MULTICULTURAL *Experiences,* MULTICULTURAL *Theories*

MARY F. ROGERS

MULTICULTURAL EXPERIENCES, MULTICULTURAL THEORIES

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PREFACE

Working with the papers you will be reading has been uplifting yet taxing. Because much of our collective future, many of our democratic prospects, and a hefty portion of our selfhood hinge on the issues aired here, I sometimes felt weighted down by the challenge of doing any justice to them. At other times I felt exhilarated by the energy and creativity afoot among multiculturalists. I hope that in these materials you will find similar cause for consternation and inspiration. Above all, I hope you find strong nurture for your consciousness of self, others, and community.

I owe many people many thanks. George Ritzer heads that list. As consulting editor, he gave me the opportunity to bring these readings together and then served as a caretaker of this project. Jennifer Lehmann and Becky Thompson were two of the reviewers whose theoretical savvy and multicultural awareness helped me fashion a collection both ambitious and lean. Susan Chase, also a reviewer, infused this project with her indefatigable spirit and critical consciousness, tempered as always by her kindheartedness. I am honored to call her friend as well as colleague.

Among friends near and far whose very lives inspire and encourage me, I can only mention names where I would rather tell stories of stamina, courage, and compassion. Those friends include Dorothy Juhlin, Sue Foley, Fran White, Helen Koster, Viola Caprio, Neil Riordan, Arline Riordan, David Patriarca, Lola Buonanno, Maurice Natanson, Lois Natanson, Dallas Blanchard, Art Doerr, Dale Doerr, Mary Hood, Louise Weston, Gloria Mattingly, Claudia Rogers, Ira Cohen, Reggie Cohen, Catherine McVey, Cheryl Thomas, and Wendy Luttrell. Named in the order of their appearances in my life, these friends are my family just as my "family" comprises friends like my sisters Kathy, Martha, and Sharon and my mother Gen.

I have left two people unnamed because saying how much they sustain me is flatly impossible. The first person is Phillip Lott who worked on this project as a research associate ready to change hats as quickly as circumstances shifted. Phil's energies are not tireless, but he consistently acted as if they were; his research, computer, and interpersonal skills are not endless, but they felt that way to me; his good humor and kindness of heart cannot be limitless, but they seemed so. Unable to say how much he poured himself into this project, I say only that working with him was reason enough for undertaking this effort.

The other person is Christy Garrett. No one in my circle of loved ones has taught me more about dignity, social justice, and the inestimable value of education aimed at empowering people. No one has listened more patiently to my rantings and ravings, and no one has spoken more passionately to the issues these readings address. Only she knows the span of my indebtedness to her, yet she knows it with a modesty and generosity that leave me free to go into further debt.

Finally, I want to mention six young people. Five are too young to have indebted me to them but just the right ages to have inspired me in diffuse ways. My five youngest nephews—Ian, Stewart, Noah, Sam, and Jarrett—have been frequent guests in my consciousness throughout this project. Awash in innocence and growing in dignity, they face a future at once uncertain and hopeful. I wish for them the kinds of awareness expressed in these readings and the kinds of community with others that will satisfy their spirits while enhancing the planet. The sixth person is also a nephew. Just entering young adulthood as a high school graduate and first-year college student, Mike has come of age during difficult times for American preadolescents and adolescents. Triumphing over those difficulties, he has remained true to his big heart and keen consciousness. His is already a multicultural awareness, and I take inspiration from him.

Mary F. Rogers

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INTRODUCTION

Multiculturalism has to do with whose perspectives figure in our consciousness. When we think about American society, do we envision only members like ourselves? When we talk about homelessness or abortion-clinic violence, do we consider only the perspectives of groups that have won our allegiance? Multiculturalism challenges such limits. It illuminates the cultural diversity and multiple standpoints shaping people's experiences as neighbors, workers, students, citizens, parents, worshippers, and consumers making and sharing a world in common. It asks who masterminded past decisions in our society, whom they thus benefited and deprived, and how our social structure perpetuates those inequalities. Multiculturalism promotes our sense of common humanity without reducing its richness to a white blur of privilege or a masculine presence that goes unnamed. Its overriding purpose is to acquaint us with perspectives and experiences "different" from our own while helping us grasp how "differences" get socially created and reinforced.

