Towards an Inclusive Paradigm in Social Work: The Diversity Framework

USHA GEORGE AND A. KA TAT TSANG

The terms 'diversity' and 'difference' have gained importance in current social work discourse because of the recognition of the need to respond to an increasingly wide-ranging client base. This article provides a preliminary outline of the elements of an inclusive framework, one capable of comprehending the experience of multiple and simultaneous oppressions. Implications for social work practice are also discussed.

Dr. Usha George and Dr. A. Ka Tat Tsang are Assistant Professors with the Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Social work is entering a new era; its future is under scrutiny in schools and communities all over the world. During the last few years, social work in the West has been critiqued for its Eurocentric theories and practice models and encouraged to be more sensitive and responsive to the changing realities of its diverse client base in order to sustain its relevance and effectiveness. Lee, Moffatt, McGrath and George (1996) draw attention to the following changes in Canadian society:

- social dislocation due to technological development;
- ideological impositions on communities;
- the devolution of social welfare responsibility to local communities; and
- the increasing diversity of communities.

These observations are relevant worldwide; they have transnational and transcontinental implications (Lorenz, 1997; Mohan, 1996a, 1996b). 'Homogeneous societies are quickly becoming a relic of the past. Continuing migrations, intercultural communications, international agreements, transnational corporations, cross-cultural coalitions all testify to the fact that we have entered the age of diversity' (Essed, 1996: 1).

Perhaps the greatest challenge to social work has been the need to incorporate the diversity of client backgrounds and experiences into
the education and practice of social workers. Clients' 'distinct group and individual identities in terms of class, gender, ethnicity, age, sexual preference etc. begin to "matter" to social work much more than their category of need or their use of a particular type of service' (Lorenz, 1997:4).

This article outlines the elements of a diversity framework that attempts to provide a basic understanding of the experiences of social work's increasingly wide-ranging client base. The article is divided into two parts: the first part examines the existing paradigms in social sciences and theoretical frameworks in social work while the second part introduces the elements of an inclusive diversity framework.

Social Science Paradigms and the Theoretical Frameworks of Social Work

The term 'paradigm' has been widely used in the physical and social sciences since Kuhn (1962) introduced it into a discussion of the nature of scientific revolutions. The term has been used in various ways: in social work, it can refer to an overarching conceptual orientation such as the ecosystems perspective (for example, Peterson, 1979), to particular epistemological positions and methodological preferences in research (for example, Newman, 1997; Thomas, 1978), to various political ideologies (for example, Mullaly, 1993), to models of service delivery (for example, Keigher, 1997), and to specific practice approaches or procedures (for example, Wu, Ender and Domokos-Cheng, 1997).

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) classify paradigms in social sciences as positivist-postpositivist, interpretative-constructivist, and critical. According to Stanfield II (1984: 182), paradigms are the 'cultural foundations' of the sciences and, as such, they are 'guides to more explicit intellectual activities, most fundamentally theory construction, methodological strategising, data interpretation, and knowledge dissemination'. 'The experiences that construct paradigms in science and humanities are derivatives of cultural baggage imported into intellectual enterprises by privileged residents of historically specific societies and world systems' (Stanfield II, 1984: 181). Paradigms are resistant to change as they tend to discard evidence that does not conform to their basic assumptions and world view. The predominant paradigm is overthrown in favour of a new one only when there is overwhelming evidence of its inadequacy.
In essence, social work paradigms are very similar to those in other social sciences such as sociology, psychology and social psychology. At the same time, social work has a plethora of theories — theories that claim to have explanatory value in individual, group and system locations. Many social work theories are 'practice theories' (Payne, 1997) who arrives at a classification of social work theories by differentiating three views of social work: reflexive-therapeutic, socialist-collectivist, and individualist-reformist. After reviewing various attempts to classify social work theories, Mullaly (1993) suggests three theoretical frameworks in social work: order theories, conflict theories, and critical theories. These classifications are mutually exclusive and all-inclusive. Many social science writers are attracted by the notion of a paradigm as it makes connections between ideological orientations and practice orientations (Mullaly, 1993).

