

INTERCULTURALISM SEMINAR

22 May 2012, Baring Foundation



NOTES OF THE MEETING

Joy Warmington, brap's CEO, welcomed 30 participants to the meeting. She explained its purpose was to generate discussion on the role and potential of interculturalism to support current integration strategies and meet existing demographic, social, and economic challenges. The seminar was convened as part of a wider programme of work brap is undertaking to extract learning from the Baring Foundation's Awards for Bridging Cultures programme.

Ranjit Sondhi, Baring Foundation Trustee, provided a brief overview of the Baring Foundation's interest in interculturalism. He explained the Foundation is a grant making organisation that aims to promote certain key civil society freedoms, including the freedom to challenge, to resist, to work where statutory organisations can't or won't, and the freedom to pioneer and experiment. It was in relation to this last strand that the Foundation developed a project designed to promote interculturalism. Recognising that multiculturalism was having problems dealing with the cultural complexities and superdiversity of 21st century Britain, the Foundation sought to explore how society could navigate difference within a framework of complex, contingent, and ephemeral identities. The Foundation allocated a substantial sum to establish the Awards for Bridging Cultures (ABCs), a three-year awards programme which showcased grassroots projects promoting interculturalism. At the end of the programme the Foundation's Trustees invited brap to extract what the activities of awarded projects revealed about the thinking and practice of interculturalism. Ranjit concluded by suggesting interculturalism was unique in identifying a set of competencies which allow people to interact with anyone 'different' from themselves.

Asif Afridi, brap's Deputy CEO, presented a brief overview of the findings of brap's research into ABC organisations. The presentation outlined the key principles of interculturalism (as exemplified by practising organisations); three main types of intercultural project; how interculturalism responds to current demographic and economic challenges; and some ideas on how greater currency around interculturalism can be generated to increase its take-up at a national and local level. Given the importance of the presentation to framing the subsequent discussions, a comprehensive overview is provided in annex 1.

Raja Miah, Director of RISE 2010 and a recipient of an ABC, has worked closely with brap to provide intercultural training in Manchester. Raja outlined his view that UK race- and community-relations policy has 'jumped' from one trend to this next. He argued that all approaches – be it anti-racism, multiculturalism, or interculturalism – have something to offer. The key is to extract the right aspects from each one. In this respect, Raja explained that he most readily saw interculturalism as a 'methodology' that allowed practitioners to overcome some of the deficits of the multicultural model. For example, intercultural

approaches to dialogue bring people together on the basis of particular issues rather than their ethnicity or culture. It therefore places less emphasis on surface difference. Furthermore, the issues on which it brings people together – the need to improve educational attainment, say, or tackle litter in local neighbourhoods – are more likely to engage ordinary people than traditional ‘contact’ activities such as multicultural feasts. As such, interculturalism has the potential to engage a wider range of people, and not just the ‘usual suspects’. Finally, Raja outlined his belief that interculturalism is at heart a technique to get people asking questions of themselves and their communities. This is essential since in Raja’s experience, self-reflection is a useful means of helping people realise culture is a dynamic, ever-changing entity.

General discussion

Following these presentations, participants engaged in general discussion around the limits, strengths, and potential avenues of development for interculturalism. Key points included:

1. the status of interculturalism: there was much debate on whether interculturalism was a policy, an approach, or a methodology. This was connected to a great deal of discussion on whether a new policy was actually needed. Some participants argued that the aim of a multicultural society was still viable (despite problems with specific multicultural policies) and the problems multiculturalism was created to address haven’t gone away. In this respect, certain features of interculturalism might have value, but it is important not to jettison a valuable and robust idea.
2. intercultural approaches to dialogue: many participants were excited by intercultural approaches to dialogue, arguing that previous, multicultural approaches had meant controversial topics were swept under the carpet. Integral to interculturalism is the recognition that dialogue should be conducted in a safe space in which participants are supported through effective facilitation to explore pressing issues within a framework of tolerance, respect, and – critically – self-reflection. Against this, some argued that, when discussing difficult issues (particularly those associated with particular communities) it was still necessary to conduct preparatory work which would allow those communities to interact fruitfully and openly with others.
3. complex identities: there was a general recognition that people’s identities are multi-dimensional, and, furthermore, that axes of discrimination cover more than just ‘race’, extending to sex, disability, age, class, and a host of other factors. Inasmuch as interculturalism addresses this feature of modern society it was welcomed. Furthermore, many participants discussed the need for a strong equality element to intercultural work, given the impact deprivation can have on cohesion.
4. creating space for interculturalism: some participants questioned whether interculturalism was sufficiently developed to constitute a national policy or whether it was a ‘tool’ to be used by practitioners at a local level. Connected with this point, others asked whether there was the space for interculturalism to flourish as a community relations policy given (a) the retraction of the state and (b) uncertainty surrounding current government integration policy. In response, some participants argued that there appears to be an appetite at a local level for a successor to community cohesion and multiculturalism-based thinking.
5. the importance of implementation: proponents of multiculturalism argued the approach had sound philosophical and theoretical underpinnings, and that problems traditionally

associated with it tended to reflect different approaches to grassroots implementation. In this respect, interculturalism could succeed as an approach operating within a broadly multicultural framework. In contrast, others saw the implementation issues surrounding multiculturalism as a key lesson, and urged greater attention be paid to how practitioners actually used and promoted interculturalism on the ground.

