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Constructions of culture and identity in contemporary social theorising

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This article seeks to address the problematic nature of the cultural concept in social theory, and public formulations such as multiculturalism and national identity. By examining two dominant, contrasting and complementary viewpoints of culture – the ideational drawn from anthropological theory, and the structural from a more sociological perspective – it suggests that identity is the outcome of a complex interaction of Socio-behavioural factors.

Keywords: multiculturalism; culture; personality; identity; nationalism; social action

Introduction

Ethnic and cultural diversity and pluralism have become significant factors in contemporary social and political theorising. This has led to an increase in interest in notions of cultural pluralism, collective identity and nationalism – all of which are in one way or another linked to the concept of culture (Gellner, 1993). A key assumption underlying this theorising is that 'culture' is critical for an understanding of human behaviour, especially as social action. This is perhaps most evident in the new and expanding field of behavioural studies[2] variously labelled as 'culture and personality', 'cultural psychology', 'cross-cultural psychology', 'psychological anthropology', etc. These schools regard culture as an antecedent of behaviour. However, some theorists leave the notion of culture undefined and pay scant regard to its conceptual status, thereby highlighting the shortcomings of this growing strand of social inquiry.

Similar difficulties emerge in other areas of social theory and public policy, e.g. of cross-cultural communication, racism and post-colonial nationalism. The complexities surrounding the culture concept are well illustrated in the growing literature on multiculturalism. In this context, the exposition of the notion of 'cultural identity' is critical to all theories of multiculturalism and associated public policies. A major shortcoming in this theorising is that 'cultural differences' cannot be understood without unscrambling the meaning attached to the culture concept. Indeed, in much of the multicultural discourse surrounding the 'politics of difference' in pluralistic societies, 'culture is not the problem, and it is not the solution' (Appiah, 1997, p. 36).[3]

In the light of the foregoing, this paper focuses primarily on analysing the meaning attached to the culture concept. In the first part of the paper I propose to deconstruct the culture concept with a brief historical and critical overview of cultural theorising in the social sciences. In the second half I look at how culture enters into the behavioural

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equation and is then translated more generally into social action. This relationship between culture and individual behaviour is examined in terms of the concept of identity as formulated by Tajfel and others (Lange & Westin, 1984; Tajfel, 1982; Weinreich, 1986). It is the individual identity that, in the end, makes adjustments to changing environs possible. Cultures are individualistic and collectivist, so are individual human beings. It does not automatically follow that all individuals from a sociocentric culture will be sociocentric.

Cultures: idealist versus structural

The anthropological tradition – from Tylor, Boas to Geertz

The usage of the term 'culture' in the literature shows two distinct traditions – one from the humanities and the other in the social science literature. The former builds on the 'common sense' view of culture as a value-laden notion referring to a process or a state of mind and intellectual activities exemplified in the creative arts. Culture, in this sense, as Mathew Arnold noted refers to 'the best that has been thought and said' (cited in Bantock, 1973, p. 200). In this sense, culture entails two levels of culture – the 'high' and 'low' culture – contrasting the culture of the gentry and the literati with the popular culture embodied in artefacts, oral traditions and belief systems. It was this latter, the 'culture of the folk', that was later appropriated and extended in the scholarly tradition of the social sciences where culture was broadly taken to refer to 'a whole and distinct way of life' (Williams, 1983). But, as Ulin (1988) demonstrates in his critique, the concept of culture is by no means unambiguous and self-evident.

The more recent social sciences approach to cultural theorizing stems largely from the classical humanities perspective known as 'the cultural sciences'. This is reflected in the writings of Herder, Dilthey and others who interpret culture as a system of ideas, meanings and understandings, and also values. Accordingly culture, in the sense of the 'informing spirit' (Verstehen), pertains to a diverse range of human behaviour and social activities manifest in language artefacts, myths and other intellectual products. In this idealist tradition of theorising, the language-culture nexus,[4] exemplified in the writings of Herder and others (see Fishman, 1987 and Smith, 1981) in the German romantic movements, became fundamental to general pedagogy, and the rationale of public policies directed to cultural maintenance, collective identity, in particular to designing multicultural educational curricula (Jayasuriya, 1990, 1999).

