Reimagining Diversity:
Moving from A Multicultural Perspective to An Ecological Perspective

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Abstract

In this article, I contend that the multicultural view of diversity found in management diversity literature and diversity training programs diminishes our understanding of diversity. It reduces diversity to differences and assumes that the goal should be including, bridging, accommodating, and managing these supposed differences. Diversity is psychologized, depoliticized, and biopoliticized. It becomes merely a means to an end. The end being superior organizational outcomes in terms of utility and functionality. I contend that an ecological perspective makes for a more constructive and expansive view of human diversity. I discuss the contours of this emergent perspective and the many ways in which it expands our understanding of human diversity. Ultimately, I contend looking at diversity from an ecological perspective makes for a richer understanding of the relationship between diversity and the human experience.

Keywords

Any rigorous reading of the management diversity literature reveals a set of core multicultural assumptions.

1. We assume that human diversity can be reduced to a set of boxes and groupings (e.g., race, gender, nationality, sexual orientation, dis(ability), religion).
2. We assume that these boxes reliably reflect human diversity.
3. We assume that we achieve or improve diversity by adding, accommodating, and including persons from boxes who have been historically excluded or marginalized.
4. We assume that racism, sexism, ableism, heterosexism, and other such forms of bigotry are the forces that obstruct the inclusion of persons from historically excluded and marginalized boxes.
5. We assume that tolerance is necessary for achieving diversity and inclusion.

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6. We assume that institutions and organizations can achieve diversity and inclusion by allocating enough resources to the mission, being willing to end discriminatory practices and arrangements, and creating brand new positions, processes, and systems that support diversity and inclusion.
7. Finally, we assume that a vast bureaucracy is necessary to successfully manage diversity and achieve inclusion. This bureaucracy usually includes a Chief Diversity Officer, an Office of Equal Opportunity, Inclusion and Resolution Services, courses, workshops, regulations, and committees, such as a Council on Diversity and Inclusion.

We find these multicultural assumptions in a set of highly publicized measures that Syracuse University took between 2018 and 2019 to promote diversity and inclusion. The university, like any other in the US facing the rise of trigger warnings, safe spaces, speech codes, and microaggressions, promised to,

1. Devote more resources to attracting and retaining persons from historically excluded and marginalized groups.
2. Allocate more resources to support diversity and inclusion initiatives so as to make the university safer for persons from diverse backgrounds.
3. Create a new bias response and education administrative position within the Office of the Dean of Students that will be responsible for managing and expanding the STOP Bias program, conducting training, and contributing to campus-wide diversity and inclusion efforts.
4. Mandate more diversity training with sessions on valuing variety, building a culture of inclusion and diversity, identifying obstacles and overcoming problems in communications when cultural understandings vary, and setting individual examples that model diversity and inclusion.
5. Create new diversity and inclusion administrative departments (Office of Inclusive Excellence) and positions (Assistant Dean for Inclusive Excellence) in every school across the university to monitor and implement diversity and inclusion policy.
6. Increase the number of course offerings that promote diversity and inclusion.
7. Create a new administrative position (Chief Diversity Officer) that will report directly to the Chancellor and play a vital role in identifying and proposing solutions to make Syracuse University a more diverse and inclusive place for students, faculty, staff, and visitors.
8. Hire an outside diversity consultant to advise senior administrators and conduct training across the university.
9. Require an expanded section on every syllabus that addresses diversity and inclusion.
10. Institute Indigenous Peoples Day as a campus initiative to honor indigenous history and culture on the second Monday of October.
11. Create a shared reading and discussion experience with small groups of new students focused on topics including identity, inclusion, and belonging.
12. Appoint a new Provost Faculty Fellow who will implement a professional development program to assist faculty in fostering a more culturally inclusive classroom.
13. Appoint a new Graduate Dean Faculty Fellow for Diversity and Inclusion who will be responsible for promoting the Graduate School's diversity and inclusion goals.

14. Develop a Strategic Inclusive Excellence Program that uses dialogic practices to develop inclusive excellence leadership skills.
15. Create a new Inclusive Excellence Council in the College of Engineering and Computer Science.
16. Create a new mandatory diversity and inclusion course for all undergraduates, beginning Fall 2019, and
17. Create new Inclusive Teaching Workshops for faculty to improve self-awareness, detect and respond to unconscious bias, and become more adept at creating diverse and inclusive classrooms, labs, studios, and field experiences. According to Martha Diede, director of the University's new Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence, "these workshops are the beginning of a concerted effort on the part of the University community to become more inclusive. As inclusion professionals will tell you – the work of inclusion is never fully completed" (Boll, 2018)

