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IDENTITY AND DIFFERENCE

In many ways, we have been discussing the idea of personhood, or what constitutes the 'self' or individual person, throughout the last few chapters. For instance, our discussion of ideology and discourse, although primarily about how we construct our worlds, was also about how individuals propogate and participate in this construction, and how this in turn shapes the way individuals act, see themselves and are seen.

In this chapter, however, I want to focus more particularly on how postmodern and critical formulations have changed the way we understand individual identity and its formation within contemporary social structures and contexts. This has important implications for how we actually assess (interpret) individual people, their situations and problems. People's sense of self is integral to their personal and social health and, of course, since many forms of social work assistance might involve some form of personal change for service users, it is important to be aware of and accountable for the types of change involved, and the types of 'selves' we create or are hoping to create. Therefore it also has important implications for how we work with people, and for what ends, since our notions about the ideal, 'normal' or 'healthy' person underpin and are embedded in our everyday practice. Since we are concerned with the ideal or 'normal' development of the self, questions about difference and diversity are inextricably bound to these issues. How we construct the self, and how we understand difference in relation to it are probably among the key questions for social work practitioners. They lie at the heart of postmodern and critical analyses of the nature of social life, the possibilities for changing it and for recreating worlds which support and include many varieties of people and experiences.

What is self and identity?

In social work we are most concerned with a sociological view of how the person, self or identity exists or develops in relation to society and social structures, and social groups within it. There are of course many different formulations about the structures and processes involved in this, and the 'self' which emerges from these. Various conceptions, arising from different disciplinary traditions, emphasise the relative importance of different types of influences, such as early family relationships, or the importance of cultural or historical contexts. Depending, of course, on the relative influence of these factors, the sense of self may be more or less changeable. However most formulations have in common the idea that there is some kind of entity 'I'

which interacts with others. As Sands says, most conceptions of self and identity 'converge in their depiction of an internalised relationship between an inner reflective agent and external experiences' (1996: 169).

These two aspects of the self, the 'internal' and the 'external', and the idea that they interact or have the capacity to act back upon and influence each other, is crucial to the social idea of identity. This interactive idea of identity formation of course means that there is a sense of the identity being in constant state of change. Different conceptions of identity place a different emphasis on the degree to which the sense of self might or should change over the course of a lifetime.

Most conceptions will also acknowledge that a sense of continuation and coherence, of a sense of self built up from a number of sources and encompassing a number of aspects, is also important. Sands poses a useful conception of self and identity as 'an internal sense of personality integration and continuity that encompasses one's life history, accrued identification and values, and relationships with others' (1996: 170).

Criticisms of traditional conceptions of self and identity

Exercise

Write a three-line description of yourself now. Where do you think these views of yourself came from and how were they developed? Now compare it with the earlier one you wrote in Chapter 5. How and why do you think the descriptions have changed?

As discussed earlier, descriptions of ourselves (the discourses which we use and in which we locate ourselves) may serve many purposes or interests, some of which we may or may not have consciously chosen. Many of us will probably have chosen at least some accepted social categories as ways of describing ourselves, such as 'dog lover' or 'white woman'. Many of us would probably feel that the descriptors we used of ourselves do not necessarily do justice to who we think we are or want to be, or at least how we want to be seen. We may feel that we do not have much choice about the social ascriptions we apply to ourselves. This is certainly the case when we fill in bureaucratic forms and have to choose from an often paltry array of categories regarding marital status, for instance.

Many of the criticisms of mainstream conceptions of self and identity relate to these very simple issues – that identity is socially ascribed and is therefore part of and perpetuates the dominant way of seeing. In radical and structural social work, identity is often defined in terms of social structural categories – race, class and gender – seeming to leave little room for variation. Worse,

since these identities are fixed in a massive structure located well outside the domain of the individual person, they seem inaccessible to the individual person to change. Worse still, in the social work arena, these ascriptions may take on a stigmatised aspect for those people defined as belonging to marginal or oppressed populations in these categories. Service users might therefore take on a disempowered, marginalised 'victim' identity, because of being assigned to social categories based on fixed social structures. Crinall (1999) discusses, for instance, the experience of young homeless women who resisted this definition of themselves.

