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Public Discourse on Ethnic Diversity and Improvement of Formal Education

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Abstract. This article presents a commentary on the belief that ethnic diversity improves the quality of formal education.

On April 1, 2003, the United States Supreme Court heard arguments on two cases that challenge race-related admissions policies at a large, highly esteemed, public university: the University of Michigan. At the core of these cases has been the belief that ethnic diversity not only is positively correlated with, but also is causally related, to an improvement in the quality of formal education. Regardless of the legal outcomes, it may be that this belief does not stand up to a rigorous analysis.

Where does one look to support the belief that ethnic diversity is positively correlated and causally related to formal education improvement? One argument is that there is a consensus among the political elite that this is, indeed, the case. Here, consensus and political elite are defined by the number and type of people with resources to file friend-of-the-court briefs supporting the belief. These people are from populations such as successful businesses; federal and state politicians; and civilian and military leaders, including some who have led military service academies. The problem with this argument is that a majority and/or elite perspective may not necessarily positively relate to something called Truth. In fact, some policy analysts believe that the very construct of policy analysis comprises speaking truth to power--a truth that may not otherwise be harbored or spoken by those people in or with power.

Another argument is that the world is multiracial, multiethnic, and characterized by a global economy. Thus, diversity within academia is a *sine qua non* of worldly success whether personal, material, or spiritual--a *sine qua non* of formal education excellence necessary for success. This argument, however, is a logical one. And there are many kinds of logic, including those of the delusional and misinformed.

A variant of argument from the same premise is an ethical one. That is, given the aforementioned nature of the world, diversity should be the key to optimal formal education and success. Another ethical argument without a conjoined premise about the diversity of the world is that formal education in the midst of ethnically diverse people should be the best, because it should be. Here, the diversity of one's physically proximal population is being reified for its assumed robustness in delivering on optimal formal education.

However, there is a significant problem with the assumption about physical proximity of ethnically diverse individuals in a formal academic environment. Such students may choose to minimize contact or unintentionally engage in behaviors that lead to an ethnic separation or even an ethnic apartheid. Even if physical proximity does occur or is forced by formal educational authorities, intentional or unintentional psychological minimization of contact may occur. At minimum, the process of diversity's linkage to formal education consequence would be suspect.

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Still another ethical argument is that, regardless of the diversity and economic reality of the world, ethnic diversity is the optimal route to optimal formal education because it should be. Perhaps, it should be, but there are many competing shoulds to contest this.

Other arguments coalesce around the associated belief that diversity helps students confront perspectives other than their own. It is then assumed that confrontation induces a host of positive consequences, such as more rigorous and imaginative cognitive functioning, the breaking down of prejudices and stereotypes, and the demonstration that any socially constructed population harbors diverse viewpoints. However, empirical and experimental research support and do not support these assumed positive consequences. Dependent on many variables--some identified and some not--cognitive functioning may become more or less rigorous and imaginative, prejudices and stereotypes more or less entrenched. Moreover, it certainly is the case that some populations are not characterized with significant intra-population belief diversity--e.g., a fanatical terrorist group or a Young Republicans group. It must also be noted that prejudices and stereotypes have positive heuristical features that are helpful and benign and, in some cases, should not merit extinction, even if people have at other times been extinguished through systematic murder based on them.

At this point, it should be noted that contesting and supporting the belief of ethnic diversity as positively correlated and causally related to formal education improvement are often a personally and politically charged activities. Depending on one's proximal and distal environments, stigmatization can occur. The quality of this stigmatization--i.e., whether it will be positive, negative, or some combination of stigmas--depends on the beliefs about race, ethnicity, and education of others in one's phenomenal world. For whatever reason, contesting or supporting the belief also seems frequently to be a significant node or nexus within one's psychodynamics and therefore may be imbued with elements of illogic, unreason, and irrationality.

This observation may have something to do with a recent and well-publicized survey of members of academic populations that has been most often interpreted to belie the belief that ethnic diversity is positively correlated and causally related to formal education improvement (Rothman et al., 2003). One conclusion by the authors from the survey is that a very significant public support for the belief is itself belied by a more private lack of support and even support for the converse--that diversity may be associated with or help lead to formal education decrement. The problem with the survey, however, is that it describes the expressed beliefs of people about the association and consequence of diversity with education, while beliefs may have little to do with whatever is actually happening concerning education.

True Believers of all shades have a vested interest in the Supreme Court arguments and the ultimate legal decisions. Believers in truth will still manifest a diversity of opinion. And perhaps this is how it should be. (See Jewell, J.O. (2000). An unfinished mission: Affirmative action, minority admissions, and the politics of mission at the University of California, 1868-1997. *Journal of Negro Education*, 69(1-2), 38-48; Rothman, S., Lipset, S.M., & Nevitte, N. (2003). Does enrollment diversity improve university education? *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 15, 8-26; Rudman, L. A., Ashmore, R. D., & Gary, M. L. (2001). "Unlearning" automatic biases: The malleability of implicit prejudice and stereotypes. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 81, 856-868; Wildavsky, A. (1979). *Speaking truth to power: The art and craft of policy analysis*. Little Brown & Co; Yuen, F.K.O., & Pardeck, J.T. (1998). Impact of human diversity education on social work students. *International Journal of Adolescence & Youth*, (3), 249-261.) (Keywords: Diversity, Education, Ethnicity, Race.)