

Reflections and Exploration of the Concepts of Race and Culture

With the increasingly complex cultural composition of learning environments, it is imperative that educators understand how this composition affects the material taught, how the material is received by the targeted audience and the nature of social interactions within the learning setting. This is easier said than done as the definition of culture is by no means a solitary, universally accepted one. The definitions of culture are many and the concepts these definitions attempt to embody are widely varied. To further complicate the matter one must also always consider the concept of race as a distinct, but related, matter. And race, much like culture, is a concept whose definitions and construction also vary a great deal. The purpose of this paper is to explore some of the many views and definitions of race and culture in an attempt to arrive at a useable “working definition” that can be applied in the learning setting.

In common parlance in America, the word culture is applied primarily in two ways that are different but related. The first usage is culture as experience and/or knowledge of an accepted cannon, usually Eurocentric, of art – in particular classical music, sculpture, opera, the visual arts, etc. The second, broader view is that culture is the practices, dress, traditions or customs used by a group of people who are defined by their assumed membership in a particular ethnic group. Whereas the things itemized in the first use are more properly termed cultural products of a specific culture, this paper is more concerned with the second application of the word and how that particular construction of culture as a concept is inaccurate, limiting and ineffective for trying to explain the motivations behind the actions of people. In this usage, behavior is almost inseparably tied to the term “ethnicity,” which in this instance is virtually interchangeable

with the term “race,” and that necessitates that the concept of race be explored before one can move to a discussion of culture.

Let's begin with what race is not – as a concept, “race is neither an ideological construct...nor an objective condition” (Omi & Winant, 1993, 4). Labeling something an objective condition is tantamount to labeling it a “fact.” That is, something that is incontrovertibly true. Something based, not upon wish, desire or belief, but based upon quantifiable characteristics that cannot be ignored. This is the scientific or biological approach to the concept. Its roots are in the Enlightenment, but the viewpoint truly became solidified in the science of the 19th century. It was during this period that classification as a process for describing and understanding the natural world into quantifiable components became *de rigueur*. Although this approach may seem to work admirably in many areas of science it is, at its root, essentially flawed for the framework of classification that is imposed upon the something to be defined is based upon an *arbitrary* set of superficial similarities or differences that are used to group and identify. For example, mammals are classified (and differentiated from other groupings) by such characteristics as body hair, giving live birth, nursing one's young, etc. While the classifications of Kingdom, Phylum, Class and so on seem immutable and carry the weight of fact, it is just as true that another set of characteristics could have been employed that would have resulted in entirely different groupings of living things. For example, what if wings were used as an identifier of category? Then, insects and birds would fall under the same broad grouping. Or, if a habitat of water were the defining characteristic – then dolphins and trout would be another subset. Thus, at its heart, such a supposedly objective system is, in fact, based upon some very subjective

assumptions. The errors inherent in such an arbitrary system have been more fully disclosed thanks to modern genetic research which shows the actual inherited relationships of living beings. In sum, race is no more a biological reality – a fact – than that flies are born from rotten meat – a once widely accepted “fact” during the Middle Ages of Europe.

Do not misconstrue this to mean that, since race is not “real,” it is not important, and that the cure for racial tensions is to ignore race as an old superstition of sorts. This is what Omi and Winant argue against when they say that race is not an ideological construct. To think of race as an ideological construct is to view the concept as false assumption that is being employed to serve in supporting an ideological framework (Omi & Winant 1993). This is problematic for it trivializes the importance of the concept and the impact it has had on so many factors of society and social organization. The concept cannot simply be ignored with the result that all of the problems associated with the concept will fade into obscurity. The solution, according to Omi and Winant, is to work towards a critical theory that:

1. acknowledges contemporary political relationships – the power dynamics between groups of people cannot be ignored when applying the concept as a tool for identifying and/or understanding people.
2. can be applied in a global context – the boundaries of race are not clearly delineated demarcations with discreet locations. Instead, race must be thought of as a fluid, ever-shifting phenomenon.
3. is diachronically applicable -- both the “meaning and salience of race are forever being reconstituted in the present” (Omi & Winant, 1993, 7). The

concept must be viewed across time as it continually changes and reinvents itself.

