

# CULTURE AS DEFICIT: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL WORK DISCOURSE

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*This paper is a critical discourse analysis of the usage of the concept of "culture" in social work discourse. The paper argues that "culture" is inscribed as a marker for difference which has largely replaced the categories of race and ethnicity as the preferred trope of minority status. "Culture" is conceived as an objectifiable body of knowledge constituting the legitimate foundation for the building of interventions. But such interventions cannot be considered other than an instrument which reinforces the subjugating paradigm from which it is fashioned. The concept of culture, constructed from within an orthodoxic, hegemonic discursive paradigm, is deployed as a marker of deficit.*

*Keywords: culture, culture definition, cultural competence, multiculturalism, discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis, social work discourse*

This paper examines social work's usage of the concept of culture. Using critical discourse analysis (CDA), a neo-Marxist turn to the study of discourse which examines language and its usages to understand their social and political import, this paper investigates the particular ways in which "culture" is inscribed and deployed in social work discourse. In following the tenets of CDA, language and discourse are approached in this study "as the instrument of power and control. . . as well as the instruments of social construction of reality" (Van Leeuwen, 1993, p. 193). Discourses are understood to be central modes and components of the production, maintenance, and conversely, resistance to

systems of power and inequality; no usage of language can ever be considered neutral, impartial, or a-political acts. This study, consequently, examines the particular meanings social work assigns to "culture," and analyzes the implications for constructing and utilizing such a signifier. It studies, in other words, what the concept of culture does in the disciplinary discourse.

This study is grounded in the theoretical position that the usage of the concept of culture in social work and the meanings social work assigns to "culture" are profoundly political, biased, and partial inscriptions. "Cultural constructions are always 'ideological,' always situated with respect to the forms and modes of power operating in a given time and space" (Ortner, 1998, p. 4). "Culture" is to be understood as a relational demarcator whose usage is an inscription of differential positions and hierarchical identities—a tractable device which can be used to demarcate whatever a particular set of interests dictates should be set apart from something else; included or excluded from the rest. The borders and the contents of "culture," in other words, are understood to be constructed rather than discovered (Allen, 1996).

For the purposes of this paper, social work discourse on "culture" is defined narrowly as the body of academic or scholarly discussions and expositions on "culture" found in social work publications. A preliminary review of such materials indicated that "culture" appears most often as the primary subject of interest in two related arenas: social work education and social work practice. In both cases, the main problematic is pedagogy—methods for teaching either students or workers to become "culturally competent." Twelve such works, selected from social work journals including *Social Work*, *Journal of Multicultural Social Work*, *Journal of Social Work Education*, and *Child Welfare* constitute the admittedly limited sources for generalizations about the disciplinary discourse. The large body of social work literature focusing on issues of "culture" and "cultural sensitivity" in research was omitted from the review to limit the scope of the discussion. The plethora of articles concerning multiculturalism, diversity, and culture in associated fields such as psychology and sociology were excluded for the same reason. In keeping with the intent to examine the general trend of the discussion in the field, no concerted efforts were made to identify works considered seminal, or authors regarded as notable authorities.

### A Conceptual Muddle

The concept of culture has taken on increasing significance in the discourse of social work in recent years. As a central construct in discussions of multiculturalism, diversity, social justice, and the correlate issues of minority populations which it is most often employed to denote, "culture" has become a key signifier of difference in our discourse. Its increasing usage as a central indicator for a large portion of the "client" population with whom social work concerns itself has, in other words, inscribed "culture" as a construct which no social work researcher, practitioner, or educator can credibly ignore.

The cultural critic Stuart Hall (1980) asserts that "no single, unproblematic definition of 'culture' is to be found here [in various discussions of culture]. The concept remains a complex one—a site of convergent interests, rather than logically or conceptually clarified idea" (p. 522). As the anthropologist Susan Wright noted of the classic review of "culture" in *Anthropology*, already "By mid-century, Kroeber and Kluckhohn had found 164 definitions in their famous review of what anthropologists meant by culture" (1998, p. 7). Some examples of more recent works attesting to enduring dilemma of the culture concept in *Anthropology* and elsewhere can be found in Keesing (1974) and his updated version of the same topic in (1994), Matthews (1989), Boggs (2004), and Cochran (1994).

