



Cultural Diversity and Its Impact on Social Development

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Abstract. Cultural diversity plays a major role in this increasingly interconnected world, especially as we live in a multicultural society where people live together with different cultural backgrounds. The irreversible trends of globalization and migration also fueled the boom of a wide variety of cultural manifestations. This paper emphasizes the implications of cultural diversity in social development. It tackles two questions: First, what is cultural diversity and how does it evolve over the years? And second, what is the impact of cultural diversity on social development? This paper offers a comprehensive overview to explore the relationship between cultural diversity and social development, and aims to put forward suggestions to tackle inequality issues and promote sustainable changes from the cultural dimensions.

Keywords: Culture, Cultural Diversity, Society, Sustainability.

1 Introduction

It is undeniable that our world consists of an array of cultures and people with different cultural backgrounds live together in this interconnected society. Intensified by immigration and economic globalization, cultural diversity has become increasingly common and has been brought to public attention, especially in recent years. The coexistence and interaction of diverse cultural groups can be manifested in various ways in society, sometimes they live in harmony and mutual respect, and sometimes conflicts and social barriers stand in the way, either case bringing both opportunities and challenges.

2 Definition

For the purposes of the intercultural study, culture is defined as the set of shared knowledge, values, and practices that are created by people for perceiving, interpreting, and responding to the social environment around them [1]. Since culture often features the collective mind or living patterns, most social scientists today view it as the primary trait that distinguishes the members of one group of people from another [2]. Needless to say, it is a key expression of who we are and an irreplaceable part of our identity,

which enriches our lives in numerous ways and helps build distinctive, innovative, and resilient communities.

As reflected in its inherent nature, the world has welcomed a multitude of different cultures, which comes with the term “cultural diversity”. It means a system that recognizes and respects the existence and presence of a broad array of cultural manifestations within a society [3]. In the context of sustainable development, it is the mainspring to draw on the creative potential of the world’s varied cultures and encourage people’s continued contribution to equality and inclusion. In the academic circle, this concept can also be used interchangeably with the word “multiculturalism”.

2.1 Multiculturalism Theories

This interesting topic has also stirred a wide-ranging debate in social studies, which summarized two primary theories accordingly [4]. The former refers to “the melting pot” theory, stating that different cultures would blend with each other and melt into a harmonious whole. The term was first used to depict the widespread immigrant experience in the United States, with people coming from every corner of the globe, regardless of race, color, gender, and any other background. In recent times, the term also applies to any context where a new culture comes to coexist and unify with another. In certain cases, however, some cultures might need to give up part of their traditions in order to fully assimilate into the predominant society.

The latter is known as the “salad bowl” or “mosaic” theory, which originated as early as the 1960s. This metaphor describes how cultures remain separate and keep at least some of their own characteristics instead of melting together. In the United States, Chinatown and Little India are the most obvious salad-bowl communities, with each culture living side by side and retaining its distinct features. Meanwhile, some scholars also expressed reservations that this model might divide society for a lack of shared values that unify the different cultures [5].

Admittedly, these two theories are drastically simplified models of the real world for practical purposes, but are still worth investigating as they represent the two extremes of the spectrum – assimilation and isolation.

2.2 How Cultural Diversity Evolves

The driver of cultural diversity mainly comes from the process of migration, which has existed for ages since the dawn of human history. With the growing mobility of the population, migration also signifies the movement of communities and political units as a direct result of changes in residence [6]. During the process of safeguarding its original features, adapting to the new environment, and shaping the new social identity, migration always caused cultural changes and social inclusion, either in immigrant culture or in the hosting region. For instance, in the 19th century, the first wave of globalization exploded in Europe, which opened an array of opportunities for massive flows of labor and capital into Canada, Australia, and the United States. This rapidly changed the social-cultural structure and formations in these countries and still has repercussions in decades to come [7].

The incredible increases in the number of people of European origin in these countries very much changed the entire cultural, institutional, and socio-economic makeup of those countries in just a few decades.