The bulk of criticism of traditional conceptions of self and identity originates from feminist thinkers. They argue that the influential conceptions of the healthy personality to date are gender biased. They are based on studies of males (Marcia, 1980) and assume that women's identities are simply derived from a patriarchal system (Sands, 1996). In short, women's identities are defined from a male perspective and may therefore simply represent a male perspective.

In brief, quite an amount of feminist research, through researchers like Carol Gilligan (1982) and Belenky et al. (1986), has developed a picture of women's psychology as more to do with relational characteristics like attachment and caring. This is opposed to more male associated characteristics like autonomy, differentiation and individuation (Sands, 1996: 172). Yet the problem with these earlier feminist critiques was the danger of stereotyping gendered identities into 'either/or' categorisations, which in a sense were still restrictive and devaluing of women.

Dichotomous thinking

In this way, one of the most cogent criticisms of modernist constructions of identity lies in the problem of dichotomous thinking (Berlin, 1990). This is the tendency, which we discussed in Chapter 1, for language (and our conceptions of the world) to be constructed as binary opposites, creating forced categories of choices, often opposed to each other, in which one member of the pair is usually privileged. It is easy to think of many examples of this.

Exercise

Refer back to your three line description of yourself. What binary opposite categories are implied in your descriptions of yourself?

Gender categorisations are often the most obvious (usually a forced choice of man/woman), but there may be other less obvious ones. For example, the choice of the label 'dog lover' implies the existence of another category 'non dog lover' or perhaps 'dog hater'. Of course not all categorisations fit this

bill. For example, for me the label 'social worker' does not immediately bring to mind an opposite category (although depending on the circumstances I might be tempted sometimes to think about whether people are either social workers or non-social workers, perhaps if I am about to deliver a paper to a mixed professional group).

What is most interesting about such categorisations is that they clearly serve particular interests. In the case of defining social workers or non-social workers, I am safeguarding my own interests in being clear about the possible expectations of the group I am about to speak to, and pre-empting issues on which I might expect criticism or misunderstanding.

Berlin (1990) conducts a thorough analysis of examples of dichotomous thinking (and its unhelpfulness) in social work. A major problem with dichotomous thinking is that it does not allow us to recognise, account for and value difference very well. Dichotomous thinking implies that most phenomena fit into 'binary' and 'oppositional' categories, in which one item of the binary is devalued in relation to the other, and mutually exclusive as well (e.g. you must either be a 'victim' or a 'perpetrator'). Aside from assigning a fixed identity, this has the added effect of devaluing difference, by implying that only one item of the binary is more valuable than the other.

Exercise

Think of some other examples of dichotomous thinking in social work.

Karen Healy (2000: 64) has drawn up a fairly comprehensive list of examples of binary opposites which are constructed in social work, to which I have adapted and added:

- middle class/working class
- the privileged/the underprivileged
- technical knowledge/lived experience
- voice/silence
- researcher/researched
- worker/client
- powerful/powerless
- researcher/practitioner
- theory/practice
- professional/non-professional
- professional/volunteer
- voluntary client/involuntary client
- public/private.

I will return to our discussion of binary oppositional thinking later when we explore the role of such thinking in constructing difference. For the moment

however let us summarise the main criticisms of these conceptions of self and identity.

Identities based on social structural categorisations, no matter how many, can be problematic since they do not allow for change. To define people simply in terms of structural categorisations also seems to deny the rich variety of combinations, indeed individuality, which can arise from the variety of backgrounds, experiences and changes which seem so much a part of the contemporary world of migration, employment, familial instability and global influences. During the course of a lifetime people experience, are influenced by and interact within many different worlds. Locking people into fixed identity categories can also have the effect of fixing power or powerlessness to these categorisations. Therefore marginal groups who are defined by a powerless identity are effectively disempowered through the assignation of this label.