This European approach to culture theorizing in the 19th century, highlighting ideational and value characteristics, was soon incorporated by the early American School of Anthropology stemming from the work of Franz Boas, and which came to be known as 'cultural anthropology'. Boas, being an immigrant settler from Europe, was strongly influenced by the work of the German romantics such as Dilthey and Herder for whom culture was a 'zeitgeist' – a configuration of a set of practices, beliefs and ideas representing a distinctive way of life. At the same time, the American tradition of cultural anthropology in characterizing 'culture' also absorbed many elements borrowed from the work of the British anthropologist Sir Edward Tylor, for whom culture consists of:

> . . . that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, aft, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. (quoted in Cashmore, 1984, p. 65)

This assembly or inventory of characteristics consisted of *normative* (value, norms), *affective* (sentiments, loyalties), *cognitive* (knowledge, beliefs, myths), *aesthetic* (beautiful and pleasing) and *behavioural* (customs, rites, practices) elements. Tylor also maintained, in

a manner not dissimilar to the German romanticists, that these characteristics of culture were discernible in the ideational systems and material arrangements of the society.

Tylor's approach, however, was not holistic and did not demonstrate configurational point of view characteristic of 'cultural anthropology'. This was a distinctive feature of the work of Boas's two outstanding students – Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict – who, in their exposition of culture, emphasized cognitive and normative characteristics as well as the holistic patterning and configurational aspects of culture. As cultures are unique there is a need to study and understand culture within its own confines – an ideographic approach to culture. This facet of culture theory is captured by the *emic-etic* distinction in cultural analysis. As these terms originate from linguistics they reflect the origins of the terms. Emic understandings are phenomenological and culture specific, while an etic approach is nomothetic and generates a positivist understanding in terms of generalities and comparisons of cultural phenomena. On the other hand the orthodox approach to culture provides much of the rationale for the doctrine of cultural relativism, arguing that all values are equally important because whatever occurs within a cultural milieu can only be appraised and given meaning within that particular cultural context. Within the logic of *emic* understanding, i.e. a view of culture from *within* with reference to its criteria and values, cultural relativism is admittedly attractive and appears defensible. In the absence of context-independent criteria, such as from an *etic* rationality, where culture is viewed from *without*, cultural relativism runs the risk of readily slipping into a moral relativism.[5] But what provides the seemingly defensible grounds for cultural relativism as moral relativism is the logic of emic understanding, which remains problematic. However, this rests on a flawed argument because it fails to distinguish between *cultural* and *sociological* relativism. The latter is non-normative and merely states that beliefs and convictions need to be understood in the context of the milieu in which they occur (Gellner, 1985).

An essentialist approach to culture theory runs the danger of presenting not just an unreal view of culture, but also one which is rigid and static and is taken to be self-contained and tends to convey an exaggerated emphasis on the uniqueness of culture and the imperative of uniform traditions.[6] This misleading and erroneous view of culture has been modified to some extent by those who distinguish between two facets of culture as patterns *of*, and patterns *for*, behaviour (Goodenough, 1961). 'Patterns *of* behaviour' describes what happens, while 'patterns *for* behaviour' denote cognitive structures that provide not merely a map, but a blueprint for emerging trends in society. Likewise, Geertz, referring to two aspects of the 'ideal' culture, distinguishes between culture as maps *of* and blueprints *for*. This distinction overcomes one of the main sources 'of theoretical muddlement in contemporary anthropology, [namely], that "culture" is located in the minds and hearts of men' (Geertz, 1973, p. 11).

It was partly to grapple with this conceptual problem that American anthropology offered a further refinement of the culture concept by distinguishing between two dimensions of culture, the *ideal* and the *real* (Linton, 1945) and likewise Bateson's (1936) distinction between *ethos* (ideal) and *eidos* (real). Drawing attention to the distinction between cognition and values, Geertz (1957) makes a similar contrast, distinguishing cultural *ethos* (evaluative elements) from a cultural *world view* (the way the world is cognized and how things are). The latter for Geertz, is seen as pertaining to cognitive aspects of *real* culture.

