

Discourse

Knowledge, Politics, Culture, and Gender: A Discourse Perspective

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In this short analysis, I want to discuss (a) a view of cultures and bodies as created within discourses and (b) the potential relationship between that creation and oppression. My main point is that the categories of "culture" and "gender" and their instances (Hmong, woman) are not theory neutral "descriptors" but theory-laden constructs inseparable from systems of injustice. We need to be very careful how we use them. Space constraints mean I'll only be able to indicate, not provide, supportive arguments.

Neither "culture" nor "gender" is an "object": there is no such "thing" as a culture. Nor are they independent variables. There is no such thing as a gender that is not already cultured. One is never a "man" and then an "Irish" man; one is an Irishman. To be an African American woman is not to be one thing, nor is it to be the same thing as a Chinese American woman. It's not possible to subtract African Americanness and Chineseness and end up with a generic "woman." Nor are there any cultures which are not already gendered. This is particularly obvious in cultures which use gendered articles ("el," "la"). But feminist scholarship has increasingly demonstrated the "gendered" nature of cultural positions such as "person" or "citizen" (Pateman, 1989; Young, 1990).

I'll start my discussion with culture because it has been less "naturalized" than "gender" (i.e., culture is not assumed to be organized around non-cultural, "natural," or "biological" reality such as "the body").

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Cultures and cultural differences are not "discovered," they are *constructed* in the process of doing something else (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). A salient example is the current struggle over "American" or "family" values. This is not a struggle to "recover" or "decontaminate" a "lost" culture. It is a struggle to create one. And the struggle itself is as much a part of the culture that is created as the values around which the culture is organized. Ours is the sort of culture that has conflicts about what "counts" as "truly American" (McLaren, 1995). Culture is thus "written" (or spoken or imaged), created through these discursive acts. (By "discursive" I mean a series of conversations or texts that are organized around a similar topic or discursive object. Thus there are liberal, conservative, Russian, and Palestinian conversations that construct – differently – American culture. In this sense, "American culture" is a discursive object – the object of multiple discourses.)

These discourses within which a particular culture is constructed arise from different perspectives and have different purposes. Consequently, the representation of the culture varies. A frequent goal of the process is creating cultural identity as a means to a political end (e.g., unifying divergent perspectives; clarifying who has access to certain resources; creating a positive identity for group members) (Mohanty, 1992). Other goals include creating generalizations that facilitate talking or working across "differences." These are the goals that we see most often in the nursing literature as people attempt to identify meanings that are generally held by, say, Thai people, and have contributed to misunderstandings or conflict when care is provided by European Americans.

There are several problems, and many strengths, in such analyses of "cultural differences." But my focus is on conceptual and epistemological concerns. Conceptually, such analyses tend, of course, to be stereotypes or over-generalizations. They also tend to be ahistorical. They are "essentialist" in that they tend to portray each cultural position as a homogeneous set of relatively fixed characteristics (necessary and sufficient conditions for correctly characterizing a particular cultural configuration as "Thai"). This becomes most problematic when it is then applied as a taxonomy to individuals: "He's not really Thai."

More importantly, in the U.S. nursing literature they are almost always defined against an implicit "norm" that is European American (West, 1990). Description is always implicit comparison: one is saying, in effect, that the "X is like Y or unlike Z." And description is always perspectival (Rorty, 1979). What is described depends on the position from which it is viewed. What might be background (or unimportant)

from one perspective is foreground (or salient) from another. Since there is an infinite number of possible viewpoints, there is no such thing as a "complete" description. Thus the comparative and perspectival nature of discourses about any particular culture is inescapable. This should not be interpreted as meaning such discourses are always "biased." "Bias" and "perspective" are synonymous *only* within an objectivist, foundationalist metaphysic that supposes some "god's eye" view that sees everything from nowhere in particular is possible. A perspective *may* be biased because it ignores counter-evidence it would normally accept but it certainly need not be (Bernstein, 1988).

The perspectival nature of discourse about a culture is only problematic when it is obscured or denied within a narrative style that is objectivist or "scientific" in the neopositivist sense. Such objectivist discourses almost always fail to acknowledge that the "background" against which features are being "picked out" is the writer's own cultural context and particular purposes (Chandler, Davidson, & Harootunian, 1994). One can imagine that a "transcultural nurse" in China might pick out quite different features in describing Thai culture from an American nurse working in a shelter for abused women. And the features of Inuit culture that might be relevant from the perspective of planning childbirth services may be different from those that are relevant for planning substance-abuse services. These different discourses would construct different "Inuit cultures." This is not a problem. The problem is in not being explicit about the "standpoint" from which one is "writing" Thai or Inuit culture.

The problem of not being explicit becomes more serious when the writer is from a cultural position that has exploited or colonized the culture being written about. Please note that this is not an attribution about individuals, but about cultural positioning. I have not individually (at least not intentionally) participated in the colonization of Guatemala. But the United States (following Spain) certainly has. So if I study Guatemala, I do so carrying with me cultural assumptions that are not merely *different* from, but potentially *exploitive* of, Guatemalan culture. Consequently, there is considerable turmoil about whether the anthropological project, born of European colonial interests, can ever serve the interests of a colonized people (Bhabha, 1994; Marchand & Parpart, 1995; Patai, 1991; Stacey, 1991). There are, of course, similar concerns about European Americans studying African Americans or men studying women (Collins, 1990).

The epistemological problem is that these understandings of culture are based on an unexamined philosophical realism that assumes

a culture is a "thing" that pre-exists its description and that ethnographers are simply "mirroring" (more or less well) the cultural entity. However, "culture is not a static object of analysis but a multiplicity of negotiated realities within historically contextualized (and contested) communicative processes" (Salazar, 1991, p. 98). Interestingly, at least in U.S. nursing literature, many of these researchers hold self-avowed "constructionist" perspectives while writing as if the culture they are "representing" is an objective phenomenon. Thus they tend to under-theorize the framework from within which they are "describing" the culture.

