Pluralism is one of those indeterminate words used frequently by interculturalists. It is also a word that can obscure and mislead rather than clarify and communicate. The problem is that scholars use pluralism in various ways. As a result, this word falls into the category known as floating signifiers. These are words that can mean many things. For example, Person A may use pluralism to express one idea, but Person B may read or hear it as something else, possibly something quite different.

Looking up pluralism in the dictionary does not help. Dictionary definitions attempt to identify what a word means in common cultural use, not necessarily as employed in academic or scholarly usage.

In scholarship, when used without an adjectival modifier, pluralism may simply refer to diversity of kind or perspective. In that sense, it generally involves three or more positions or perspectives. As such, pluralism stands in contrast to the idea of dualism, which posits the dividing of the world into two, and no more than two, often polarized views of reality.

Over time, scholars have ascribed multiple meanings to pluralism by adding adjectives. This has led to the emergence of concepts such as demographic pluralism, cultural pluralism, structural pluralism, religious pluralism, linguistic pluralism, and ideological pluralism. The list can be virtually endless.

Confounding the situation is the popularization of two other words: (1) diversity and (2) multiculturalism. Like pluralism, these two words also imply multiplicity, particularly cultural multiplicity. Unfortunately, like pluralism, diversity and multiculturalism have become floating signifiers with myriad meanings.

The following sections discuss the various forms of cultural pluralism within nations, with specific attention to the roles played by the factors of power, law, and ideas of societal equality in determining how cultural pluralism is expressed. Next, the perspective of structural pluralism is described, and the entry concludes by noting the importance of using precise language and establishing the context in any discussion of pluralism.

**Cultural Pluralism**

Within the realm of interculturalism, pluralism is most commonly used in the sense of cultural pluralism. Sometimes, the adjective cultural is stated explicitly, while at other times, pluralism is used with culture being assumed and implicit. Yet even here there are variations.

In its simplest iteration, cultural pluralism becomes a label for a situation in which there is a multiplicity of cultures. This could be global cultural pluralism, a recognition that there is cultural variation around the world. It could also be regional cultural pluralism, an acknowledgment that diverse cultures exist within a particular world region. Then, there could be cultural pluralism within a nation, although this creates a different kind of conceptual complexity.

Culturally speaking, nations can be categorized according to three basic types. First, some nations, particularly racially and culturally homogeneous nations, may have a single national culture (sometimes referred to as a common culture) and exhibit little internal cultural variation. Second, a nation may have both a national culture and a variety of subcultures, usually ethnic cultures but possibly cultures of other types, such as regional or religious cultures. Third, a nation may be composed of a variety of strong
ethnic, religious, or regional cultures, held together by a national government but without a powerful unifying national culture. Either of the latter two types of nations could be referred to as culturally pluralistic, although their types of cultural pluralism are quite different.

The idea of a culturally pluralistic nation arises from at least four primary sources: (1) ethnicity, (2) language, (3) religion, and (4) race. Let us examine each of these in turn.

**Ethnicity**

Most commonly, cultural pluralism refers to the existence of a multiplicity of ethnic cultures within a society. It also implies that these ethnic cultures—or at least some of them—have a significant degree of vibrancy.

In other words, in a culturally pluralistic nation, ethnic groups would not merely be demographic categories (demographic pluralism). They would not just be groups with a set of identifiable ethnic surnames but rather would maintain a significant number of distinctive cultural features. However, cultural pluralism does not imply cultural separatism, although the latter may exist. Members of those ethnic groups might well internalize both the national culture and features of their own ethnic cultures. This type of pluralism could also apply to regional cultures, which in some cases could be synonymous with ethnic cultures or might have their own cultural distinctiveness.

**Language**

Language may be a particularly evident signifier of ethnic cultural richness. Although many ethnic cultures remain vibrant even if most members no longer speak the heritage language or languages, some ethnic groups emphasize language maintenance as a major source of cultural strength. This language use may occur in sectors ranging from the home to community activities, to commerce, to ethnic media.

As with culture itself, multiple language use should not be confused with a rejection of the common culture. In nations with a predominant or even official language (or languages), de facto multilingualism often coexists with a national language. In this case, most people speak the predominant language or languages whether or not they also maintain their ethnic languages. This is sometimes referred to as linguistic pluralism, although it may be assumed to be a component of cultural pluralism.

**Religion**

Religious pluralism refers to the presence of multiple religions within a nation. Such pluralism can exist whether or not there is an official national religion or a predominant but unofficial religion. It can also intersect with ethnic pluralism in a number of ways.

For example, one religion may predominate within an ethnic group. In fact, it may provide a particularly powerful type of cultural glue. In some cases, religion intersects with language as a cultural unifier, such as when religious services are held in the heritage language, thereby further strengthening ethnic identity.