In general, the *ideal* culture is prescriptive and located in the realm of expectations, values, ideas and belief systems; and as a 'normative consensus', provides the blueprint for society. These normative affective components are seen as having a regulatory influence on behaviour, that is, they provide individuals with decision rules about norms, expectations

and evaluating behaviour. The *real* culture, on the other hand, comprises cognitive elements and meaning systems as well as the lived reality of individuals functioning within the prevailing social, economic and political institutions of a society. This notion of culture, clearly evident in the British tradition of social anthropology[7] is more oriented towards structures and processes rather than idea systems, meanings and values.

The contrast between the *ideal* and *real* culture points to the existence of two different dimensions of culture theory – the *ideal* and *material* – often overlooked in conventional theorisng (Westen, 1985). The material aspects of culture have been stressed in the Marxist approach to culture, which, by and large, regards culture as epiphenomenal and/or reducible to the material forces, and relations, of production. For orthodox Marxist theory, culture is subsumed under 'ideology' in its various nuances of meaning (Mclellan, 1995) and seen as the determining influence on behaviour (Bloch, 1983; de Lepervanche, 1980).

However, despite notable exceptions, anthropological theory tends to equate culture with the 'ideational system' or the:

> System of hard ideas, system of concepts and rules and meanings that underlie and are expressed in the way that humans live [i.e.] what humans *learn*, not what they do and make. (Keesing, 1981, pp. 68–69)

In similar vein, Geertz (1957) refers to culture as 'the fabric of meaning in terms of which human beings interpret their experience and guide their actions', and views 'human behaviour as symbolic action' (1973, p. 10), i.e. actions which are generated and interpreted according to the 'fabric of meanings'. Significantly, this is viewed as an autonomous realm of primary significance in social behaviour. Consequently, for Geertz, and like-minded theorists, the real culture, which is composed of material aspects of culture, belongs to the domain of social structure and constitutes a 'different abstraction' interwoven with the cultural realm. It is this relationship between culture and social structure that is critical for any interpretive understanding of social behaviour.

Westen (1985), in a challenging analysis of culture in relation to individual behaviour, focuses on this aspect of culture theory by highlighting different paradigms of contemporary anthropological theory. Thus he describes Geertz and others as 'cognitive anthropologists' for whom cognitive-affective value structures as 'shared meaning systems' have greater significance than for 'ecological anthropologists' (e.g. Durkheim, with his notion of 'collective representation') and also British anthropologists (e.g. Malinowski and Radcliffe Brown). For the latter, culture is more firmly anchored in the *material* world of social structures, including power and authority structures, as proposed by functionalists such as White (1949) and Steward (1955) and also by Marxist anthropologists (Bloch, 1983). Thus, Westen observes that it is not the cognitions that mediate between reality and actions but material factors, which include social and economic factors, such as interests and power relations underlying meaning systems.

The dialectic between the *real* and *ideal* for the more structurally oriented 'culture theorists' is mediated by the cultural cognitions, not as coming from an autonomous realm, but arising from the way society is actively operating through its material structures and processes. The highly cognitive view of culture is both naïve and non-dynamic and fails to capture the lived reality of culture as a form of cultural practice where: '*people do not act because they think. They think because they want to act.* (Westen, 1985, p. 200)

The materialist/structural perspectives – *Raymond Williams approach*

In this context, Raymond Williams (1977, 1983) offers a challenging and refreshing alternative framework for analysing the significance of culture for social behaviour. Williams offers a redefinition of culture that attempts to avoid the dangers of Marxist reductionism, which denounces it as ideational, a 'false consciousness', as well as the exaggerated autonomy given culture by cognitive anthropologists. Baudrillard (quoted approvingly by Friedrich 1989) captures this fundamental dilemma with the remark that:

> ...if the bourgeois vulgate enshrines culture in this transcendence of values and consciousness precisely in order to exalt it as culture, the Marxist vulgate embalms it in the very same transcendence in order to denounce it as ideology ... the two scriptures rejoin in the same magical thinking. (1989, p. 308)

