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## Dialogue across disciplines: bringing politics to a social psychology of multiculturalism

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### **Dialogue across Disciplines: Bringing Politics to a Social Psychology of Multiculturalism.**

#### **Caroline Howarth**

Historically much of social psychology has failed to develop a sufficiently political analysis of multiculturalism. Psychology, as a discipline, has suffered from both experimental and cognitive reductionism that have constructed 'inter-group relations', 'cultural difference' and discrimination in somewhat essentialised, ahistorical and decontextualised accounts. The ideological construction of cultural difference, the possibilities for social and political change and our human capacity for dialogue, debate and resistance receive far less attention than often dry, empirical accounts of intergroup competition and conflict and the psychological consequences of threatened identities and stereotyping. Multiculturalism is often assumed to be simply another type of intergroup relations that we can apply our well-worn theories of social categorisation and social identification. Within Sociology, cultural studies and political science, by contrast, multiculturalism is a fiercely debated and extensively researched topic.

Rather than leave our friends and colleagues in neighbouring disciplines to lead debates in academic, policy and community spheres, I would suggest that we need to enter into dialogue ourselves and offer a range of perspectives on the *psychology* of multiculturalism. Clearly we do need an understanding of the psychological dynamics at stake here: to make sense of multicultural contexts, encounters and identities we need to ask *when and why do cultures appear multicultural?* That is, when are we psychologically aware of difference, or, more accurately, how is difference intersubjectively constructed? This question takes us to the very heart of Social Psychology and to the birth of self-consciousness, the development of social identities and the possibilities for self-reflection, dialogue and agency. To understand how and why we develop a sense of 'ourselves' - we need an awareness of 'others' who we make different to us and whose difference clarifies our sense of identity, community and culture. We may see connections and disconnections, similarities and differences,

opportunities for dialogue and the potential for bloodshed. However, we do not do this alone - happily or nervously making sense of the connections and disconnections of human encounters. Our understanding of identity, culture and difference is something we inherit and is bound to the material consequences of long histories of othering, racialised violence and cultural oppression. Hence we need to develop a dialogical account of multiculturalism that integrates an understanding of the social psychology of difference and subjectivity with a politics of cultural difference and the possibilities for dialogue and social change.

Political scientist Paul Nesbitt-Larking's stimulating paper on multiculturalism provides an excellent opening to such an inter-disciplinary debate. Critical responses from social psychologists, sociologists and political scientists make for a fascinating exchange as to what we see at the key issues in academic constructions of multiculturalism and the possibilities for dialogue. Situated together these pieces demand that we develop a more engaged discussion across the politics and the psychology of culture, difference and dialogue. Not only is this because we need a contextualised understanding of multiculturalism, but also because there are important political consequences to the ways in which we construct, negotiate and resist the construction of multiculturalism, both in the everyday and in the reified world of Psychology. It is to this objective that Nesbitt-Larking and the commentators make a significant contribution.

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