

Culture Instead of Politics: Negotiating 'Otherness' in Intercultural Educational Activity

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Abstract

Programs based on intercultural encounters with the 'Other' place culture and cultural difference at their center. Culture is perceived to be a key component in mediating, exploring, and shaping processes of recognition in intercultural encounters, and as a venue that helps to overcome differences between 'Others'. In the light of these assumptions, the study used ethnographic field work to examine the ways culture was employed by Palestinian and Jewish students who took part in an intercultural program in a college in Israel. The findings reveal two major discursive practices that were used during the meetings: individuation; and collectivization. Individuation of the culture of the 'Other' was used mostly by the Jewish group and served to emphasize the particularity of the participants. By claiming individuality, the privileged group disassociate the connection between the oppressive conditions and their privileged position in the dialogue/society, while constructing the encounters as 'intercultural friendships' that marginalized issues of social justice.

Collectivization of culture was used mostly by the Palestinian group and served to emphasize the particularity of their group. The main role that culture was playing was to maintain their group's particularity ('We are different') and thus strengthen their boundaries and sense of shared belonging. Furthermore, Palestinian participants felt that by emphasizing their group's cultural characteristics they were able to mark their counterparts as 'outsiders' and thus gain self-worth. Despite these moves, and partly because of them, the Palestinian 'Other' was positioned outside the dominant social context and scope of interpretation. Being isolated and almost 'out of touch' blurred social dynamics and social structures and allowed to discuss cultural aspects as if they had nothing to do with power and politics.

The different ways both practices used culture served to de-politicize majority-minority rhetoric and to position this rhetoric outside the national-political contexts. Thus, these findings problematize the role and authority given to culture in inter-cultural encounters with the 'Other'. Despite the clear connection between the cultural sphere and the political sphere, the findings show that culture is mainly voiced through the power relations that characterize the social structure. These findings suggest that intercultural encounters cannot impose one set of

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use/meaning on culture. Diverse social groups can construct different orders of culture that evolve out of different socio-political conditions and serve different needs and interests. While culture is a central venue in processes of recognition it can be used against its political aims and mission.

Keywords: politics; intercultural encounter; individuation; collectivization; culture