The examination the concept of culture as such a "site of convergent interests"—its salience, its substance, and most importantly, its function as a powerful category of identity—*has* been interrogated by scholars outside of social work (Abu-Lughod, 1991; Appadurai, 1996; Archer, 1985; Bhabha, 1994; Bourdieu, 1991; Brown, 1995; Foucault, 1972; Gramsci, 1985; Stuart Hall & du Gay, 1996; Mitchell, 1995; Rosaldo, 1993; Said, 1994; Young, 1995). The increasing focus on "culture" as a problematic occlusion of the dynamic of power in our society—a displacement from the discourse of other politically significant factors such as race, class, and gender—has also been discussed elsewhere (Gordon & Newfield, 1996; Scott, 1995; Stolcke, 1995).

Despite the ubiquity of its usage, however, neither the meaning nor the significance of the concept of culture has been sufficiently examined in social work. What the sociologist Margaret

Archer (1985) has said of the conceptualization of culture in that discipline, that "it has displayed the weakest analytical development of any key concept" which "remains inordinately vague despite little dispute that it is indeed a core concept" (p. 333) can also be said for social work. The salience of "culture" and the efficacy of multiculturalism, its main paradigmatic support, remain uncontested and under-examined in social work discourse. "Culture," which the critic Raymond Williams (1976) has famously called "one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language" (p. 87), remains a taken-for-granted term in social work, a "naturalized" concept in Marxist terms.

As the historian Hayden White observed, there is exquisite difficulty involved in speaking about or defining with a degree of clarity and precision, any perpetually convoluting and contestable concepts such as culture.

When we seek to make sense of such problematical topics as human nature, culture, society, and history, we never say precisely what we wish to say or mean precisely what we say. Our discourse always tends to slip away from our data towards the structures of consciousness with which we are trying to grasp them; or what amounts to the same thing, the data always resist the coherency of the image which we are trying to fashion them. More over, in topics such as these there are always legitimate grounds for differences of opinion as to what they are, how they should be spoken about, and the kinds of knowledge we can have of them. (White, 1978, p. 1)

Anyone who has attempted to sort out that which is due to "culture" and that which is not and anyone who has attempted to delineate one "culture" from another, will recognize the aptness of both Williams' and White's descriptions, and it is, perhaps, the sheer slipperiness of the term that deters social work from examining the construct. If, however, the difficulty of conceptualization and communication were the only issue, social work discourse should resound with discussion and debate about "culture": how it should be conceived and why it should be conceived thus, however clamorous and contentious the resulting discussion may be. But no such debate is evident.

The absence of debate and deliberation cannot easily be attributed to social work's lack of recognition that constructs such

as “culture” are consequential. A field so sensitive to the power of labels, which insists on “serving clients” rather than “helping patients,” is obviously aware of the perils of language and its uses. The lack arises, perhaps in part, from social work’s conceptualization of the issue as one of measurement rather than premise. Our struggles with the definitional niceties of our basic constructs tend to be limited to the problem of methodology: the difficulty in determining the right variables to represent the category/construct at hand. The assumption appears to be that if we had better tools or methods then we could actually get to, and measure, the thing itself. The essential existence of culture is taken for granted, in other words, and it is only the deficits of our existing methodologies in capturing and measuring culture that we find troublesome; the problem is conceived as the need for epistemological refinement rather than ontological scrutiny.

CDA, on the other hand, sees the examination of the taken-for-granted assumption, the investigation of basic constructs, as the crucial task at hand. Discursive demarcations—the acts of naming, classifying, and categorizing—necessary to all language usage are in themselves considered acts of power which demarcate the center from the periphery, the normal from the deviant, the same from the different, self from the Other. Identities and realities constructed through such discursive practices are, consequently, not only constructed in ways that conceal their manufacture, but are always constructed unequally, legitimating one at the cost of the other. From this perspective on language and discourse, destabilizing basic constructs—interrogating, contesting, and reinscribing entrenched, sedimented, and naturalized assumptions—becomes a *political* imperative. On this view, a task which we tend to see as an ancillary aggravation to the *real* work of building interventions, is deemed necessary as a mode of resistance against the marginalizing, exclusionary forces of hegemonic ideologies.

De-naturalizing occluded assumptions, the taken-for-granted context of discourse, is a key task of CDA. That which is uncovered through CDA as both an agent and a product of discursive occlusion is usually defined as ideology (N. Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). Ideology’s ordinary indiscernibility in discourse is attributed to the functioning of hegemonic power. Cast in the neo-Marxist terminology of Norman Fairclough (1995),

the power to control discourse is seen as the power to sustain particular discursive practices with particular ideological investments in dominance over other alternative (including oppositional) practices. . . . such assumptions are quite generally naturalized, and people are generally unaware of them and of how they are subjected by/to them. (p. 2)

Although most critical discourse analysts inscribe the mode of hegemonic power as “ideology,” it can also be understood to be any version of structurally or “culturally” imposed dominating/subjugating power that functions to construct unequal identities—whether based on gender, race, culture, or other inscriptions of power. Kress’ (1996) use of Bourdieu’s concept of the “habitus” rather than “ideology” to capture the naturalizing dynamic of power which devises and maintains the unequal binary positionalities of the subject/object is an example.

