

The Charter of Quebec Values: A View from Cultural Psychiatry

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Abstract

Cultural diversity can contribute to mental health. Research demonstrates that familiarity with others can reduce prejudice and that the positive valuation of one's own cultural identity by others can reinforce self-esteem and well-being. Recognition in public institutions is one important dimension of such social recognition. As well, there is evidence that systematic recognition of cultural and religious identity in health services contributes to improved care. The presence of clinicians from diverse backgrounds in the health care system is an essential resource to improve the accessibility, appropriateness and effectiveness of health care. In addition to undermining fundamental human rights, therefore, the proposed Quebec Charter of Values may negatively affect the health of minority groups as well as impeding their access to safe, equitable, and effective health care.

The current proposal by the Parti Québécois for a Charter of Quebec Values raises key questions about the direction of our society. Despite the claim that they will foster an egalitarian society, we believe that the Charter proposals are profoundly misguided for many reasons. By restricting expression of religious identity in public institutions, the Charter will undermine basic human rights of freedom of expression of religion and culture. Although respect for human rights is the most fundamental issue, and sufficient reason for rejecting the Charter, this paper briefly reviews evidence from cultural psychiatry, psychology and social sciences that suggests that the Charter will have negative effects on mental health, well-being and social integration (Kirmayer, 2012).

Cultural Diversity and Mental Health

Recognition of cultural identity by others is important for the mental health and well-being of individuals and communities (Fraser & Honneth, 2003). Language, religion, ethnicity and other aspects of cultural background are potential sources of strength, resilience and belonging (Kirmayer et al., 2011a; Ruiz-Casares et al., 2014). There is evidence that many of those who practice religion or other spiritual or moral traditions have better mental health, perhaps because they enjoy a supportive community, and a worldview that provides meaning and value to

their lives (Jarvis et al., 2005). The positive effects of cultural identity also come from recognition and respect by others, which is necessary to guide equitable sharing and redistribution of resources. To promote mental health, therefore, we need to actively engage others in ways that respect their backgrounds.

There is much research in the sociology of mental health that reveals the value of ethnic enclaves as a buffer against the negative effects of prejudice and discrimination in the larger society (Shaw et al., 2012). Such discrimination has been shown to have a dramatic effect on the mental health of migrants, with increases in the prevalence of major mental health problems (Hassan, Rousseau & Moreau, 2013). This is particularly important in the development of children and adolescents. Studies of refugee children indicate that exclusionary practices in a society increase the risk of difficulties in school and later mental health disorders. Allowing members of ethnocultural and religious minority groups to participate fully in public institutions is an important pathway toward their health and vitality and their ultimate integration into a society that aims not at homogeneity but a rich and lively diversity.

We all seek a balance between the comfort and familiarity of sameness and the vibrancy and stimulation of diversity (Kirmayer, 2011b). But lack of exposure to others leads to unfamiliarity, and unfamiliarity breeds stereotypes, prejudice and mistrust. Those who live in highly diverse urban settings like our large cities are more likely to become comfortable with diversity and see it as a source of strength and creativity. People who live in settings where they have little exposure to diversity may find others from different backgrounds strange and the whole idea of diversity challenging or even threatening. Rather than exploiting the stereotypes and prejudice that come from lack of familiarity, then, we need more education and exposure to diversity to actively promote mutual understanding and acceptance.

Neutrality as a Veil for Discrimination

Under the banner of secularism and neutrality, the proposed Charter launches an attack on minorities and on the very idea of diversity in society. Neutrality — in the sense of equity, fairness, openness and even-handed recognition — does not depend on ignoring difference or insisting that individuals hide their identities. On the contrary, it means recognizing people for who they are and insuring they have the same opportunities, agency, voice and presence as others, regardless of their identity (Kirmayer, 2012).

Over 82% of the Quebec population identify as Christian; another 12% declare no religion. Those with non-Christian religious affiliations constitute a small minority of less than 6% and it is these groups that are explicitly targeted in the Charter. It is striking that this small minority is viewed as a threat to the integrity of Quebec society. This seems to be an example of what has been called the “fear of small numbers,” in which a dominant group frames itself as threatened and besieged in order to justify restrictions on minorities (Appadurai, 2006). Although presented as liberating, in fact, the Charter is most restrictive of those for whom a particular style of dress is part of their daily observance of religion or spirituality. This process of exclusion will diminish the integrity of Quebec society.