Based on the key findings from the World Migration Report, there are three major inclusion patterns: 1) cultural assimilation, which refers to the one-way process for minority ethnic groups to merge into the culture; 2) cultural integration, which means the bi-directional melding of the traditions, values, and beliefs from both communities; 3) multicultural society, which describes the phenomenon of recognizing the uniqueness of each culture and celebrating the diversity while co-existing in the collective [8].

2.3 Why Cultural Diversity Matters

With diverse societies continuing to expand, it is necessary to acknowledge the benefits of cultural diversity and how it has changed both individuals and communities. According to UN reports, nearly three-quarters of the world's major conflicts involve a cultural dimension [9]. It is inherent in mankind's instincts to absorb similar traits rather than digesting something foreign. Therefore, cultural diversity can serve as an open and productive channel amongst different groups of people and reduce bias, prejudice, and negative stereotypes caused by misunderstanding and poor communications. Nowadays, diversity is particularly prevalent in schools, workplaces, and countries, which are composed of all kinds of cultural, racial, and ethnic groups. Recognizing differences and learning about them can provide common ground to build mutual trust and respect across cultures.

Another benefit is through the lens of sustainability. The 1987 World Commission on Environment and Development defined sustainable development as the "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." [10] It focuses on the balance between society, ecology, and economy with the ultimate goal of promoting mutual prosperity across the planet. The concept was supported by three underlying pillars – social inclusion, environmental protection, and economic growth, which internally interact and impact on each other. In recent years, a four-pillar approach also gained popularity, which includes culture as the fourth dimension. Although the sustainable model has been constantly negotiated and revised, the crucial role of cultural diversity remains unquestioned. It can be regarded as a bridge and a link between the three other dimensions, or a direct driver that stimulates sustainable changes and promotes sustainable development goals (SDGs).

3 Impacts of Cultural Diversity

It has long been widely acclaimed that diverse cultures have profound effects on the social environment, and this topic has been well-ventilated in academic discussions regarding. To provide a comprehensive overview, this section delves into how cultural diversity exerts influence in several contexts and breaks down its impact in different dimensions, as approached in sequence.

3.1 Politics and International Relationships

Cultures may thrive and flourish in countless ways, but the establishment of the political system, however, can be a lengthy process and less responsive to social changes in a short period of time. Many challenges that accompany with cultural diversity have intensified the divisions of national governance and consequently in politics, including political instability, cultural conflicts, diminished trust, and loss of social productivity, to name just a few. Since cultural diversity has already become a distinct characteristic of the world today, the pivotal role of a powerful government in maintaining a united yet inclusive public opinion in society is increasingly prominent.

Although a uniform institutional framework is necessary to advocate on social justice and equality, it is often based on the viewpoint of a non-plural society, which makes it difficult to cope with a variety of diversities [3]. In this case, many countries are pressured to reflect on their existing regulations and take cultural diversity into account when designing and implementing policies. But when looking on the bright side, reforming the design of political policies from the perspective of cultural diversity is a critical step toward human civilization. For one thing, it offers written guidelines and protects the rights of marginalized groups in terms of legislation, marking a turning point to a more plural and democratic society [11]. For another, the enforcements by governments also contribute to shaping public awareness of cross-cultural communications and facilitate mutual understanding between different languages, religions, and races [12].

3.2 Economy and Global Business

As the main pillar and critical enabler of social development, the economy is a common concern among the public, and greater importance has been attached to probing into possible channels of influence of cultural diversity on economic growth. Seen laterally, they can be divided into the macro (country) and micro (company) levels.

From the macro/country level, the recent pertinent literature review did not reveal the direct link between population diversity and economic prosperity. But on the basis of social research supported by samples from 195 countries, the diversity of immigrants has a significant positive influence on the macroeconomy. Notably, statistics from developed countries show that, if highly educated immigrants are the major source of diversity, the economy also keeps growing at a steady pace [13]. In areas with dense population, the positive influence becomes even more dominant, possibly due to agglomeration effects. Higher cultural diversity can contribute to the productivity and income of natives.