The consultant that Syracuse University hired was Damon A. Williams, the leader of the National Inclusive Excellence Leadership Academy and "a national expert on diversity and inclusion." Williams supposedly has worked with over 1,000 colleges and universities and is described as a "visionary and inspirational leader." He recently launched "The Inclusive Excellence Tour" that offers "a chance to strengthen your organization's diversity commitment by engaging your entire community in a conversation about diversity, equity, inclusion, and change with Dr. Damon A. Williams." The tour includes a "working session ... that is specifically designed to motivate and empower chief, senior, and campus diversity officers, diversity groups, ... multicultural marketing officers, and diversity and inclusion champions across all roles and levels of the community." It also includes an "executive coaching session ... that is uniquely designed to help your CEO or president hack the diversity, equity, and inclusion challenges impeding progress in your organization," and a "private book signing with the author [Williams] of the only diversity and inclusion strategy books endorsed by the presidents of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), American Council of Education (ACE), Association of Americans Colleges and Universities (AACU), National Association of Student Administrators (NASPA), National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA), and the National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO)" (The Inclusive Excellence Tour, 2019). Damon Williams came on the heels of another prominent "diversity and inclusion specialist," Kathy Obear, who Syracuse University hired to host "a three-day retreat focused on diversity and inclusion" for the Chancellor, vice-chancellors, and other university leaders. Out of the retreat, a workgroup was created to "develop solutions on how to further create a more diverse and inclusive climate" (Romano, 2015).

The kinds of multicultural initiatives that Syracuse University took between 2018–2019 are no different to what other organizations and institutions have long been doing in the United States. However, these multicultural initiatives reflect a set of fundamental problems.

1. **The Conceptual Problem**. What exactly are the origins, limits, and contours of culture? According Don Mitchell (1995), past Director of the Geography Department at Syracuse University, there is simply no such thing as culture. Indeed, analysts and anthropologists are yet to come to any kind of agreement on what exactly is culture. Also, where exactly do cultures begin and end, especially when cultures break down into tribes, clans,

regions, religions, traditions, races (bloodlines), and social classes? Moreover, what groupings should matter in defining and grouping a person, and who gets to decide who gets entry to those groupings? (E.g., Orthodox Jews refusing to view Reform Jews as Jews, and prominent African Americans refusing to view Barack Obama as the first African American President.)

2. **The Ethical Problem**. Multiculturalism begins on the premise that our racial and cultural differences must be respected, included, and even celebrated. But what of the racism, tribalism, sexism, and heterosexism within various minority groups that now demand inclusion? Simply put, should all racial and cultural differences be respected, included, and celebrated? Who gets to decide, and upon what moral authority, which racial and cultural differences should be valued, included, and celebrated?

3. **The Ontological Problem**. The groupings that form the foundation of multiculturalism are of our own making, for our own purposes. According to Mukhopadhyay, Rosemary, and Moses (2014), authors of *How Real is Race? A Sourcebook on Race, Culture, and Biology*, "in a biological sense, there are no such things as races. Contemporary humans are, and have always been, one species, with roots in Africa. There are no subspecies of humans" (p. Xvi). What then to make of multiculturism's insistence on valuing race as a reliable marker of human diversity? In other words, if race as a notion was born to justify oppression, which most analysts now acknowledge it was, could it now function as a tool of liberation? If so, what to make of Audre Lorde's claim that the tools that make for liberation must be different from those that make for oppression? Put differently, if liberation requires the ending of race, and other such "tools that build the house of the master," what becomes the value of movements like multiculturalism that insist on preserving and even elevating race?

4. **The Definitional Problem**. Multiculturalism operates on a definition of diversity that begins and ends with a certain number of boxes. Diversity is supposedly about race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, and dis(ability). But what of our different modalities, different rationalities, different sensibilities, different geographies, different epistemologies, different cosmologies, different spiritualities, and different histories? Why should these differences matter less in defining and appreciating our diversity? How did multiculturalism acquire the power to dictate what differences should matter, and what differences should be valued? For Appiah (2018), the endless delusions and distortions found in multiculturalism's definition of diversity laden our identities and diversities with many falsehoods.

5. **The Political Problem**. Multiculturalism values racial and cultural differences. There is no valuing of moral and epistemological differences, such as those that made for Martin Luther King's, Jr., opposition to the Vietnam war, which had broad support in the Black community. Why must we continue to uphold a perspective of diversity where our racial and cultural differences have no obligation to be morally and epistemologically different? Case in point, Michael Eric Dyson (2016) claims that the first Black President of the US was practically of no use to Black people. What then becomes the valuing of race and culture when neither promises to disrupt anything in any profound way? In short, why in any diversity equation should our moral and epistemological differences matter less than our racial and cultural differences? If our racial and cultural differences are in no way

morally and epistemologically different from those of the dominant groups, what then becomes the value for fighting for the inclusion of these differences?

