

## **Towards a Critical Understanding of Difference and Diversity**

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### **Abstract**

*Difference is the defining character of our globalizing and postmodern times. Difference is also the basis of oppression. Social work practitioners need to be cognizant that the way difference is deployed in public discourses is not benign. As such, a critical understanding of difference has crucial implications in anti-oppressive as well as social work practices. Furthermore, much of our understanding and perception of difference is implicit, subliminal, and often enmeshed with existing oppressive social relations. Not making visible and bringing to our critical consciousness how difference is understood and perceived would risk reproducing and perpetuating oppressive relations unwittingly in both daily and professional interactions. The objective of this article is, therefore, twofold. First, to understand the meaning of difference and its implications in anti-oppression from a critical social work perspective. The politicized meaning of difference will be further elucidated by being distinguished from a similar yet more diluted term of diversity. This more nuanced understanding of difference and diversity is important to social workers as they critically engage social critiques and social justice debates regarding issues of difference and diversity. Second, to foreground the meaning of difference to our consciousness, and thereby disrupt our unconscious complicity in oppressive relations. In bringing what may be an implicit acceptance of existing meanings of difference to the fore of our critical consciousness, one may be better positioned to resist participating in and reproducing oppression in daily mundane as well as social work interactions.*

### **Introduction**

**D**ifference is the defining character of our globalizing and postmodern times. Difference is also the basis of oppression (Mullaly, 2010). One needs to realize that how difference is deployed in public discourses is not benign, but heavily laden with power implications. As such a critical understanding of difference has crucial implications in anti-oppressive as well as social work practice. However, much of our understanding and perception of difference is implicit, subliminal, and often enmeshed with existing oppressive social relations (Bourdieu, 2002; Mullaly, 2010; Wacquant, 1993). Not making visible and bringing to our critical consciousness how difference is understood and perceived would risk reproducing and perpetuating oppressive relations unwittingly in both daily and professional interactions. The objective of this article is, therefore, twofold. First, to understand the meaning of difference and its implications in anti-oppression from a critical social work perspective. The politicized meaning of difference will be further elucidated by distinguishing it from a similar yet more diluted term of diversity. Such more nuanced understanding of difference and diversity is necessary for social workers as they critically engage social critiques and social justice debates regarding issues of difference and diversity. Second, to foreground the meaning of difference to our consciousness, and thereby disrupt our unconscious complicity in oppressive relations. In bringing what may be an implicit acceptance of existing meanings of difference to the fore of our critical consciousness, one may be better positioned to resist participating in and reproducing oppression in daily, mundane as well as social work interactions.

### **Critical social work perspective**

As stated in the introduction that this paper is written from a critical social work perspective, it is necessary to first define what critical social work perspective means. Critical social work perspective is not a unified perspective but rather a set of perspectives informed by a wide range of theoretical frameworks which sometimes overlap and at times contradict each other. Scholars vary slightly in their list of theories pertaining to the critical social work perspective, but they generally include: radical social work, structural social work, feminism, anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practices, critical race theory, postmodernism/poststructuralism, and post-colonialism (Martin, 2003; Mullaly, 2010; Peace, 2007). Despite their divergence, two central concerns of critical social work perspective are most relevant to the objectives of this article. First, critical social work has social transformation as its goal, and is keen on conceptualizing power and oppression in human relationship as well as in social structure. Second, critical social work perspective recognizes the connection between social structure and consciousness (Agger, 1991; Mullaly, 2010). Agger (1991) points out, “domination...is a combination of external exploitation...and internal self-disciplining that allows external exploitation to go unchecked” (p.108). This recognition of the connection between social structures and consciousness in critical social work literature foregrounds the risk of the unconscious perpetuation of oppressive relations on the part of the social agents. These two distinct characters of critical social work perspective underpin the discussion of difference and diversity in the sections that follow, and why such discussion is necessary.

