Virginia Spinks

ENG 212W

Literature Review

Insofar as the issue of multiculturalism in higher education is concerned, there is a vast amount of discourse, for as the United States becomes more and more ethnically and culturally diverse, and in the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s and the more recent Human Rights Movement on a more global scale, there has been a large push for a culturally pluralistic society. These ideals of course, are sourced from our broad, venerable, and generally liberal system of higher education.

However, some have argued that we do not currently see multiculturalism as it should be seen. Hu De-Hart makes the argument that too many “politically correct” academics spout a “triumphalist” point of view into the conversation of “American culture.” This view largely ignores the points of views of minorities in the United States that were not ethnically European (here, she focuses on Native Americans, African Americans, and Asian Americans, etc.) and the fact that these minorities were largely ignored and overlooked for large periods of this nation’s history. She also acknowledges that there is now this demographic reality in the United States that we are a culturally and ethnically diversifying population and this can be especially reflected in higher education, and the push for “multiculturalists.” Hu De-Hart then argues that the triumphalists cannot combat multiculturalism in this area (higher education), because the ideals are too entrenched. Instead, they are “masterful at manipulating a media already too willing to sensationalize” and they “[aim] their propaganda at the larger American public.”

What Hu De-Hart describes as the triumphalist agenda (in terms of media manipulation) actually seems to hold up in other pieces of the discourse. Take for example, the media’s treatment and coverage of Muslims and Middle Eastern-centered issues post-9/11. Elisabeth Anker does a good job dismantling and explaining the melodramatic tendencies that the media has in this specific aspect.

Other scholars, such as Neider, have examined how these misperceptions, created and propagated in part by American media (and society as a whole), are played out for students of Middle Eastern heritage on college campuses. She says that “For students of Middle Eastern heritages the current sociohistorical moment is riddled with misconceptions, misrepresentations, misunderstandings, and perhaps more egregiously, miseducation, both formally and informally” (56). Here, Neider acknowledges that the American public is being miseducated both informally, such as by the media as Anker suggests, and the remedy for this is to “begin to question the seductions of this national self-understanding” (Anker 36). Neider also acknowledges the failure to educate people about people of Middle Eastern heritages in a formal setting. Neider’s research is an attempt to correct this problem for, “scholars have also explored how elements of campus environments that are hostile toward some aspect of identity can be detrimental to individual students and thus compromise the value of education for all students” (Neider 56). Hu De-Hart would advance that more Ethnic Studies programs in higher education would be a way to counteract this trend. This correction must be seen as imperative because currently “The mythical American is permitted to survive as a multicultural and global citizen with only a limited purview of the world” (Friedman as cited by Neider 168).

Other scholars, as an attempt to remedy this miseducation, have conducted research that aims to dispel such stereotyped by introducing studies of identity of Muslim ad Arab Americans into the discourse and academic conversation. Derose spends a long time in his dissertation just giving background to Arab American Culture and explaining just exactly what Islam is. In Bavifard’s interviews of “Iranian college students in the post 9/11 context,” “Media bias and misinformation were mentioned repeatedly and consistently by informants. Students used the term ‘ignorance’ repeatedly,” and they acknowledge that they were fearful of saying certain things that might confirm the stereotypes and prejudices that these people had of them (Bavifard 109).

But the reality is that Muslim American students do not conform to stereotypes and they have very complex and diverse identities. Neider gives an anecdote about Muslims’ diverse ethnic identities (159). Many believe that all Muslims are Arab and vice versa, but that is not the case. Many would be surprised to know that there are “50 million Muslims in China” (Neider 159). Bavifard and Neider both share the stories of students and their experiences with prejudice and stereotyping as well as their struggles to form their own identities in “resisting how their identities were being defined by others” (Neider 176). A study done by Abu-Ras, et al hints at this sort of identity complexity inherent in being Muslim and an American. He studied the alcohol use of Muslims on college campuses (as that is a large part of social life) and found that Muslim American students were less likely to consume alcohol than other students. This can influence the social lives’ of Muslim American students, because they embrace their American culture and want to go out, but also embrace their Muslim culture and don’t want to explain why they abstain from alcohol use (Bavifard).

So, the discourse shows not just a complex sense of identity, but also that stereotyping and prejudice is often more multi-dimensional than we may think. For example, much discrimination is “’below the radar’ of societal awareness” (Derose 97). And “stereotypic beliefs can shape the behavior of even low-prejudice people.” (Derose 99). In addition, another nuance to this complex question of stereotyping and the experiences of Muslim Americans is that people define Multiculturalism differently. Hunter aimed to study views on multiculturalism in Greek Organizations on college campuses and found that not all organizations even claimed to aspire toward multiculturalism, and many others who did, defined multiculturalism differently.

This is where my research comes in. It is apparent that people are talking about issues of stereotyping of Muslim Americans, and a push for multiculturalism in higher education and there’s even a discussion of multiculturalism in Greek Organizations. However, this discussions, as in Hunter’s and Hu De-Hart’s, often focus on the legacy of race barriers in this country, i.e. African Americans, Asian Americans, and Natives Americans—those whose oppressions have become apparent and highly discussed. I’d like to posit however, that although there is conversation of stereotyping and prejudice of Muslim Americans (as can be seen in Bavifard, Neider, and Derose), Muslim Americans are still being overlooked in the broader conversation of multiculturalism on college campuses, and in Greek Organizations in particular. Therefore, I am interviewing Muslim American students about their experiences with Greek Organizations to examine the dynamics of stereotyping among a social institution that seems particularly prone to the type of in-group, out-group dynamic that Derose discusses (94). Derose mentions that “evaluations of out-group members also tend to be polarized and extreme compared to evaluations of in-group members” (Linville and Jones as cited by Derose 94), and he even goes on to cite the viewing of all Muslims as violent extremists as an example.

So, the foundation has been laid, and here I aim to enter the conversation of redefining multiculturalism, but in the nuance of the experiences of Muslim Americans and their interactions with Greek Organizations, given the current sociohistorical context (9/11).