There are then three main problems with traditional conceptions of self and identity:

1   They deny the possibility of changing identities in response to changing contexts at a number of levels.
2   They deny personal autonomy, the ability to change and reinvent the self in relation to changing contexts.
3   They 'fix' identities in ways which potentially disempower those with marginal identities.

From a critical and postmodern perspective, we need a conception of self and identity which incorporates an understanding of changing identities and the ability to empower oneself by participating in making these changes.

Reformulating the idea of self and identity

In simple terms, a postmodern view recognises that people's identities are made and understood in context and that therefore they may:

• change
• be contradictory
• be multiple.

The postmodern idea of identity, or 'subjectivity' as it is sometimes termed, can be summarised as 'multiple, contradictory and in-process' (Newton, 1988: 99). The idea that identities can only be fully understood in context, which may be fluid and changing, is sometimes referred to as 'situated subjectivity'. Identities and people's own perspectives must be interpreted in the light of changing and specific situations in which they are located. Not only do they change in relation to context and over time, but they may include quite

contradictory aspects (presumably because the contexts in which we live can be experienced as contradictory). As well, people may have a number of different identities at any one time, again, because all of us operate in several different contexts even over the course of one day.

Exercise

Review your three-line description of yourself and add any descriptions you think are missing. How many different 'identities' can you identify? Think about how your descriptions of yourself might have changed over time. Do you have a sense of yourself which is continuing, despite all this? How have you arrived at this sense?

In a critical postmodern view, structural categories such as race, class and gender might still have meaning, although a person's self-hood might not automatically be linked to these categories. This is seen as a 'non-essentialist' view – the recognition that although there may be fixed labels and categories with which people identify, the ways in which these are actually enacted and understood might vary according to the situation.

This notion gets us around one of the potential problems with a postmodern approach to identity – that although identities might be fluid, people still experience their sense of self as coherent and often have a need to do so (Sands, 1996: 176). Sands suggests it is better to refer to self-hood, or subjectivity as 'positionality' or 'narrative identity'. Both these terms acknowledge the idea of a sense of self, a need for some coherence in the way people see themselves, but at the same time allow for the relative and changing aspects of identity.

According to Sands, the term 'positionality' assumes that the self/identity both does and does not exist in an essential form. It depends on the context in which we are using the concept. Certain parts of the self might remain constant, others might change and different and multiple identities might co-exist. (1996: 176). In simple terms, while a person might not see their own perception of her or himself changing, she or he might recognise that the way other people see them, and therefore the way in which they present themselves, may change from situation to situation.

Sands coins the term 'narrative identity' (borrowed from Ricoeur) to acknowledge the idea that narratives provide a means for people to integrate potentially adverse experiences into a coherent whole. Because narratives usually carry a cultural requirement to be coherent, people fashion them in these terms, in order to gain acceptance and validation within their own cultural context. It is effectively through constructing culturally appropriate stories then that identities are made coherent (Sands, 1996: 178). The idea of narrative identity therefore carries with it the possibilities of both coherence and change, of coherence being remade constantly in relation to experience and context.

This type of conception of identity also addresses another of the major criticisms of traditional modernist conceptions – it restores a sense of agency to the individual. Through participating in constructing their own narratives, people are also effectively taking some responsibility for constructing their own identities. However, they create narratives for social and cultural reasons, and often the form the narrative takes is culturally influenced (Cohler, 1991; Ricoeur, 1986) and certainly infused with and within cultural discourses. This idea that individuals are being constructed, but also engaged in constructing themselves at the same time, is important in a postmodern feminist (Butler, 1995; Fawcett, 2000: 67), and indeed in a critical and postmodern view.