Critical social work theory appeared in Britain, Australia, and Canada in the 1960s and 1970s, mostly in response to criticisms of order and conflict perspectives (McGuire, 1987). The critical perspective 'is part of a cluster of theories which analyze all aspects of social life from an explicitly political perspective. This political perspective intertwines theory and practice in order to produce knowledge aimed at both interpreting the world and changing it' (Baines, 1998:5). There are three requirements of critical theory (Leonard, 1993):

- the location of the sources of domination in actual social practice;
- the presentation of an alternative vision of a life without domination; and
- the communication of these findings in an accessible format to those who are oppressed in society.

Some of the current critical theories in social work are radical social work, structural social work, Marxist social work, postmodernist/post-structural social work, feminist social work and anti-racist social work (Baines, 1998). In the context of politics of difference, both feminist social work and anti-racist social work have recently received great deal of attention, and, as we shall see, both arrive at similar conclusions in their attempt to be inclusive.

The first wave of feminist theories were critiqued for excluding the realities of lives of women of colour (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1995; Essed, 1991; Hooks, 1981; Young, 1997). Additive models, such as double jeopardy and triple jeopardy, also failed to capture the complexities of women's experiences. Until recently, Western femi-
nist perspectives 'have paid very little attention to the processes of racialization of gender, class or sexuality' (Brah, 1992: 132). Feminist theory has now moved towards the concept of intersectionality (Williams Crenshaw, 1995).

Social work practice has gone through many stages in acknowledging the importance of race and ethnicity: at present, the main battlelines are drawn between anti-racist and multiculturalist approaches. Dominelli (1988) is critical of assimilationist, ethnically sensitive, and multicultural approaches that avoid any substantial discussion of the inequalities of power and privilege in a stratified society. Rattansi (1992: 41) challenges multiculturalists 'to abandon their additive models of cultural pluralism,' while simultaneously challenging anti-racists 'to move beyond their reductionist conceptions of culture and their fear of cultural difference as simply a source of division and weakness in the struggle against anti-racism'. After examining the current discourse on race and ethnicity, Elliot (1996) argues, in the same vein, that single-factor explanations should be avoided and discourse must acknowledge the complex relationships among race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and so on. Mullaly (1993), in his structural social work, also underlines the importance of understanding these complex relationships, but he stresses the significance of social class.

**A Diversity Framework for Social Work**

Race, class, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, age, and other factors are the elements of 'diversity' in social work literature (Lee *et al.*, 1996). 'Diversity' is also used interchangeably with 'difference', 'which is generally understood to refer to a broad and ever-expanding set of particular groups or categories such as race, gender, age, sexual orientation, class, and physical or mental ability' (Stainton and Swift, 1996: 76). Traditionally, 'diversity' is used predominantly in the context of cultural and ethnic variations, and 'difference' is used in postmodern and feminist discourses.

In the following pages, we describe the essential elements of the diversity framework. We have borrowed heavily from post-modern and feminist discourse. Similar listings of essential components have been compiled for integrative anti-racism (Dei, 1996), postmodern feminism (Van Den Berg, 1995), and feminist conceptualisation of difference (Brah, 1992).
The Social Construction of Diversity and Difference

Stainton and Swift (1996) distinguish three ways in which differences are defined and mediated:

- difference as a value-neutral empirical phenomenon;
- difference as value neutral, but socially constructed; and
- difference as value-driven and socially constructed.

In the last category, difference is constructed by the exercise of power and oppression by a dominant group. This definition is most applicable to a diversity/difference framework. The extensive work done by social scientists (Banton, 1987; Benedict, 1983; Miles, 1989, 1993; Rex, 1986) demonstrates the social nature of racism. The overlapping relationships of race, ethnicity and culture are complex, particularly when race was seen as the determining factor (Berry and Laponce, 1994; Yinger, 1994). 'We are close to having come full circle. In the nineteenth century, race was used to mean culture as well as race. The twentieth may well end with culture meaning race as well as culture' (Berry and Laponce, 1994: 5). Similarly, 'gender' is socially constructed and changes over time in response to social, political, and economic relations (George and Ramkissoon, 1998; Ng, 1996).