### **Difference**

Stainton & Swift (1996) points out that while the term difference is increasingly used in academic and public discourses, its meaning is not at all clear. Different theoretical perspectives and academic disciplines would render varied and sometimes conflicting meanings to difference (Brah, 2007). According to George & Tsang (1999), the concept of difference is used interchangeably with diversity. However, the term diversity has acquired a cultural and ethnic character as it is used predominantly in the context of cultural and ethnic variations, whereas the concept of difference is rooted in the postmodern/poststructural argument against the grand narratives and Eurocentric views that have underpinned social theories since the Enlightenment era. Connell (2007) argues in her work “Southern Theory” how “overwhelmingly, general theory is produced in the metropole” and makes “claim to universal relevance” (p.28). The universal claim obscures the experiences of those who are different from the Eurocentric norm and values, and it is out of this sensitivity that the concept of difference emerged. Now difference and diversity have come to be generally understood to refer to “a abroad and ever-expanding set of particular groups or categories such as class, race, gender, age, sexual orientation, and physical or mental ability” (Stainton & Swift, 1996, p. 76).

However, the usage of the term difference is not benign. Stainton and Swift (1996) suggests that there are three ways the term difference is viewed: difference as value-neutral empirical phenomena, difference as value-neutral but socially constructed phenomena, and difference as value-driven and socially constructed phenomena. It is beyond the scope of this paper to cover each view in details. Suffice it to say that both of the first two views conceive difference as unproblematic ways of doing things differently without negative value assigned to them. They deny the role the dominant group and imbalance of power plays in the construction of difference. Stainton and Swift (1996) sharply points out that the term difference “necessarily

implies the ‘other’” (76). In a similar vein, Bannerji (2000) questions “different from what?” (550). Difference implies a core to which difference is primarily measures, “the difference that produces heterogeneity suggests otherness in relation to that core...it is a socially constructed otherness” (Bannerji, 2000, p. 550). Brah (1992) also observes that difference results from the referent point of whiteness. As such, semantically difference is a relational term, and necessarily implies a normative subject. Moreover, as an empirical phenomenon, difference cannot be detached from the social, and therefore cannot be immune from power. By ascribing a neutral value to difference, the first two views mask the power of the normative subject or dominant group (Stainton and Swift, 1996). One is left with the third view that difference is value-driven. By value-driven, difference is defined as “the exercise of power by a dominant group which, as noted, frequently remains invisible” (Stainton and Swift, 1996, p. 80). Moreover, difference is about how the ‘other’ is defined by the dominant group (Stainton and Swift, 1996; Bannerji, 2000). To name is to have power. Stainton and Swift (1996) points out, difference is about “dominant construction of an identity defined as ‘different’” (p. 80). Echoing Stainton and Swift (1999), Bannerji (2000) comments how no one ever spoke of “the absurdity of calling white women colourless or invisible” (p. 545). In similar vein, Brah (1992) also questions why no one calls white people “non-coloured people” (p. 127). These statements by Bannerji (2000) and Brah (1992) are poignant examples of how difference is always evaluated from the vantage point of the dominant group or normative subject, and easily rendered deficient and inferior. Such is the case when often a minoritized individual does something right, nobody would pay attention, while his/her particularities are prone to be magnified and pathologized. A value-driven view of difference illuminates the embedding power relations rather than the particular identity features creating difference.

By now the central role of power and oppression should become evident in the value-driven view of difference. Power is what makes the socially constructed phenomenon of difference seem “natural” or “objective” – reification. An obvious example is blacks and biologically-determined inferiority. Here it should be noted that power and oppression are taken as fluid rather than fixed notions. Power is dispersed, though unequally, in society rather than concentrates or localizes in institutions and dominant groups, and there is no fixed identity for who is the oppressor and the oppressed. Power in the poststructural understanding is not locked in polarized locations, such as the oppressor and the oppressed or the white and the non-white. Strega (2005) articulates the poststructural position of power succinctly, “for Foucault and many other poststructuralists, power is understood as something that is circulated and dispersed throughout society rather than being held exclusively or primarily by certain groups” (p. 225). Such an understanding frees us from seeing oppression as fixed in individual, group or institutions, but rather as a relationship. As a relationship, oppression dynamics shifts constantly depending on how the power positions change at any given moment. So the individual is not acted upon by power but is positioned in power. As such oppression is relational and positional. One can find him/herself constantly in and out of oppressed and oppressive positions depending on the nature of interaction and exchange. In other word, “power is a form of action or reaction between people which is negotiated in each interaction and is never fixed and stable” (Mills, 1997 as cited in Strega, 2005, p. 225). Rather than a dividing concept which separates people into the oppressed or oppressor groups, the fluid conception of power and oppression binds people together because everyone is implicated in oppressive relationships. One can easily fall prey to oppressing others if one is not aware of the power position one is in, and reproduces that oppressive relationship unconsciously. For instance, it is generally recognized by critical race