Tolerance, mutual understanding and respect come from dialogue with others. Public displays of religious affiliation are affirmations of personal and communal identities and values from which we all can learn. Excluding personal expressions of culture, religion, and spirituality by employees working in public institutions will prevent people from learning about each other and will lead to greater stereotyping, discrimination and social exclusion. The Charter will thus undermine efforts to build a tolerant and inclusive society and will increase ethnic conflict both at home and abroad. It is a major step backward in the effort to build a pluralistic society committed to human rights.

The Politics of Division: Making a Religion of Secularism

The thinking behind the Charter is a throwback to an earlier time when racism, anti-Semitism and discrimination against minorities were features of everyday life in Quebec—as they also were elsewhere in Canada (Satzewich, 2011). Both Anglophone and Francophone institutions participated in this intolerance. Indeed, the Jewish General Hospital was built in the 1930s because of systematic discrimination at major academic and health care institutions in Montreal.

Given this history, and the francophone experience as a minority in the larger North American context, Quebec politicians should have a good understanding of the importance of recognition and respect for collective identity and well-being. But there are particular features of Quebec history that have led to some difficulties appreciating the experience of local ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities. Memories of the colonial history of Quebec and the injustices of Anglophone domination, in particular, seem to hamper awareness of the impact of the Charter—or else are used to justify its evident repression and exclusion of

minorities. As Joppke (2008) points out, attitudes toward the veil are mirrors of identity of the larger society that is moved to enact restrictive legislation.

Quebec has a long history of domination by the Catholic Church and, since the 1950s, made efforts to diminish the role of church in everyday life. Only a few decades ago, nuns in habits were a common sight on the street and religious values suffused everyday life. In fact, despite efforts to secularize, Quebec remains a society profoundly shaped by Catholicism. The role that this history plays in current debates is seen by the frequency that those seeking to justify the suppression of other traditions refer in positive ways to this recent experience of throwing off the oppression of the Church. Unfortunately, in making this connection, they assume that this very specific local experience provides insight into the meaning of religious institutions for people from very different backgrounds.

Arguments from Quebec's past have been transposed to interpret a very different current reality rooted in the dynamics of global migration and growing hybridity. The solutions that seemed to have worked for an earlier dilemma will certainly not have the same impact on this entirely different situation. Interestingly, our own research with francophone Quebecois found that many who thought of themselves as secular, nevertheless turned to religion or spirituality to cope with serious illness (Groleau, Whitley, Lesperance, & Kirmayer, 2008). Hence, the self-depiction of Quebec as a secular state ignores the experiential reality of many of its "old stock" members. It is hard to see how ignoring or suppressing this reality will contribute to an open, welcoming attitudes toward others with their own religious and spiritual commitments.

In the last 50 years, we have made real strides in moving beyond the history of discrimination in public institutions, including schools, hospitals, social services, police and the courts. Now, the Charter proposal is sowing the seeds of dissension by proposing a policy that violates fundamental human rights and creates an environment openly hostile to minorities. Freedom to practice one's religion and other aspects of culture are fundamental human rights and integral the mental health of individuals and communities (Kirmayer, 2012). The current effort to limit religious freedoms has capitalized on global anxieties about the "Other"—usually framed as someone from Muslim or other non-Christian background. There is evidence that such political manipulation of fear and mistrust has had negative impacts on the security and well-being of many minorities as well as the population as a whole (Rousseau et al., 2011).

Confronted with the obvious irony of exempting the large Christian crosses in the legislature, on Mont Royal, and on the Quebec flag, advocates insist these are essential parts of Quebec's historical patrimony—and not strictly religious. This view fails to comprehend the meaning and message of these symbols to those who are not Christian. These exemptions also perpetrate a very selective view of history that ignores the centrality of First Nations peoples and the contributions of many other immigrant groups. Aboriginal peoples had their traditions undermined and suppressed by government policies and have struggled long and hard to regain and revitalize their own spirituality. Indeed, honouring their history and traditions with prominent symbols in public institutions would be an important acknowledgement of our collective history (Saul, 2008).