In contrast, within some ethnic groups, there may be religious diversity. There may even be religious conflict and animosities inherited from a heritage nation. This can be further confounding when members of an ethnic group also come from different language traditions.

**Race**

Finally, there is the issue of race. While most contemporary diversity scholars concur that race does not
exist in a biological sense, it certainly does exist in a social sense, in terms of personal identity, cultural practice, legal status, and traditions of racial categorization. In some nations, cultural pluralism is rooted in the idea of racial difference or, at least, in the ideas of racial categorization and racial group cultural practices.

In short, cultural pluralism does not have a single meaning. It can refer to a wide variety of combinations of ethnicity, language, religion, race, and possibly region. It can also refer to a wide variety of societal systems in which group cultural expressions exist.

**Power, Law, and Equality**

Making the issue of cultural pluralism even more complex is the presence of at least three other factors: (1) power, (2) law, and (3) the idea of equality. These factors vary in their significance within different systems of cultural pluralism.

**Power**

Power encompasses the strength of the common, mainstream, dominant, or national culture. That power may be expressed in a number of ways. This includes the relationship of the common culture to ethnic cultures.

For example, that power might be expressed through the dissemination of the dominant culture in ways that immerse people of all backgrounds and ethnic identities. Another expression of the power of a dominant culture is the inculcation of a common language. Schools often serve as the front line of such immersion in culture and language.

Power might also be expressed in the muting, suppression, or marginalizing of ethnic cultures. Some pluralistic systems, while emphasizing the common culture, are capacious in their acceptance, or even support, of the maintenance of ethnic cultures, even ethnic languages. Other pluralistic systems attempt to marginalize those cultural practices, even while recognizing the existence of ethnic diversity and accepting its low-key maintenance, such as in the home. For example, culturally pluralistic nations vary in their acceptance of multiple language use in commerce, government, the media, elections, or the public square. There are also cases in which power is expressed in efforts to eradicate ethnic, religious, or language pluralism.

**Law**

At times, the power of the mainstream or dominant national culture is embodied in law. This legal effort might take the form of prohibiting ethnic practices, such as restricting the importation and selling of certain types of ethnic foods. It might also take the form of restricting the use of ethnic languages or limiting the practice of ethnic religions.

In contrast, some nations support cultural pluralism through law. This can be accomplished by legislating or declaring some type of official multiculturalism. This could mean erecting protections for religious diversity. Or it might take the form of making more than one language official at the national level, giving regional units the right to select their own official languages, or publishing selected government documents in multiple languages.

**Equality**

Considering the aforementioned variables, in what respects would a specific culturally pluralistic nation also be a nation of societal equality? In fact, what does equality mean within a culturally pluralistic
context? This is a topic on which scholars disagree.

For example, what would a nation of culturally pluralistic equality look like? Would it be a nation in which there is a predominant national culture but ample space for ethnic cultures, including languages, to flourish? Or does it need to be a nation in which its multiple ethnic cultures have equal status and value in the functioning of the society? There are no definitive answers to these questions.

**Structural Pluralism**

This leads to one final wrinkle in the examination of pluralism. Some scholars approach pluralism from the point of view of structure, not merely that of culture. For them, structural pluralism refers to the degree of representation of the constituent cultural groups throughout the various dimensions of a nation's socioeconomic and political structure.

When applied to ethnicity, structural pluralists would argue that pluralism does not really exist if members of certain ethnic groups—often those designated as certain racial groups—are represented disproportionately at or near the bottom of the societal structure in terms such as wealth, income, education, occupational status, and political influence. From that perspective, mere cultural presence does not equate with pluralism. Some degree of structural equality is necessary. To such analysts, true pluralism is incompatible with the existence of structural inequality, regardless of the existence of cultural diversity.

**Conclusion**

*Pluralism*, in short, is neither a clear nor a simple term because it is used in so many ways by different scholars and in different fields of scholarship. It is still a useful term, however, particularly when referring to cultural pluralism, because it focuses attention on the significance of ethnic diversity. Yet the mere presence of ethnic diversity alone does not guarantee cultural pluralism, and certainly not an equitable structural pluralism.

Therefore, when saying or writing the word *pluralism*, it is important to be precise about the way the word is being used. Moreover, it is also important to establish the context—global, regional, or national—in which pluralism is being discussed. Pluralism exists, but multiple pluralisms also exist. Such is the dilemma of using and attempting to comprehend this powerful, multifaceted, indeterminate word.

**See also** Assimilation; Biracial Identity; Ethnicity; Intercultural Conflict Styles; Language and Identity; Religious Contexts; Theory of Acculturation

**Further Readings**


Carlos E. Cortés