The idea that identity can include contradictions is also important. In an earlier chapter I discussed the idea of 'complicity with oppression', the idea that people might seemingly engage in behaviour which works against their own best interests. This might be explained by the idea that people operate within a number of different discourses, not all of which might be their own. They may perceive their 'best interests' differently from the way in which accepted discourses define them. For instance, I know of many feminists who still do the bulk of the housework for their male partners. In feminist discourse their behaviour is seen as contradictory. In terms of relationship preservation, however, it might not. Presumably any feminist, like any woman, also has concerns about relationships, because she lives in a culture and social structure in which they are important. I am not trying to justify here the idea that it is acceptable for men not to do their share of the housework. What I am pointing out is that contradictions exist in identities because contradictions exist in discourses, and identities cannot and do not exist separately from, to use a more jargonish phrase, their 'discursive context'. This aspect of postmodern thinking about the contradictions inherent in identities is important in allowing us to see and appreciate the complexity of people's everyday lived experience. Such a view is therefore important in allowing us to envisage ways in which such experiences might be changed.

The whole self

An important implication of this more complex view of self and identity is the recognition that there are many aspects to the self made in social context. As we noted earlier from Sands (1996: 170), there are at least three aspects – life history, accrued values and relationships with others. If we add to this the three main structural categorisations which are commonly used to define people socially – race, class and gender – we build up an even more complex picture. Of course it is possible to add to these three major categories – ethnicity, age, ablement (dis/ability), health, sexuality – to build up an even more complex picture.

In discussing the role of subjectivity in research, ethnographers like Rosaldo (1993) point out the role of personal weakness and emotions in influencing our interactions, and therefore the knowledge that we see and make from

situations. For example, Brigg's ethnographic study of an Eskimo family is partly conducted through the prism of her own emotions. Her own depression and need for privacy appeared at great odds to the Eskimo way of living and earned her a loss of status in that community (Rosaldo, 1993: 178). She was able to understand something of the Eskimo approach to living, by observing their reactions to her emotional outbursts, but also by comparing her reactions to their living conditions with her own.

Brigg's emotional reactions to the cold temperatures and harsh living conditions of the Eskimos points up the *embodied* nature of the self. Our identities, and the knowledge we make for ourselves and create for others, are mediated through our own physical perceptions and experience. Additionally, our physical appearance carries social connotations and has a role in defining our social place and identity. While this seems like a self-evident point, there has been much criticism of sociological thinking which has omitted this perspective from our understanding of social interactions (Turner, 1992).

It is not hard to see how an understanding of race, health, age or abled related identities might be integrally concerned with the embodied nature of knowledge and social relations. Leonard (1997: 41–3) also points out how an understanding of identity, from a postmodern perspective, also involves an understanding of the regulation of bodies. For instance, gender categorisations can be seen as based upon a desire to regulate women's bodies and sexuality. Health and medical systems are also based on a desire to regulate and monitor people's bodies:

> It is because people's physical bodies and their subjectivities are fused inextricably together that we might see the body as representing the subject, as a text which the professional observes for certain signs, signs which might be referring to what might be going on 'under the surface'. (Leonard, 1997: 55)

Constructions of the self in social work

Exercise

Refer back to your last three line description of yourself. Imagine that your ageing mother has been hospitalised and you have been asked to see the social worker about care options for her.

Think about how the social worker might see you and how you would want to be seen by the social worker. Try to rewrite your three-line description, describing yourself in the terms in which you would like to be seen.

What identities have you constructed for yourself and what identities do you think the social worker will have constructed for you?

Compare the two.

It is useful for us to examine what types of people social work and welfare discourse more generally try to create. What identities should service users have and what identities do we believe them to have? An analysis of this type of course tells us much about how we participate in constructing ourselves and the people we aim to assist. It is likely that there is quite a bit of discrepancy between how you think the social worker might have seen you and how you would want to be seen. Often we do not want to be seen as service users; not just because we are aware of the loss of status involved and possible disempowerment, but because of the ways in which our lives and identities may be remade to fit the identity of service user. Yet in order for 'good social work' to take place, there may be a need for people to fit the relevant identity categories.

