

COMMENTARIES

Speaking for Ofosu: Immigrant Experience, Multiculturalism and the Psychological Trauma of Migration

Inaugural memorial lecture organised by the Department for Inclusion and Access to Learning, Faculty of Education, University of Malta. Delivered at San Anton Palace in the presence of Her Excellency Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta, Attard, Malta, 12th May 2017

Yonah H. Matemba, PhD, Fellow Higher Education Academy, UK
School of Education, University of the West of Scotland, UK
yonah.matemba@uws.ac.uk

Abstract: In this memorial lecture - given as tribute to Frederick Ofosu, a Ghanaian migrant in Malta who tragically committed suicide on 18th January 2017 - I draw on critical race theory to highlight subaltern voices in the discourse, and in everyday life, particularly related to immigrant experiences, the failure of multiculturalism and the resultant psychological trauma of migration. I then recast the positive impact of an inclusive society, and importantly emphasise the role of civic education in fostering a sense of community for all people who live in a multicultural country such as Malta.

Introduction

This lecture reflects on the wider discourse of the immigration debate, and where relevant draws from the UK experience to explicate three related issues: (a) immigrant experience, (b) multiculturalism and (c) the psychological trauma of migration. In my critical discussion of these issues I draw on Critical Race Theory as the conceptual framework in highlighting the immigrant 'subaltern voice' within the context of post/neo-colonialism. I then provide a critical discussion on the following issues: (a) lived immigrant experiences, (b) multiculturalism - its promise and challenges, (c) psychological trauma of migration. I will end my lecture with a discussion on

the positive impact of (civic) education for an inclusive society focusing on the role of civic education in fostering a sense of community for all people who live in a multicultural country such as Malta

To reiterate, this memorial lecture is presented in honour of the late Frederick Ofofu. From what I have read Frederick Ofofu migrated to Malta from the beautiful country of Ghana in 2009. He lived and worked for a number of years in the quintessentially beautiful country of Malta. However, he got stuck in the immigration quagmire - as most migrants do - and tragically took his own life on 18th January 2017, aged only 33 years. I never met Frederick, but his story - like most of immigrants - is a painful reminder and a lesson of an immigrant life: a tragic story of dashed hopes for an immigrant trying to make something with his life, and for his family; a young life gone too soon. May He rest in Peace. To place my lecture tonight in its appropriate theoretical context, allow me to say something briefly about Critical Race Theory.

Critical Race Theory as Conceptual Framework

Critical Race Theory integrates transdisciplinary methodologies that draw on theory, experiential knowledge, and critical consciousness to illuminate and combat root causes of structural racism, especially for the marginalised 'others'. It contests institutionalised ways of dealing with race and marginalised communities, including immigrants. It challenges convention and government structures and speaks to power and the powerful to conscientise in them the need for equality in whatever form that this may exist (Ford and Airhihenbuwa, 2010). Critical Race Theory is grounded in Social Justice and is also synonymous with speaking for socially marginalized groups. Importantly, it empowers activists and its supporters to demand racial equality in all walks of life. Critical Race Theory can be applied in any area of life where social inequality, racism, marginalisation and disempowerment exist (Ford and Airhihenbuwa, 2010). Related to this, is the equally important concept of speaking for the *subaltern*. Critical Race Theory suggests that to fully understand the lived experience and everyday reality of marginalised groups, it is necessary to give those groups a 'voice'. And if they can't speak themselves, others should, as I am doing today for Frederick Ofofu. This is what I mean in the title of the lecture when I talk about "Speaking for the Subaltern". The concept "Subaltern" is post-colonialist in its conceptualisation and application. After all, issues of immigration, especially for people coming from previously colonised territories, I would argue, are issues of a post-colonial encounter - that is a reversal of the flow of immigration or interest by people from previously colonised territories, like Ghana or Jamaica, to areas of the historical colonisers like Britain.