Another thesis central to CDA is that language and discursive practices are not simply reflections of ideology and the manifestation of power, but active agents in the hegemonic process of constructing and maintaining ideology. Rejecting classic structuralisms from orthodox Marxist materialism to Saussurean linguistics and Levi-Straussian anthropology, CDA maintains that discourse is to be understood not as an epiphenomenal product of structural determinants, but as a constitutive mode/function of power relations. “CDA sees discourse—language use in speech and writing—as a form of ‘social practice’ . . . discourse is socially *constitutive* as well as socially shaped” (N. Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 258). Cameron (1997), a feminist scholar of discourse, locates this approach within a postmodernist turn: “whereas sociolinguistics traditionally assumes that people talk the way they do because of who they (already) are, the postmodernist approach suggests that people are who they are because of (among other things) the way they talk” (p. 49).

CDA is posed in part as a critique of conventional discourse analyses whose lack of concern for the role of power in discourse, and whose naïve/hegemonic faith/insistence upon positivistic inquiry is deemed a serious socio-political failure. Though some scholars are more explicit than others in identifying their positions, CDA does locate itself unambiguously on a political terrain. Fairclough’s (1995) definition of CDA is a fair description of its topography: “this [CDA] framework is seen here and throughout

as a resource for people who are struggling against domination and oppression in its linguistic forms" (p. 1). Discourse being "always/already political" (Pennycook, 1994, p.131), the role of the discourse analyst cannot be other than politicized, and for some scholars, even activist in character since the ultimate purpose of CDA, for them is the engendering of social change. "Critical studies of language, Critical Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis have from the beginning had a political project: broadly speaking that of altering inequitable distributions of economic, cultural and political goods in contemporary societies" (Kress, 1996, p. 15). Or in the words of Teun van Dijk (1997):

Analysis, description and theory formation play a role especially in as far as they allow better understanding and critique of social inequality, based on gender, ethnicity, class, origin, religion, language, sexual orientation and other criteria that define differences among people. Their ultimate goal is not only scientific, but also social and political, namely change. (van Dijk, 1997, p. 22).

#### Discursive Lacunae

Although the concept of culture is central to the reviewed works on cultural competency and much attention is devoted to delineating methods for working "appropriately" or "sensitive" with those who have "culture," most of the reviewed pieces do not anchor their assertions upon explicitly delineated definitions of "culture." Most of the articles do not provide any definition at all while the three that do, Liberman (1990), McPhatter (1997), and Christensen (1992), do so only in vague terms. Whether the authors assume a discipline-wide consensus on the definition of "culture," consider it a matter of common sense understanding obviating the need to use up any of the already scarce space allotted a journal article, or recognize the task as a troublesome one and opt simply to ignore it, the central construct of "culture" is left invariably ill-defined.

In her 1990 article "Culturally sensitive intervention with children and families," Lieberman, one of the three who do attempt a definition, describes the theory of cultural adaptation rather than giving a straightforward definition of "culture." She cites a particular childrearing strategy of an African tribal group to make the point that cultural practices develop in response to an

actual or perceived need for survival in a given environment. Guisi women's custom of toting their children on their backs is attributed to their need to keep children away from open cooking fires. The author candidly concedes that there are endless variety of adaptive strategies which the Guisi could have chosen for child safety, "but for reasons of their own, restricting mobility is the adaptation the Guisi came up with" (Lieberman, 1990, p. 102).

The analysis here seems incomplete in two obvious ways. If, for one, the given survival-driven adaptation theory is taken to its logical end, the explanation for the particular choice must be that a host of survival needs working in complex concert determined that no other method but this would do. If such a theory is to be rejected, then surely it is those ineffable factors which fall under the unexamined rubric of "reasons of their own" that constitute the crux of how "culture" develops. In either case, however, an explanation of how "culture" develops is an insufficient substitute for a definition of what "culture" is.

