Section I
Overviews, Strategies and Prevention
1

Cultural diversity and cultural wellbeing: Understanding a complex relationship

Anthony J Marsella

Australia has been, and will continue to be, a land of opportunity for many — a land that remains, for the most part, gracious in its welcome to all who seek refuge and all who seek a chance for a better life.

I do not wish to romanticise or valorise Australia, for I am well aware that it also has been a land of great sorrow and suffering for many. And I am aware of its many political, social, and economic flaws and frustrations and of its violent history. Yet, I choose to acknowledge and emphasise the hope, security, and contentment it has brought to so many who have come in need, in want, and in grief, searching only for an opportunity to rebuild their lives on Australia’s distant shore.

Australia is not without its problems. It is not a Shangri La! But what society or nation is? Yet, even with its shortcomings, Australia remains one of the very best places in the world to live — a land of great beauty and abundant resources, a nation of great inner strength and virtue, and an ideal that can remind the world of what is possible when people of goodwill gather in common purpose. Indeed, in my opinion (current social and economic woes aside) Australia is a harbinger of the world’s future: a nation where people from hundreds of different ethnic ancestries and cultural traditions can live in relative harmony, stability, and security, appreciating and celebrating their diversity while embracing and sustaining a dynamic and ever-changing shared public culture.

Australia is a special place! Its 19 million diverse people are unusually blessed and endowed in talent and skill. Its land is rich and its history remains mythical in proportion. But more than anything else, Australia is a special place because it has a remarkable ‘can do’ national spirit! While other nations are mired in helplessness, Australia seems able to move forward. It falls, it stumbles, it bumbles along, but it does not give up. Cynics abound, but so do idealists. Prophets of doom cry out, but so do voices of inspiration and possibility.

Isn’t diversity great! Every person, every idea, every value seems to yield an alternative response or an elaboration. And there may be no other place in the world
beyond Australia with such an acute consciousness of its cultural diversity, and of the importance of sanctifying and preserving this diversity because of its obvious virtues and consequences.

Yes, there is hate, violence, prejudice and racism in Australia! The ‘One Nation’ political party continues to propagate xenophobic views, and there is, and has been, a very inadequate response to the obvious abuse of privilege in responding to the needs of the Aboriginal populations that have graced this land with their magnificent heritage and identity. And need I remind you here that Australia’s most important national treasure is not the Sydney Opera House, nor the Great Barrier Reef, nor Australian football, but its Australian Aboriginal people and cultures.

Today, there are strong and audible voices in Australia that resent the changing ethnic and cultural composition of the nation, especially the influx of non-Western immigrants. One can only wonder why these voices are oblivious to their own immigrant history. Were they denied entry when they came in need? Did they hurt any more than those coming today? Yet, in the end, Australia — as a nation, as a national culture, and as an ideal committed to reason and justice — will move forward toward its destiny as a land of hope and opportunity for all, a distant horizon toward which to sail. This monograph on Diversity and Mental Health in Challenging Times, in its very purposes and intent affirms that destiny, and is an endorsement of the words that I am sharing with you at this moment.

Australia has a remarkable consciousness of cultural diversity, a consciousness that arises from both a historical and contemporary recognition that diversity is a source of strength. Indeed, in my opinion, cultural diversity may be the most important force for preserving human survival. This is because the cultural differences that are often the sources of difficulty, are also the sources of new choices and new freedoms. The reticent and restrained world view of the English and the expressive and exuberant world view of the Italian need one another, and both need the Aboriginal and Asian world views to counter their cultural blind spots. There are virtues in all, even as there are limitations. That is our dilemma!

The dilemma on this, the dawn of a new century and millennium, is that two indisputable facts confront us! First, the vast majority of instances of national, regional, and global instability can be traced to conflicts involving perceived cultural and racial diversity. Second, the greatest resource for ensuring the survival and growth of the human race is cultural diversity.

While the first fact may seem more apparent than the second, both are nonetheless true, and both are nonetheless critical for national and international stability. Thus, we are faced with a paradox: A single characteristic of human life — cultural diversity — looms as both the principal source of local, regional and global tension, and as the principal resource for the survival and growth of the human species. Amazing!