6. **The Practical Problem**. Multiculturalism values and promotes tolerance. It claims that toleration rather than assimilation stretches our humanity. It supposedly makes us better human beings. Yet toleration is laden with all kinds of contradictions. Even vociferous proponents of toleration like Stanley Fish explicitly admit as much. Whose beliefs and values, after all, should we use to end practices that other groups consider appropriate? Yet any violation of the beliefs and values of other peoples is a violation of toleration. Toleration assumes that human beings have a proclivity for chaos. As such, toleration needs rules, laws, and structures, those things that are supposedly necessary to save us from chaos. Toleration even heightens our dependency on such mechanisms. We supposedly have no natural capacity to coexist peacefully with our diversity. If there is going to be order, then toleration is supposedly necessary. We must all agree, regardless of our supposed differences, to abide by the same rules, the same laws, the same structures. There shall be no diversity without commonality. In the end, toleration sustains a view of human beings that undermines any hope in our ability to create new worlds. In doing this, toleration protects the status quo by encouraging us to accept a view of the human condition that diminishes our moral imagination.

7. **The Methodological Problem**. Multiculturalism promotes a set of notions (e.g. safe spaces, trigger warnings, microaggressions) that have no foundation in science. For example, in a comprehensive study of different scholarly literature in psychology, Scott O. Lillienfeld (2017), a Professor of Psychology at Emory University, found negligible support for any of the core assumptions that supposedly make microaggression a meaningful psychological construct. Consequently, Lillienfeld calls for an abandoning of the label microaggression and a moratorium on microaggression training until scholarship emerges that supports the notion. For Lillienfeld, the methodological problem deals with intention, interpretation, and reaction as what constitutes a microaggression is in the eye of the beholder. Indeed, human diversity means that all human beings interpret things differently. What one person may view as a microaggression (e.g., "You speak so eloquently.") another can view as a compliment. As Lillienfeld (2017) explains,

> it is unclear whether any verbal or nonverbal action that a certain proportion of minority individuals perceive as upsetting or offensive would constitute a microaggression. Nor is it apparent what level of agreement among minority group members would be needed to regard a given act as a microaggression. As a consequence, one is left to wonder which actions might fall under the capacious microaggression umbrella (p. 143).

For instance,

> Would a discussion of race differences in personality, intelligence, or mental illness in an undergraduate psychology course count? Or a dinner-table conversation regarding the societal pros and cons of affirmative action? What about news coverage of higher crime rates among certain minority populations than among majority populations? It is likely that some of these admittedly uncomfortable topics would elicit pronounced negative emotional reactions among at least some minority group members (p. 143).

In short, multiculturalism exaggerates the power of language and symbols. No proponent of "hate speech" proscriptions is yet to give a rigorous account of how "hate speech" *actually* causes harm. We are merely to assume that because language has power, hateful language has the power to do hateful things. But no language has such power. We give language power, or, as choice theory reveals, chose to give language power.

8. **The Empirical Problem**. Multiculturism assumes that meaning resides in words and symbols. Banishing and banning certain words and symbols are supposedly necessary to stop various meanings from circulating and causing harm to minority peoples. We are to assume that because certain words and symbols are inherently "hateful" and "harmful," such words and symbols incite hate and cause harm. Thus, such words should be banned. However, meaning resides within us rather in words and symbols. As Lee Thayer (2011) reminds us, "Words do not contain or convey meaning. To the contrary, humans impose meanings on words" (p. 104). For Virginia P. Richmond and James C. McCroskey (2009),

> The idea that meanings are in words is perhaps the most common misconception about communication…. No word has any meaning apart from the person using it. No two people share precisely the same meanings for all words. *Meanings are in people, not words*. Therefore, we must realize that what we say to others … might not convey the meaning we intend (p. 17).

That religious scriptures lend for different and conflicting interpretations validates this point. Any fostering of a fear of language through the threat of sanction and retribution impedes the rise of new meanings and interpretations and, consequently, the rise of new ways of perceiving and understanding things. To believe that meaning is in words diminishes human diversity. Indeed, nearly every prophet was accused and persecuted for saying things that were generally assumed and judged to be offensive and derogatory. In this way, multiculturalism puts us on the wrong side of history by assuming that meaning can reliably be found in words and symbols.

9. **The Existential Problem**. Multiculturalism cultivates the belief that diversity problems require institutional solutions. However, an institutional approach to dealing with human problems conflicts with many important teachings found throughout the world. In Buddhism, *The First Noble Truth* is that "There is suffering." To live is to suffer. The challenge is to avoid as much unnecessary suffering as possible and deal constructively with any that remains. However, nearly all our suffering is of our own making. As Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche (2009), a prominent Tibetan Buddhist master, notes in *Joyful Wisdom: Embracing Change and Finding Freedom*, "Our normal tendency is to assign the cause of suffering to circumstances or conditions …. however, the cause of suffering lies not events or circumstances, but in the way we perceive and interpret our experiences as it unfolds" (pp. 63–64). We make our own suffering by viewing ourselves at the center of everything and thereby demanding that everything conforms to our wants, desires, aspirations, needs, and expectations. However, in order to avoid suffering, removing ourselves from our perspectives is necessary. In other words, removing our narcissism becomes an important spiritual exercise. We must develop a perspective of things that in no way begins with us being at the center of everything. What certain words and phrases mean to us is nothing but a creature of our own perspective of things. The same words and

phrases can mean completely different things from different perspectives. In the end, what matters is our *perception* of things. For as the Buddha teaches, "When the mind exists undisturbed in the Way, nothing in the world can offend, and when a thing can no longer offend, it ceases to exist in the old way" (Kononenko & Kononenko, 2010, p. 146).