Christensen, in her 1992 article detailing a curriculum for Canadian school of social work, uses a definition attributed to Elaine Pinderhughes. "Culture" in this case is described as "consisting of commonalities around which people have developed values, norms, family styles, social roles, and behaviors, in response to the historical political, economic, and social realities they face" (1992). The latter part of this description traces its roots to the anthropological survival/adaptation theory utilized by Lieberman, and is similarly, a description of the etiology of "culture" rather than a definition of it. The first part of the description, explaining 'culture' as a set of "commonalities" around which values, norms, styles, roles, and behaviors have been constructed, suggests the existence of culture as a kind of meta-phenomenon from which the given laundry list of social configurations arise. As a distinct departure from the commonly espoused idea that culture is those very values, norms, family structures, social roles, etc. rather than something that produces them, the theory is of interest. However, in failing to define what those commonalities are (race? ethnicity? religion? locality?) the description remains as ambiguous as the previous.

In her 1997 article on cultural competence in child welfare, McPhatter cites James Green's (1999) definition that culture is

“those elements of people’s history, tradition, values, and social organizations that become implicitly or explicitly meaningful to the participants . . . in cross-cultural encounters” (p. 265). The most obvious problem with Green’s definition is his employment of the term to define the term—*culture* as that which becomes meaningful in a cross-cultural encounter. This kind of tautological enterprise is all too common among the authors who tend to write about culture as that which people of diverse ethnic, racial, and *cultural* background have. More importantly, taken out of whatever context it originally appeared in, Green’s definition of culture is an oblique and incomplete dictum. In describing what culture does, rather than what it is, Green’s explanation serves to raise more questions than it answers. Which elements of history, traditions, values, and social organizations constitute culture? How do these discrete elements become transformed, aggregated, as culture? Does the definition imply that culture is transactional in nature? If so, does culture come into existence as an entity or a recognizable phenomenon only within the context of a transaction? Can, culture, in this sense, be said to exist?

Sowers-Hoag and Sandau-Beckler, the authors of “Educating for cultural competence in the generalist curriculum” (1996) do not provide a definition for culture. They do, however, talk about culture as a matter of personal identity and an essential ingredient for individual dignity. Cultural competence is, therefore, described as a “commitment to preserving the dignity of the client by preserving their culture” (p. 39). Since, as will be discussed in later sections of this paper, the pervasive underlying assumption of these works is the notion that culture is that which differentiates minorities, immigrants, and refugees from the rest of society, culture as a signifier of personal dignity and identity can be understood to be true only of minority/immigrant/refugee populations. If culture, characterized as a kind of a personal and community resource, is of significance and relevance only to minority/underprivileged populations, then it must be understood also as a paradoxical measure of deficiency; that which marks one as being less than those without it, and simultaneously, that which one must strive to retain as a buffer against that very weighted differential.

The idea of identity and personal dignity being intrinsically

tied to culture is present also in Lieberman's piece. Immigration, in so far as it places a person outside of a familiar language and mores, is said to cause in some cases, "a shattered sense of one's identity" (Lieberman, 1990, p. 104); that countries ravaged by war and political upheaval and the subsequent destruction of cultural institutions that have traditionally "upheld their sense of personal dignity" (p. 105) produce emigrants who experience a cultural crisis as well as a personal one. The given example of the prevailing argument against interracial adoption that "Black babies will ultimately suffer from severe identity problems if they are raised by parents of a different ethnic background," (p. 105) speaks to the paradoxical use of culture as both deficit and necessity. In citing this particular issue, however, the author also exposes a key conceptual problem common among the reviewed articles. In throwing together the "race" of the babies, the ethnicity of adoptive parents, and the cultures of both as a single undemarcated impediment to successful adoption, Lieberman displays a characteristic conceptual snarl which appears to be at the heart of social work's discussion of cultural competence.

Though "culture" is much employed—deployed—in these pieces, basic critical analyses interrogating the validity, adequacy, and legitimacy of this plainly meaningful and exceedingly consequential signifier are conspicuously missing. The unimpeachability of "culture" as a sensible signifier for large segments of our client populations appears to be taken as truth established beyond question. Despite these lacunae, the discussions do on the whole provide an abundance of substance from which implicit definitions for culture and the ramifications of their deployment can be inferred. Because of these lacunae, critical consideration of the inscriptions and deployment becomes essential. The point is that the discourse's lack of transparency and legibility regarding its choices for inscription and deployment highlights the need for critical examination, and opens up the space in which to do so.