Multiculturalism as a movement is distinctively, though not exclusively, American. It emerged as the second wave of the civil rights movement that shaped American society during the 1950s and 1960s.[1] Like that movement, multiculturalism grows out of the realization that the " 'price of admission' to the bourgeois civil societies of the West" remains indefensibly high for many groups of people and out of reach for other groups. Full admission entails assimilation.[2] It requires "different" people to compromise or even abandon their distinctiveness by conforming their public behavior to bourgeois tastes and to act as if they fully shared the culture of straight men in the white Protestant middle classes. Unwilling or unable to pay such prices, members of many groups get cast as our society's "Others."

Today many of those "Others" are multiculturalists of one sort or another. Whatever else they favor, most multiculturalists advocate schooling that affirms cultural diversity.

They emphasize that students come to school with identities anchored in historically specific, psychologically comfortable subcultures. Besides seeking equal access to and equal distribution of educational resources, multiculturalists want social-psychological equity. Such equity necessitates textbooks, classroom guests, laboratory manuals, and field trips offering each student a mirror wherein his or her own face sometimes makes an unmistakable appearance. Giving diverse students equal opportunities to learn requires inclusive curricula that pay detailed attention to the history, arts, and customs of all those groups in our society whose subcultures are misunderstood or widely maligned.

American higher education has been moving toward multicultural curricula since the days of "free" or "open" universities in the 1960s. In those student-run, loosely structured, alternative "universities" students learned about women's bodies and women's history, about colonialism and its aftermath, about how to make peace instead of war. As early as 1984, more than forty percent of American colleges offered Women's Studies courses; more than a third offered courses in Black Studies; a quarter offered Asian and Pacific American Studies courses; nearly a quarter offered Hispanic Studies courses.[3]

Perhaps you bought this book in connection with such a course. You may be enrolled in a Women's Studies course this term, or maybe you are taking a course in multicultural education, social stratification, or social theory. Then you are a participant in multiculturalism. With many other actors, you are standing on a panoramic stage where a historical play is taking shape. This drama, which is about cultural diversity, is a morality play concerning power, dignity, and social structure. Its plot revolves around the close connections among diverse kinds of subordination in society, a plot informing or even centering many fields of study today.

Sociology courses from race relations to the American class structure, for instance, widely focus on social inequalities. We have long known through wrenching expressions of social unrest, failed social policies, and false starts at substantial social progress that race, money, power, and privilege densely intertwine in our society. By now, we are beginning to see that gender, age, sexual orientation, and much else inform the dynamics of race and class in American life. In practical terms that generalization means that many women are socially positioned to feel the weight not only of their sex, but also of their race or ethnicity; it means that many lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and other sexual minorities feel the weight of their race or social class as well as their sexual orientation; it means that many impoverished and working-poor people feel the weight of their skin color, national origins, or sexual orientation as well as the weight of their class position. During the past several decades we have come, in short, to recognize that social inequalities not only take shape as structured systems but also gain force as *interlocking,* albeit distinct, systems. Thus, how individuals experience gender depends substantially on how they are positioned within hierarchies other than the sex/gender system and how they experience their heterosexuality or their middle-class position depends on their gender, age, and ablebodiedness.

On their way out, then, are what Jean-Francois Lyotard calls "totalizing grand narratives." Also on their way out are essentialist or essentializing theories implying that one dimension of individuals' identities—gender, sexual orientation, or race, for instance—is capable of rendering their "situations or experiences . . . essentially the same in all social, cultural, and historical contexts."[4] Such essentializing entails a denial of diversity

and difference. In its stead stands theorizing attuned to human variety and versatility. In the hands of multicultural theorists, for instance, human agency remains tied to social structure, but the tie-ins diversify. We begin to see that evidence of agency often gets conceptually buried by labels such as "victim" or "underdog"; that expressions of agency reflect people's positions in multiple, intersecting hierarchies; that the visible agency of hyperprivileged members depends on the invisible labors of less privileged members.

What this all means is that the days of narrowly construed feminist theory or sociological theory or any other kind of social theory lie in our past. In the 1990s Betty Friedan could no more credibly write *The Feminine Mystique* than Eldridge Cleaver could write *Soul on Ice.* The mostly white, largely middle-class homemakers whose alienation Friedan dramatized have flown the nest, been yanked into the labor force, reentered school, become single parents, or divorced and remarried and blended families while holding down a full-time job outside the home. The social facts have indeed changed, and so has our awareness. Today's "feminine mystique" would have to be writ large in terms allowing for lesbians' and bisexual women's experiences, old women's stories, Chicana and Asian American and American Indian as well as Euro-American women's prospects and outcomes, cancer-ridden and HIV-positive and crack-addicted women, and all those other big groupings of women whose experiences used to be missing or distorted in the works of social theorists and culture critics. Similarly, Cleaver's narrative has no clear-cut place in today's multicultural drama. It ignores, even celebrates, gender inequities; it says virtually nothing about racial oppression beyond the black/white dichotomy historically institutionalized as the "race problem" in our society. Like Friedan, Cleaver would have to enlarge his theoretical scope before claiming a place at the multicultural table.