Nonessentialisation of Diversity and Difference

Race, gender, class, sexuality are nonessentialist and nonreductionist categories; 'essentialist' refers to a notion of ultimate essence that transcends historical and cultural boundaries' (Brah, 1992: 126). Essentialism involves 'unequivocal and universal understandings that can create dichotomous and hierarchical categories of right and wrong' (Van Den Berg, 1995: xiv). Two problems with essentialism are evident when dealing with racial and ethnic minorities: the fallacy of homogeneity and the fallacy of monolithic identity. The first ignores the cultural diversity within minority groups, and the second assumes that people of colour have no differential identity in a white dominated society (Stanfield II, 1993). Furthermore, there are the problems associated with category construction: the failure to recognise social and political processes involved in social definitions; the treatment of race categories as unproblematic; and the confusion of objective and subjective identification (Stanfield II, 1993). We have to question essential truths and underlying structures (Van Den Berg, 1995) as the categories are 'historically contingent and context-specific' (Brah,
Categories must be analysed in terms of the historical experiences and the specific contexts in which they operate. We also need to question overlapping categories, for example, the practice of using 'race' and 'ethnicity' interchangeably. In fact, 'ethnicity' introduces diversity into the concept of 'race' (Essed, 1996; Yuval-Davis, 1997).

Intersectionality of Oppressions
The additive models of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, which became prominent after the National Urban League in the USA in 1964 showed that older black women face the double burden of age and racial discrimination, are unsatisfactory because they do not include the interactional effects of these factors in producing cumulative oppressions. Racism can be understood only in relation to its interconnections with ethnicity, nationalism, class, gender and state (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1995; Rattansi and Westwood, 1994). 'Analyses of the interconnections between racism, class, gender, and sexuality must take account of the positionality of different racisms with respect to one another' (Brah, 1992: 126). Intersectionality theory examines the complex and combined effects of race, class, gender, sexuality, and other factors in systems of oppression. There are three forms of intersectionality: those of structure politics, and identity (Williams Crenshaw, 1995).

Multiple Identities
Intersectionalities of identities create multiple identities, which may be conflictual in nature (Williams Crenshaw, 1995). 'Identity is never a fixed core' (Brah, 1992: 142). There are hybridised identities, decen­tered subjects, and multiple sites of engagement. As Young (1997:178) observes, 'to talk of any one woman's identity or affiliations as if they were fixed and complete is to ignore the process by which particular aspects of an individual's identity are animated by various discourses and potential subjectivities as the individual moves through her life, from circumstance to circumstance'. Shifting and fluid identities are context­specific, and, therefore, the emergent identity is site-specific. Moreover, racial and ethnic identities are not necessarily self-managed; there may be considerable discrepancy between the 'insider' and 'outsider' definitions of identity (Yuval-Davis, 1997).

The Nonhierarchical Nature of Oppressions
Concepts of double and triple jeopardy generally create a hierarchy of oppressions when there are competing claims to the intensity of
oppressions. Examining the features of integrative anti-racism, Dei (1996:58) observes, 'it is important that the social categories of race, class, gender and sexuality are not seen as competing for primacy'. Privileging one oppression over another is reductionist, as it claims that complex and multifaceted phenomena can be explained by a single cause (Cohn, 1992).

**The Contradictory and Ambivalent Nature of Relationships**

The relationships among various diversities can be contradictory and ambivalent. 'Ambivalence' in its most basic sense, means fluctuation between opposites within a thing (Rattansi and Westwood, 1997). Rattansi (1992: 37) notes that it is important to consider the contradictory and ambivalent character of racialised and ethnic discourses and encounters, which are contextually produced and differentially deployed in particular situations and institutional locations and which are also 'inevitably suffused with elements of sexual and class difference'. These experiences, at times, subvert class lines: 'It is now quite clear that the complexities of white racism cannot be grasped without an exploration of the anxieties and ambivalences generated. This interaction between sexuality and racism is an important source of the irrationalities and resistances' (Rattansi, 1992: 29-30). Essed (1996) notes that life in multiethnic complex societies involves ambivalences and contradictions, especially when dealing with experiences of ethnic and national identity.