A key point is that writing culture is a definitional act and, as such, always creates an "other," an "outsider," a "not us." This "other," then, is *defined* in relationship to the first position; this sets up a binary (us/them) in which the first term is privileged (i.e., in a descriptive sense it "sets the terms") and is often hierarchically located as superior, preferential, etc. (Said, 1978).

Another, empirical and political, problem with such descriptions is that in the nursing literature they tend to be nationalistic. Ethnic/cultural locations very often "happen" to be written within vocabularies of nationalist boundaries. My own examples (e.g., Chinese, Thai, etc.) have done this. Almost all current "nations" are, of course, colonialist creations. Even those that have had successful anticolonialist revolutions often stay mired in the binaries of nationalistic identities that are the mirror image of the colonialist project they attempted to purge (Said, 1993).

To conclude about culture: my two main points are that (1) culture is created, not discovered, and (2) when the standpoint from which it is created is inadequately articulated, the result is likely to participate in various forms of colonialist appropriations.

Gender

The discourse around gender is somewhat easier to address, because the term "gender" was created to detach the social construction of sexual identities from the "real" biological differences of sex. There are three points I'd like to emphasize with respect to gender: (1) genders are not binary: any time we sort folks into two kinds (male/female, masculine/feminine, men/women) we are really talking sex, not gender; (2) the "body" is as much a cultural construction as "gender"; and (3) gender is always cultured.

My discussion of gender is linked to my discussion of culture in several ways. I can capture my main theme by saying "demographic categories" are theory-laden, not simply "descriptive," and they are not politically neutral (Mohanty, 1991). Thus I believe we need to be much more theoretically self-conscious about how we employ these categories in our theory, research, and practice (Allen, Allman, & Powers, 1991). Whenever one uses a social category that is *also* employed as a mechanism of social injustice, one is in danger of reproducing the conditions that perpetuate injustice. For example, the U.S. culture employs categories such as "gender" or "race" to privilege or restrict access to important cultural resources and opportunities (e.g., jobs, salaries, cultural authority, mortgages, housing). These categories operate ideologically in the sense that they become internalized into ways we think about other people (e.g., what we "expect") and ourselves (e.g., what we desire, our self-concepts). Consequently, when one thinks of *oneself* as a "man," one thinks in terms that are complicit with (but also escape, go beyond) sexism. When I identify my students or research participants as "women" or "African American" or "American Indian" I am using a social theory that these are "basic units of analysis."

And they are. But one reason they are is society itself uses them to structure opportunity and privilege. Often, however, people think "gender" is "basic" because it is grounded in a biological reality. This marks "gender" (and "race") as a different sort of demographic marker from "culture" or "ethnicity," because it presumes the former are "secured" by the natural order of things while the latter are secured by history and society.

I believe this conceptualization of gender is misleading in ways that are analogous to the way thinking of culture as a "thing" is misleading. In the short space I have here, I can briefly trace but one line of argument to suggest the concerns I have and a way out of them. I suggest we think of bodies (e.g., sex) as social objects, *not* "natural" (pre-social, "real").

Three lines of reasoning can help free us from this biologism. First, whatever else bodies are, they are discursive objects in exactly the same sense that cultures are (Jacobus, Keller, & Shuttleworth, 1990; Smith, 1990; Turner, 1984). We have numerous cultural conversations that construct the "body" in multiple ways. Biological conversations are only one set, although they are culturally privileged. There are fashion, fitness, penal, educational, and a host of other cultural discourses about bodies (Coward, 1985). But I'll stay with the biological because it has

the most ideological hold on us, since we think it's not our conversation, but nature's own.

Second, biological taxonomies are theoretical, conventional, pragmatic ordering systems. They are internally inconsistent and historically and theoretically variable (Diprose & Ferrel, 1991; Lewontin, 1994; Martin, 1994). Think, for example, about the assumptions behind assuming that "skin" marks off a "body" from its "environment," despite the fact this border is transitory (since we shed it regularly), permeable, and arbitrary (why not set the border in thermal terms?). Skin is a practical boundary only for certain purposes; for others it is irrelevant. Virtually no internally consistent biological taxonomic system, for example, sorts human bodies into only two sexes. Chromosomes don't. There are XXY, XYY, and a host of variations. Possession or non-possession of uterine tissue does not. External genitalia do not. And social taxonomies are even more multiple and overlapping (hence we wonder if gays or quiche-eaters are "real men") (Jaggar & Bordo, 1989).

Third, the body is always already cultural and historical (Oudshoorn, 1994; Turner, 1984). The differentiating of bodies increasingly starts before birth through technological identification of sex that immediately creates a different context for male and female fetuses. Once a child is born, social shaping of its body increases in intensity. Thinking this way requires us to take "seriously the ways in which diet, environment and the typical activities of a body may vary historically and create its capacities, its desires and its actual material form... the typical spheres of movement of men and women and their respective activities construct and recreate particular kinds of body to perform particular kinds of task" (Gatens, 1992, p. 130). There are no bodies (or organs) that are not already shaped by their cultural context.

To summarize, our descriptions of "culture" and "gender" are always perspectival social constructions. They always depend upon a host of theoretical assumptions and not upon some guarantee of correspondence to a "real" world independent of our conversations about it. And since these demographic categories are always already taken up by, created in, systems of injustice, we need to be extraordinarily careful not to supply further support for these systems by unintentionally reproducing ideological discourses under assumptions of descriptive neutrality.

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