6. narratives: there was some discussion on the need for a common, cross-societal narrative that would answer key questions occupying ordinary people – what kind of society do we want? how much immigration is acceptable? to what extent should new arrivals integrate? The extent to which interculturalism helps create this narrative was questioned. After all, it was argued, the terms around which interculturalism seeks to build consensus – fairness, justice, and so on – are contested even within largely homogenous communities. In response, it was argued that rather than assuming consensus could be built on these issues, interculturalism was developed after experience showed that strong facilitation could draw out commonalities between ‘different’ communities.
7. terminology: a few participants called for interculturalism to be rebranded. This was for a couple of reasons. Firstly, the name suggests that it is a theory primarily concerned with promoting interactions between people from different cultures. In fact, interculturalism does not attempt to foreground culture as a unique identifier at all. Secondly, the name might suggest some continuation or resonance with multiculturalism. A different approach would make it easier to establish interculturalism as a new paradigm in community relations practice.

Joy Warmington and **David Cutler**, Director of the Baring Foundation, concluded the seminar by thanking the participants for their attendance and honest contributions.

ANNEX 1: AN OVERVIEW OF BRAP'S RESEARCH INTO INTERCULTURALISM

The following is a brief outline of the talk presented by Asif Afridi, brap Deputy CEO, at the Interculturalism Seminar held on 22 May 2012.

Overview

In 2011, brap were commissioned by the Baring Foundation to draw out learning about effective intercultural thinking and practice from the Awards for Bridging Cultures. As part of the research process, brap interviewed 22 awarded projects, in addition to conducting an expansive literature review and interviewing other key thinkers in the field.

Good practice in projects

Activities adopted by the ABC projects can be grouped into three broad categories:

- activities intended to weaken cultural boundaries
- activities to develop the skills necessary to live with and benefit from 'diversity'
- creation of spaces 'of' and 'for' intercultural dialogue

The most successful ABC projects:

- utilised strong facilitation which helped people to engage in dialogue on sensitive and emotive issues
- responded to the way prejudices, attitudes, and norms are created and helped people understand the negative and harmful effects of stereotypes
- used art, music and other forms of creativity to promote dialogue
- focused on clear, strong dialogue methods, creating 'neutral spaces' for dialogue and clear 'rules' of conduct to enable effective dialogue
- energy, engagement and trust-building

A framework of practice?

This led us to propose a sort of 'framework' of practice, suggesting that intercultural dialogue should:

- take the form of a dialogue between equals
- involve common goals or engage participants in a common project
- see participants as individuals not representatives of this or that community
- have clear values and frameworks
- emphasise that it is permissible – indeed important – to discuss the impact of 'culture' on people's ability to exercise their freedoms
- emphasise people's shared humanity – culture plays a key role in preventing and enabling collective action

Limiting factors

However, a number of factors contribute to the limited traction and currency the concept of interculturalism currently has in public policy and more widely:

- difficulties in understanding the impact and benefits of interculturalism due to lack of an evidence-base
- contesting theories and definitions of interculturalism
- widely differing views amongst practitioners about what interculturalism 'means' and what its effective implementation would look like
- the difficulties inherent in identifying successful outcomes

Wider opportunities

Based on an analysis of the ABC experience we suggested that there were a number of other contexts or 'sites' in which intercultural approaches might be applied or tested:

- interculturalism in the design of public services – helping to balance competing needs of different groups in a climate of public austerity
- intercultural approaches and practice for civil society organisations
- using intercultural approaches to promote collective action
- using interculturalism to move beyond the conventional boundaries of cohesion policy (race and 'faith') – interculturalism is about all communities/groups
- negotiating and agreeing shared norms/values and a shared vision for society
- an 'educational' tool to help communities identify, understand and accept different outcomes and measures of success in community relations?

Definitions

All this led to proposing the following as a tentative definition of interculturalism.

Interculturalism recognises that culture is important and of equal value to all people. It recognises that forcing people to subscribe to one set of values can create tension between individuals and groups. It understands that human beings are multi-dimensional in nature and that cultural fusion has been, and will continue to be a by-product of human interaction. It requires negotiation to accommodate our expression of culture in the public domain, using the principles of human rights to shape shared entitlements.