Williams endeavours to reconcile these contrasting traditions of cognitive and ecological/ Marxist anthropology by viewing culture as a product of social activities. By doing so, he provides a material basis for cultural activities, but at the same time emphasises the constitutive significance of culture. This convergence of idealist and materialist viewpoints is interestingly couched in the language of cognitive anthropology. This, in essence, regards culture itself as a form of communication firmly located within a social context. The meaning of any act of communication derives only from the context and is not arbitrarily linked to meanings inherent in the system of signs and symbols. Thus, according to Williams' composite definition, culture is a:

> 'signifying system' through which necessarily (though among other means) a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored. (Williams, 1977, p. 13)

The 'signifying system' includes the anthropological notion of culture as a 'distinctive whole way of life', as well as the common sense view of culture, referring to all forms of intellectual productions and artistic forms and practices (including high and folk culture). But what is most significant is that culture, in this broader sense of a 'signifying system', is enmeshed in the total social order of social classes, groups and competing ideologies. These are modified by, and also modify, other elements in the social system and as Jakubowicz, paraphrasing Williams, observes that:

> culture contains often competing partial ideologies and world views, articulating the different interests and life experiences of groups. Thus the 'dominant culture' sustains these values and ways of life which benefit the dominant groups or classes in society, however much these may change or be resisted, or lead to negotiated resolutions. (Jakubowicz, 1984, p. 2)

This theory of culture makes a notable contribution by acknowledging the constitutive significance of the culture concept and overcomes the systematic shortcomings of conventional anthropological views of culture (Williams, 1977, 1983). Culture is not a fixed entity or an autonomous realm, which, it is argued, should be understood as 'an interrelated configuration of *archaic*, *residual* and *emergent* culture' (Williams, 1977, p. 63). The *archaic culture* refers to past patterns, usually of historical tradition and identity, not effective in the present, but has symbolic value in limited instances; the *residual culture* embodies the lived patterns of behaviour which continue to be effective in the present; and, the *emergent culture* comprises expectations, negotiated aspects of culture as processes, lived meanings and relationships, all of which are seen as practised, evolving and interwoven with aspects of social reality. Williams' reformulation of culture is conceptually defensible and attractive because it avoids the danger of reifying culture as an entity, or

identifying it exclusively as a value system. This theory of culture also accepts the existence of an ideational heritage and asserts that culture in both historic and real terms. What is more, it recognizes that though culture resides in public it is largely manifest and operative at the level of individual behaviour and actions; and because of this, for Williams, culture is not dissociated from lived social practices.

Interestingly, this perspective is similar to that of other recent theorists, such as Giddens (1979) and Bourdieu (1977), who have attempted to overcome the classic problem of the social sciences, namely that of having to straddle the dilemmas created by the *subjective* and *objective* accounts of social phenomena. This distinction is pertinent to culture theorising because it highlights the difference between micro and macro explanations, i.e. those couched in terms of methodological individualism, such as the subjectivism of idealist thinking and the structuralism of Marxist theorisation, which attempts to deduce the facts of culture from structural phenomena. Neither account of culture is satisfactory; one exaggerates the autonomy of cultural phenomena and the other is guilty of a simplistic reductionism which amounts to a negation of culture.

Giddens (1982) in terms of his 'structuration' theory, and in a point of view not dissimilar to Williams (1983), attempts a reconciliation of three competing accounts by observing that:

> social theory (which I take to be relevant equally to each of the social scientific disciplines: sociology, anthropology, psychology and economics, as well as to history) would incorporate an understanding of human behaviour as *action*; that such an understanding has to be made compatible with a focus upon the *structural compromise* of social institutions or societies; and the notions of *power* and *domination* are logically, not just contingently, associated with concepts of action and structure. (Giddens, 1982, p. 29)

Broadly, he argues that both agents and structures are mutually constitutive and, therefore, material practices are embedded in ordinary individual behaviour. In other words, culture is part of the very fabric of social practices.

What is important for Williams and for Giddens is that the processes of cultural transmission and transformations are related to social, political and economic realities such as the hegemonic influences in society, institutional structures and power relations between dominant and subordinate groups in a given society. The shared emanating systems of signification, according to this view, are not historical views but are created and sustained by what happens between people – a point of view regretfully absent in the essentialist discourse of culture which tends to romanticise culture in terms of fixed traits, heritage culture, symbolization and 'core values' (Donald & Rattanasi, 1992).