Leonard (1997: 50–52) argues that the New Right movement has constructed the idea of the welfare recipient as 'dependent', a subject position in which 'the individual is likely to experience . . . subjection to a discursive formation which addresses her or him as an object of both negative ethical judgement and moral reform' (p. 51). In this sense, there is an implication both of how the identity of a welfare recipient is seen (negatively judged) and what they should become (reformed). Cannan (1994) makes a similar point when she refers to the 'enterprise culture' governing current conceptions of welfare, in which service users are supposed to become independent and self-reliant. These sentiments are echoed in Jordan and Jordan's (2000) analysis of Britain's New Labour Third Way policies as 'tough love'. Tough love incorporates the following characteristics:

- emphasis on the family and education as sources of norms and discipline;
- demand for more reciprocal effort from those who receive welfare support;
- a tough response to forms of 'disorder' like crime, drug use, begging;
- the prescription of moral standards and obligations;
- support for those in 'genuine' need (Jordan and Jordan, 2000: 26).

Although most recent policy in the Western world is based on similar sentiments, these conceptions of the identity of the 'welfare service user' have built up over some time. Leonard traces the idea of the 'welfare dependent' to corresponding ideas about the 'culture of poverty', in which the dominant discourse about service users included their construction as being 'trapped' in a pervasive and self-perpetuating way of being and doing which effectively kept them poor. Interestingly, however, current conceptions of the new underclass lump together groups which may have no feelings of group self-identity – for example, 'the poor' may now include single parents, the unemployed and ageing populations (Leonard, 1997: 53). The overarching identity as 'underclass' is clearly one attributed from outside. The contradiction inherent in this attribution of dependency is that it is in fact only dependency on *the state* which is discouraged – dependency on *the market* is in fact encouraged (Leonard, 1997: 53).

Exercise

Identify a field of welfare services in which you have had some experience. What kinds of identities were attributed to the users of that service? How were 'good' and 'bad' service users defined? What corresponding identities did social workers and other professionals have/construct in that service?

Of course different fields may attribute appropriate identities to service users and professionals, depending on the specific characteristics and discourses of that setting. For instance, in an income security setting, a 'good' service user might be seen as someone who engages in budget planning and counselling and only asks for assistance in extreme emergencies. A 'bad' client might be seen as someone who 'manipulates' the system and takes no responsibility for managing their finances. For example, Moffat (1999) discusses how a social assistance office creates the category of 'welfare client'. In a child protection setting an appropriate service user may be someone who is seen as a 'victim' of their situation. A poor service user may be seen as someone who doesn't have any 'boundaries' and does not respond to discipline. Taylor and White (2000) provide some very useful analyses of the sorts of ways in which service users might construct themselves as 'appropriate clients' by establishing identities as 'credible', 'entitled', with an 'authentic story'. Similarly professionals might seek to establish themselves as impartial, simply 'relating facts' or 'bound by the organisation'.

In Chapter 9 we will explore how these more complex conceptions of self and identity, and the way we construct them in welfare structures and cultures, affect some of the most basic and taken-for-granted practices in social work, like interviewing, assessment and establishing rapport. However, in the second part of this chapter, I want to explore how our reformulated notion of identity affects the idea of difference, and how we make and understand this, from a postmodern and critical standpoint.

Making difference

Earlier we spoke about dichotomous thinking and how the construction of binary oppositional categories could lead to a fixing of identity and an effective disempowering of the individual. Since identities are made in relation to and in interaction with the social world, the making of identity also involves the making of difference.