Coming to that table means seeing the overlapping pains, dilemmas, deprivations, and fears wrought within interlocking systems of domination in our society. It means seeing that intragroup diversity is as worthy of notice as intergroup differences and that both varieties of differentiation have cultural roots. Coming to the multicultural table means, then, forswearing feminist theory rooted mostly in white, middle-class women's experiences; it means forswearing sociological theory that is out of touch with the hum and buzz of cultural diversity buried beneath the grand narratives of much systems theory, psychoanalytic theory, and rational-choice theory. It means taking seriously the theoretical efforts of thinkers like those found in *Multicultural Experiences, Multicultural Theories.* Finally, it means thinking about the social construction of knowledge, the multiple functions of social theory, and the costs of either/or thinking.

Multicultural awareness assumes many forms, as the readings in this volume show. It helps us see how "difference" routinely takes hold of consciousness without raising the question, "Different from whom or what?" Once we raise this multicultural question, our theoretical consciousness gains force. "Different from whom or what?" opens the floor for questions about how "difference" rather than "similarity" comes to the fore when people think about women and men, gays and straights, the poor and the rich, the old and the young; the black, the white, the brown, the yellow, the red. It raises questions about whose standards, preferences, and priorities hold sway; about how such standards come to prevail; about how the beliefs and perceptions of oppressed people often give

expression to standards that malign them; about how collective action can shift people's perceptions and expectations while transforming social structure. Fundamentally, multicultural awareness sensitizes us to the pervasively social character of what we know. It alerts us to how people construct knowledge in the light of their past experiences, current social locations, and perceived prospects. Multicultural awareness thus promotes a process-centered approach to social realities, especially those that have gotten constructed as "natural" and "normal"—that is, especially those that have been naturalized and normalized through institutionalization.

A multicultural standpoint advances our understanding of the social construction of theory, too. It helps us see that the concepts centralized in a given theory, its key propositions, its grounding in these rather than those empirical data, and its applicability to the real world of diverse groups all take shape from the choices and activities of flesh-and-blood people with careers to advance, bills to pay, reputations to cultivate, and deadlines to meet. Typically positioned in academic bureaucracies inhabited mostly by white upper-middle-class male professionals and overseen by white male administrators, social theorists have often refracted the social and material circumstances of their work in their theories. By and large, they have theorized safe, clean, fairly stable worlds. They have theorized actors whose masculine prerogatives, white privilege, able bodies, heterosexuality, and affluence are taken for granted.

Over the past several decades many social theorists have widened their theoretical scope, at least superficially. One can now turn to the index of book-length treatises and find such terms as "Women," "Hispanic Americans," and "Lesbians (see Homosexuality)." Commonly, one comes across "men and women" and "his or her," if only in response to widespread requirements of gender-inclusive language. One seldom sees, however, social theorists positioned high in the academic hierarchy—at Ivy League universities, for instance, or in the internationally known circle of renowned social theorists—advancing a culturally inclusive theory or theorizing the experiences of people "different" from themselves. Such undertakings are mostly left to those of us who are "different" and those few who are exceptions to the rule of homosocial reproduction.

Since all theory is socially constructed, we are certain to develop richer social theory from the work of theorists who come from cultural backgrounds other than those of white, middle-class males. Looking at the social world from the standpoint of a lesbian feminist, for instance, is likely to foreground heterosexuality as a social institution; looking at that same world from the standpoint of American Indians is likely to foreground the connections between art and community more than those between art and individuality; looking at it from the standpoint of a working-class or working-poor person is likely to foreground the pathos of mass advertising and the American Dream. As previously excluded people enter academic life, however marginalized they remain there, they change not only its demographics but also, though inconsistently, its culture and its products. In social theory they have broken through the institutionalized limits on subject matter and have introduced perspectives heretofore absent or minimized. Although multiculturalism comes in many varieties, its proponents share at root a commitment to using the perspectives historically lodged in *many cultures,* not just falling back on the values, beliefs, and normative leanings of the dominant groupings in society.

