Shifting Meanings of Multiculturalism: Content Analysis of Print Media Representations, 1992-2002

Robert J. Rock (Dennis Downey)
Department of Sociology, University of Utah

Multiculturalism was an important and contentious issue throughout the 1990s, as popular and academic publications emerged to lend support, opposition, or purely meaning and understanding to the concept and its connotations. The debate over multiculturalism reached its peak in the early to mid 1990s, and has since become much less of a contentious issue. Debate has subsided so much so that the sociologist Nathan Glazer (1997) has asserted that “we’re all multiculturalists now” This research began in an effort to offer some answers as to how and why public discussion and opinion shifted so dramatically over the previously-contentious issue of multiculturalism. Our research involved content analysis of the Los Angeles Times articles indexed under “multiculturalism and pluralism” spanning the years from 1992 to 2002. The articles were systematically coded for specific variables, including the primary institutional focus; whether the articles gave a positive, negative, or neutral representation of multiculturalism; and the usage of and definitions provided for multiculturalism. Preliminary findings indicate that the institution of education was the dominant focus throughout most of the period under investigation, but the institutional foci became more varied in the later years. There were no identifiable strong trends in changing representation of multiculturalism, though the overwhelming majority of depiction was positive. We also found that the term "multiculturalism" was rarely used in the articles, when used was even less often defined, and was used largely as a synonym for "diversity". We were surprised at how little context readers are given for understanding the meaning of multiculturalism. Our findings also confirm the claims Glazer (1997) made regarding the reduced frequency of usage of multiculturalism and the way in which the term becomes a synonym for diversity (rather than a philosophy about addressing diversity). This research is ongoing, and similar analysis will be performed using different print media. In addition, we will analyze all articles indexed under "multiculturalism" in the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature. The continued analysis involving articles with greater depth will allow us to more closely track the shifts in meanings of multiculturalism.