Being inclusive of diversity in Australia

Introduction

Australian society has become increasingly complex with a population that is diverse in many ways including culture, language and socioeconomic status. The current approach to diversity, in Australian society through multiculturalism, can be argued to be limited in scope that is not inclusive of other diversities.

Beyond multiculturalism

In the late 1970s a multicultural approach was adopted in state and federal policies (Bennett, 1990) as a response to the poverty and disadvantage experienced by recently arrived migrants both generally through high unemployment rates and specifically within the healthcare context where cultural differences were ignored and information was simply not provided (Henderson, 1975). Multiculturalism was aimed at providing a way for immigrants of different languages, cultures, religions and histories, to live together equally in the mainstream of society (Kymlicka, 1995). However, as it was a response to the diversity of immigrants rather than to the diversity of the Australian population (Jordens, 2002), multiculturalism minimised aspects of diversity such as class and gender, into unitary concepts of culture be they monocultural or ethnically diverse (Milner, 1993).

Recently, the change in title of the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs to Immigration and Citizenship' reflects and now forms the backdrop for current and future immigrants to Australia (ABC News online, 2007). This oneness as Australians attempts to overcome the separateness that can be created by the emphasis on different cultures. The impact of this is as yet not determined. Hopefully this focus will match recognition of

difference with inclusion (Zubrzycki, 1996). This central thesis, beyond multiculturalism,

creates the opportunity to reflect on population diversity. Is the diversity of the population

being captured?

Population diversity

The Australian population is ethnically diverse. At the 2006 census almost half of the

Australian population was born overseas or had one or both parents born overseas (ABS,

2007), representing more than 260 source countries (Hugo, 2004). The trend in migration has

changed dramatically from a dominant European presence in the twenty years after World War

II to a stronger Asian presence. Between 2004 and 2005 settlers arriving under the Skill stream

predominantly came from the United Kingdom (20%), China and Hong Kong (17%) and India

(16%) with 33% of arrivals under the Family stream coming from China, Hong Kong, India,

the Philippines and Vietnam (Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs [DIMA],

2005). Australia also provides asylum to refugees. In the last six months of 2005, 46% of

refugees came from the Sudan and Iraq (32 and 14% respectively) (DIMA, 2006). However as

Horne (2002, p. 37) says, "being ethnic is only one way of being different".

Although the main identifiers of difference recognised in Australian society are ethnicity

and aboriginality, other aspects of individuals define their diversity (Omeri & Malcolm,

2004). Attributes of diversity recognised as contributing to individuals' life patterns

include age, gender, poverty, literacy, unemployment, psychological trauma, experiences

of political intimidation, environmental damage, physical disability, social support

networks, occupation, socioeconomic status, housing, transport, health beliefs,

educational opportunity, access to health services, food supply and family health (Baum,

2002). Some of these attributes are culturally based, whereas others can be considered to be sourced ecologically, defining social and physical resources or constraints in individuals' environment that contribute to their diversity (Walsh et al., 2002). The term ecocultural refers collectively to these aspects. Being inclusive of ecocultural and other pertinent factors within the population can provide a broader interpretation of diversity.

Further the more recent consideration of a single equality framework approach rather than a multiple equality framework approach to address diversity encompasses a wide array of variants of diversity in society (Harrington, 2001). These variants included mental disability, political belief, record of criminal conviction and dependence on alcohol and drugs. The scope of diversity envisaged is a framework for explaining the whole. According to Mason (1990) cultural aspects are part of this and must only be considered a part rather than be extrapolated as the framework to explain the whole (Mason, 1990).

Conclusion

The complexity of diversity engenders the challenge. Such diversity demands a responsiveness that addresses differences including inequities and disparities. Active respect for the diversity and uniqueness of individuals, families and communities are central to a more inclusive view of diversity that demands culture though an essential consideration must be accompanied by other aspects of an individual's diversity. As universal and human rights issues are paramount, government policies must address the entire population. To date major human rights issues include poverty, discrimination, social exclusion and violence. Any definition of diversity needs to recognise these and other individual characteristics. Such characteristics of difference can be sourced from multiple social-environmental circumstances, for example obesity, from

lifespan groupings for example the aged, from gender, for example women placed in

disadvantaged positions through their unwanted pregnancies resulting from rape, from

environmental factors for example drought and famine resulting in malnutrition, and many

more. By interpreting population diversity more broadly, the potential for disparities, inequities

and poor social cohesion can be addressed.

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