Hence, the manifest culture revealed in individual behaviour is selective and not necessarily representative of a historical cultural tradition in its abstract form. This is well illustrated in the theorising of cultural pluralists who subscribe to an essentialist' understanding of culture in terms of primordial ethnicity. Ulin (1988), in this context, makes pointed reference to Williams' concept of selective tradition and suggests that in a complex society, the cultural tradition of any particular group, such as ethnic minority groups, is constrained by the hegemony of the ruling elite; in other words, ethnicity is *not primordial* but *situationally determined*.

The contrast between a primordial and situational approach to culture and ethnicity is critical to an understanding of the discourse of cultural pluralism in the ideology of multiculturalism as an aspect of public policy (Jayasuriya, 2000). The conceptualisation of culture and cultural identity in primordial terms is markedly evident in 'culturalist multiculturalism' of Australia (Castles, 1994; Foster & Stockley, 1988). In this form of

multiculturalism, the 'boundary markers' of ethnicity are the possession of shared values and other characteristics denoting the expressive (affective) aspects of culture and ethnicity. For example, Australian multiculturalism characterises ethnic groups in terms of an idealist interpretation of culture (Jayasuriya, 2000), unlike the Canadian multiculturalism which espouses corporate pluralism (Gordon, 1981), which is focussed more on the material aspects of living, one's 'life chances' as against 'life styles'. This draws attention to the instrumental, rather than the expressive/affective dimension of culture and ethnicity, such as the need for economic and social security and enabling rights to overcome inequalities. Accordingly, ethnicity is seen more as a resource to be mobilised in defined social circumstances (e.g. marginality, alienation, social discrimination etc.) rather than in terms of a fixed immutable set of values or identities.[8]

The essentialist understanding of culture and/or cultural identity (e.g. as ethnic identity), in the discourse of cultural pluralism is typically primordialist and tends to reify culture. Whereas other formulations of cultural pluralism, such as Gans (1979) and Parekh (2000), adopt a structurally or situationally determined viewpoint in conceptualising the conjunction of culture and ethnicity and view it more flexibly as being situationally revealed.

But, in terms of the dynamics of individual behaviour, what enters into the behavioural equation is the selective tradition of culture reflected through one's sense of identity, that is, how one regards one's self. This ascribes special significance to identity and identity formation in understanding behaviour as social functioning. The concept of culture is therefore constitutive in that it shapes and patterns the forms of social interaction and exchange in a given society. It is this interaction which contributes to the formation of social identity, which in turn determines the nature of social interactions.

Identity and social functioning

Westen (1985) in a challenging review of the issue of identity and in the context of the individual-society dialectic, correctly argues, paraphrasing Erikson, that the concept of identity may be viewed as a 'process' at the core of personality as well as that of culture (Erikson, 1968). Following the classic work of G.H. Mead (Brown, 1985) cultural influences on behaviour, therefore, may be conceptualised within an actor's internal frame of reference, in particular, one's conception of the self circumscribed by one's group membership. This formulation falls within the broad framework of Tajfel's (1982) 'social identity' theory, further developed by Tajfel and Turner (1986), and provides a useful concept in analysing behaviour that occurs in socio-cultural interactions. According to Tajfel social identity is:

> that part of the individuals' self concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social groups (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance of that membership. (Tajfel, 1981, p. 255)

Following the lines of identity theory developed by Tajfel and others such as Weinrich (1986), it is clear that identity is a complex concept which lends itself to analysis from different theoretical perspectives. For example, theorists who propose such concepts as 'civic culture' (Almond & Verba, 1980) in the analysis of 'political culture' of liberal democratic societies have recourse to notions such as 'civic identity'. We also detect strands of identity theory being invoked in studies of inter-group processes such as bias and prejudice (Eysenck, 2005). In fact, there is much to be gained from the study of intergroup

processes in understanding how culture as public facts becomes translated into the behavioural domain of social functioning.[9]

Social identity for Tajfel and others necessarily relates to self-categorisation, that is, an understanding of how one characterises oneself in terms of one's group membership. In this context, self-categorisation theory can be categorised at two different levels – the *personal* and the *social* (Turner, 1999). This differentiation leads to an important distinction between *personal identity* (self-categorising in terms of one's definition of oneself) and s*ocial identity* (categorised by others in terms of one's group affiliations). As regards social identity, depending on the groups to which we belong, we possess various social identities. For instance, the cultural identity and/or ethnic identity manifest in defined situations is never fixed or immutable and at best reveals mixed identities.

