized diversity as “both a weakness and a strength.” Less than five percent of respondents saw diversity as an unqualified weakness. With minor variations, optimism held across lines of race, gender, religious affiliation, and class background. Diversity appears to have positive connotations for almost all Americans – and some might think this is cause for celebration. But our in-depth interviews revealed that happy talk about diversity is vague, superficial, and often obscures what people really have in mind.

- Asked to explain what diversity meant to them, about half of our interviewees offered simple rewordings or very general definitions. “Diversity to me is being exposed to many different people from many different cultures,” recounted Lucy, a 55-year-old white woman from Boston, whose answer was typical. When pushed to elaborate and give specific examples, respondents often struggled for words or offered additional platitudes.
- Asked for examples of diversity, many respondents provided laundry lists of assorted social characteristics they believed could be tallied under a general, catch-all diversity heading – everything from religion, attitudes and tastes, to the way people look or talk.
- Tellingly, respondents who discussed concrete experiences often mentioned people of a different race and referred to conflicts or complex interactions.

In short, many Americans define diversity in abstract, inclusive terms, yet at some level have in mind lived experiences involving interactions with racially different people.

Tensions and Confusions

In addition to being relatively vague, the language of diversity blurs two crucial distinctions:

- **Distinctions between individual choices and group boundaries.** Some Americans see an appropriately diverse society as one in which all individuals are treated the same regardless of differences. For others, diversity connotes a society in which group differences themselves are consciously celebrated and sustained. It is difficult if not impossible to endorse both ideals at the same time. If they are conflated in one term, it becomes hard to see the contrasting conceptions of individuals and groups they represent.
- **Distinctions between how things are and how they ideally could or should be.** When Americans speak happily of diversity, are they talking about the aspiration for a genuinely diverse, tolerant society? Or are they hinting at ongoing challenges in contemporary U.S. life with all of its conflicts and inequities? It is hard to think clearly about how to get from the imperfect to the better if our concepts confuse “is” and “ought.”

Racial Inequalities Must Not Fall Out of Sight

The greatest difficulty with overly optimistic talk about diversity is that it divorces discussions of social variety and multiculturalism from more uncomfortable conversations about inequality, power, and privilege. In our interviews, the vast majority of respondents spoke extensively about diversity without ever acknowledging – let alone seriously engaging – the entrenched inequalities that often accompany racial differences in the United States. Even the most articulate and politically engaged respondents found it difficult to talk about inequality when the conversational topic at hand seemed to be the happy notion of America as a country that welcomes diversity and makes each distinctive individual feel at home.

Unspoken norms about cultural assimilation and the shared core values of U.S. society often blind Americans to the ways in which race structures social life – and diversity talk can be just one more way to avoid troubling issues. By appearing to recognize differences yet failing to appreciate the special privileges attached to white experiences and identities, discussion of diversity often relegates non-whites to assorted “other” categories. Talking about how nice it is to have many kinds of “others” around can avoid acknowledgement of racial differences in power, opportunity, and social wellbeing.

Drawing upon classic American themes of optimism and uplift, the language of diversity celebrates difference, inclusion, and identity in contemporary society. Yet one of the great tragedies of U.S. history is the extent to which ethnic and racial diversity has been grounded in pervasive and persistent inequalities of power, esteem, and wealth. Twenty-first century Americans cannot escape such inequalities merely by talking happily and vaguely about the wonders of social diversity. If the persistent conflicts and inequalities of race are to be addressed, they must be directly acknowledged. We need to use words – and concepts – that allow us to think clearly about the true challenges America has long faced, and still faces.

Read more in “Diversity in Everyday Discourse: The Cultural Ambiguities and Consequences of ‘Happy Talk’” (with Joyce Bell). *American Sociological Review* 72, no. 6 (2007): 895-914 and at the [American Mosaic Project](#).