From an Indigenous perspective, images of co-existence emphasize not integration or assimilation but mutual tolerance and respect, in which Indigenous peoples and Euro-Canadians move along toward a shared future along their separate paths. For Iroquois, this is symbolized by the wampum belt with two parallel rows (representing two paths or vessels, two nations, etc.) and three beads representing peace, respect, and friendship bridging the rows. The message is clear: “Peaceful coexistence among conflicting voices is possible, but only from within a dialogical relationship” (Turner, 2006, p. 85).

The citizens of Quebec come from many different backgrounds. Many minority groups have been here for generations and rightfully expect to have their values and traditions fully represented and respected in mainstream public institutions. For some, religion or spirituality are key aspects of what constitutes them as individuals and as a community. Other newcomers have come here fleeing persecution in their countries of origin. All have chosen Quebec because they see it as a society that is committed to values of equality and mutual respect. Honouring these values requires not just toleration of others but active recognition and engagement with diversity, giving others a place in all of our institutions.

Pluralism, Multiculturalism and Diversity in Civil Society

Premier Pauline Marois has made some misleading statements about the negative effects of multiculturalism in the UK and has implied that French republicanism avoids these pitfalls. In fact, these claims have little basis in reality. The UK is not rife with ethnic conflict and France certainly is not free of it. Many have critiqued the way that the French ideology of republicanism has worked to marginalize, silence and exclude minorities (Ben Jalloun & Bray, 1999; Joppke, 2008).

The Commission for a Multi-Ethnic Britain, report *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain* advanced the ideal of a “community of communities” and individuals undergirded by a strong human rights framework (Modood, 2007). While ‘ethnicity’ has been institutionally marginalized or politically distained as a source of inter-group conflict on much of the European mainland, Britain has enjoyed a measure of ethnic assertiveness that includes promoting ‘positive’ images that challenge longstanding stereotypes (Kivisto, 2002).

In reality, it is Canada—and Quebec—that have been positive examples of successful pluralism, advancing the ideal of creating societies inclusive of diversity. Multiculturalism, which the Quebec government rejects as a political policy, actively supports diversity as a source of collective strength and shared identity (Kivisto, 2002; Kymlicka, 2007). Although the metaphor of *interculturalism*, which the Quebec government favours, would seem to imply a symmetrical relationship—with an equal exchange between two cultures—in its application by the Parti Quebecois, *interculturalism* appears to be coded language for the re-enactment of systems of domination, marginalization and exclusion. Despite criticism of multiculturalism, there is evidence that it has promoted social integration and well-being (Beiser, 2009; Bloemraad, 2006). Though many have proclaimed the death of multiculturalism, it is fairer to describe it as an unfinished project (Ryan, 2011). Multiculturalism and other inclusive approaches to pluralism need encouragement and support through education and social policy.

In its mental health strategy, the Mental Health Commission of Canada (2012) noted the importance of developing a health care system that is culturally safe. Cultural safety, in this context, comes from recognizing colonial histories and systems of racialized identity and discrimination that have oppressed Indigenous peoples and many minority groups in Canada since its inception. Only by recognizing this history, and actively supporting the inclusion of minorities at the center of our public institutions can we redress this historical inequity.

Culturally competent mental health care provides an opportunity to advance this project, by respecting the nature of individuals’ cultural backgrounds and identities in the clinical encounter (Kirmayer, 2011b,c). There is evidence that systematic recognition of cultural and religious identity in health services contributes to improved care. The presence of clinicians from diverse backgrounds in the health care system is an essential resource to improve the accessibility, appropriateness and effectiveness of health care. For many from minority communities, having a clear presence among professionals in health care

institutions and other public settings is a source of comfort and trust as well as an acknowledgement of the openness and inclusiveness of our society.

In fact, new waves of migration to Quebec will lead to even greater diversity, changing the nature of our culture and community. We need to respond to this inevitable process of culture change by dialogue rather than political repression, promoting a vision of pluralism and unity in diversity, rather than ethnic nationalism. Far from leading to divisiveness, dialogue and engagement with others, learning about their traditions and living together, can strengthen the social fabric so that we all benefit from the rich tapestry of diversity (Meyer & Brysac, 2012). Respecting each other — not simply for our common humanity but precisely for our uniqueness — is the way to build a healthy, strong and creative society.

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