10. **The Axiological Problem**. Why should inclusion be the mission of diversity? How did inclusion become the only natural goal of diversity? Inclusion, like normal, civility, and patriotism, is an ideograph; a tool of ideology that naturalizes an ideology. So, being against inclusion is like being against normal. Inclusion just seems good and natural. Such is the insidious power of an ideograph to concretize and weaponize an ideology. The tying of inclusion to diversity is the doing of multiculturalism. There is no mention of inclusion in the writings of Frederick Douglass or any other person fighting to end regimes of oppression. We can have equality without inclusion. We can also have diversity without inclusion. Inclusion means assimilation. Inclusion means that diversity must promise to pose no threat to the status quo. As such, what becomes the value of inclusion for those who have been historically brutalized by the status quo? What is also the value of inclusion for those who wish to create new worlds? In short, what is the value of being included into organizations that oppress, exploit, and destroy? History teaches that exclusion foments innovation and revolution. What, after all, would have come of Einstein, Marx, Kropotkin, Malcolm, Bob Marley, Shirin Neshat, and so many other icons without exclusion? Why then should exclusion have no place or value in our understanding of diversity?

The measures that Syracuse University took between 2018 and 2019 will do almost nothing to promote diversity and inclusion. The research on diversity training is especially abysmal (Bezrukova et al., 2016; Dobbin & Kalev, 2016; Yirka, 2019), even when the goal in most cases is merely to create "positive intergroup interactions." Most likely, all that will come from Syracuse University's diversity and inclusion measures is a false civility, one where persons are afraid to speak openly and honestly for fear of being socially and institutionally punished.

As with nearly every other organization, Syracuse University is assuming that we achieve inclusion by adding and supporting diversity. Supposedly, the university will be better off by bridging, accommodating, and including diversity. According to Keith Alford, the new Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer at Syracuse University,

> Diversity requires inclusion, which means actively acknowledging, incorporating, engaging and facilitating participation from all groups …. The more we increase campus diversity on a number of fronts, the more educational advantages increase for everyone associated with campus life (News staff, 2019).

Indeed, diversity management literature discuss diversity in terms of functionality. Diversity training is promoted as being "key to helping employees with different backgrounds understand and respect each other's differences so they learn to collaborate and achieve the company's goals" (Kesee, 2019). Also, diversity supposedly cultivates superior decision-making, promotes innovation, enhances problem-solving, improves customer relations, increases organizational flexibility, and improves organizational learning (Kochan et al., 2003). We look at diversity as a means to an end. Diversity training literature would claim that, "Whether an organization

has global operations, a complete understanding of cultural diversity is imperative for successful business operations" (Kesee, 2019). In a review of diversity management literature, Grimes (2002) found that the reasons given by organizations for the need to manage diversity include

(a) the need to adapt to changing workplace demographics; (b) the desire to increase business effectiveness (for example, to decrease conflict, increase productivity, keep the business out of court, and/or to respond to changing markets and customer bases); and (c) a concern for justice (including a desire to decrease discrimination, increase alternative perspectives, recognize bias, and increase cultural awareness) (pp. 10–11).

However, diversity management literature also show that diversity continues to present challenges. Diversity is commonly referred to in this literature as a double-edged sword. On one hand, diversity promotes creativity and superior problem-solving (e.g., Watson, Kumar, & Michaelson, 1993), on the other, diversity correlates with higher turnover rates, less job satisfaction levels, higher levels of deviancy, higher levels of absenteeism, and less integrated collectives (e.g., Wagner, Pfeffer, & O'Reilly, 1984). In a review of the management diversity literature, Milliken and Martins (1996) posit:

One of the most striking and most important findings of research on diversity is that groups that are diverse have lower levels of member satisfaction and higher rates of turnover than more homogenous groups. This is true across a wide range of types of diversity, including age, gender, racial/ethnic background, and tenure. Similarly, people who are different from others in their groups tend to be less satisfied, and individuals who are unlike their supervisors on these characteristics tend to receive lower performance evaluations. The consistency of these findings suggests the presence of a systematic problem, namely that groups and organizations will act systematically to drive out individuals who are different from the majority. (p. 420)

We have many compelling accounts of the experiences of women and minority persons about this *washing out* of differences (e.g., Allen, Orbe, & Refugia, 1999). Milliken and Martins (1996), however, speculate about whether organizations can afford the trade-off between the benefits and costs of diversity,

If so, are there ways in which organizations can perform a balancing act between the costs and benefits of diversity? On the other hand, is it possible for organizations to get the best of both worlds by minimizing the affective costs and maximizing the cognitive and symbolic benefits of diversity? (p. 421).