In simple terms, according to poststructural thinking, the main problem inherent in establishing difference also arises out of the problem of binary constructions in language. Because Western logocentric thinking tends to construct differences in terms of binary oppositions, we tend to define one

category against the other, or in terms of the other. Because one member of the pair is usually privileged, it is the characteristics of this privileged member which are used to define and measure the other. Thus, for instance, feminists argue that women's identity is defined in terms of men's and therefore devalued. As well, because the binaries are constructed as oppositional and mutually exclusive, the characteristics of one cannot (are presumed not to) belong to the other, and are usually couched in the opposite terms. Thus men might be characterised as autonomous and independent and women relational and dependent. Clients may be characterised as powerless and lacking in information and professionals as powerful and informed. Service users might be categorised as potentially manipulative and social workers as objective.

Derrida (1978) however suggested that there are many phenomena and meanings which do not fit into these binary categories. He made a distinction between '*difference*' and 'difference' in order to point up this broad variety of meanings which is often left out of our discourse because language categories do not exist. He used the term '*difference*' to refer to meanings which encompass 'both–and' categories; neither category, or alternative categories (Grosz, 1989; Sands and Nuccio, 1992).

Because difference is often constructed in a binary and oppositional manner, difference categories may become fixed. And because they are often determined by the dominant discourse, then the difference categories which are created often preserve dominant categorisations and hierarchies.

Exercise

Re-examine your earlier exercise in which you described yourself as you thought the hospital social worker might see you, and compare that with how you might wish to be seen.

What kinds of terms did you use to describe yourself and how did they compare with the terms you thought the social worker might use?

What are some of the potential problems with this?

Did you find that you were defining yourself at all using the terminology you thought the social worker might use? If so, this would be an example of using the dominant discourse to define other categories. You may have found that you were quite frustrated because you felt you were defining yourself in someone else's terms. It might have been quite difficult to present yourself in a 'good' light. For example, imagine if the social worker put only two options to you: that your mother live with you to be cared for by you, or that she be placed in a nursing home. If you refuse to have her in your home you are therefore seen as uncaring and selfish. Although you may feel you are quite caring, because you also need to consider the needs of your teenage children, the category for you to be both caring, yet refuse to take your mother in,

does not exist. You are therefore limited to being constructed as selfish. In this case, the appropriate number and types of categories do not exist to represent the range of experiences. So you lose out by being defined in a negative way.

This is a really clear example of how *difference* might be constructed as inferior, and of how the service user's perspective might be completely silenced, dismissed or not even recognised, simply because the categories for labelling it do not exist. In simple terms this is how difference is often constructed, and how problems arise because it is usually constructed along the lines of dominant thinking.

This following story from my own experience, which I have referred to earlier (Fook, 2001a), illustrates the problem of difference in another way. I am Australian-born Chinese by descent, being the third generation of my family to be born in Australia. Although of Chinese appearance racially, I was raised to speak only English, and in fact speak it with a broad Australian accent. I can well remember my frustration and annoyance when I attended a workshop on cross-cultural counselling, run by a prominent white North American trainer, some years ago. He began the training by informing us that many people in traditional cultures have particular meanings attached to their names, so he thought it was a good idea to begin an interview by asking the meaning of a person's name. We then conducted role played interviews, starting with this question. I remember thinking I didn't have a clue what my name, 'Janis', meant (unless my parents had deliberately named me after Janis Joplin the rock singer, whose first name is spelt the same as mine). Even worse, I couldn't care less. Not that I thought I was typical of the different cultural groups with whom practising professionals interact, but I was pretty sure I wasn't atypical either. In fact, nearly 20 per cent of the Australian population are second or third generation migrants (Jayasuriya, 1997: 11). What offended me about the example of asking the meaning of a name was its almost innocent assumption of difference, a clear route to 'othering' and distancing a person. I felt I had somehow been assigned an inferior status, constructed as different to and perhaps patronised by my interviewer. Without waiting to find out who I was, in my own terms, the interviewer had assumed my difference and related to me in those terms. He wasn't concerned about finding out *who I thought I was*, only initially relating in terms of *what he thought he saw*.

