

**Building Cohesive Society: Responsibilities of Equal Association**

**Presented At**

**Intercultural Dialogue Institute  
"Calgary 2020:  
Responsible Citizens Looking Into the Future"**

**By**

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**November 19, 2015**

**[Slide 1]:**

I want to talk a little bit today about the issue of integration vs. assimilation. This is a topic that has been coming more and more to the forefront in my own work and in our society as our population grows and as our immigrant & refugee populations continue to settle. It comes up in dialogues of building trust in communities, in intercultural and interfaith discussions, and in needs assessments within our immigrant populations.

Perhaps because the work that I do is based on looking deeper into the personal feelings and growth of individuals to effect change in themselves in order to change the world around them, these issues may become more apparent than when discussions occur on the surface level in other contexts.

What concerns me is the feeling of emptiness that many people report when they experience a lack of connection to their community, to their families, to their specific immigrant group. I have heard this in many different communities – Cambodians, Sudanese, First Nations, South Sudanese, Indian, French, and Eastern European as examples. It shows up in discussions with youth and older age groups alike.

One woman of Asian background, upon realizing that she had been assimilated since moving to Canada as a young girl, told me something very compelling that stuck with me. She said she felt there was a hole in her heart area that was empty and just could not be filled. It was a place that made her feel all these years that she didn't quite belong but she had been unable to figure out why. Until the day we were talking about the difference between integration and assimilation. She realized she felt disconnected from her original culture. As a person who grew up without a father I could instantly relate to her description of having a hole in her heart that just could not be filled. It is a very crushing feeling that we live with, a feeling that something is just missing in our lives. Do we really want to be responsible for our new citizens to feel like this?

So let me begin by looking at the definitions of the two words, Integration and Assimilation, because often we use them interchangeably when in fact they are different.

**[Slide 2]:** Integration: is about adding, mixing, combining, incorporating. It's about bringing together people of different race, faith, ethnicity, etc. into unrestricted and **equal association**. (like a fruit salad, for instance, where all the pieces are combined to become something better, tastier, more flavourful than just a single fruit on its own.)

Assimilation: means the process of absorbing one cultural group into another, already established, and usually larger community. It's like talking about nutrients, assimilation describes the act of taking something in and absorbing it fully into your body. One culture always predominates, which thus presumes a loss of many characteristics of the absorbed group.

**[Slide 3]:** We must also understand the importance of the Canadian Charter of Rights & Freedoms in relation to this issue. Most of us are somewhat familiar with Section 15.(1) "Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law *without discrimination* and, in particular, without

discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.”

But we must also pay attention to Section 27. “This Charter shall be interpreted in a manner consistent with the *preservation and enhancement of the multicultural heritage of Canadians.*”

My experience leads me to conclude that we have a problem in the implementation of Section 27. I’ll try to explain why.

First, let’s take a realistic look at our Western Society. With a little bit of generalization, we are largely an Individualistic Society. The reality is that almost every other society in the global south – including Asia, Africa, South America, India, from where most of our refugees and immigrants originate, are largely what we call “Collectivist Societies.”

**[Slide 4]:** Professor Stella Ting-Toomey at Berkley University has done a great deal of work describing the relevant differences between western individualistic societies and the collectivist societies in the majority of the rest of the world.

Worldview is the background from where we come, how we are raised, the common perceptions that reference all our interactions. So for instance, in Ting-Toomey’s analysis of Individualistic societies we have a worldview that is

- very “I” oriented;
- we assume it is normal to be focused on individual rights;
- we focus mainly on our immediate family and friends;
- people should be out “doing” and “accomplishing” something
- we are very competitive – from sports, to business, to looks and fashion
- we are outcome-oriented, and
- we focus more on the short to medium-term planning or contracts.

Whereas in the majority of the collectivist societies in the world there is a focus on

- “we” rather than “I”
- In-group obligations instead of individualism
- large extended family to think about and care for (an btw, this obligation continues throughout life, no matter where in the world family members may be)
- Relations within the group take precedence
- harmony within the group is paramount
- outcomes are less important than the process by which it was accomplished, and
- Building Trust for the long-term relationship.

**[Slide 5]:** How each side interacts in life is also differentiated. We can see in this slide that individualistic societies have more horizontal interactions, vie for individual credibility and respect, expect individuals to take initiative on their own, and operate more informally – so it’s ok in our society for you to call me by my first name.

On the other hand, interactions in collectivist societies focus more on vertical relationships based on seniority, age, title, and respect for elders, along with an emphasis on formality of interactions—a younger person wouldn't dare to call me by my first name. They also have a far more compassionate approach to conflict resolution based on utilizing respected elders to solve problems. These elders are directly involved and knowledgeable about all aspects and players in dispute. This is directly opposite to our Western mediation techniques.