Indeed, such questions continue to be the subject of discussion in various diversity management literatures.

Multiculturalism as Modernism

Multiculturalism is a creature of modernism, and as Zygmunt Bauman (2000) compellingly argues in *Modernity and the Holocaust*, modernism aims to diminish and ultimately vanquish human diversity, or at least any diversity that could threaten anything. Modernism views human diversity as a threat to order and progress. It wants to limit and control this supposed threat through the imposition of a worldview that values and promotes a certain conception of order and progress. This is the mission of multiculturalism: to do the bidding of modernism as regards neutralizing any threat that human diversity poses to the order of things. This is also why multiculturalism promotes such a narrow and depoliticized view of diversity. Because of multiculturalism, members of historically excluded and marginalized groups can now rise to the highest echelons of business and management, and nothing about this kind of multicultural success will disrupt anything, such as ending the exploding gap between rich and poor. Such is the success of multiculturism in doing the bidding of modernism. When diversity is psychologized, depoliticized, and biopoliticized, it becomes nothing but a caricature of diversity.

A multicultural perspective reduces diversity to plurality. Diversity becomes something a person supposedly possesses by merely being of a certain group. This is how diversity "effectively functions to fix sameness" (Ahonen et al., 2014, p. 279). We assume that sameness defines groups and demand that sameness remains the measure of group membership. Diversity programs promote no fundamental change because our conception of diversity is devoid of any political and epistemological power to make such change possible. In fact, such programs protect the status quo by peddling a shallow and narrow definition of diversity that has no power to threaten the status quo. That diversity can be included and accommodated means that it can be neutralized, depoliticized, and biopoliticized.

Diversity and inclusion are inventions of what Michel Foucault (2007) describes as biopolitics: social inventions that aim to bring order and control to the human experience for one reason or another. Biopolitics assumes that order and control are necessary for maintaining the status quo. In this way, the mission of multiculturalism was always to use diversity to limit diversity, to use inclusion to stop revolution, and to use affirmative action to undercut reparations. Through biopolitics multiculturalism dictates what kinds of differences are tolerable, acceptable, and desirable, and, inevitably, which ones deserve either sanction or expulsion. Such is the insidious workings of biopolitics in terms of helping various groups amass power over the lives of others. There is no account as to why our differences must be managed and included and why multiculturalism must have the power to do so. But who benefits from the managing of our differences, and from engendering and reifying a fear of our differences? In the case of Syracuse University, administrators acquired new levels of control over the lives of faculty and students under the pretext of promoting diversity and inclusion. Now any faculty or student found in violation of any of the many new diversity and inclusion measures faces sanction or expulsion. Yet this new power was given to university administrators by faculty and students under the belief that diversity and inclusion are important values for the university to uphold through a vast bureaucracy that would reach further and further into the lives of faculty and students. Such again is the insidious nature of biopolitics. We end up willingly oppressing ourselves by things of our own making.

In the remaining pages of this article, I introduce an ecological perspective of diversity. In this emergent perspective, diversity has origins in the world's natural rhythms that make evo-

lution, disruption, and revolution possible and necessary for the flourishing of life. To understand the origins of diversity requires understanding these natural and ecological rhythms. As regards locating the contribution of this article, I am responding to Patrizia Zanoni and company's (2010) "plea for diversity studies that actively search for new, emancipating forms of organizing" and "focus on examining and developing practices and interventions reflecting an affirmative, engaged and pragmatic ethos on diversity (p. 19). I am also responding to Pasi Ahonen and company's (2014) call for diversity research that seeks "ways to preserve the multiplicity and fluidity of difference in its repetitions rather than seek to stabilize and normalize it in its generality through objectivation, categorization and taxonomy" (p. 279).

Contours of an Ecological Perspective

Human diversity means that because our circumstances, experiences, and struggles are different, nothing will lend for one meaning, one understanding, one perspective. Such is the case with defining and conceptualizing diversity. A multicultural perspective merely represents one way of defining, framing, and engaging diversity. Its hegemony reflects the fact that it successfully serves a much larger ideological interest (modernism) that aspires to maintain a certain kind of order. There are other ways to frame, define, and engage diversity. I contend that an ecological perspective gives us a much more expansive way of defining, framing, and engaging diversity, ultimately deepening our understanding of the relation between diversity and the human experience.

