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'Othering' processes

'Othering' processes are integral aspects of identity formation. The 'self' exists because there is an 'other' to whom one can compare oneself. The self–other dichotomy or binary dyad enables the self to externalize the 'other', and facilitates the act of viewing the 'other' in an antagonistic and hierarchical relationship to itself. This dyad involves comparisons that evaluate some people as superior to others, thereby creating inegalitarian relations in identity formation and hierarchies of valuing human beings. These dualisms become the basis of oppressive relationships which reinforce negative evaluations of others and reproduce relations of domination in and through interactions with other people.

'Othering' processes create divisions for policing populations labelled 'other' – those set outside the 'normal' population. They do so by configuring people as 'desirable' (the normal), or those who can be included within social relations, and 'undesirable' (the deviant), or those who can be excluded or considered outsiders. The legitimation of certain claims and practices has been central to the regulation and disciplining of groups that have been 'othered'. This goal is constituted as an integral feature of discourses and is achieved by stipulating which actions comprise 'normal' behaviour (Foucault, 1977) and which do not.

Like other professionals, social workers are implicated in 'othering' processes. These are particularly evident when they construct the 'other' as being deviant or outside prevailing social norms. In externalizing the 'other' as out there, beyond mainstream society, clients become constituted as not part of society. They thereby become socially excluded individuals to whom or for whom things can be done. 'Othering' becomes a barrier that keeps excluded people away from those who are included – a process of separation that distinguishes the 'deserving' from the 'undeserving'.

'Othering' is crucial to the process of defining the 'deserving' client as different from the 'undeserving' one. The concepts of deviancy and normality confirm a particular way of constituting people and are useful in dividing 'normal' individuals from 'deviant' ones. Although othered and treated as separate and distinct, the 'deviant' person, like the 'normal' one, is part of society. The most positive aspect of this process is that what is constituted can be deconstituted or altered. Consequently, social workers should not feel defeated when they begin to acknowledge their participation in the dynamics of oppression for they can use their new understandings to change their practice in more life-enhancing directions.

Valuing people's identity and appreciating the significance of identity relations are important, if unacknowledged, parts of the values framework in social work. People's sense of who they are, whether as policymakers, employers, practitioners or clients, has a dialogical relationship with the values to which they subscribe. Consequently, identity has a substantive impact on interpersonal interactions regardless of whether these are undertaken with members of one's own group or other groups. Identity formation is dialogical because it occurs in and through social interactions with other people. In these interactions, people draw upon available discourses to constitute the kind of identity that they want or feel they have to subscribe to. So, identity is multifaceted and fluid, and individuals choose which aspects of their identity they wish to emphasize in any particular context. Elements of identity that professionals share with friends will not be the same as those revealed to clients, other professionals or peers. The same holds for clients' use of their identity attributes.

Identity in social work relies on practitioners knowing *who* they are and understanding *who* their clients are, or how clients constitute themselves and are constituted by others for specific purposes. Identity relations in social work have been individualized and tend to be expressed in fixed and immutable terms, leading practitioners to think about identity as something that an individual acquires at birth and sticks with until death. Individuals belonging to the same category are deemed to have the same characteristics. This limited conceptualization of identity is applied to themselves as much as to clients. They deem identities as fixed and discrete rather than interactive, although they may concede that some 'discrete' characteristics overlap with others across a number of social divisions.

Social workers believe that once they learn the specifics of a given culture, they will become culturally sensitive enough to work with those who are different from them. This approach has ultimately provided the paradigm for 'culturally competent social work' (Lum, 2000). Like its earlier antecedents, colour-blind multicultural responses to racism and cultural difference, however, culturally competent approaches fail to treat identity as a fluid, multifaceted phenomenon formed through dialogical processes that are constantly being created and re-created through social interactions.

Social workers may recognize a person as 'black' but deem those subsumed within that category as all the same (see Lum, 2000). Although practitioners have moved beyond the normative 'colour-blind' approach of treating all clients as if they were white

middle-class people to acknowledge socially constructed racial differences, they have replaced one stereotype with another. In relying on stereotypical definitions of 'black people', practitioners lose the uniqueness of the individual and draw unjustified conclusions about the commonalities among that grouping. Not valuing the complexities of diversity is a failing of both social work practitioners and educators. Casting a specific cultural group as homogeneous is evident in culturally competent approaches to social work (see Lum, 2000).

Unitary conceptualizations of identity are extremely powerful and deeply embedded in social work. All women, black people, older people, are treated as if they were like all the others in their particular category; individualism means being one of a homogeneous whole. Even when drawing distinctions within categories, social workers deal with each discrete element as fixed and lacking heterogeneity. And, as social workers discovered cultural difference, they began to ask for courses on each culture so that they could better understand the differences between their culture and that belonging to the 'other'.

Rigid views of identity make it easy for social workers to adhere to stereotypes about what features and attributes constitute a particular type of person. This formulation of identity can cause social workers endless difficulties in establishing dialogical relationships with clients because they are conceptualized as passive recipients of practitioner benevolence and expertise. Much of this dynamic has underpinned oppressive social work practice with marginalized peoples or those human beings whom social workers 'other', whether as individuals, groups or communities.