**Subject-Object Positions**

Individuals are both subjects and objects (Mullaly, 1993; Werbner and Modood, 1997). Individuals can create their own reality and are, in turn, created by circumstances. As individuals move through social encounters, they occupy subject or object positions, depending on the situation: 'In any given situation, multiple discourses operate-and often compete-to, provide subjects with an understanding of their situations and options for action' (Young, 1997: 177). The reconceptualisation of identity as produced and generated, rather than fixed creates opportunities for 'agency' (Butler, 1997).

**The Essence of Experience**

'Experience' is generally used as the criterion to affirm one's membership in a constituency. Experience, however, should not be seen as the sole determining criterion for membership, due to the varied nature of experience even within one social category and the fact that experience is dependent on an understanding of the social environment.
Experience should be seen 'not as an unmediated guide to truth, but as a practice of making sense, both symbolically and narratively; as a struggle over material conditions and over meaning' (Bran. 1992: 141).

**Locating Common Threads for Transformation**

We need to acknowledge the diversity of social and personal experiences, but it is important to locate collective or common threads that will lead eventually to organisational and structural changes (Payne, 1997), which should lead to organisational and structural changes. Brah (1992: 126) emphasises 'the importance of a macro-analysis that studies the interrelationships between various forms of social differentiation empirically and historically, but without necessarily deriving them all from a single determining instance'. Gregory (1993: 401) concurs: 'Critical interrogations of identity raise important and, indeed, troubling issues for scholars and activists concerned with the politics of social transformation'.

**Implications for Social Work Practice**

As we have outlined above, individuals have multiple identities, which are context-based and socially constructed, that are often independent of their individual definitions. Recognising and responding to diversities should not result the paralysis of social work interventions. The concepts of diversity and difference offer viable alternatives to the more rigid, stereotypical, and value-free conceptualisations of groups. When diversity and difference are examined as socially constructed and value-driven, 'difference is defined by the exercise of power by a dominant group which, as noted, remains invisible. Difference, in other words, always entails an "other" and always implies both power and oppression' (Stainton and Swift, 1996: 80). When the mechanisms of power and oppression, rather than identity-based characteristics, become the focus of analysis, there is opportunity to encourage collective action (Stainton and Swift, 1996). At the individual level, clients may be seen as having multi-layered realities, 'which are contextually based in the client's history and "life space"' (Van den Berg, 1995: xx).

Pragmatism is necessary in this context. The diversity framework does not set up imaginary battle lines between qualitative and quantitative types of inquiry. Both should be seen as 'relevant to understanding effectiveness and evaluating theoretical concepts' (Payne, 1997: 33).
Social differentiations, according to any definition, are important, and the definition of difference can be used to explain disadvantage. Knowledge should be deconstructed and reconstructed on an ongoing basis — a process that will challenge established hegemonies (Van den Berg, 1995). A profoundly critical attitude towards both modernity and postmodernity is required (Leonard, 1994). Critical social work should take the part of the oppressed and the impoverished (Leonard, 1994). 'While new ideological waves shift interventive emphasis, let us remain cognizant of our primordial commitment to the poor, the needy, and the oppressed. In so doing, we should always remain open to criticism and innovation. This spirit of self-renewal will help synergize diversity and praxis' (Mohan, 1996b).

Paradigms are sustained by communities of professionals and practitioners. As a shared structure for guiding understanding, knowledge, research, and practice, social work paradigms have been stretched to accommodate recent changes. It is not realistic that a single monolithic paradigm can be applied to all social work practice situations; different areas of practice require 'local' paradigms to guide conceptualisation and practice. The proliferation of site-specific theoretical formulations and practice procedures will be essential features of the social work profession into the next millennium (Lorenz, 1997).

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Diversity and inclusion are often treated as a single initiative owned exclusively by HR. But for real change to happen, every individual leader needs to buy into the value of belonging both intellectually and emotionally. Only when the entire C-suite steps up to own diversity and inclusion will a company’s D&I practices thrive.

4. Quotas don’t automate inclusion. Hiring goals may boost diversity numbers, but this won’t automatically create an inclusive culture. Too often, leaders focus diversity and inclusion efforts disproportionately on the employee pipeline, but the employee experience continues far beyond an offer letter.