An elegant way of understanding the differences between a multicultural perspective and an ecological perspective is with metaphors. A multicultural perspective views diversity the way a landscaper views a garden. The landscaper's goal is to use a set of tools, resources, and techniques to impose an artificial order on a certain place. This order reflects what the landscaper views as beautiful and desirable. Indeed, in any garden, certain plants are judged desirable while other are judged undesirable and deserving of eradication. To reinforce the distinction between the plants, the desirable plants are given beautiful names and descriptions (e.g., Alpine Aster, Alpinia, Angel Wing Begonia, Begonia Fairlady, Blue Alpine Daisy, Blue Dawn flower, Blue Jacaranda, Blue-Passion flower), and the undesirable ones given ugly names and descriptions (e.g., Crabgrass, Creeping Charlie, Pigweed, Climatis, Ragweed, Creeping Jenny, Tongue Grass, Devil Grass). An undesirable plant is usually described as "an aggressive, creeping perennial weed [that] infests crops, pastures, and noncrop areas." Landscapers describe undesirable plants as "invasive," "aggressive," "thuggish," and "ill-behaved." These plants supposedly need a lot of "weed control" measures. For landscapers, "The best way to keep weeds out is to ensure that your lawn and other plants benefit from the right growing conditions and proper care. Thus, to obtain a healthy lawn with grass that can compete effectively with weeds, just follow these golden rules." In the case of multiculturalism, a vast diversity and inclusion bureaucracy is assumed to be necessary to stop undesirable things from sprouting and despoiling our diverse and inclusive organization.

Fertilizers	Speech codes
Pesticides	Trigger warnings
Herbicides	Microaggression warnings
Mulching	Language covenants
Importing and Planting Only Certain Kinds of Plants	Mandatory Diversity and Inclusion Training Seminars
Mowing	Inclusive Education Guidelines
Weeding	Office of Multiculturalism
Plant food	Chief Diversity Officer
Gardening tools (e.g., lawnmowers, leaf blowers, seed spreaders)	Council on Diversity and Inclusion
Sprinkler Systems	Office of Equal Opportunity, Inclusion and Resolution Services

An ecological perspective looks at diversity from a forest metaphor. The diversity found in a forest has no notion of any plant or species being native or invasive, desirable, or undesirable (Raffles, 2011). These kinds of arbitrary distinctions distort the valuable contributions that all species make to the prosperity of different ecologies (Zimmer, 2008). A dandelion is simply a dandelion. It is neither desirable nor undesirable. Its prosperity is purely dependent on its ability to live in harmony with all the other species in its ecology. It must accomplish this organically. Diversity in a forest is also abundant and unrelenting. Every plant must find creative ways to coexist with other plants and species. Diversity in a forest is also always in flux. It is always changing, evolving, and growing. That is, no species ever remains one thing. Species survive and thrive by evolving and changing, learning and adapting. Moreover, when species change, ecologies change, and when ecologies change, species must change again. The net effect is always an increase in species diversity (Goode, 2016). The diversity found in a forest is also resilient. It can deal with adversity and stupidity. It needs no pampering, no protecting, thus no trigger warnings, no speech codes, no Office of Equal Opportunity, Inclusion, and Resolution Services. This is a tough and rugged diversity.

An ecological perspective reveals that this is a relational world, or to use language found in quantum theory, one that is entangled. Nothing exists or thrives in isolation. The condition of the world is bound up with the quality and quantity of the relationships that the world reflects. Chaos, disruption, and conflict are natural catalysts found within the world. Such forces vitalize ecologies by forcing such systems to develop new techniques, new skills, new talents, new ways of understanding things. In this way, such forces organically undercut the status quo. Indeed, all ecologies need to constantly adjust and adapt to a world that is constantly changing and evolving.

To adjust and maintain harmony with the world demands that ecologies remain fluid rather than rigid, open rather than closed, dynamic rather than static. Power and privilege come with a hefty price. Harmony also demands that ecologies remain vibrant and full of vitality. Stasis is death. Complacency is death. Ecologies survive and thrive by remaining on the edge of chaos. Indeed, all ecologies have natural points of conflict, chaos, and disruption. Forest fires are

examples of such chaos and disruption. Forest fires enliven the vitality of forests. Such fires destroy the status quo by destroying the underbrush and fallen trees that block the rise of new plants and trees. This destruction also nourishes the soil, which supports the evolution of new life. Consequently, without forest fires, forests would perish. Yet no ecology has no vast and ever-expanding bureaucracy dictating what kinds of diversity are permissible and tolerable. This happens organically.

Therefore, whereas a multicultural perspective views diversity as an entity that can be added and included, an ecological perspective views diversity as a set of processes that must be nurtured and cultivated. *Diversity is any process that promotes opportunity and possibility.* An ecological perspective gives diversity a moral foundation. It pushes us to view diversity in moral rather than functional terms. Actions and decisions, structures and arrangements that undermine the evolution of ecologies, including all the disruption and tribulation that come with such evolution, threaten life. Thus, aiming to end conflict, chaos, and disruption in the name of promoting civility, diversity, and inclusion, thwarts life. Diversity will always challenge the order of things. Indeed, from an ecological perspective, life is constantly striving to promote new meanings, new understandings, new ways of being and experiencing the world. It is always seeking to transcend the present, to make new things possible. So, whereas a multicultural perspective values inclusion, an ecological perspective values revolution.

