

Discourse

The Conundrums of Binary Categories: Critical Inquiry Through the Lens of Postcolonial Feminist Humanism

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The topic of diversity has gained widespread attention in health-care discourses in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. While in many instances it has been treated as a neutral concept devoid of political ramifications, critical discourses such as those on poststructuralism, postmodernism, postcolonialism, and feminism have challenged us to critically examine what we mean by the term and have shown us that a number of truths can be contingent upon history and setting (Fox, 1999). Steadfastly held notions of how we know, and what we know, have been questioned, not in the sense of debunking knowledge from modernist perspectives, but rather to claim the legitimacy of different forms of knowledge and to redefine who has the authority to speak, and for whom. These analytic perspectives have made visible how socio-historical-political positioning enters into the everyday to determine life chances and opportunities and the experiencing of health and well-being. But as we move into the 21st century we must ask whether these perspectives will suffice to address the complex issues that confront us. Disparities between rich and poor, continuing neo-colonization, poverty, violence, and deep-seated structural inequities continue to challenge us despite our growing awareness of the ways in which social and economic inequities affect health and well-being. Any discussion of “diversity” and health must be underpinned by a critical understanding and examination of these issues.

As we ponder the way forward, other issues come to the fore. A rereading of the Call for Papers for this issue of the Journal led me to reflect not only on what we mean by the word “diversity” but also on the specific terms that have been linked to it — for example, “marginalized,” “immigrant,” and “racialized.” I will argue here that these associations are problematic and must be held up to scrutiny. For example, what do we mean by “immigrant”? Is a middle-class person fluent in either of

Canada's two official languages an immigrant in the same sense as a working-class person who speaks neither language? In what contexts do we invoke the label "immigrant"? Who is *really* an immigrant? Is a white academic from the United States or Great Britain categorized similarly to an academic from India? Is "immigrant" a euphemism for the racialized Other — does the term mask hidden racisms? Are white middle-class people included in the discourse on diversity, and if not, why not? And how does racialization function? Can a white middle-class man be disenfranchised through the process of racialization, and be at increased risk for health problems? My colleagues and I wrestled with this last question as we sifted through ethnographic data from one of our research studies. Our data showed us that racialization can cut both ways — an apparently privileged white middle-class family can be disenfranchised through the process of racialization (Anderson et al., 2003).

These are not easy matters to confront, especially when we have entrenched ideas about masculinity, about immigrant or Aboriginal people, and about the process of racialization and racism. There is a very real concern that drawing attention to the aforementioned issues will minimize and depoliticize the experiences of, as Homi Bhabha (1994) puts it, "those who have suffered the sentence of history — subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement" (p. 172). I would argue, however, that far from minimizing human suffering, such analyses expose the nature of oppression in ways that allow us to address specific oppressions based on race, gender, class, age, sexual orientation, religion, and other forms of oppression, as they intersect and operate structurally and in the everyday, and, in so doing, offer the hope of eventual social justice. Furthermore, critical scholarship demands that we "unpack" the concepts that we use in ways that will make them transparent.

The writings of scholars such as Brewer (1993), Collins (1990, 2004), Gandhi (1998), Gilroy (2000), and McConaghy (2000) give us the tools to rethink concepts such as diversity and to question assumptions about the relationship between diversity and oppression. In this paper I offer a critique of a discourse on diversity that constructs it solely in terms of racialization and marginalization. Furthermore, I want to question these as fixed categories, which would suggest that some people are marginalized while others never have this experience. Such conceptualizations present the very real danger of setting up binary categories that undermine the competencies and human agency of those considered marginalized or racialized. The above-mentioned scholars help us to see that it is no longer useful, for *analytic* purposes, to think in terms of dichotomous categories (e.g., oppressed/oppressor). Rather, we need to examine *specific* oppressions at *specific* sites (McConaghy). This is not to say that these categories should not be invoked, but we must ask for what

purpose, in what contexts, and with what analytic value. A very real issue with dichotomous thinking and setting up categories as distinct entities is that those of us constructed as marginalized by virtue of the category in which we are placed may see this as our right to lay claim to a moral superiority by virtue of our “oppression” and, in so doing, perpetuate even more virulent forms of oppression. This is because what we do, as members of “oppressed groups” or “marginalized groups,” may go unchallenged and unquestioned by reason of our perceived diminished social positioning. We must remain mindful that “depending on the context, an individual may be an oppressor, a member of an oppressed group, or simultaneously oppressor and oppressed” (Collins, 1990, p. 225); no one of us can claim, in an uncritical way, that we belong solely to one or the other category. We need to be aware, through critical self-reflection, of the ways in which each of us can be an “oppressor,” can abuse power or collude in the abuse of power, can be a “racist,” can be morally bankrupt. In other words, we need to move beyond an *analysis* that positions people without critical examination of the specific context of oppression.

