Book Review

Nadya A. Fouad & Patricia Arrendondo
Becoming Culturally Oriented: Practical Advice for Psychologists and Educators
Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 2007

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

If a list of major challenges encountered by people in the early twenty-first century were to be written, there would be plenty of candidates for the top places. The more likely choices might come from ecology (global warming, droughts, hurricanes and volcano eruptions), economics (financial collapses among the corporate rich and enduring poverty among the desperately poor) and international conflict (terrorism, torture and pre-emptive warfare). Racism and sexism might rate more than a casual mention. Moral and spiritual questions could easily arise, especially among those who disapprove of the morals and spirits of others. Concerns about the implications of high technology can still be found among those dinosaurs who still insist that literacy involves reading actual books, and not merely "texting." And, of course, there is always crime and punishment as championed by those who promote the politics of fear, and cater to our more vengeful moods.

Usually, however, it is only when violent clashes occur (as they sometimes do) between recent immigrants and settled populations that we pay close attention to one of the most significant social phenomena of modern times. Human migrations from rural to urban areas, from impoverished regions to more prosperous ones, and from poor countries to wealthy nations (and continents) constitute one of the greatest engines of change in the contemporary world. Yet, unless these movements generate sudden and immediate evidence of the "clash of civilizations" or especially upset those who are preoccupied with "illegal immigrants," the decline of the monocultural society is everywhere in evidence but seldom addressed as an important social issue. True, residents notice that neighborhoods change. Population diversity is apparent in workplaces, schools, shopping malls and even among the anchors and correspondents on CNN cable news. These demographic transformations, however, tend to be taken in stride and are sometimes even applauded as the entertainment and gastronomic industries begin to offer more (and more stimulating) choices. Cosmopolitanism is more or less in fashion and, although prejudice and discrimination still exist and may remain endemic in modern and postmodern societies, outright bigotry is generally repressed and rarely loudly endorsed.

In these current conditions of comparative tolerance and tentative acceptance of diversity, Fouad and Arrendondo's practical guide deals with circumstances among people from different cultures that fall far short of violent conflict, but constitute areas of human need nonetheless. So, despite the tendency of citizens of the United States to react badly to the word "multiculturalism," the American Psychological Association is among many organizations that have recognized not only the harm that can be done on an individual level, but also the waste of human resources that can result when people do not act proactively to bridge cultural and subcultural divides. Cultural divisiveness is bad for the individual, bad for the community and bad for business in what is almost universally touted as a high-speed, high-tech and highly competitive global economy.

Becoming Culturally Oriented is a primer and a handbook for people in all sorts of social situations. It encourages us all to become more sensitive to different perceptions, emotions and behaviours that arise from disparate cultural values and practices. It is written explicitly for psychologists and educators, but its applications are far wider.

In eight jargon-free chapters, the authors (both "women of colour") take the reader through the elementary stages of cultural awareness, and simultaneously acquaint those interested with some of the main academic approaches to questions of cultural identity and bias, strategies for effective cross-cultural communication, and opportunities for action as "organizational change agents." Whether dealing with employees at home, delivering public services across the country or buying and selling around the world, it is commonplace to observe that facility with other customs, traditions, mores and languages betokens not a well-traveled, amateur sophistication, but an increasingly valuable (and eventually an essential) tool for personal and organizational success.

The book contains some instructive vignettes in which abbreviated case studies, mainly of cross-cultural communications failures, might have been handled more sensitively and ultimately more productively. It also provides some useful self-evaluation questions which will demonstrate to all but the most self-deceptive how well (or poorly) we handle relationships with the "racio-ethnic other."

From even this brief gloss on Fouad and Arrendondo's effort to bring well-meant intentions to good practical effect, it should be plain that an underlying motivation for the book, as for all good projects in the helping professions, is a general increase in well-being among individuals and an aggregate rise in social justice. Creative application of the lessons to be learned in this book will help administrators no less than educators, and public service providers no less than psychologists, to overcome problems of insensitivity and misunderstanding that are often the product of ignorance, but not necessarily of malice.

If Fouad and Arrendondo's work is taken both to heart and to mind, the complications of cultural heterogeneity will seem less daunting and, despite the intermittent need to step lightly into zones of discomfort and to deal responsibly with our own and others' communicative and emotional dissonance, we should be able to reduce, if not to eliminate, obstacles to mutually responsive relationships—whether across the office or across the world.

Well and good! But there is one small nit that seems in need of picking. The authors appear to place a good deal of faith in institutional integrity and the notion that the right talk implies the right walk. Optimism and faith in the human potential for overcoming intolerance and simple lack of awareness are worthy additions to anyone's interactive tool-box, and are certainly needed in our and others' societies. At the same time, it is sensible to treat this optimism with a measure of caution.

Fouad and Arrendondo, for example, include as an appendix a survey questionnaire called "The Empowerment Workshops' Workforce Diversity Audit: An Organizational Self-Assessment." Some of the data to be gathered may be useful in determining whether an institution displays racio-ethnic diversity among senior management, from which we can perhaps infer whether it promotes personnel on the basis of "colour-blind" assessments of merit. A less useful question asks whether an organization's mission statement or strategic plan mentions issues of cultural, ethnic, linguistic and even socioeconomic (but not gender) diversity. Why less useful? Although such information is suggestive of an enlightened attitude, it may as easily be described as cosmetic. While overt performance markers such as whether an organization's communications systems (e.g., newsletters), interior decoration (e.g., office art) and special events (e.g., holiday celebrations) are evocative, there is sometimes more to racio-ethnic and other forms of prejudice than meets the eye.

About the Author

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