A Set of Ecological Implications

So, how would an ecological perspective fundamentally alter the doing of human diversity? What would an emergent set of ecological practices look like? I offer a few below.

1. **No diversity and inclusion bureaucracy**. The reason being that institutions ultimately end up institutionalizing us. Multiculturalism erases and undermines human diversity by demanding institutional solutions to issues and conflicts that are of our own making. It separates us from the consequences of our actions and decisions. In other words, multiculturalism demands that institutions create and enforce rules and regulations that either stop or undercut different peoples (of different origins and backgrounds) from dealing differently with different issues and conflicts. In this regard, rather than being on the side of diversity, multiculturalism emerges on the side of conformity and homogeneity by using institutions to impose one reality on all of us. We must all, for instance, refrain from saying and doing certain things, regardless of our racial and cultural differences. Moreover, in demanding institutional solutions to language issues and conflicts, multiculturalism moves language issues and conflicts from the individual realm to the institutional realm, in the process undermining individual agency and autonomy. That is, besides undermining diversity, in relying on institutional solutions, multiculturalism undercuts individual initiative and responsibility. As Neil Postman (1979) explains,

   > Once an institution takes on a problem, to some extent individuals are released from the obligation to solve it themselves. It is true enough that much of the pain and inconvenience of modern life are systemic in their origin and cannot be eliminated without social and or political action…. But it is not true that every difficulty, every inadequacy,

every failing, is entirely social in origin and beyond the range of personal control. Although the liberal point of view does not easily admit it, each person has the capability to take responsibility for some part of his or her life, and of altering that which is painful or destructive (p. 118).

In fact, exercising this capability and taking on this kind of responsibility are vital for human flourishing.

2. **No banning of speech**. The reason being that meaning resides in humans rather than in words. Indeed, multiculturalism assumes that language is the foundation of communication. As such, words matter, and knowing how to use words properly and correctly is supposedly important. Supposedly, in most cases diversity problems arise from our failure to use language properly and correctly. But then there is that persistent problem, as in "Yes, I know what I said, but you are taking my words out of context." Such an admission reveals that context shapes what words mean. Consequently, no word is inherently offensive or derogatory, just like how no species is inherently invasive and undesirable. What words mean must always be understood within a context. Yet knowing what context is shaping the meaning of any word (or set of words) is all but impossible to reliably know as there are many forces (e.g., racial, cultural, historical, political) that shape the context that, in turn, shape and guide the meaning of words. Indeed, what really matters in communication is meaning. According to Vernon Cronen (1998), "Meaning emerges within communication practices" (p. 31). In other words, through communication our meanings of different things are created, navigated, and contested. For William Barnett Pearce (2012),

    > Communication is about meaning … but not just in a passive sense of perceiving messages. Rather, we live in lives filled with meanings and one of our life challenges is to manage those meanings so that we can make our social worlds coherent and live within them with honor and respect. But this process of managing our meanings is never done in isolation. We are always and necessarily coordinating the way we manage our meanings with other people (p. 4).

    Being communicatively competent is about always attending to four questions: (1) *What is intended*? That is, what meaning is the person seeking to convey? This question assumes that what a person is intending to mean can be different from what the person seems to be meaning. (2) *What is interpreted*? That is, what meaning is being derived from our words and actions? This question assumes that we have no reliable way of controlling how others interpret our words and actions. (3) *What is distorted*? That is, because human beings are of different experiences, different perspectives, different resources, our words and actions will always be vulnerable to different interpretations. (4) *What is impacted*? That is, how is the medium in any communication impacting what meaning is intended and what meaning is interpreted? This question assumes that every medium impacts communication differently. These common expressions (e.g., "Yes, I know what you said, but what exactly do you mean?") also remind us that meaning often exceeds language and symbols. Many different things shape and influence what things mean to different

people. To understand what I mean, you have to pay attention to many different things. In fact, determining what any person means is difficult and complex as our experiences and worldviews can be fundamentally different. There is simply no way to precisely know what a person means, and assuming you can only create problems. As Lee Thayer (2011) explains, "Systems of every size are complex – including conversations. You cannot say something and expect it will be understood as you intended. It lands on the complex minds of other people. They will interpret what you say as they intend – and as is necessary for them" (p. 109). Thus, "In human communication there will always be collateral damage. There will be residual and accompanying effects you may not have intended" (p. 109). Consequently, communication requires restraint, generosity, and grace. We should give others the benefit of the doubt and be generous in our interpretations of things. We should even be ready to be wrong. As Martha Nussbaum (1997), Ernst Feund Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics at the University of Chicago, writes in *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*,

> The first step of understanding the point of view of the other is essential to any responsible act of judgment, since we do not know what we are judging until we see the meaning of an action as the person intends it, the meaning of speech as it expresses something of importance in the context of that person's history and social world" (p. 11).