The concept “subaltern” explains the socially and politically disadvantaged; the marginalised groups in society whose voice is muzzled by social, political and economic structures that only hear the “voice” of the powerful and privileged. In her critically acclaimed work that popularised the concept “Can the Subaltern Speak”, the Indian scholar, Gayatri Spivak may perhaps help explain why Fredrick Ofori, as a subaltern, took his own life. Spivak toys with the idea that for the subaltern suicide is the ultimate manifestation of mental anguish, melancholy, frustration and the inability to confront the task and “yet aware of the practical need for trust” (Spivak, 1988, p. 103). For example, Frederick Ofori recorded a voice message for his friends trusting that they will tell the world what happened to him. By speaking for themselves marginalised groups can begin to heal because the stories they tell: (a) provide a vehicle for psychic self-preservation and (b) help the listener (that is the powerful and privileged) overcome ethnocentrism and the dys-conscious conviction of viewing the world only one way (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995). Then, if we focus on the life of the immigrant we learn a few things.

Shinning Some Light on Immigrant Experience

One issue about immigrant experience is what I call the queer “other” – the “visible” immigrant. That is immigrants come with their cultural and religious ‘identifiers’ that make them “visible”. The second issue is race concerns race (colour of their skin). For skin complexion other immigrants are hard to spot from afar. For immigrants of colour (i.e. Black Africans) his race makes him particularly “visible”. This creates the impression on the host community that “they are everywhere” and they will soon “swamp us”. The other issue is language: Inability to speak the host language “properly”, for example, in Nordic countries or Germany means that one can give up hope for decent employment – if any employment at all. Religion: for example, the hijab for Muslim women and the erroneous idea that this is a form of oppression by the hegemonic and patriarchal structures within that religion.

Further concerns regarding the constant utterances by the host community that “there are no jobs here” – our children do not even have jobs. And yet in most cases when the immigrant has work, the jobs available to him is what Flynn and Kay in their recent study (2017) of migrants in rural Scotland call “devalued work” (p.58), work which the locals do not want to do in agriculture, food processing and increasingly, care work for the elderly. Here, by doing this work the immigrant contributes immensely to the social and economic life of the host country. Patronising attitudes against migrants usually in the form of a series of predictable questions we get in the street is another painful experience for immigrants: Do you like it here? Do you ever think of going back home one day? Your family must miss you terribly Do you plan to have more children? Here, later migrants learn that this particular

question has to do with an estimation of how much financial support the migrant will get from state for having many children.

The migrant continually feeling that he is a burden to the host society. Schools and hospitals are already full – we have no space here. Living in “ghettoized” housing estates and the problem of what I can call “cultural silos” – that is immigrants housed together in one location, and having little or no interaction with the host community. This creates what Flynn and Kay see as “forced interaction with their co-nationals in the host country” which by the way is “burdensome and claustrophobic” to the immigrants (p. 63). If there is interaction it is with *marginal communities* in the host community who are also housed in these locations such as those: without an education, not in employment, living off the state and in many cases impacted by drug use. Next is the issue of migrants living in “homogenised” cultural “silos” where they speak their home language and makes it difficult to learn the host language, a requirement to get settlement status. Then there is problem of immigrants living in high rise flats which historically are breeding grounds for crime and criminal behaviour by the host community. So, in reality, immigrants experience multiple and repeated disadvantage - running away from their countries to escape only to find themselves at disadvantage in the new the host country. Here the question to be asked is: *does the immigrant have voice to speak about these things? And when he speaks, who listens?* This now takes me to the next issue I wish to discuss: multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism: Promises and Challenges

Multiculturalism is an important facet of any discussion about immigrants and migration. As a concept multiculturalism is the presence of several ethnic, cultural and religious groups within a society (Lenti and Titley, 2011). In recent decades the flow migration across the globe has made almost all countries “multicultural”. We now talk about “multicultural societies”. However, the definition of the term “multiculturalism” can be interpreted differently such as: People of different communities living alongside each other and ethnic or religious groups in a country leading completely separate lives. For me it is the former proposition that I would support. Let me now talk about the promise and challenges of multiculturalism.