Given that individuals often belong to more than one group, we can have mixed identities. To take one example, the concept of cultural identity in plural societies is by no means co-terminous with a fixed notion of social identity; it also includes other identities which intersect with gender, occupation, family and class. This approach avoids reifying a particular aspect of identity and recognises that the meaning and experience of, say, cultural or ethnic identity markedly varies from one cultural group to another and also between individuals within groups. It is therefore the result of context driven experience of a self-image that in turn becomes a key determinant of social action.

Furthermore the particular facet of personal or social identity dominant at any given point of time depends on four factors: one's past experience; present expectations; currents needs and motivations; and behavioural/structural pressures (Turner, 1999). Stated differently, this suggests that one's 'identity' can be seen as internally or externally perceived. What aspect of identity prevails in influencing social functioning varies with whatever facet of identity – personal or social – prevails in any particular instance of behaviour. Besides, as each of these forms of identity and sub identities can interact with social factors, there is a constant process of definition and re-definition of identity, all of which in turn have the potential to create identity conflicts, especially in conditions of social transformation.[10]

How this complex identity structure is formed and functions in social interactions is critically important for understanding the dynamic of behaviour in a variety of contexts, such as cross-cultural communications in intergroup behaviour. Overall, this orientation remains a useful theoretical formulation in the analysis of the link between culture and behaviour. In particular, the processes of identity formation are especially relevant in coming to terms with aspects of social functioning linked to mixed identities and identity conflicts in plural societies, such as those evident in the offspring of intergroup marriages or with intercultural adoption. Here, we encounter the complexities of what has been referred to as 'dual socialisation', pointing to the vastly different and often conflicting socialisation influences on offspring in these plural or heterogeneous societies.

The existence of 'dual socialisation', as Weinreich (1986) correctly observes, cautions against a simplistic view of cultural identification. What we find is that during the period of 'primary socialisation', children from different backgrounds are likely to have different identifications. For example, the identification outcomes for children from particular ethnic groups will depend greatly on how the family perceives its own sense of cultural and other group attachments. However, these identifications are soon overlaid by 'secondary socialisation' influences coming from the school, peer groups, church, etc. These encounters with significant others, often drawn from the dominant groups of society lead to different outcomes as regards manifest identity. As a result, the sense of identity and, in particular, the resultant cultural identity must be viewed as a product of a complex

set of transactions governed by the varied social relationships that people form as a result of their lived experiences.

   This process of identity formation has been vividly portrayed by an Italo-Australian, Teresa Angelico (1989), who describes how, having come to Australia from Italy at the age of eight years, she grew up and socialised in a bi-cultural context. She describes how she was exposed to conflicting dual socialisation processes through the family, school and work, and poses the question 'How does a coherent set of meanings emerge from conflicting sources of reality?' (1989, p. 9). This, she suggests, is through a process of self - reflection, leading to a sense of self-identity, linking the present ideas with the past and integrating 'meanings from both contexts'. She concludes her account of this fascinating process of cultural identity formation as follows:

> ...integrating realities of past and present has clarified values into a coherent set of meanings which is important for future decisions. This clarification process occurs by identifying meanings, 'letting go' of meanings which are no longer relevant, retaining meanings which are considered to be of value and incorporating new meanings in the cultural framework.
>   While much of the discussion has been about the potential conflict and challenges to be faced by individuals in a bi-cultural context, there are many advantages that could be explored and an important example would be that exposure to a broader range of possibilities provides one with the options to choose. In addition, potentially conflicting situations can be a stimulus for self-challenge and growth. (Angelico, 1989, p. 9)