The cross-cultural trainer had also done several other things which are problematic from a postmodern and critical standpoint. He had made a prejudiced assumption that because I appeared racially 'non-white' I therefore came from a 'traditional' background. He had assumed only two categories and that I belonged automatically to the 'other' one (that is, not his). Because of my embodied appearance, he had assumed I belonged to a 'different' category, and that this category was automatically inferior. In the discussion immediately following, I voiced some of my concerns (perhaps foolishly). What was interesting was that I felt it was very difficult for me to get my points across, because the only way in which the instructor felt he could make

reparation was to instate me to the status of his category. He thought I wanted to be seen like him, in fact to be regarded as 'white', and therefore that his cross-cultural strategies of asking about traditional names did not apply to me. I, on the other hand, was quite comfortable with my racial and ethnic identity, but did not like being patronised. I didn't want to be elevated to his status – I just wanted my own category recognised. But in his thinking, the terms for him to understand this did not exist.

Amy Rossiter (1995) comes to this realisation from the standpoint of a white middle-class, non-racist woman (as she sees herself), who believes that in according her non-white colleague the status of 'friend', she is also according her the status of 'sameness'. By attributing this identity category to her colleague, she believes she is also acting in a non-racist way, effectively saying 'you are as good as me' because you are the same as me. Of course there are implicit assumptions here about non-white categories still being racially inferior. As well, the non-recognition of non-white experience being different actually serves to devalue it.

Difference, diversity and inclusivity

How does this understanding of the making of difference help us as critical social work practitioners, and what sorts of dilemmas does it raise? We will discuss these possibilities in some detail in Part 3 of the book, but in this section I wish to refer to some of the broad directions which are indicated by our foregoing analysis.

One of the major challenges in developing a critical postmodern practice is creating meaningful labels and categories which order our world, but which do not at the same time deny or stigmatise the experiences of marginalised groups.

The dilemma of difference

According to Minow (1985) the 'dilemma of difference' is a major problem in working with people with disabilities. How do we label disability categories, without stigmatising or discriminating against the people defined by the categories? She recognises that in order to name and validate experience we may need to coin labels which bring it to public awareness. So the creation and application of the 'disability' label can make important political gains for people with disabilities. The recognition of difference and the creation of an identity category on the basis of it can have positive effects. At the same time, however, that same process of categorising can have deleterious effects as well. By naming the difference, we also create the possibility of discrimination.

How to recognise and validate difference without discriminating unfairly is a central problem for critical social work practitioners. The main answer she puts forward is to locate the problem of difference squarely in the relationships which define the difference, rather than in the difference itself. The problem is in the way we construct difference, rather than being inherent to the differences we identify. She argues, as Rossiter points out earlier in relation to her non-white colleague, that the problem of ascribing stigma comes about because we equate 'sameness' with 'equality' and 'difference' with 'inequality'. More inclusive formulations might incorporate this understanding that 'difference' and 'equality' are not part of the same categories themselves, nor are they mutually exclusive categories. In fact the attribution of equality may involve the recognition of difference.

Brown takes a slightly different approach to Minow. She argues that postmodern social work should be about 'identifying contradictions, tensions and layers of the ever-changing aspect of social work identities', rather than delineating difference (Brown, 1994: 42). I would take this to mean that rather than actually defining differences as 'differences', perhaps it is better to talk about contradictions, multiple or other perspectives, and changes. The language of our labels for categories needs to reflect these aspects.

Yet another viewpoint is put forward by Williams (1996). She argues that it is meaningful to assert differences. She differentiates between 'differences' and identifies three types:

- diversity, which is the difference claimed because of shared collective experience, which is not necessarily subordinated, e.g. age;
- difference, if there is resistance against subordinate status, e.g. gender;
- division, if the difference is translated into a form of domination and forms an identity which protects a privileged position, e.g. race.