### Culture as Deficit

In the literature reviewed, "culture" is inscribed unambiguously as a signifier of difference: "a state of enlightened consciousness enables one to connect with *culturally different others*

at a new level of excitement and joy" (McPhatter, 1997, p. 265); "problems experienced by *culturally diverse* persons" (Sowers-Hoag & Sandau-Beckler, 1996, p. 38). This difference is written as a particular marker for ethnic minorities and people of color. All of the reviewed articles employ the labels "minority," "people of color," and "ethnic" as synonyms for the "culturally different" and the "culturally diverse." Morelli (1998) states, for example that:

In the United States, our increasing populations of ethnic and racial minorities suffering with severe mental illnesses require culturally sensitive and culturally appropriate mental health services. The multiple facets of work involving culturally diverse individuals with severe mental illness challenge social work faculty to prepare students with salient, useful knowledge and skills. (p. 75)

Lieberman (1990), writes:

*on the average*, it is more likely that a person from a particular culture (let's say Hispanic) will display more of a particular characteristic—let's say a tendency to defer to the wishes of others—than a person from another culture where that value is less prevalent. (p. 109)

That "culture" is conflated with race and ethnicity is conceptually and methodologically dubious; that it is invariably equated with minority races and ethnicities is cause for consternation. Deployed as a synonym for race, the traditional demarcator for difference in US society, and ethnicity, the sophisticated multifarious variant of "race," "culture" functions in this discourse as a referential demarcator measuring the distance these Others stand in relation to the Caucasian mainstream, inscribed in its turn as the "culture-free" norm. The inscription of "difference" begs the question "different from what?" Explicitly stated in some cases, (Pinderhughes, 1997; Mason et al, 1996; McPhatter, 1997; Lieberman, 1990) and implied in other cases (Sowers-Hoag & Sandau-Beckler, 1996; Haynes & Singh, 1992), the "white" mainstream as the point of comparison for difference and divergence is again consistent throughout the reviewed pieces. Lieberman (1990), referring to "Latino values," states in the most obvious example, that "when it comes to respect for the parents and the management of anger, the differences from Anglos are clear" (p. 108).

Although,, this “cultural-sensitivity” accounting of group differences is a distinct improvement on the pernicious tradition of the mono-cultural grand narrative, this distinctively multiculturalist vision is not without problems.

Against the blank, white backdrop of the “culture-free” mainstream, the “cultured” Others are made visible in sharp relief, and this visibility—a sign of separateness and differentiation from the standard—are inscriptions of marginality. Embedded in the conceptualization of culture as difference, in other words, is that of difference conceptualized as deficiency. “Culture” in this arithmetic is a marker for the periphery, a contradictory descriptor for a deficit, since to *have* “culture,” in this schema, is to be assigned a position subordinate to that of those inscribed as without “culture.” As the anthropologist Renato Rosaldo (1993) puts it, “the more power one has, the less culture one enjoys, and the more culture one has, the less power one wields” (p. 202). “Difference” or “diversity,” linked to the notion of culture in social work discourse does not describe the overall variance among cultures; does not function as a neutral descriptor for heterogeneity, but is a unidirectional identifier for those who are not normative.

In inscribing and deploying “culture” as a discursive device marking out minority populations, the discourse simultaneously defines its opposite. If “culture” and its contents are understood to be socially constructed demarcators, then not only “cultured” minorities, but the “culture-free” majority must be understood as an inconstant identity which is constructed rather than found.

Culture never stands alone but always participates in a conflictual economy acting out the tension between sameness and difference, comparison and differentiation, unity and diversity, cohesion and dispersion, containment and subversion. (Young, 1995, p. 53)

Despite its insistent rhetoric of cultural relativism or multiculturalism purporting the sensibility that cultures are different but equal, social work constructs and deploys the central concept of culture as a device marking simultaneously that which is on the inside of the margins, and that which is outside.

### Culture Reified

As a measure for gauging difference from the norm, “culture” and cultural borders are assigned in social work discourse

in reductionist terms that allow for enumeration and categorization. "Culture" and cultural attribute are presented as reified characteristics—fixed difference rather than positional divergence—which can be attributed to groups of people, who in turn can be identified by those essential attributes. Such essentialist definitions of culture are usually modified, appended often with caveats asserting that, in fact, "culture" is not static but ever changing, and additionally, that people, being individual, have differing levels of identification or ties to their cultures. These caveats, do not, however, substantively affect the functional conceptualization and deployment of "culture" in the discourse, since the idea of changeability and fluidity are assigned not to the category of "culture" itself, but the specifics of characteristic attributes. Remaining embedded within the caveat is the identification of a static core "culture" which can be modified and differentially adhered to, since variance must center around something, and modification presupposes a core entity which can be modified but remain discernible as itself.

