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The language of anti-racism in social work: towards a deconstructive reading

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The idea that philosophy has a place in social work has a respectable history, concentrating for the most part on the moral/practical dimensions of practice - the values, beliefs and attitudes that support (or are perhaps the prerequisite for) 'good' practice. The development of an ethics of and for social work has traditionally been associated with practice derived from humanistic values, particularly around 'respect for persons'¹. But ethics is not the only branch of philosophy that is relevant to social work. This paper does not directly address current debates within the social sciences about post-modernism² but acknowledges the impact that post-modernism and post-structuralism have begun to have in some areas of social work thinking. Such explorations have often drawn on the work of Foucault in particular, where the themes of discourse and power seem to resonate with many social work concerns³. My focus here is rather on the implications of what might be called the 'linguistic turn' that comes from an engagement with post-structuralist thinking, reading and writing and is an attempt to explore a key social work concern from one perspective, that of deconstruction.

Social workers spend a lot of time talking and writing; indeed, one of the standard comments (or insults) about social workers is that they don't actually **do** anything, they just talk. So whatever else it may or may not involve, social work is about words and ways of talking. This immediately highlights the potential importance and power of social work language and directs attention towards how it is used, whether in spoken or written form. For social work is also an enterprise that is irreducibly dependent on reading and writing. Its textual nature is demonstrated at every turn: the essays, process recordings, placement reports; the case records, applications, letters, case conference and court reports. From the process of applying to go on a training course, through the training programme itself, to the daily practice of 'professional' workers - social work is inescapably involved with the production and reception of text. Social work is, of course, involved in

NOTE: For expositional ease, gender forms are varied randomly throughout the text.

¹ See, for example, Butrym (1976), Downie and Telfer (1969), Howe (1987:98ff), Wilkes (1981).

² This is clearly a large and expanding area of study, and it is not possible in a paper such as this to provide exhaustive references; however, a number of useful texts can be cited which map out many of the key issues: Giddens (1990), Lyon (1994), Rosenau (1992), Smart (1993). In addition, Penna and O'Brien (1996) offer clarification of the different theoretical positions often subsumed within a general 'postmodern' frame.

³ See Rojek et al (1988), Bell (1993), Parton (1994a and 1994b), Pardeck et al (1994a and 1994b), and Featherstone and Fawcett (1995).

reading in a more metaphorical sense - 'reading' and interpreting people and situations, patterns of activity as well as written language. This paper suggests that - and then sets out to demonstrate how - critical analysis of social work texts, exploring their discursive structures and strategies, may clarify the assumptions and values that (perhaps unwittingly) support them.

The central concern in this paper is anti-racism and how this concept is understood and applied in a range of welfare and health practices. Though a similar exercise could be undertaken in relation to texts from other areas of welfare or 'helping' practice, I have chosen to concentrate on social work and to develop my argument through a case study drawn from the social work literature, where issues of anti-racist practice have been prominently discussed. Attempts to develop anti-racist practice have been pursued in a wide range of agency settings. At the same time, within social work education and training, the broad requirement for students to demonstrate understanding of and competence in anti-discriminatory practice (CCETSW, 1991) focussed attention on the theoretical and practical dimensions of anti-racism⁴. So engagement with these issues is timely, arguably both practically and morally; but it has proved a painful and difficult process and one which is still very much unfinished.

In what follows I want to join the discussion about anti-racist social work, starting with a brief history of what might be called the race and social work debate to locate the present concerns with the development of anti-racist practice. I go on to raise perhaps a slightly different set of questions to the ones that have preoccupied the literature to date, questions about the meaning and place of anti-racism in social work thinking, and to do this in the context of a discussion of the applicability of a deconstructive approach to social work reading and writing⁵.

An examination of the social work literature suggests a shift across time in the way social work with ethnic minorities has been conceptualised and presented. Ely and Denney (1987) offer one such historical account of the changes that social work thinking and practice have undergone. They identify five main perspectives in the literature, each perspective being associated with a particular socio-political configuration. Thus the first perspective they note, "cultural deficit", appears in the literature at a time when assimilation was being promoted as the best approach to adopt for,

⁴ Although the specific stance taken in the 1991 version of CCETSW's Paper 30 in relation to anti-racist practice was subsequently (and quite quickly) revised.

⁵ I draw here on research undertaken in connection with my Ph.D. thesis (Lesser, 1994) which explored the philosophical bases of anti-racist social work using ideas from the hermeneutics of tradition associated with Gadamer (1979) and from deconstruction (Derrida 1976, 1978, 1981, 1982).

and in relation to, ethnic minorities. The cultural deficit model implied that the problems of black families derived from supposed weaknesses or deficiencies within their cultural patterns and practices. The idea that 'colour = problem' (Jansari, 1980) encouraged social workers to put their efforts into intensive casework, designed to assist the black person or family in assimilating ever more closely into white society. Social work itself was not implicated as part of the 'problem'; this was held to reside with the 'coloured immigrants' who were having trouble adapting to life in Britain.