This revealing account confirms the observation of Weinreich (1986) and others (e.g. Ghuman, 1999) that cultural and ethnic identity is not a fixed entity, but has to be seen as taking on different forms in specific concrete situations. We reveal ourselves in many ways, sometimes overriding or concealing some aspects of our identity, depending on the context. As Angelico's portrayal of identity formation illustrates, this process, though conflict ridden, is not necessarily a liability and may even be an impetus for change. What is significant in this account is the way in which identity factors interact with personality, social and contextual factors to determine outcomes in social interaction, such as in cross-cultural communications. As a result, there is not one identity, say, as an ethnic identity, but mixed identities that are situationally revealed, particularly in the context of a multicultural society.

   This complex process of identity formation in diverse and plural societies is well described by Bottomley (1979, 1991), who, on the basis of work on second generation Greek-Australians, points out that the process of identity formation includes cultural resistances and transformations. These influences on identity formation can be studied by looking at peoples' location in the socio-political system; the cultural content of their activities; and the individuals' definitions of their own situations. It is for this reason that, 'class, position, status aspirations and gender [are] at least as important as ethnicity in the construction of the identities' (Bottomley, 1991, p. 98) of migrants and their offspring. What this suggests is that in ethnically diverse societies, 'ethnic identities are not fixed for life ... they are variable according to context and circumstance' (Brass, 1985, p. 23).

   In other words, one's social identity and ethnic identity are the products of a complex set of transactions governed by the various social relationships that people form as a result of their lived experience (Baldassar, 1999). We reveal ourselves in many ways, sometimes overriding or concealing – depending on the context – some aspects of our identity. Contrary to the essentialist discourse, which tends to romanticise culture in terms of fixed

traits, heritage culture and 'core values', identity is no longer primordially but situationally determined.

It was none other than the legendary post-colonial theorist, Edward Said (1994) who drew pointed attention to the dangers of portraying closed and fixed identities. He warned us that the romanticising of culture in terms of ethnicities and spiritual essences, which was so dominant in the hey day of anti colonialism, would come back to exact a very high price from their successful adherents. Indeed, we need to remember, as Said expressed so tersely:

> No one today is purely *one* being. Labels like Indian or woman or Muslim or American are not more than starting points which, if followed our actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind ... (Said, 1994, p. 407)

Identity formation, particularly plural or pluralistic societies, often amounts to a question of negotiating and articulating hybridity – a fusion of cultures. Hall (1994), analysing the mixed identities of the new diaspora created by post-colonial migrants in Britain and revealed in culture representations, observes that hybridity may, indeed, be 'one of the novel types of identity produced in the era of later modernity' (Hall, 1994, p. 310)

Conclusion and summary

Considering the centrality of the culture concept in diverse areas of social and political theorizing, we have endeavoured to deconstruct the notion of culture by contrasting two main theoretical orientations – the ideational and structural. The ideational-value-based orientation to the culture concept, which had been highly influential in many areas of research and public policy such as 'multiculturalism', is imbued with concepts drawn from 'cognitive-anthropological' culture theorising. A key proposition advanced here has been that this theoretical orientation is flawed because it presents an erroneous view of culture as a narrow and limited dimension, highly prescriptive and endowed with relatively fixed and distinctive attributes. By contrast, it is suggested that a more acceptable theoretical perspective may be found in the exposition of the culture concept presented by the British social theorist, Raymond Williams (1977, p. 1983). Williams' mode of theorising is attractive mainly because it attempts to reconcile competing and conflicting points of view, especially the disjunction between the ideational (values, meanings, etc.) and material (structural forces) factors in defining culture as an identifiable social fact.

The merit and value of Williams' contribution lies in 'bridging the dichotomy between material existence and consciousness' (Ulin, 1988, p. 170). Williams' approach is particularly significant because 'he treats human actions and events as intrinsically communicative' and additionally acknowledges that these communicative actions have often to mediate their 'significations' with respect to power through the notion of 'selective tradition' and cultural hegemony. This refers to the impact of structures of power and power relations in social interactions, a point of view also echoed by Giddens' (1979) notion of 'structuration'.