Writers who are attempting to generalize about ethnic cultures typically qualify their descriptions by pointing out that research is limited, that groups are heterogeneous, and that many conclusions are based on informal observations or clinical experience rather than on empirical[sic] data (e.g., Uba, 1994). Nevertheless, there appear to be core characteristics that many accounts agree on. (Phinney, 1996, p. 920)

Identification of such core cultural attributes abound in the reviewed literature. Lieberman (1990) writes about the difference between "the quintessentially American value of individualism" (p. 107) and the oft cited Hispanic value of collectivism. Referring to a study conducted to prove this idea, she reports that while "Anglos" were found to value "honesty, sincerity, and moderation" "Hispanics" were found to value "being sensitive to others, loyal, dutiful, and gracious" (p. 170). Woll (1996) advises that "writers such as Sue and Sue, Atkinson, Maryuma, and Matsui, and Bryson and Bardo have clearly articulated that ethnic minorities do not particularly value 'personal insight' or the ability to talk about the deepest and most intimate aspects of one's life" (p. 71). Mason et al. (1996) assert that "people of color are more likely to be in an extended family configuration," and

that another example of the difference between people of color and the "dominant culture" is the "concept of time, which for many people of color is more past- or present-based as opposed to future-oriented for people of European descent" (p. 168).

The multiple slippages evident in Mason's attribution of social practices to the racial designation of "color," and the pairing of the racialized marker of "color" against the geographic (and arguably "cultural") descriptor "European" are problematic connotations which merit examination in themselves (Dyer, 1997). But the point to be made here is that the identification and the preservation of such identification—stereotypes in other words—are made possible by the acceptance of the conceptualization of culture as a category defined by essential, fixable traits. The conceptualization which constructs, inscribes, and naturalizes the dominant as the normative, "culture-free," and "white," also makes possible this reification of "culture" and obstructs the legibility of both positions as constructed distinctions. The seemingly evident connection between the reification of "culture" and the generation of such cultural stereotypes is, to reiterate, kept assiduously occluded. While stereotypes of racial characteristics are vehemently repudiated in social work discourse, stereotypes fashioned from "culture," a term used interchangeably with, and as a descriptor for race, escapes equal censure.

### Culture Commodified

What then is the utility of conceptualizing "culture" as a static phenomena which emphasizes the "homogeneity of culture and the imperative of uniform traditions?" (Jayasuriya, 1992, p. 41) If "culture" can be claimed in objective terms, that is, if "culture" is conceptualized as an inventory of set traits or identifiable markers, it can also become classified as a body of knowledge which can be studied, disseminated, and acquired, however complex and difficult those process might be. Such a discourse, furthermore, enables the production of the "cultured" as a "social reality which is at once an 'other' and yet entirely knowable and visible" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 70).

One obvious benefit of this commodification of "culture"—constructing "culture" as a knowable, measurable thing—is that

it allows social work to both study and teach about "culture" and the "cultured." Perhaps more importantly, as an acquirable and transferable body of objectifiable knowledge, "culture" can be reduced to the level of problems for which interventions, to be practiced upon the "cultured" and their problematic differences, can be devised. While interventions to be practiced upon the "raced" and "ethnicized" for their problematic differences may be objectionable to social work, interventions conceived to ameliorate differences attributed to "culture" are, through this conceptual mechanism, made not only possible but palatable.

The difficulties inherent in such assimilative or even acculturative enterprises are freely acknowledged in the literature reviewed. The problem, however, is generally attributed not to the mechanisms of a discursive construction which objectifies "culture," but to constraints in current pedagogical methodologies which are as yet incapable of fully enumerating and enlightening students and practitioners about the great multiplicity of cultures and their various attributes. The problem is conceptualized as our inadequate technology and inadequate commitment to the cause. If there were only sufficient time, funding, institutional, and societal support, social workers could acquire and inculcate in others the requisite body of cultural information. If a truly inspired methodology or technology for researching, acquiring, and disseminating cultural knowledge could be discovered and be sufficiently disseminated, social workers could become competent to deal with the "cultured" and their accompanying cultural issues.

The key problem inherent to the discursive designation of "culture" as an essential, identifiable, knowable entity, is that the central role of power becomes concealed. One of the more interesting consequences of this construction of culture is that it obviates the necessity of structural reform. Although the subject is too complex to discuss here in brief, the individualizing, pathologizing function of this construction is worth further study. If the "cultured" are indeed the exotic, different, deficient human beings, the construction inscribes them as, then the source of the problem lies in their difference and their inability to adapt to the normative society, not vice versa.