Given these facts, do we eliminate or limit cultural diversity as a source of tension in favour of monolithic national or international cultures, or do we promote
cultural diversity as a way of establishing an unending flow of alternative lifestyles and world views? Certainly there are some virtues to cultural homogenisation; but there are also problems! Keeping new and diverse immigrants out ossifies a society by restricting its views and values to a single tradition; this, in turn, reduces a society’s capacity for creative growth, change, and development.

Let me share ten interesting facts about the world, facts that are shaping the world in which we live in new directions for which we are unprepared. Facts that are shaping Australia’s future even as you read this:

1. Five out of every six people in the world are from non-European/non-North American ethnic and cultural heritages.
2. Around 20 per cent of the world’s population live in absolute poverty.
3. There are more than 40 million refugees and internally displaced people in the world.
4. There are more than 68 low-intensity wars going on in the world today.
5. There are 189 nations in the United Nations but there are more than 5000 cultural groups, most of which are not represented. Further, there are more than 10,000 languages.
6. The indigenous peoples of the world are rapidly becoming extinct, unable to survive the disease, murder and cultural destruction of which they are victims.
7. Environmental destruction is proceeding at a pace that threatens to destroy entire species of fish, animal life and the human societies dependent upon them.
8. The world’s population will grow from 6 billion people to more than 8 billion within the next 20 years — a 40 per cent increase. Of the 83 million children born each year, only 1 million are from industrial/technological nations (excluding China).
9. International migration (both the legal and the unauthorised) is reaching new proportions and this will not end.
10. The world is a global community and Australia’s previous geographic isolation from much of the world is no longer a reality.

Why do I tell you these facts? Because they are the seeds of cultural diversity for Australia’s future. There will be no social Great Barrier Reef to buffer the global changes coming to Australia; no futuristic Mel Gibson nor Crocodile Dundee will be able to alter these changes, nor their impact for you. Cultural diversity is Australia’s future. It cannot be escaped!

Cultural Diversity

Cultural diversity is an expression of the diversity inherent in life itself. In even its most rudimentary and essential forms, life possesses the potential for diversity, and
it is this potential which offers to life its defining capacity to respond with a variety of options and alternatives for growth and development. No living organism — plant, animal or human, is restricted to a single monolithic form because of this potential. Life, then, is the ecological potential to respond with many forms and manifestations, all of which increase the probability that life will thrive amidst different contexts. It is this potential for diversity that provides all forms of life with the opportunity to adapt, thus ensuring that changes in environmental demands will not destroy the ‘seed’, but only alter its manifestations.

When we speak of cultural diversity, we are speaking of the inherent potential within the human species to develop a range of alternative life styles that can facilitate human survival, adaptation and adjustment. To the extent that a way of life becomes so rigid and closed that it denies any further opportunity for change, that way of life will ultimately fail, and will be forced to yield to its better-suited competitors.

In this way it is possible to see that cultural diversity offers the human species numerous options for dealing with the ever-changing requirements of the physical, cultural, socioeconomic and political milieu.

When we insist on uniformity, when we insist on conformity, when we insist on adherence to convention, we may, for a short-time, promote survival through order; but, ultimately, in doing so, we suppress the essence of our human capacity to survive — our cultural diversity.

But making cultural diversity work is not easy. There are challenges associated with power, communication, psychological sensitivities, and trust.