Applying these three approaches does appear to reconcile many of the problems associated with race as it is more commonly conceptualized. I would argue, however, that one must go a step further and recognize that, while race is not an *objective* reality, it is most definitely a *subjective* reality and this, in turn, has significant implications. Subjectivity is inherently human, and as long as human beings attempt to classify or describe something, subjectivity will be involved at some level. When something is subjectively based it is often based on personal belief or view and is thereby more difficult to term as true or false – subjectivity in this sense is akin to opinion, and is therefore not essentially wrong or right -- it just is. Whether in defining the self or classifying the other, people subjectively create racial categories that are correct and “real” for the need to which they apply. That is not to say these categories are fair, just, equal, or comprehensive in their scope; they contain, however, a kernel of validity in that they help bring understanding, however imperfect, to the one doing the classification. To follow through with this thought, race is a subjective *reality* because the very real impact such subjective beliefs have on social interactions of all sizes and scopes cannot be ignored. These subjective beliefs can enforce existing power dynamics or, on the other hand, be the start of a usurpation of a particular power dynamic. These beliefs can define and determine what types of relationships are created among people and when they are created, as well as determining what manner of relationships are not forged. The ramifications are extensive and cannot be ignored,

nor can they be satisfactorily explored in this limited space – one can only be made aware that they exist.

So, if one adopts a critical theory of race that accepts the concept as a subjective reality, one can begin to appreciate and understand the complexity of the issue and its myriad manifestations. This does not, however, particularly help one to understand how to apply the concept in interactions occurring in the learning environment. In closing this section, I propose that the key to the meaningful use of race as a concept is awareness – awareness of the complexity of race, whether in acknowledgement of political relationships, a global context or a diachronic approach, and awareness of the subjectivity of the concept. For this sort of awareness allows the concept to be malleable – to change according to need, perception and application of whatever related issue may be at hand. The educator must be aware that s/he will classify students in a manner that is subjective, and that these classifications must be adaptable and accepting of the just as subjective (and no less important) self-classification that will be occurring among the students. This openness/acceptance will help to foster an atmosphere that is a fluid give and take and, in the end result, much more equitable than that of using an essentialized and rigid system of identification.

Leaving the concept of race for the time being, let us now turn to an exploration of the concept of culture as it is studied in academia. The study of culture has its roots primarily in the western study of the “exotic” that became so popular during the colonial period.¹ What began as a so-called “gentleman’s” hobby soon evolved into the field of anthropology by the end of the nineteenth century. Anthropology is, essentially, the

¹ For an in-depth discussion of the study of the “exotic” as a style of thought, see Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978).

study of human behavior with the hopes of discovering a reason for said behavior. Unstated is the implied goal of gaining enough understanding to predict behavior in specific circumstances.

In seeking this explanation, a school of thought called Structuralism developed in the early part of the twentieth century. Structuralism operated under the premise that a society is comprised of structures that define, shape and guide behavior. Therefore, if the structures were to be discovered and understood, one would be able to understand the reasons for different types of behavior. Structuralism was followed by Functionalism. Under this view an understanding of behavior requires not only that one identifies and understands the structures underpinning society, but that one also identifies and understands the functions those structures serve. Both schools of thought attempted to be comprehensive and all encompassing as a means of explaining behavior. As such, by the middle of the twentieth century the approaches were deconstructed and faulted for trying to superimpose a false order or rigid framework on top of societies.

Nonetheless, the roots of both can be seen in a more current view of the concept of culture. Clifford Geertz, borrowing from Max Weber, sees mankind as being suspended in “webs of significance” that s/he has created. He goes on to say that culture is comprised of these webs. The webs are structures that serve the function of assigning significance (Geertz, 1973, 5). Following from this, one arrives at the more straightforward explanation that culture “is a system of...meanings...that groups of people employ to make sense of their existence (Hemphill, 1992, 9). As such, this system of meanings is a subjective tool used by people. If one accepts the subjective nature of the system then “the analysis of [culture cannot be viewed] an experimental

science in search of law, but an interpretive one in search of meaning” (Geertz, 1973, 5). This is not so far removed from Omi & Winant’s declaration about race not being an objective reality. An interpretive process is a subjective process, and what we have here is a subjective process attempting to explain a subjective system. An unavoidable conclusion to such a situation is that culture cannot, therefore, ever be completely explained or understood, as it cannot be distilled into a list of pronouncements that carry the weight of “fact,” and any explanations that exist must exist in an arena that has no strict boundaries or absolute components. This does not mean that we cannot hope to ever reach an understanding of behavior, but it does mean that we will never arrive at a complete understanding, but will only approach it. It means that we must remain aware of the fact that any understanding we achieve will be incomplete, imperfect and, of necessity, subject to ongoing interpretation.

The idea that culture is not a fixed structure is further explored by Renato Rosaldo. Because, as he puts it, “people often live with ambiguity, spontaneity and improvisation...fixed cultural expectations...do not suffice as a guide to behavior” (Rosaldo, 1989, 92). In these imprecise states people negotiate their way through life. Negotiations and power struggles about factors such as gender, race, and/or class inform and impact how people ascribe meaning to behavior. This idea that culture is a process -- that it is in motion and ever changing – supports the notion that it can never be fully understood. Rosaldo says that “culture requires study from a number of perspectives, and that these perspectives cannot necessarily be added together into a unified summation (Rosaldo, 1989, 93).