As multiple cultural perspectives are adopted by social theorists, the face of social

theory begins to change. It starts to look more human and feel more alive; its voice varies more in pitch and volume, and its rhythms ebb and flow much as our daily experiences do. So, too, theory's functions broaden. Meant now to illuminate diverse people's lived experiences and to transform culture and social structure, social theory begins making noise where once silence prevailed. Multicultural social theory demystifies; it challenges and defamiliarizes mundane realities once seen mostly from hyperprivileged perspectives. It confronts the sad, hard questions of social life having to do with brutality, exploitation, abuse, trauma, cruelty, snobbery, and greed. Yet multicultural social theory also exposes resistance, resourcefulness, stamina, courage, and resilience where once theorists saw mostly the passivity, resignation, and fatalism of victims. Multicultural social theory diversifies the standpoints, concerns, and purposes of social theory. To that extent it enlarges the theoretical realm, making room for those tales of daily living and struggling that ultimately anchor all telling, theoretical and otherwise.

Ultimately, multiculturalism underscores our capacity to see cultural groups as *both* similar to *and* different from one another, not the same as or the opposite of one another. Each of us has different lessons to learn from multiculturalism, depending on our past experiences and current situations. Some of us, for example, exaggerate the differences between people of color and "white" people so we habitually overlook the similarities between African American and white parents or between Latina/o and Anglo upper-middle-class professionals. All of us reap rewards from multicultural exposure, but what we reap differs from one to the other of us.

We all, though, reap insights into the complexities each of us embodies. Multiculturalism illuminates our diverse "subject positions" as gendered, raced, aged, classed, embodied, sexual, ethnic individuals. To that extent it illuminates the grounds of our dignity. Human dignity affirms the differences between this individual and that individual, between this grouping and that grouping. As Peter Berger notes, dignity concerns "intrinsic humanity"; it "pertains to the self as such, to the individual regardless of . . . position in society." Like honor, dignity involves "moral enterprise."[5] The concept thus puts us in touch with the ethical dimension of multiculturalism.

Dignity, which historically supported a politics of human rights, gets little attention in social theory today. By contrast, its close cousin "identity" gets a great deal of attention. Over the past several decades identity has evoked a politics of difference, emphasizing various groups' historical and cultural distinctiveness. The philosopher Charles Taylor is scarcely alone in calling for some middle ground between a politics based on an "homogenizing demand for recognition of equal worth" and a politics based on various "ethnocentric standards."[6]

The "middle" ground is a multiculturalism anchored in our public schools but fanning out to other institutions including businesses, religions, and governments. Most multicultural perspectives emphasize the cultural diversity among those entitled to equality of rights and opportunities. The *politics of dignity* is an apt term for the dynamics of such a multiculturalism. As Berger emphasizes, dignity concerns individuals apart from their social positions and roles. No individuals exist apart from the enabling and constraining values, beliefs, norms, and lifeways of their cultures, however. Above and beyond and beneath our roles, then, stands a self whose dignity rests on culturally shaped distinctiveness. Ultimately, dignity derives neither from our species nor our roles but from the

cultural affiliations specifying the boundaries of our individuality. As Susan Sontag has noted, a group's culture is its claim to members' dignity.[7] It is how a group provides for the selfhood of its members. Differently put, social structure and human dignity are historically intertwined projects. That lesson ties together the readings at hand.

Also tying these readings together are the social identities of their authors who, by and large, belong to marginalized groupings.[8] They represent gay, American Indian, Latina/o, lesbian, African American, Chicano/a, feminist, Asian American, Hispanic American, and other comakers of our society who dare not take their dignity or even their human rights for granted. That circumstance often finds expression in their work and thus differentiates them on average from "mainstream theorists," those whose social identities generally go unremarked in discussions of their work. One rarely hears, for example, "the white male sociologist Randall Collins," but one often hears "the African American feminist sociologist Patricia Hill Collins." The former individual gets cast as a full-fledged, unadulterated sociologist; the latter, as a "kind" of sociologist.[9] "Mainstream theory" generally centers on matters other than power, dignity, and social exclusion or marginalization. Its legitimacy is relatively uncontested, even though its rigor may be fiercely debated. Mainstream theory is discernibly rooted in influential, respectable traditions; it is canonized or likely to be canonized, that is, institutionally endorsed and transmitted.