The Challenges of Ethnocultural Diversity

Language, communication, and cultural preservation

Cultural diversity poses serious challenges because of communication problems. In countries with multiple languages (e.g. India, Indonesia, Russia, Philippines and Australia), linguistic diversity promotes, in both direct and indirect ways, a sense of separatism, a ‘we’ versus ‘they’ mentality. Yet, it is clear that if languages and dialects are destroyed in favour of a single common language (e.g. the case of the Celtic language in Ireland), what is lost is more than words. Language embodies a world view, a way of understanding reality, a template for making sense of people's psychology. One shop foreman in Sweden pointed out to me that his shop has signs in seven different languages to accommodate to the diverse worker populations. One is reminded here of the Biblical tale of the Tower of Babel! Language problems are also compounded by cultural variations in non-verbal communication (i.e. postures, gestures, grimaces) and paraverbally (i.e. tone, rate of speech, pitch). But, if we insist on one language, we will destroy the codification of a culture and, with that, access to alternative world views and experiences.
Diversity and Mental Health in Challenging Times

On the other hand, if we try to learn about another culture, if we try to develop ‘cultural literacy’, we can ‘experience,’ in part, what it means to see and know the world from a particular point of view or vantage point. When we do this, we acquire a wonderful sense of freedom and exhilaration because we are ‘liberated’ from the boundaries of our own experience. In the immediacy of that moment, we are able to transcend our past, and to leap beyond the limits of previous understanding.

**Cultural particularism**

Cultural particularism is yet another problem of cultural diversity. It leads to separatism, elitism, and, ultimately, isolation. Cultural particularism derives from the premise that to be a member of a particular cultural group gives one a certain legitimacy and authenticity which cannot be had by anyone who is not a member of that group. It is more than simply knowing the language; it is the ‘moral’ prerogative to speak with authority on behalf of the group. Within this context, only people from this ethnocultural group have the legitimacy to describe or carry their struggle. Clearly, this limits the possibilities of others working on a group’s behalf. Helpful resources are thus lost.

**Political correctness**

A third problem of cultural diversity is ‘political correctness’. Many minority ethnic groups are now demanding — and rightfully so — that the biases inherent in majority group practices and accounts of history be revised to reflect the abuse of power and privilege. This has given rise to the term ‘political correctness’. One response to this has been the emergence of numerous apologies to groups who have been abused, and to many legal suits. This is good because for many ethnocultural and racial minorities, the commitment to ‘political correctness’ offers an opportunity to correct the myths and lies that were frequently passed off as fact.

In commenting on the distress and disruptions this has caused the majority culture, Stanley Fish, a Professor of English Literature, wrote: ‘... An older coherence has indeed been undermined, but a new coherence is emerging ... [The American Way of Life] has now been replaced by what might be called an ideology of difference. Rather than contribute your particular racial, ethnic, or even sexual identity to a general shape, you affirm and even exaggerate the differences ... The superfluidity [of thought, materials, and ideology] may be exhausting — but first it’s exciting ... Disagreement can be fun’ (Prescott, 1990, pp.50–51).

Thus, the answer to the question ‘How does ethnocultural diversity contribute to the wellbeing of individuals and societies?’ is clear! Cultural diversity offers choices, options, and alternatives in values, world views, and life styles. It increases the talent pool and expands the range of solutions. It enriches society! Are the problems that accompany worth the trade-offs? The answer to this question is a
resounding ‘yes.’ Adjusting to the minor demands presented by diversity (communication, cultural particularism, political correctness) are worth the liberation of mind and character that these demands bring.

‘We are a part of the whole; we are apart from the whole’
(Arthur Koestler, 1968)

Cultural diversity provokes much confusion and conflict for both majority and minority group members. How can we be separate yet part of another group’s culture. A number of years ago, Arthur Koestler, the famous author and social commentator, coined the term ‘the Janus Principle’ to describe what he termed an essential characteristic of all living organisms. According to Koestler (1968), this principle suggests that every living unit is both an independent unit of organisation and an interdependent unit. That is to say, whether we are speaking of body cells, people or nations, every unit is simultaneously separate and yet a part of something larger. Koestler assigned the name ‘Janus’ to this principle in honour of the Roman god, Janus, whose two faces enabled him to look backward and forward at the same time.

Koestler claimed that every unit of life possesses both a self-assertive tendency and an integrative tendency. Indeed, from Koestler’s point of view, a unit can never fulfil its mission unless it can be both separate and yet attached, for becoming part of something larger yielded an emergent property — something that was more than the sum of its parts.