So what does this mean for how culture is recognized and interpreted in the learning environment? Before answering that question, we must first look at where treatment of culture has been and where it is now most often located. In the nineteenth century a growing sense of national identity began to emerge in the United States. Americans began to identify themselves as Americans – they self-identified creating a “we” and therefore, a “them.” This identification became a particularly strong force in the latter part of the nineteenth century with the onset of massive waves of immigration. This immigration brought “them” into direct contact, and often conflict with, “us.” The result was the melting pot approach. Americans aggressively sought to culturally assimilate the immigrants into American culture. The goal was to leach the immigrants of all aspects of “the other” and to superimpose on these people an identity of American. This view of the concept of American incorporates the idea of America being without culture. Culture was relegated only to the exotic other. The immigrants’ past experiences and cultural heritage were denied as being unimportant and, indeed, inferior and subordinate to what it meant to be American.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, cultural assimilation was replaced with the concept of multiculturalism. This view recognizes the existence of other cultures and proclaims that all cultures are valid – that each culture has something valuable to offer that can enrich the lives of all. Furthermore, this cultural relativity, seeks to act as a tool that will bridge difference through understanding and rectify existing social inequities by placing equal value on differing cultures.

Many modern social theorists take issue with this approach. They claim that this recognition of the variety of cultural difference does not lead to equality for all. Instead,

they believe it often leads to a trivialization and romanticizing of other cultures. Instead of reconciling difference, they believe the multicultural approach reinforces difference by “creating boundary effects that a homogenous ‘we’ reproduces itself [only] through the constant fabrication of ‘them’” (Moallem & Boal, 1999, 253). This, in turn, leads to, among other things, stereotyping and the creation of false, shallow interpretations of others.

Moallem & Boal take further issue with the multicultural approach. They argue that, in addition to wrongfully reinforcing the dichotomy of “us” vs. “them,” the multicultural approach is in error because it makes the [false] assumption that different ethnic communities are homogenous and representative of “authentic and unified” (Moallem & Boal, 1999, 257) cultures. This is best, if rather esoterically and abstractedly illustrated, by Homi Bhabha through the concept of cultural hybridity. Like Moallem & Boal, Bhabha shies away from viewing cultures as distinct bounded phenomena. He argues that a culture is a hybrid product resulting from the mixing of two or more differing, and often oppositionally placed, starting points. By using the term hybrid, Bhabha implies that this mixing was often forced. Unlike multiculturalism, this approach acknowledges the impact that factors such as gender, age, sexual orientation, politics and power dynamics have on the formation of culture. This approach also steers us away from dichotomy of binary constructions used for cultural interpretation that he says, being based on a Eurocentric model, are inadequate (Bhabha, 1994). In closing this section, I would say one other point has to be made. Since the notion of hybridity carries with it the idea of a forced mixing, it is important to realize that another type of mixing occurs – that of blending. Blending is the willing, from personal choice,

mixing that contributes to the complexity of cultural production. Being willing, the results and impacts of blending are far different from hybridization and must be acknowledged.

In closing, it is time to return to the locale of the learning environment. We have explored the notions of race and culture, and have arrived at the conclusions that both are fluid constructs that are ever re-creating themselves. We have shown that any discussion of race and culture must include an acknowledgement of the forces that influence the formation of racial and cultural identity. That is, we cannot ignore the impact of such factors as age, gender politics, and interpersonal power dynamics and the subordination of “the other.” Now we must examine how an acceptance of such theories should be used to create a learning environment that is productive, engaging, stimulating and equitable.

One workable response is to seek cultural democratization. We must shift away from a “deficit/assimilation perspective (Hemphill, 2006, from lecture: date not recorded) that only allows for a win/lose approach when acknowledging sharing of cultural variety. Instead, we must embrace a cultural citizenship that proclaims “the right to be different and [still] belong in a participatory democratic sense” (Rosaldo, 1994, 402). If we embrace diversity and its implications, the question of “the other” begins to dissipate. For who is “the we,” and who is “the them” will change from day to day depending on the topic of discussion. This, in turn, leads to dissolution of the rigid us/them dividing line and replaces it with a stronger mix of acknowledging difference while reinforcing solidarity (Rosaldo, 1994). Rosaldo warns that introducing diversity and inclusion into the learning environment “can make things less comfortable and can make reaching consensus more difficult” (Rosaldo, 1994, 410). But, he goes on to say, the reward is

well worth it as in the end, the conclusions reached “usually prove more durable because they have been tested against a broader range of opinions” Rosaldo, 1994, 410).

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