Unlike mainstream theorists, multicultural theorists often cite their own experiences as partial grounds for their insights; they routinely inveigh against the hierarchical status quo and demand attention to what is fair; they make efforts to overcome the essentializing tendencies in mainstream theory. As we will soon see, multicultural theorists also favor broadly postmodernist stances emphasizing the fluid, localized nature of sociocultural realities. Typically, then, they concern themselves with contextualizing whatever generalizations tempt them. Doing so means habitually asking, Which members? Under what circumstances?

Another characteristic difference between multicultural and mainstream theorists revolves around the distinction between theory and metatheory.[10] Mainstream theorists produce a lot of metatheory, that is, theorizing about the ins and outs of theorizing. Metatheoretical concerns include such matters as the structure of scientific explanation, the nature of scholarly rhetoric, and the limits of rational models of human action. Open any theory textbook or journal, and metatheory is much in evidence. At hand, I have the March, 1994 issue of *Sociological Theory,* a journal of the American Sociological Association. Among its six papers is Sharon Hays's examination of the "conceptual prism in which structure, agency, and culture are all poorly understood"[11] because of social theorists' inadequate definitions and misguided presuppositions. Multicultural social theorists write relatively few such papers. They do challenge extant conceptions and models and thus stimulate metatheoretical undertakings. Yet they routinely subordinate such challenges to the project of presenting innovative descriptions and other accounts of the social realities that concern them. Above all, those realities comprise the actualities that flesh-and-blood individuals face in their everyday lives. Afrocentrist scholars spend relatively little time, then, criticizing racist models of social mobility or "vanilla" portrayals of the class structure. In the face of gaping holes in our knowledge about African American culture and the various subcultures of African Americans, they

focus mostly on substantive questions such as why African American preadolescence and adolescence pose severe hazards for males and how we might eliminate those hazards.

Multicultural social theory exhibits a bold, eclectic shape. It comprises "idea systems" that "have a *wide range* of application" and "deal with *centrally important social issues.*"[12] Grounded not only in real people's real lives but also in pressing social issues of the day, multicultural social theory tends to be unpretentious and down to earth. By and large, it illustrates that "theory doesn't have to be grand to be good."[13] It often shows us that theory need not be linguistically contorted, unduly abstract, and purportedly universalist in its claims before it can advance our knowledge of people's circumstances and experiences.

Because they favor both/and thinking, multicultural social theorists invite attention to the continuities between themselves and their mainstream colleagues. Jargon—more kindly, a technical vocabulary—is one obvious continuity, as is scholarly writing that entails footnotes or endnotes, bibliographies, and little apparent interest in the mass distribution of the author's ideas. Another continuity is the academic affiliations most theorists enjoy. Also, multicultural and mainstream social theorists today identify themselves as transdisciplinary thinkers able to leap across the institutionalized boundaries dividing the social sciences and, for the more daring, the boundaries dividing the humanities and the social sciences. Finally, mainstream and multicultural social theorists join hands around questions about the future of social theory, its place in educational curricula, and its connections with practices ranging from empirical research to community organizing.

Thus, no either/or divides multicultural from mainstream theorists. In fact, a number of mainstream theorists offer concepts and principles highly resonant with multicultural social theory. I try to show this in the brief essays introducing each section of *Multicultural Experiences, Multicultural Theories.* There I draw on theorists well established within the "malestream" of social theory. By weaving their ideas into the multicultural tapestry, I hope to demonstrate some overlap of outlook between the two groupings. Such points of connection are as theoretically instructive as the divergences between the two broad groupings.

One aim of this book, then, is to give you grounds for seeing how similar to and different from mainstream social theory these multicultural works are. Another aim is to offer you multicultural substance sufficient for building up a sense of the topics of inquiry that multicultural theorists deem important. Thus, I have grouped the readings by broad themes rather than by their authors' social identities. Another reason for organizing the readings thematically is to dispel any sense that members (or seeming members) of a given cultural grouping belong together regardless of their own preferences and projects.

Above all, this volume aims to enliven your thinking about social theory while furthering your understanding of our multicultural society. Social theory engages one's consciousness with the very stuff of social life—its triumphs and pitfalls, its dominant structures and subversive processes, its pathos and profundity. Since nearly all the theorists speaking in this volume belong to groups of people facing an uphill struggle in our society, the pictures they draw of social life and how they frame their pictures not only