When we speak of cultural diversity, we must speak of both the separateness of a person or a group, and their attachment to the larger whole. The Janus Principle as articulated by Koestler offers us a conceptual aid for understanding that in cultural diversity we have both an opportunity for self-assertive and integrative tendencies. Unity and diversity are not mutually exclusive, but rather parts of the same life force.

The United States of America is often held up as an example of both the virtues and the evils of cultural diversity. A century ago, Israel Zangwill, a 19th century Russian-Jewish immigrant, wrote a play entitled ‘The Melting Pot’ which celebrated America’s capacity for cultural assimilation. Zangwill wrote:

America is God’s crucible, the great Melting Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and reforming! . . . Here you stand in your fifty groups, with fifty languages . . . and your fifty bloody hatreds . . . A fig for your feud and vendettas! Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians — into the crucible with you all! God is making the American (Zangwill, 1908, quoted from Schlesinger, 1991, p. 11)

That was the ideal! But, it was never attained. America was only a ‘melting pot’ in the minds of white Anglo-Saxon males who held political power and privilege.
Diversity and Mental Health in Challenging Times

The ‘melting pot’ was a myth! It was noble to speak of ‘one America’ as long as the people being given opportunity and choice shared a similar background — the White Male Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) background. But what of the multitudes denied opportunity and choice because of their ethnicity (e.g. Irish, Italians), race (e.g. Blacks, American Indians, Japanese, Chinese, Native Hawaiians), or creed (e.g. Jews, Islamics) (Stannard, 1992)?

The better and more accurate metaphor for America is the ‘salad bowl’, where different ingredients can co-exist in harmony, each contributing their unique flavour and texture to the whole, without loosing their distinct value and identity. America never succeeded in erasing or eliminating its citizens’ commitment to their cultural heritage, contrary to the claims of the assimilationists.

Old roots were never lost, new roots merely grew along side of them, making an ever-stronger tree. That was and is America’s strength! It is critical that we not destroy or eliminate different cultures. There is nothing noble in that! Octavio Paz, the famous Mexican winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, who possessed a magic way with words, stated:

What sets worlds in motion is the interplay of difference, their attractions and repulsions. Life is plurality, death is uniformity. By suppressing differences and peculiarities, by eliminating different civilizations and cultures, progress weakens life and favours death. The ideal of a single civilization for everyone, implicit in the cult of progress and technique, impoverishes and mutilates us. Every view of the world that becomes extinct, every culture that disappears, diminishes a possibility of life (Paz, 1968).

In conclusion, cultural diversity and cultural wellbeing are inextricably linked, and cannot be separated from each other. But this raises some critical and seemingly paradoxical questions: How much ethnocultural diversity can a society/nation take before it ceases to function as a coherent whole, before unity is lost? And lastly, how can we simultaneously encourage cultural diversity and unity in a multicultural and multiracial society, especially when cultural diversity often yields inequities in power, dignity and opportunity?

In retrospect, perhaps we should say cultural diversity is not a major source of conflict in the world today. It would be more accurate to say that prejudice, intolerance, bias, fear and ignorance are the sources of cultural conflict and violence because they restrict equality, hope and opportunity. A society can have extensive cultural diversity if it is willing to provide members from different cultural traditions with equal opportunity and freedom — with a level playing field. Australians believe this whenever they say ‘Fair go’!

Within this context, diversity will thrive, but so will a commitment to national unity. Ethnocultural diversity can exist in proportion to the society’s commitment to guarantee equality, justice and opportunity to all its citizens. The citizens will then
Cultural Diversity and Cultural Wellbeing

act to preserve the unity of the society! Unity and diversity are different sides of the same coin!

Thus, whatever ethnicity or culture you may be, embrace and nurture other cultures; embrace and nurture your own unique cultural heritage; embrace and nurture your national citizenship as Australians; embrace and nurture your region of Oceania; and embrace and nurture your role as responsible citizens of our global community. You are all of these things, and that is glorious!

The word ‘other’ is only a problem if we fail to recognise that we are both one, and part of one, and that the endless process of fission and fusion — of separation and unity — is the very principle upon which the universe is created.

References