theorists that modern day's exclusion strategies against racial minority groups are unconscious, subtle and invisible mechanisms embedded in cultural and social processes (Raczak, 2004; Yee & Dumbrill, 2003). Moreover, the poststructural understanding of power and oppression better enables us to resist and to navigate the pitfall of essentializing identity, as Strega (2005) explains, "analyses directed at uncovering these [hidden power] mechanisms and delineating how they operate within us and in the minutiae of our daily existence present us with better rationales for resistance than do universal and essentialist theories, which both obscure difference and require massive mobilization to bring about change" (p. 226).

### **Diversity**

Finally, while the term diversity is often used interchangeably with difference, its usage evokes different reaction in some scholars. Homi Bhabha prefers the term difference to diversity. In an interview with Rutherford (1990), Homi Bhabha states that cultural diversity is the liberal discourse to contain cultural difference. In making a distinction between cultural diversity and cultural difference, Homi Bhabhi observes that the deployment of the term diversity shows the tension within liberalism discourse which says that these other cultures are fine, but we must be able to define them in our own terms (Rutherford, 1990). This is what Homi Bhabha means by "a creation of cultural diversity and a containment of cultural difference" (Rutherford, 1990: 208). As such, the term diversity masks "the universalist and normative stance from which it constructs its cultural and political judgments" (Rutherford, 1990, p. 209).

In similar vein, Bannerji (2000) critiques the notion of diversity as dilution or "degeneration" of difference into "seemingly benign concept of diversity" (p. 546). Echoing Homi Bhabha, Bannerji (2000) argues that liberalism deploys the term diversity to manage difference in the Canadian, US, and UK contexts. Rather than the more politically sensitized term difference, diversity diverts people's attention from power relations that create the difference, to cultural celebration and identity features. In other words, diversity in its liberal deployment relegates cultural difference to ethnic cultural issue rather than power relations issue, and turns political into cultural/personal, and public into private. As language incites thinking, depoliticizing difference in the discourse of diversity functions like ideology which masks the reality of domination, and produces false consciousness in people's minds that inequalities, social hierarchy and division do not exist.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has foregrounded the notion of difference as not benign. It distinguishes the politicized usage of difference from the depoliticized usage of a similar term of diversity. It has brought to our critical consciousness that there cannot be claim of neutrality in our view and treatment of difference. Difference necessarily implies a normative subject against which it is measured. As such difference is already othered for its departure from the normative subject. And such departure more often than not is evaluated down and pathologized. This understanding of difference has sobering implications in the context of anti-oppression. On one hand, acquiring a critical understanding of a value-driven view of difference would help center our gaze in the power relations constructing the difference, and enables us to challenge practices that subordinate and oppress people deemed to be "different". On the other hand, the value-driven understanding of difference reminds us of the human tendency to internalize the societal view of difference. As mentioned, critical social work perspective points out a connection between

power relations and consciousness. This means that social agents can uncritically internalize the societal value of difference which in turns creates a propensity in them to pathologize those who are deemed “different”. As such, one can hardly claim innocence in one’s perception and action directed to difference. A vital critical reflexive question to ask in anti-oppressive education and practice would be: How much of our action based on our perception of difference has in fact been reproducing unjust social relations without knowing it?

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