What becomes occluded in the discourse is that the exoticiz-

ing, stereotyping constructions of those marked by “culture” as the Other becomes possible only through the objectification inherent in the assigning to “culture” and those marked by “culture” an inventory of essential characteristics; that within this paradigm, the Other, the object of knowledge and intervention, cannot be construed as other than subordinate to its dominant counterpart who occupies the position of the knowing, intervening Subject. In the language of a feminist critic who likens this dichotomy between the dominant subject and the subjugated object, to that between the European and the Oriental:

Orientalism is part of the European identity that defines ‘us’ versus the non-Europeans. To go further, the studied object becomes another being with regard to whom the studying subject becomes transcendent. Why? Because, unlike the Oriental, the European observer is a true human being. (Hartsock, 1987, p. 546)

### Discursive Hegemony

The prototypical argument offered against the viewpoint outlined in this paper is succinctly expressed by historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.: “It is time to adjourn the chat about hegemony. If hegemony were as real as the cultural radicals pretend, Afrocentrism would never have got anywhere” (1991, p. 570). Whether or not Afrocentrism is the actual end product they would promote, both Schlesinger and social work discourse appear to accept as a self-evident truth that the persistence of multiculturalism is evidence of progress. The device of identity politics which built departments of *Ethnic* Studies and Women’s Studies in the academy, and forged the course towards ethnic consciousness, diversity promotion, and cultural relativism in its applied arenas, are accredited by both as measures of an emancipatory teleology, headed steadfastly (or precariously, depending on one’s politics) toward the eventual eradication of racial/ethnic/cultural inequities in our society.

The contrasting view raised by this paper, echoing a multidisciplinary plethora of critiques and examinations of the focus on “culture” and the multiculturalist paradigm, is that this fragmenting enterprise may be an essentially convoluting undertaking which not only fails in producing its purported goal of progres-

sive liberation, but actually fortifies the inequities it purports to undo. The point is that social, political, and economic hegemony maintained by an orthodox ideology cannot be deposed by constructions contrived from the confines of that very ideology. In the words of Audre Lorde (1979), "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (p. 486).

Discursive power constructs "truths," defines "realities," and maintains these constructions as devices which simultaneously produce and preserve that power (Foucault, 1977). Social work's turn to the construct of culture, its posing of multiculturalism as its primary emancipatory modality is, in the language of another critic, a conceptual and methodological dead-end similar to the dilemma of misapplied postmodernism: "If interest in postmodernism is limited to a celebration of the fragmentation of the 'grand narratives' of post-enlightenment rationalism, then, for all its intellectual excitement, it remains a profoundly parochial enterprise (Bhabha, 1994, p. 4).

Despite all its good intentions, as long as social work remains bound within the paradigm which celebrates the inscription of "culture" as racialized and ethnicized deficits, its discourse as well as its applications will remain parochial and subjugatory endeavors that assume the guise of change while reinforcing marginalization.

Furthermore, social work's multiculturalism bolsters this marginalizing paradigm through enlisting its subjugated, less-than-normative, minority clientele as compliant partners in their marginalization. What Gramsci (1992) said about capitalism—that the ruling do so not by manifest coercion but through the production and maintenance of ideas and ideals which obscure the need for contestation and manufacture the willing acquiescence of the ruled—might also be said of our deployment of "culture." Those who are demarcated by the deficit marker of "culture," in other words, accede to the hegemonic claim that the very measures which define them as "cultured" and therefore "deficit" entities, are also the devices for their progressive liberation. Culture-enforcing interventions, in this light, should be problematized as power-obscuring, conciliatory measures that serve to both distract from and occlude out the mechanisms behind both the conceptualization of the problem and their proffered solution.

According to Bourdieu (1977) a hegemonic discourse “delimits the universe of possible discourse” (p. 165). Social Work’s lack of examination key constructs such as “culture,” must be problematized.

The mechanics of the orthodoxy is another question entirely too complicated to pursue here. But I will pose two possible threads to follow in answering the question of why social work, despite its avowed mission to oppose and to dismantle such oppression, remains entrenched within the paradigm which might very well enforces it. Perhaps in part it does so because inherent in its mission to mend the consequences of social problems is the professional necessity for determining and enforcing appropriate behavior. That dominant ideology determines that which is “appropriate” should, hopefully, be clear by this juncture in the discussion. This primary imperative cannot but exist in conflict with the other, later call for multiculturalism which claims in essence that all behaviors should be viewed as appropriate: “all values are equally important because whatever occurs within a cultural milieu, can only be appraised and given meaning within that particular cultural context.” (Jayasuriya, 1992, p. 40). Social work’s reluctance to examine and expose the tension between these two antithetical disciplinary imperatives, is perhaps understandable. Its existence as a viable profession depends on the maintenance of the paradigm which ensures that such troubling questions become concealed. The reification, or the commodification of culture and cultural traits is necessary to social work’s professionalization project—the turf-claiming, identity-seeking enterprise which attempts to demarcate its incontestable purview apart from and on equal footing with other disciplines such as psychology, sociology, psychiatry, and economics. Social work has claimed culture, particularly the practice of cultural competency, however precarious such a claim may be, as an arena in which it outstrips the competing disciplines. Perhaps more to the point, the reification of culture is maintained, since if social work cannot claim a body of objective, transmissible, and acquirable knowledge from which measurable outcomes and interventions can be built, it also cannot claim the legitimate disciplinary status in the academy it has for so long pursued.