Promise of multiculturalism include, recognising and protecting cultural heritage; language and religion; ensuring social justice prevails related to race, ethnicity, culture, religion, language and gender identity; economic efficiency and opportunity for all people regardless whether one is native or was born in a different country (Australian Government, 2014). Challenges of multiculturalism include absence of unifying commitment to the host country and its interests; parallel communities threatening social cohesion; creation of what Lentin and Titley see as “enemies from within cultivated by

irresponsible cultural relativism” (Lenti and Titley, 2011); requirement that all people who live in the nation state accept its basic structures and principles; imposition by the nation state of obligations as well as rights for people to express their own culture and beliefs but also to respect those of others (Australian Government, 2014); and now the emergence and growing popularity of far right political parties among many leading Western countries, which see immigration and multicultural policies as the bane of society. In what ways are immigrants impacted the experience of migration?

Psychological Trauma of Migration

By their very nature causes of “forced” but not “voluntary” migration (due to economic, social, religion or political factors) are traumatic. Studies on the mental health of immigrants indicate that psychological trauma manifests in two kinds: First, *pre-migration trauma* that is caused by experiences in the home country that forced people to migrate: First, what caused the migrant to leave: war, famine, gender violence – female genital mutilation, poverty and the drive for a better life, religious conflict, natural disasters and political persecution. Secondly, the perils of migration itself and traumatic experiences of travel from home country to new country. Secondly, *post-migration trauma* in the new country caused by stressors such as: perceived and actualised discrimination, being made vulnerable to potential attack and abuse by insensitive re-housing arrangements – like the “Red Door” problem in the UK (i.e. recent immigrants given houses with doors painted red, which placed them at serious risk of racist abuse from some locals against their presence – once the error was noted this was quickly corrected), unfamiliar customs, social conditions, and language, unemployment and economic concerns, lack of recognition of skills or educational achievements, difficulties accessing medical care and welfare services, language acquisition difficulties, fear of repatriation to the home country, asylum processes and decision waiting times, loneliness and homesickness, lack of social and emotional support, separation from and worry about family members. Among refugees, for example, these post migration stressors have been shown to act as determinants of mental health disorders (Aragona et al., 2013; Dunlavy, 2001).

In a recent mental health study (2013), Aragona and others found that first generation immigrants in Italy exhibit psychopathological symptoms related to: depression, anxiety and somatization – a chronic condition with physical symptoms (e.g. pain or fatigue) but no-known physical cause (Aragona et al., 2013). We may never know what exactly drove Frederick Ofose to commit suicide but reading how the local news have captured the story we can make out the fact immigrants are at-risk group due to the following reasons: (a) uncertainty of their status, (b) fear of forced removal, (c) no right to work due to immigration restrictions and (d) poverty and social exclusion and feelings of utter despair. Situations like these engender multiple mental health

problems for immigrants, and were likely what may have drove Frederick Ofofu to the edge. Based on their study, Aragona and his colleagues suggest that early detection may offer the opportunity to reduce psychopathological morbidity. There are some positive factors that are associated with better mental health outcomes for immigrants: feelings of acceptance, welcoming societal attitudes by the host country, involvement with the host country's culture, access to employment opportunities and better integration and policies in the host country (Dunlavy, 2001).

(Civic) Education as Panacea?

To impact positively on attitudes towards social change, civic education about immigrants and immigration may hold the key. Part of the problem is that societies know little to nothing about immigrants and immigration and why immigrants have come to a particular country: And sadly sometimes reports about what migrants are up-to, generate only negative news that feeds into the fear of immigrants. I think that in every country political will is necessary to make the right changes needed to protect immigrants and create policies with a Human Rights touch. Civic education for adults is necessary to help them understand "why migrants are here" and "what the country should do to support them". The national school curriculum may also hold another important key in addressing this issue. School subjects such as Citizenship Education, Inclusive Studies and/or Religious and Moral Education may facilitate the transmission of pro-social values that include a Human Rights agenda for an inclusive and welcoming society for all (Cowan and Maitles, 2012). However, for such subjects to be effective there is need for teacher reskilling and openness by education authorities to ensure adequate resources and commitment.

Conclusion

Already in Malta civic education is underway. There has been wide reporting of the Frederick Ofofu in the local media and this has kept the story and his memory alive but also has helped start a national conversation around issues of immigration. That I am here speaking at this inaugural memorial lecture in honour of Frederick Ofofu is clear testament of this fact. By being here tonight you all have given the "Subaltern" the "voice" to tell his story, and thus help him towards "psychic self-preservation".

References

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