

Article

MULTICULTURALISM EXPLORED

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Multiculturalism is a unique term that has been widely used around the globe. What is multiculturalism? There are many definitions and interpretations on the concept of multiculturalism. The term itself is a combination of the word 'multi' and 'culture'. According to social anthropologist Margaret Mead, the word "culture" is defined as a set of social systems, symbols, representations and practices of signification held by a certain group.¹ In *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*, Bhiku Parekh offered his perspective that human life is organised by a historically created system of meaning and significance, and in turn this is what we call culture.² In his article, *What Do We Mean by Managing Diversity?* Caleb Rosado³ explained that the concept of multiculturalism embodies a new orientation toward the future. He further illustrated that the needs for the 21st century demand a citizenry that is culturally sensitive and internationally focused. This is a realistic description of many societies that are home to diverse communities. In his work, he suggested that some of the approaches to manage diversity is to recognise diversity, respect

minority groups, acknowledge cultural expression, encourage and enable contribution of the various communities and empowerment.

Sociologists use the concept of multiculturalism to describe one way of approaching cultural diversity within a society. In plain context, the word multicultural describes something that incorporates ideas, beliefs or people from many different countries and cultural background. Today, multiculturalism is often associated with the idea of integration, inclusivity and respect for one another. Multiculturalism represents the ideals of living and interacting with people from different backgrounds. This way of life has been an integral part of society and has evolved through times. Different countries and continents have their own unique history on the origins of multiculturalism. Several historical events such as mass migration, war, political instability, colonialism and similarities in race and religion and current socio-economic trends such as seeking better economic opportunities, and attainment of quality education are some of the

¹ Rodrigues, L. C. (n.d.). Multiculturalism. Retrieved from <http://www.iep.utm.edu/multicul/>

² Parekh, B. C. (2011). *Rethinking multiculturalism: cultural diversity and political theory*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

³ Rosado, C. (2006). What do We Mean by "Managing Diversity?". *Workforce Diversity: Concepts and Cases*, 3, 1-15

reasons why an individual, families or communities choose to migrate to a different country. In this regard, the emergence of a new culture co-existing with the inherent and dominant culture in a society has created the concept of multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism considers each race as equal and espouses the concept of fair and equal appearance of all cultural groups in public and private institutional environment and creating a balance between races or languages. Interestingly, the most important groups or states today consist of seven or eight major civilisations. These are new realities in most societies. Lilla Berkes in her article *The Development and the Meaning of the Concept of Multiculturalism* shared her insights that cultural differences are the new norm and adapting the concept of acceptance and tolerance is essential to live harmoniously.⁴

However, embracing and adopting the concept of multiculturalism has its fair share of negative perception and criticism. Some people perceive multiculturalism as a threat to the existing culture or norm in a society. Concerns arise because of the misconception that new ethnic groups and culture will influence the current norms or practices in a society that could result in

the dominant culture losing its identity and influence on most of the population. Each country has its own unique history and origins on the concept of multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism has influenced the structure of society in more ways than one. For example, with a fusion of several cultures in society, it creates an environment that is rich with tradition and diverse identities. Multiculturalism also promotes unity, cohesiveness, and inclusion among the various races. Many countries and societies have embraced the concept of multiculturalism in their respective social groups. The workforce is no exception.

Many organisations are now hiring a more multiracial workforce. Many studies have shown that a workforce which is more diverse tend to address and resolve workplace issues and challenges in a more creative and innovative way.

Today, the concept of multiculturalism has been widely accepted especially by the younger generation. The young people are inclined to be more open and accepting to a person of a different racial background as compared to the earlier generations. Hence, it is important for multiculturalism to be accepted as part of society and preserved for many more generations to come.

⁴ Berkes, L. (2010). *The Development and Meaning of the Concept of Multiculturalism*. *Delkelet- Europa-South-East Europe: International Relations Quarterly*, 1(4).