From the micro level, studies mostly focus on the cultural diversity in companies and how it impacts the overall team performance. A general conclusion points to the fact that more culturally diverse companies can make better decisions and products, because people of different backgrounds can share new insights and perspectives. In the context of transnational business and cross-cultural projects, cultural diversity is beneficial to promote work efficiency and creativity, especially when collaborating with different teams. Another academic branch analyzes the diversity in executive

boards and its relationship with firms' profitability. Diverse management styles of female and minority leaders are found to be more sensitive to stock performance, and might impact different aspects of performance through different mechanisms [14].

Therefore, it is clear that social inclusion in the workplace and non-discrimination policies can be important roll boosters to make the most of diverse labor.

3.3 Education

Needless to say, education shoulders significant responsibilities to cultivate critical skills and competencies as well as nurture the next generation to promote social changes. Whether to individuals or to nations, it is a kind of activity of self-development and continuous growth towards a better future. Across the globe, culture and education are permeated and blended – on the one hand, culture enriches education as it compasses values and ideologies; on the other hand, education helps people assimilate the cultural traits of different groups. Thus, the relationship between education and culture is inseparable and inseverable in virtually all aspects and activities [15].

It is commonly believed that cultural diversity has a strong impact on educational patterns, for culture tends to manifest itself as a major source in the formation of education contexts and approaches. Studies have indicated that when the existing educational system fails to include certain aspects or traits of minorities' cultures, it could result in the loss of the cultural and local identity of these people, including language barriers and lack of group sense of belonging[16]. Schools and other educational institutions can, however, act as places to promote universally-accepted values, such as justice, non-discrimination, social equality, and respect. This means that cultural diversity brings forward the higher request to provide inclusive and equitable quality education nationwide, and to transform learning content and pedagogy to adapt to local needs and cultural realities. Meanwhile, faculty and staff are also required to integrate diversity-based values in teaching contexts such as the classroom.

3.4 Sustainable Development

Sustainable development enshrines a conceptual shift in social development patterns with the aim of achieving an equitable, inclusive, and environmentally future. In UNESCO's Global Report, culture is key in accelerating the SDGs implementation and fostering sustainable changes. It serves as an indispensable asset to sustainable growth and has a direct influence on many of the SDGs, including the eradication of poverty, reduced inequalities, inclusive societies, quality of life, decent work and economic growth, etc. From another perspective, although culture does not appear in the SDGs proposed by the UN in 2005, preserving diverse cultural heritages and traditions is also an end of sustainable development, and this has been introduced as a cross-cutting theme across all the goals. Table 1 highlights the main channels on how cultural diversity could impact the SDGs.

Table 1. Channels of Influence of Cultural Diversity on SDGs

SDGs	Channels of Influence
#1 No Poverty	By developing transferrable skills and competencies that lead to secure livelihoods in the society
#3 Good Health and Well-Being	By being culturally responsive to the context and the particular needs of diverse groups
#4 Quality Education	By calling for a culture of peace and non-violence in schools and educational patterns
#5 Gender Equality	By employing women in cultural sector activities
#8 Decent Work and Economic Growth	By attracting tourism investment in local communities and cultural heritage; By revitalizing local and national markets via trade in cultural goods and services
#10 Reduced Inequalities	By promoting equal treatment for locally-produced goods through cultural policies
#11 Sustainable Cities and Communities	By protecting and safeguarding the world's cultural and natural heritage
#13 Climate Action	By integrating knowledge of ecosystem management and the reuse of natural resources into traditional occupations and crafts
#16 Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	By enhancing cultural understanding, preventing conflicts, and protecting the rights of marginalized groups
#17 Partnerships for the Goals	By bringing together diverse individuals and groups for the development of a project

4 Conclusions

The world is evolving on the basis of its cultural diversity and takes on features of multiculturalism, which makes us rethink the importance of human unity and challenges us to develop the ability to live with differences. It is clear that cultural diversity strongly impacts various aspects of social development, including politics, economy, and education. In closing, cultural diversity should be seriously treated and deliberately incorporated in the social sectors of different nations. Only by following this direction will it be possible to forge more equitable and peaceful futures for all.

This paper mainly centers on the literature review and qualitative analysis. The precise role and impact of cultural diversity on society are expected to be systematically studied and demonstrated with data-driven reports and mathematic models. Further work is needed to build a systematic and measurable framework to delve into its contribution, especially in its contributions to the SDGs.

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