### Conclusion

This paper has outlined the position that in social work discourse, "culture" is inscribed as a marker for difference, and that difference, constructed from within an orthodox, hegemonic discursive paradigm, is deployed as a marker of deficit. "Culture" has also largely replaced the categories of race and ethnicity as the preferred trope of difference: it is a markedly less controversial indicator than race, a category despite whose continued ubiquity is increasingly denied both conceptual legitimacy and political bona fides. It is also a more profitable device than ethnicity, a descriptor which seems to be used currently as a kind of particularized progeny of "race," and appears to be particularly useful only when coupled with "culture," its functional enunciation. The concept of culture has come to characterize the minority, the "person of color." Additionally, "culture," as the operationalized measure of racial and ethnic status, is conceived as an objectifiable body of knowledge which can constitute the legitimate foundation for the building of interventions. Such interventions, produced entirely within the conceptual paradigm which constructs "culture" as a deficit marker for subjected populations, cannot be considered other than an instrument which reinforces the subjugating paradigm from which it is fashioned.

Given this proposition that social work, either as a conflicted entity which finds itself in an irresolvable bind between two antithetical imperatives, or as a subjugating body which claims to dismantle hegemony while actively promoting it, fails in achieving its professed goals, what then can be done? What alternative conceptualizations and modes of practice can be adopted? The single suggestion offered by this paper is for social work to take pause from its preoccupation with the production of interventions and critically examine, de-naturalize, its foundational concepts—to excavate and uncover the mechanisms which assemble and perpetuate the predicament that renders its interventions moot. As Henry Louis Gates (1986) put it: "To use contemporary theories of criticism to explicate these modes of inscription is to demystify large and obscure ideological relations and, indeed, theory itself" (p. 592). Or in the words of Cornel West (1990), "demystification

is the most illuminating mode of theoretical inquiry for those who promote the new cultural politics of difference" (West, 1990, p. 589).

Whether such a demystifying process can produce a different kind of discourse, a qualitatively different means of language usage which can be employed by social work to address the needs of the population it serves, without automatically attributing deficiencies to them or the issues that they confront, is difficult to foresee. Such a language, or a method of discourse would have to allow for the de-inscription from "culture" its current encumbrance of subjugation, allowing it to be understood not as a marker for the Other, but as a descriptor for inevitable human variation.

Bhabha contends that:

the transformational value of change lies in the rearticulation, or translation, of elements that are *neither the One* (unitary working class) *nor the Other* (the politics of gender) but *something else besides*, which contests the terms and territories of both. (Bhabha, 1994, p. 28)

The one, in the case of social work can be translated as the pre-multiculturalist—Eurocentric and monocultural—discourse and application, and the other as the current multiculturalist discourse and application. The argument made throughout this paper has been that while the former is a pernicious form of bigotry which social work has long struggled to stamp out from its discourse, the latter ideal, conceived usually as the ideal replacement of the first, is also problematic.

Whether a transformation or a change can be instituted to rework, rearticulate, those two subjugating discourses to create a more radical emancipatory discourse and application is difficult to conceive, however necessary it may be. It is clear, however, that the transformative role of contemporary social work must be devised as something fundamentally unlike the role it assumed in adopting its fragmentary multiculturalist ideals. Although the mechanisms for achieving this are far from easy to envision, it is apparent that the initial step must be the task of examination, the demystification and contestation of the current discourse necessary to create the conceptual space in which alternatives can be posed, tested, and contested.

The manifest censorship imposed by orthodox discourse, the official way of speaking and thinking the world, conceals another, more radical censorship: the overt opposition between “right” opinion and “left” or “wrong” opinion, which delimits the *universe of possible discourse*, be it legitimate or illegitimate, euphemistic or blasphemous, masks in its turn the fundamental opposition between the universe of things that can be stated, and hence thought, and the universe of that which is taken for granted. (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 165)

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