

Four things the Catalan crisis can teach us about social unity

November 24 2017, by Eva Polymenakou

The [Catalan crisis](#) has made headlines numerous times around the world over the past few months. It has sparked heated arguments between pro-independence and anti-independence supporters. And in many of the reports, the Catalan people – especially pro-independants – have been referred to as "[troublemakers](#)" and "nationalists".

While some Catalan [people](#) might indeed be nationalists, [not everyone](#) is. And in this way, accepting a simplistic representation of individuals limits our understanding of complex human beings, and [complex societies](#). Not only is this unfair, it is also dangerous, as it puts [social cohesion](#) at risk.

As a researcher of intercultural communication and education, I spend a lot of my time investigating how people can learn to accept and respect cultural diversity. I also look into how people can interact peacefully with those who are different from themselves. These are important skills to have, because all of us encounter people who are culturally different to us on a daily basis. This can either be in the immediate reality or mentally – through things like newspapers, TV, books and films.

The Catalan crisis has shown how people living in the [same country can have strongly opposing views](#) – which are sometimes different to friends, [family members or neighbours](#). And for some of these people, inflamed passions and lack of understanding have led to violence and misunderstandings, protests and the severing of personal relationships.

It is clear then that being able to accept and respect other people's views and cultures helps people to live harmoniously in multicultural societies. And in this way, there is a lot that can be learnt from what has happened in Spain.

1. No two people are the same

In the midst of the current [political conflict in Spain](#), it is important to attempt to understand what may unite the Catalan people, but also to develop an understanding of the unique complexity of each person. Catalan people do not make up a homogeneous group – based on their shared (national) culture. Nor does any given group of people.

The contemporary societies we live in are multicultural. And a broad understanding of culture involves differences among the citizens of such societies in terms of nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, gender, sexual orientation, abilities and disabilities. In this way, [we all belong to multiple cultural groups](#) and as a result have multiple cultural identities.

2. It's time to ditch the stereotypes

To coexist peacefully in any multicultural society, we need to resist the human tendency of thinking in [stereotypes](#) and of ascribing imaginary identities to others. Thinking in [stereotypes](#) prevents people from grasping individual complexity. Stereotypes reduce individuals to a prevalent characteristic – which can be real or imaginary. Even when an attribute is real, it might not be stable over time and across different situations. This is because [culture](#) is something that is fluid, dynamic and context-specific – it is ever changing and always evolving, just like us.

3. It's not just enough to have an opinion

Everyone has the right to agree or disagree with the fight of some Catalan people to gain their independence from Spain. In fact, in democratic societies, we are all free to hold and respectfully support our own opinion on any matter. But this right comes with a responsibility: to learn as much as possible about the matter at hand and about the people involved. For example, many people still don't know that [Catalunya](#) is an autonomous region of Spain, with its own language, its own historical and cultural heritage.

4. Walking in someone else's shoes pays off

One of the most powerful ways of understanding others is by stepping into their shoes, to see the world through their eyes. Empathy can be [defined](#) as:

The ability to identify with or understand the perspective, experiences, or motivations of another individual and to comprehend and share another individual's emotional state.

No doubt, empathising with others takes an effort and requires people to step-out of their comfort zone. But caring for others is a social investment – because everyone will ultimately benefit from a spirit of mutual understanding and care.

Thinking and acting in these ways – with more knowledge and with greater empathy, without prejudice, and without leaning on stereotypes – would allow people to value those who think and feel differently. And it would also make it easier for the voices of the "smaller", the "weaker", or simply the "other" to be heard and respected.

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