3. **Cultivating opportunity and possibility**. Rather than trying to achieve diversity by simply adding members from different boxes that have been historically excluded and marginalized, the focus would be on creating and cultivating practices that push against the limits of what is possible. This means creating environs that expose and challenge our biases and prejudices; that is, creating environs that induce risks and vulnerability. So, as much as we need to acknowledge that various peoples have been historically excluded and marginalized – and also continue to deal with all kinds of biases and prejudices – we must also acknowledge that moral and epistemological diversity is vital to cultivating and expanding opportunity and possibility.

4. **Building resilience**. According to the Thomas theorem, "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." That is, the interpretation of a situation causes the action and reaction. As such, something is only a problem if you choose to make it a problem. In this case, certain words and symbols are only a problem if you choose to make either a problem. There is no law in the cosmos that mandates certain words and symbols to be inherently offensive or derogatory. This is purely our doing. Also, you choosing to make certain words and symbols a problem should in no way obligate the rest of us to do likewise. If anything, human diversity should mean that you should respect my choice just as much as I should respect yours. Choice theory would posit that claiming to find a word to be offensive is a choice. You have chosen to be angry and feel hurt in response to hearing a word. You have made a choice, and choices have consequences. However, you are by no means devoid of agency and thus purely a victim of language or how others choose to use language. You can always make better choices, and you should be encouraged to do so. As Don Miguel Ruiz (1997) explains in *The Four Agreements: A Toltec Wisdom Book*,

> When you take things personally, then you feel offended, and your reaction is to defend your beliefs and create conflict. You make something big out of something so little, because you have the need to be right and make everybody else wrong. You also try hard to be right by giving them your own opinions. In the same way, whatever you feel and do is just projection of your own personal dream, a reflection of your own agreements. What you say, what you do, and the options you have are according to the agreements you have made – and these opinions have nothing to do with me (pp. 48–49).

Indeed, claiming that certain words, symbols, and phrases make you angry (by supposedly triggering or microaggressing you) assumes that your response is natural and even proper. But as Marshall B. Rosenberg (2015) explains in *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*, when "we are angry, we are finding fault – we are choosing to play God by judging or blaming the other person for being wrong or deserving of punishment" (p. 143). Anger results from us releasing ourselves of being responsible for the condition of our own lives. It represents weakness, as in allowing our instincts and impulses to control us, and being unwilling to look carefully and thoughtfully at the consequences of our actions and decisions.

5. **Finally, emphasizing relational rather than institutional processes**. From an ecological perspective, notions of self and personhood come through relationships. That is, the condition of our humanity is shaped through our relationships with other human beings. No person becomes human without other human beings. Other human beings shape how we define and experience ourselves. As Kenneth Gergen (2009) notes in *Relational Being: Beyond Self and Community*,

> virtually all intelligible action is born, sustained, and/or extinguished within the ongoing process of relationship. From this standpoint there is no isolated self or fully private experience. Rather, we exist in a world of co-constitution. We are always already emerging from relationship (p. xv).

The kind of human being we will become will depend on the kind of human beings that surround us. We depend on other human beings, and other human beings depend on us to become human. Consequently, from an ecological perspective, all human beings inherently have certain obligations to other human beings as regards helping others to become fully human. To help others become fully human is to help ourselves become so. Indeed, an ecological perspective shares Frederick Douglass's astute insight that "No man can put a chain about the ankle of his fellow man without at last finding the other end fastened about his own neck" (Ratcliffe, 2010, p. 237). The reason being that the humanity of both persons is entangled. We become either the good we do to others or the harm we do to others.

Conclusion

A multicultural view of diversity poses no threat to the status quo. It reduces diversity to a commodity that can be included without disrupting or threatening anything. Moreover, a multicultural perspective reinforces assumptions about the world and our own humanity that the status quo uses to undercut the rise of bold new ways of experiencing the world. A multicultural view of diversity thus undercuts the disruptive kinds of changes that life needs to flourish. So, as we strive to include, bridge, accommodate, and value difference, the gap between the rich and the poor grows exponentially, human despair and misery continue to reach new heights, weapons of mass destruction proliferate, and the planet verges on collapse from our unrelenting plunder. We assume no relationship between our own condition and that of the world. This is arguably the most serious consequence that comes with reducing diversity to plurality, our inability to recognize our humanity in each other and, thus, our responsibility to each other and the planet.

Revolutions begin in our readiness and willingness to imagine the world in bold new ways. We must be ready and willing to believe that the world allows for much more expansive and redemptive modes of being that make for a prosperity that is devoid of all the misery and strife that for too long have defined the human experience. In my view, an ecological perspective gives us the beginnings of a new way to engage, frame, and define human diversity. It offers a new way to look at human diversity that enlarges our understanding of the human experience in ways that can save us from much misery and strife. In this regard, an ecological perspective releases us from fears that have long stifled our moral and epistemological imagination. If only for this, it has value and purchase.

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