Social workers' reliance on unitary and fixed notions of identity reinforces dynamics that devalue people by labelling as 'manipulative' those clients who do not behave according to their expectations, or as 'having played the game' if they have gone along with them. In their research on young mothers, Callahan et al. (2000) refer to these dynamics as 'looking promising'. One practitioner explained it thus:

> ... if in fact you [the young mother] are an active parent, a cooperative parent, a good parent, then I would suggest that you come to me and I'll go to my manager and I would support that [young mother's request] and that'll happen. (Dominelli et al., forthcoming)

These dynamics implicate practitioners in creating the client whose needs will be (un)met. They also draw the client into constituting

him- or herself as professionally defined. Acting as a member of a specific client group may seem absolutely necessary when social workers treat social divisions as significant in establishing deserving client status. For example, a social worker responding to an older person as one of a dependent or vulnerable group in need of assistance in the community may find that he or she plays along to receive resources that allow him or her to remain at home. Mothers who argue that their children are 'at risk' so that they can access scarce family support services are also displaying this kind of behaviour. Their interactions constitute the persona being related to, thereby providing a 'truth' about negotiated realities that practitioners have to address.

Practitioners create their professionalism along with their clients while clients create themselves and their social workers. Traditional social work texts have acknowledged a danger in this dynamic: *dependency* as an avoidable hazard of professional practice. Practitioners create this state when they make clients dependent on their skills or force them to meet their needs. Subordinating clients' capacities to their needs encapsulates poor or unethical practice that practitioners should eschew (Butrym, 1976).

Understanding identity as a constituted phenomenon that is negotiated through social interaction is important to relational social work practice because it frees both practitioner and client to acknowledge each other as having the power to influence what happens in their relationships and exchanges with one another. Additionally, it enables practitioners to appreciate the boundaries around their capacity to change either individual behaviour or structural conditions by helping them to recognize the limitations of their own power.

In casework relationships, recognizing the agency of a client enables a practitioner to transcend the restricted vision embodied in seeing him or her as a passive consumer. The potential for change is also blocked in competence-based approaches which relate to clients primarily in their roles as consumers of the expert services provided by professionals. In drowning out the voices of clients, professional power is diminished as practitioners add another layer of oppressive practices to control clients and restrict their scope for self-directed action. Clients are 'othered' instead of being empowered in the process, and the vicious cycle of not getting the necessary services is repeated.

Fixed views of identity formation are evident not only in official social work discourses, but also in radical ones that attempt to create alternative ways of understanding the social world and

acting within and upon it. Static and linear constructions of identity formation are evident in the portrayal of the development of black consciousness in the writings of black authors including Eldridge Cleaver (1971) of the Black Panthers; Malcolm X (Malcolm X, 1989; Lee, 1993) of the Nation of Islam; Robert Staples (1988) in discussions about black masculinity; and W.E. Cross (1978) and Lena Robinson (1995, 1998) on black psychology. These authors present identity as a fixed, chronologically determined phenomenon. Progress through specified stages of development is used to measure the extent to which black people are conscious of themselves as an oppressed group and can rise to the challenge of redefining themselves as a group capable of self-liberation. Cross's (1978) model of nigrescence and those derived from it, like Robinson's (1995, 1998), portray the use of fixed models of black people's identity formation for radicalizing purposes.

Unitary conceptualizations of identity formation have also been applied to white people (see Frankenburg, 1997). Some have focused on white women's social and psychological development. Amongst others, Jean Baker Miller (1978) ignores differentiation amongst women and treats all women as the same. Carol Gilligan (1982) does likewise when drawing distinctions between men and women's moral development. Although the writings described above have been useful in getting black people and white women to think positively about their capacity to change their oppressive situations by positing alternative ways of viewing society and their place within it, these models do not account for the less regimented ways that identity formation occurs and is experienced by oppressed peoples in everyday life.

Other thinkers have begun to theorize development differently and have looked for continuities and discontinuities in culture and identity that allow more flexible understandings of identity formation and radicalizing consciousness. These endorse oppressed people's capacity to resist being locked into a passive model of personal and group development that subordinates them as objects of other people's power to name their realities for them. In social work, John-Baptiste's (2001) model of Africentricity and Graham's (2002) Africentric analyses of identity and knowledge creation exemplify these alternative concepts.

By reframing continuities as sources of growth in diasporic conditions alongside the power to redefine reality to respond to exigencies in the daily life of people of African origins, John-Baptiste and Graham have validated the experiential knowledge of African-origined people as the basis for promoting their development as

consciously aware individuals and groups. These authors show that people of African origins exercise agency rooted in the routines of everyday life to overcome oppressive structures. Although retaining a unitary dimension to identity formation, their approaches have the advantage of highlighting how daily life experiences and the transmission of knowledge across generations and geographical space become the basis of resistance, rather than presuming that it is simply there as a by-product of power relations in the Foucauldian manner (Foucault, 1983).

People's awareness of the realities of everyday life is more messy and partial than is presupposed in academic paradigms. People may be aware of their oppression in some areas of their lives and not in others. They may wish to exercise the prerogative of emphasizing a specific aspect of their identity in one situation, but de-emphasize the same trait in another, depending on what they wish to achieve in a specific interaction with another. Their capacity to take action in support of what they may or may not know is also contingent. Much will depend on the contexts within which people operate; the extent to which they think real alternatives exist for them; and their reading of the possibilities for acting in and upon these. Their experiences of life will be more instructional if they can realize opportunities to change their situation rather than count on purely abstract theoretical models that are not rooted in their specific realities. Practitioners can improve their practice by taking note of these dynamics and using everyday experiential knowledge as the basis for change. If our lives are socially constructed, they can be deconstructed and transformed.