Assimilation vs. Multiculturalism: Views from a Community in France

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A recent American survey of attitudes toward societal multiculturalism vs. assimilation has found surprisingly widespread support for maintaining heritage cultures not only among immigrant minority groups but also among most subsamples of majority "host" groups, black and white. Working-class whites are the one exception. This pilot study explores the same attitude domain in a contrasting European setting. Randomly selected samples of middle- and working-class families (a mother, father, and teenage son or daughter) from a small city in France were interviewed. As a group, they were neutral to slightly favorable to immigrants maintaining heritage cultures and languages rather than losing them through assimilation. On measures of attitudes toward specific immigrant groups, there were marked intergroup differences with "Maghrebian Arabs" rated least favorably and Southeast Asians, the "model" immigrants, most favorably. Comparisons of subgroups of respondents who varied in terms of (a) political left-right orientation, (b) social class standing, (c) degree of religiosity, and (d) generational level provide the base for a more general discussion of cultural assimilation and multiculturalism.

KEY WORDS: assimilation; multiculturalism; France's intergroup attitudes; politics; religiosity.

INTRODUCTION

In the United States and Canada, the vast majority of people can truthfully say "we are all immigrants," unless they happen to be American Indians or

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Inuit. Consequently, the issue of immigrants and their “integration” into the main society is commonplace and meaningful, and is as salient today as it ever has been, because the United States and Canada are still very active immigrant-receiving nations. Even though immigration is often thought of as a natural and potentially enriching process for the nation involved, many North Americans are preoccupied with the various kinds of societal strains associated with the process (see Lambert and Taylor, 1990).

Underlying this preoccupation are concerns about attitudes and policies toward immigrants and established ethnic minorities. Two contrasting ideological positions dominate: assimilation, the belief that cultural minorities should give up their so-called “heritage” cultures and take on the “American” (or “Canadian”) way of life, vs. multiculturalism, the view that these groups should maintain their heritage cultures as much as possible while establishing themselves in North America. This policy debate is an ancient one in the United States and Canada because both countries were initially settled by diverse national and lingual groups. The same debate is still a highly active focus of research in the behavioral sciences in both societies (e.g., Gordon, 1981; Lambert et al., 1986; Moghaddam and Taylor, 1987; Moghaddam et al., 1987, 1989; Lambert and Taylor, 1988, 1990). A current approach is to solicit the views of various immigrant groups about immigration and to compare these with the views of long-term residents. A brief review of recent U.S. findings will make evident why one might be interested in gathering comparable data from other national settings.

The study of Lambert and Taylor (1988, 1990) was conducted with parents in a multiethnic urban center in the United States. The results indicated (1) strong cross-group support for the option of culture and language maintenance as compared to assimilation, not only among ethnolinguistic minorities, but also among most subgroups of host residents, i.e., black and white established Americans; (2) support for the multicultural option among certain subgroups of immigrants who have resided in the United States for over 25 years (e.g., Polish- and Mexican-Americans); (3) support for bilingualism for their children among all subgroups (immigrant or host); and (4) endorsement by all ethnolinguistic immigrant groups of public school involvement in teaching the history of heritage cultures, an idea also supported by black and middle-class white Americans. Working-class whites were distinctively out of line with all others, reflecting a set of attitudes and values that were negative toward multiculturalism as well as racist in makeup.

One conclusion drawn from this research is that some members of ethnic minority groups in the contemporary United States are evolving a new perspective on immigration. Rather than choosing between heritage and adopted cultures, the option is to develop full biculturality and bilinguality, with the American culture and its language as the second component. Newcomers, in