As Gellner (1993) rightly observes, the distinction between culture and structure (e.g. in Radcliffe-Brown, 1952), has considerable significance for the practice of social inquiry. An important perceptive comment Gellner makes in this regard is that:

> Culture mirrors structure – but not always in the same kind of way [because] there are radically different ways in which the system of tokens and signals (culture) can be related to the system of roles or positions constituting a society. (1993, p. 13)

This theoretical critique advocates an adoption of a reformulated concept of culture because it is more consistent with social reality, more adaptable, flexible and accommodating of other influences, coming from society and individual behaviour. This in turn permits a proper specification of culture as a critical factor in social functioning. But, having clarified the culture concept at a macro-level of analysis, we encounter the exceedingly difficult task of translating the facts of culture into the realities of day-to-day individual and social behaviour. This translation is effected by invoking the concept of identity, drawn from contemporary social psychological theory, especially the work of Tajfel (1982) and others (Elmes et al., 1999), as a way of mediating the gap between culture and individual behaviour. It is suggested that, if cultural identity, as an aspect of social identity, is to be the vehicle through which culture operates in social functioning, we need to formulate it more properly and locate it within a broader concept of identity,

The notion of social identity enables us to view cultural identity as a negotiated outcome in specific socio-cultural situations which involve conflict and hegemonic control. Furthermore, such an identity is neither fixed nor immutable; it is situationally revealed, and hence its impact on social interactional processes is always constrained by contingent contextual factors. Within a cognition-structural view of culture, following Williams and others, identity is formed within the complex of social practices. Or, put in Freudian terms, identity is 'over-determined' in that is not closed nor fixed – the outcome of complex and changing influences.

By taking a 'psycho-cultural approach to social belonging [as being] is necessary for understanding social behaviour' (de Vos, 1984, p. 38), we are able to adopt a conflict approach to society based on formal structural analysis. In short, the identity concept still holds the best prospects for linking the cultural domain with the dynamics of individual behaviour in socio-cultural contexts. Above all, policy initiatives and practical measures directed at enhancing the effectiveness of socio-cultural interactions flow from adopting a more theoretically defensible approach to the culture concept.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was published as a chapter in *At the Cutting Edge*, Womens Unlimited, 2007.
2. See Berry et al. (1997), Bock (1999) and Van de Vijve and Hutsohemaekers (1990) for an overview of this literature.
3. See Appiah (1997) and Templemann's (1999) critique of the recent studies of multiculturalism; also Donald and Rattanasi (1992) who provide a good account of the uses of the culture concept in this area of social theory and public policy (Clare & Jayasuriya, 1990).
4. Alter (1985) provides a good introduction to the German romantic movement and the influence of the 'cultural sciences' in the context of a succinct discussion of nationalism.
5. However, Ulin (1988) points out that Lukes, Mcintyre and others argue for a context-independent criteria of rationality to avoid the serious consequences of moral relativism. See also Crittenden (1982).
6. Brah (1992) notes that some theorists, e.g. Spivak (1987) have argued in favour of a '*strategic essentialism*' in order to mobilize a constituency to counter hegemonic dominance. But, as Brah rightly observes, this is hardly defensible and remains problematic if one form of oppression only leads to reinforce another.
7. Radcliffe-Brown (1952) who had a profound influence on the British anthropological tradition, identified anthropology as 'social' not 'cultural' and placed his emphasis on 'structure' defined as a system of a relatively, though not completely, 'stable social position' (see Gellner, 1993). See also Firth's (1951) concept of social organisation.
8. In addition to Templemann's (1999) critical overview of models of multiculturalism, see Jayasuriya (2005) for an analysis of Australian multiculturalism.

9. For fuller discussion of empirical studies of inter-group processes, see Hogg and Vaughan (2002) and Hewstone et al. (2002).
10. Barrett (2004), reviewing the research of the psychologist Singh Ghuman (Ghuman 1994) on culture and ethnicity in the adaptation of young people of South Asian origin, documents culture conflicts resulting from differences between that of peer groups and parents. He also observes the need to take account of the intersections between such factors as culture, ethnicity, religion and gender, in accounting for cultural adaptation of South Asian youth in the UK.

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