But I would like to raise other questions to encourage critical questioning and reflection. Might there be “value” for those who see themselves as members of a privileged group (“the centre”) to construct a marginalized Other? Does this reinforce the *position of power at the “centre”*? I am suggesting that fixed binaries might privilege some at the same time that it keeps others “marginalized” by reproducing colonizing relations. But what happens when the marginalized Other “steps out of line” (e.g., resists being categorized) to contest and claim the space at the centre? What resistances and tensions from the “centre” arise as privilege is contested? Such questions are raised for reflective and analytic purposes and are by no means meant to suggest that scholars, researchers, or clinicians deliberately construct “marginality” to maintain their position of privilege. Rather, I want to question the ways in which we might, unwittingly, reinforce the very power structures we seek to dismantle, by undermining resistances “at the margins,” human agency, and the competencies of those from whom many lessons can be learned. Black feminist scholars such as bell hooks (1984, 2004) and Patricia Hill Collins (1990, 2004) have shown how the view from the margins can offer new insights into the dialectic between margin and centre. As bell hooks puts it in writing about growing up in the segregated South:

Living as we did — on the edge — we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. We understood both. This mode of seeing reminded us of the existence of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and center.

Our survival depended on an ongoing public awareness of the separation between margin and center and an ongoing private acknowledgment that we were a necessary, vital part of that whole. (1984, Preface)

This understanding of both offers a particular vantage point for critical scholarship. What I also understand from hooks is that marginality is not a static concept — there is movement to and fro, from margin to centre.

So how might we move forward as we work towards a liberatory discourse? I suggest that we need to demystify the “hard categories” of marginalized and privileged, to expose how privilege is retained by some and denied to others, and the conditions of all of our vulnerabilities. This, I maintain, can be done by making situated experience the starting point of analysis, instead of the “categories” in which we are positioned. Such an analysis might well unmask the fluidity between “margin” and “centre” as identified by hooks and Collins. The example from our ethnographic research (Anderson et al., 2003) also helps to show the movement between margin and centre — a person of privilege can be made vulnerable through illness and may not be able to get the help he or she needs because of our assumptions about those we see as privileged. This is not to deny that the “social space we occupy has been historically generated” (Skeggs, 1997, p. 8). Rather, it is to show how the mediating circumstances of the everyday intervene to disrupt taken-for-granted social positions and put us at increased risk for poor health.

By pressing for the exposure of situated vulnerabilities, I hope to open an inclusive discourse on diversity that sees discrimination and social injustice not as the prerogative of those assigned to certain categories but as germane to all. No one is exempt from the discourse on diversity. Nor is anyone immune to the experience of marginalization, dehumanization, and human suffering. Scholars such as Paul Gilroy (2000) remind us that divisions along racial lines have “amputated” our common humanity — such divisions have dehumanized all of us. Postcolonial feminist authors draw our attention to interlocking systems of oppression, an approach that, as Collins (1990) puts it, “fosters a paradigmatic shift of thinking inclusively” (p. 225). Collectively, these scholars provide the conceptual lens for moving us beyond binary thinking, divisive categories, rigid boundaries, and reified identities that obscure the ways in which various oppressions and discrimination function.

I argue that a scholarship that draws on the theoretical underpinnings of postcolonial feminism and a “new” humanism, as discussed by Paul Gilroy (2000), exposes past and present injustices, and, without naivety, promises to move us towards recognizing our common fragile corporeal existence:

This is not the humanism of existentialists and phenomenologists.... Indeed, mindful of racial/ethnic associations between past humanisms and the idea of progress, this humanism is as unfriendly toward the idea of 'race' as it is ambivalent about claims to identify progress that do not take the de-civilizing effects of continuing racial division into account.... This humanism is conceived explicitly as a response to the sufferings that racism has wrought. (pp. 17–18)

To underscore Gilroy's point — this is not a humanism that foregoes an analysis of racism, sexism, classism, ageism, and other forms of oppression. It is a humanism that is possible precisely because analysis makes explicit the specific, rather than falling back on what is assumed to exist in predetermined binary categories. We are liberated from the tensions that arise around "hierarchies of oppression" (e.g., my oppression is greater than your oppression) or from seeking a common ground where there is none. A postcolonial feminist humanism holds out hope for the opening up of a discursive space for diverse voices, resistances, and praxis that might move us towards inclusivity and social justice.

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