A Brief History: From Melting Pot to Salad Bowl

Just a little walk in the city of New York or Chicago would make any foreigner realize the presence of people of various ethnicities walking down the street: probably Caucasians (white Europeans), Hispanics, African Americans, Asians, and so on. Almost anywhere in America, the possibility is encountering a mix of people. Thus, America is a land of many ethnicities, with a multicultural environment.

The variety of ethnicities in America is often claimed to be the best mix in the world. Traditionally, the concept of a melting pot has been looked at as the best metaphor to describe the multi-ethnicity of America. The basic idea presents the whole nation as one large pot. Anyone who enters the United States is automatically thrown into this "pot" where, for the following years, a process of assimilation into the American belief systems is taken place. All the cultural aspects that immigrants bring into it are blended together, or melted, to form a new culture. The outcome of this massive "melting" of cultures is described as "American." In this assimilation, the identities of each original culture are extinguished to bring out a complete new mixture.

Along with this perspective, however, there is another metaphor that describes the diversity of people in America. The salad bowl has a different way of approaching and explaining American society. This idea demonstrates that the newcomers bring different cultures into the pot (America). Each separate culture identity is kept as an essential part to make up the whole. Every distinctive culture or belief is considered to be one of the tastes or ingredients that contribute in forming the whole; therefore its original shape and characteristics are maintained. A mix of different cultures is what makes up the American society.

The ideas of the "melting pot" and the "salad bowl" in America are both an ideal concept to many people and are often admired. At the same time, there is a large discussion and controversy about which term is the best to describe the American multi-ethnic environment. In a way, both serve as an effective and successful metaphor, despite their slight differences. Many say that the salad bowl encourages immigrants to keep their original culture and not to assimilate as an American therefore the American culture would no longer continue. The Salad bowl supporters agree that newcomers should learn the language and American ideals, but at the same time they should have the right to preserve their original identity.
American Cultural Diversity  
Review Questions

Directions: Match the definitions to the correct term:

___ 1. Culture                       a. your family’s background
___ 2. Cultural Diffusion            b. the way people live their life
___ 3. Conform/Assimilate            c. the process of spreading cultural ideas
___ 4. Identity                     d. changing to fit in
___ 5. Ethnicity                  e. the fact of who you are
___ 6. Salad Bowl Theory            f. mixing cultures where original identity are still evident
___ 7. Melting Pot Theory           g. mixing cultures into one new culture
___ 8. Diversity                   h. different things, variety

Two Theories

Directions: Match the theory to the clue. Write MP for Melting Pot or SB for Salad Bowl.

___ 1. Change your name from Hussein to Sam
___ 2. Only speak English
___ 3. Speak English and another language at home
___ 4. Wear traditional wedding clothes
___ 5. All of your traditions are American
___ 6. The U.S. is the only country you identify as home
___ 7. You eat other cultural food than just American food
___ 8. You identify with a country as home along with the U.S.