When we are part of the dominant society it is easy to be content with the way things are. We can become self-righteous in thinking that “our way” is the “right way” because it is the way **we** were brought up. Therefore, everyone else must adapt to our way. We certainly focus on preserving our own dominant culture. But what about the **enhancement** of it, as per Charter Section 27? Enhance is defined as meaning “to improve the quality of.” How do we consciously make an effort to enhance our dominant culture?

Complacency in this way leads to tolerance rather than acceptance. Acceptance is a step above “tolerance.” Where tolerance seems to go hand-in-hand with judging another against our own way of living or believing, acceptance encompasses the ability to embrace diversity in beliefs, people, cultures, speech, etc. Acceptance is nurtured through feelings of compassion and empathy, not with criticism or judgement, but with openness and acknowledgement.

Our diversity provides space for learning and for expansion of understanding. Acceptance of these differences provides us with the ability to work and live with others to address problems from different perspectives and to gain harmony in our lives. This means we must embrace change and new ways within ourselves in order to fully understand the other. This is not an intellectual exercise, but rather an exercise of the heart – as all acts of compassion and empathy are. The minute we leave the exercise in our minds, it is open to our mental propensity to judge.

Integration is **not** a one-way street. Minority communities do not have a moral obligation to absorb **into** the majority community. Such a suggestion assumes the majority community's values, lifestyle, culture, and customs are superior. This is simply an arrogant supposition and devalues the dignity of every immigrant. If we believe that one culture is superior to all others we are setting ourselves up for dehumanizing the other. Dehumanizing means not respecting the other and devaluing their inherent dignity. If we devalue the other, we are setting the stage for resentment, lack of trust, conflict and social breakdown. Integration must have an element of give and take and willingness to share from both sides – not just me sharing my “right” way, but me being open to learn and embrace the others’ “new” way.

When we focus on Integration, we work together to come up with an agreed upon set of common values. We can only do this through dialogue and understanding. Integration means that we learn more about new societies and celebrate our differences and similarities equally, rather than suffocating the other by not respecting their right to preserve their traditions, their collectivist affinities, their own worldview. Could we not all benefit by learning to be more inclusive in our own lives? By doing so, we would all be integrating. We take the good from the immigrant society and integrate it into our own lives. Rather than expecting immigrants to become more “I” focused – which puts them into conflict with their own elders and sets them apart – what if we take steps in our own lives to be more inclusive of our wider community? Then integration becomes what it is meant to be by definition – a 2-way street. This then, is the aspect of “enhancing” our dominant culture, rather than simply preserving it. We need to “preserve the best” and “integrate the rest.”

Being able to understand the two distinct types of societies provides us with an awareness of cultural differences along with motivation to learn more about our inherent perceptions, values and differences. It is not about which way is right, because they are both right in their own context. But we are living in a rapidly integrating world where these worldviews are coming into conflict. If we deliberately set out to acquire cultural knowledge of the other then our viewpoint expands beyond the self to the other, intentionally shifting our worldview to make us more adaptive and flexible in our application of culturally sensitive communication practices.

Therefore, we must openly seek to embrace the best of both our individualistic societies, as well as the community building values and caring for others of the collectivist societies. Believe it or not, when we were more of a rural-based society, such as where I grew up out on the farm, these were the every-day values that were lived. Farmers built community by helping each other – but we lose that concept when we live in our rows and rows of houses with drive-in garages where we rarely ever see our neighbours from day-to-day.

When we focus only on our individual lives and making ends meet at all costs, we forget to be inclusive of the rest of the community, of all our members – if this is not true then why do we have a homeless issue?

**[Slide 6]:** So in conclusion, I would like to leave you with the question, “How can we, that means you & I, together, build a better, more cohesive community together in the upcoming years? What do we each do to build more trust in our own community—across boundaries? How can we learn more about others? How can we be more inclusive so that nobody feels left out in our community of Calgary?”

If each one of us will take the initiative to change ourselves first, then the world around us will change also. We will build a community of common values, equal worth and respect. We become a better, healthier, safer, more dynamic society. I would encourage each person to be **bold** – to explore different communities, to talk to new people in their own environment; to really take an interest in what works for them; not just what foods they eat but why? Embrace something new from an immigrant community you know little about, or that you have always made assumptions about.

We are, after all, human beings together in this world. And we all deserve to live in a community that *preserves and enhances the multicultural heritage* of which we are so proud.

It’s an exciting place to be when we are open to each other. **[Slide 7; Slide 8]**