In this breakdown, it is useful from a critical social work standpoint to pursue 'diversity' and its recognition. Difference becomes more problematic when it is associated with the potential for subordination. She also points out usefully that not all discourses about difference necessarily see it as problematic. She identifies three discourses around how difference is addressed:

- the consumer choice discourse
- the management of diverse needs discourse
- political and anti-discriminatory discourses.

In the first two sets of discourses, difference is actually constructed as, and might be used quite positively, in terms of responding to community needs.

It is useful to refer to a specific example in illustrating how fixed identity categories and notions of difference can work for or against the political interests of groups defined as 'different'. With regard to the situation of indigenous peoples in Australia, for instance, there is substantial criticism of the essentialist view of Aboriginal culture (Lewin, 1991; Patton, 1995),

particularly as one constructed by anthropologists (Finlayson and Anderson, 1996). It is possible to view Aboriginal ethnicity as constructed through harsh state policies of segregation and assimilation – Aborigines were institution-alised (put on missions or reserves), their children removed and their rights to marriage and movement curtailed. While not to deny the injustice of such practices however, there is also an argument that none of these policies could be all-pervasive in the construction of Aboriginal identity – many Aborigines learned both to accommodate and contravene these practices (Finlayson and Anderson, 1996: 53–4).

Taking a more dynamic view of ethnic identity in relation to Aboriginality, Lewin (1991) notes that Aborigines are increasingly taking responsibility for defining Aboriginality, which is not a homogeneous category. Not recognising that Aboriginality is not homogeneous has political consequences. Lewin argues:

> Ideological commitment to the existence of a homogenous culture and its independence from social context prevents recognition of key structural factors, such as Aborigines' and migrants' recognition of their disadvantaged position and their use of those perceptions to mobilise to help redress that disadvantage. (Lewin, 1991: 175)

In other words, an essentialist view of Aboriginality can easily function as a victim-blaming political stance, in which a homogeneous and fixed Aboriginal culture is seen as the cause of the structural disadvantage of Aboriginal peoples. Lewin finishes by arguing that universalist and essentialist ideas of Aboriginality also function to legitimate governmental control over the definition and solution of problems in the Aboriginal community.

Identity politics and critical possibilities

It is arguments such as Lewin's which give rise to the potential of what is often termed 'identity politics', the possibility of resisting domination through the recognition of difference and the creation of new identity categories as a result (Best and Kellner, 1991: 205).

The key point, for us, as social workers, from this type of analysis, is that the politics of identity construction become integral in resisting and challenging domination. Identity construction plays in important role in the empowerment of disadvantaged groups. For example, Karen Crinall (1999) points out how, although feminist analysis is perceived at one level to be helpful to young homeless women, at another level it can be experienced as disempowering, since it is based on the necessary assumption that young homeless women are powerless victims. It is also the language of middle-class women, a discourse arising from a different set of experiences and positions. With indigenous Australians, as argued above, it is the control over the construction of Aboriginality, as well as the specific constructions, which are

important. There are therefore two key issues which have a direct bearing on social work practice in relation to identity politics: the elements of the identity, as well as the control over its construction, are vital in ensuring a critical social work practice with multiple differing groups. Young (1990) notes the politicising effects of a process of control in the construction of identity:

> Assumptions of the universality of the perspective and experience of the privileged are dislodged when the oppressed themselves expose those assumptions by expressing positive images of their experience. By creating their own cultural images they shake up received stereotypes about them. (Young 1990: 155)

Thus *narrativity* is seen as a route towards a type of social change:

> The postmodern politics of identity defines effective social change as the achievement of selfhoods by group members who tell stories about their own lives and thus do not deny their identities as members of these racial, gender and cultural affinity groups. (Agger, 1998: 73)

We will develop in more detail elements of this narrativity approach and its usefulness as practice strategies for critical social workers in Part 3 of this book.

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