As assimilation gave way to integration, the next perspective to emerge in the literature was "liberal pluralism" (Ely and Denney, 1987:155). This perspective acknowledges that society consists of a number of competing groups, none of which exercises overall social control. However, it is also acknowledged that power is not evenly distributed throughout society, with some groups having greater access to power and resources than others who may be excluded as a result of discrimination. Cheetham (1972), writing from within this framework, was clearly aware of discrimination as a real and very negative fact in the lives of black people. Once the idea was accepted that ethnic minorities were the victims of structural inequalities in British society, social work could have a role in making sure that the distribution of available resources was as equitable as possible, and also in arguing for more or 'better' resources for all disadvantaged groups. Again, the focus was not on social work practice but on the position of ethnic minorities in the broader (structurally unequal) society.

Even the emergence of the idea of racism as a causal factor in the disadvantage suffered by ethnic minorities did not immediately challenge social work to any great degree. If social work was distorted by racial bias then this could be overcome by training and the availability of culturally appropriate information. This seemed to be the position taken, albeit in slightly different ways, by both the "cultural pluralists" (Ely and Denney 1987) - for example, Roger Ballard (1979) and Catherine Ballard (1979) - and by Devore and Schlesinger (1981). The fundamental integrity of the social work enterprise was not threatened; although local examples of 'bad practice' could be found, these could be corrected if the tenets of 'good practice' were once again rigorously applied. So social workers could concentrate on eradicating 'bad practice' rather than start questioning the assumptions of the whole enterprise.

The articulation of a structuralist perspective turned social work's attention to the class and racial divisions of British capitalist society. This more overtly political position challenged the traditional casework response which personalised the problems of black clients and pathologised them as individuals and in turn reframed their difficulties in terms of structural

inequality and inadequate social and welfare resources. Writers within this framework such as Dominelli (1979) and Husband (Brake and Bailey, 1980) identified racism as a key determinant affecting the lives of black people. Introducing racism into the equation allows the relationship between social work and ethnic minorities to shift dramatically, as demonstrated by the emergence of a range of black⁶ and/or anti-racist perspectives. Since the late 1970's, it has been acknowledged that social work has failed to respond adequately to the needs and demands of ethnic minorities⁷ but the question of how to act on this recognition has not yet been satisfactorily answered. The implementation of the Children Act 1989 with its requirement on social workers, for the first time, to consider children's needs in relation to race, cultural and linguistic background and religion focusses attention on social work involvement with black families and brings new urgency to the question of appropriate intervention in these cases. Social work, then, cannot stand still or rely on old ways of 'making do' in relation to work with ethnic minorities. New approaches are being formulated with, as indicated above, two predominating: anti-racism and the incorporation of black perspectives into social work education, training and practice. In the later part of this paper, I look in greater detail at a text that speaks from an anti-racist perspective and suggest that an approach based on the analysis of particular texts may shed some light on the philosophical bases of the arguments that support them⁸.

The development of an anti-racist perspective questions the status and nature of the social work enterprise. Social work's self-image may be caring and even-handed, but this is no protection from the realities of practice in a racist environment. Anti-racism challenges social work to re-examine both its premises and its priorities and to ally itself in the most practical way with the oppressed. In this way, anti-racism becomes part of a more general anti-discriminatory position which is equally concerned with questions of broader social justice and equality in relation to gender, age, disability, class, sexuality and so on. From this position, then, the terms of the debate about social work and race have changed: 'colour = problem', that is, the

⁶ Ely and Denney (1987) refer to a "black professional perspective", but devote only two and a half pages to its consideration, reflecting perhaps the newness of the ideas being presented then. In the intervening period since the publication of *Social Work in a Multi-Racial Society* the discussion has moved on a considerable way.

⁷ See, for example, ADSS/CRE (1978), Anon. (1988a), Ahmad (1988c), CCETSW (1991), Draper (1978), Jackson (1979), Jolley (1988), Ranger (1989), Scott (1988), Sharma (1991), Williams (1988).

⁸ Given the stated focus of this paper, I will not be able to offer a critique of or commentary on the articulation of black perspectives here. However a number of significant texts have appeared - for example Ahmad (1990), CCETSW (1991) and NCDP (1991) - which take forward the discussion of black perspectives in social work.

problematizing of ethnic minorities, has given way to a set of positions that have the capacity to problematise social work itself.

Having briefly outlined the stages that social work has gone through, the question of course remains, “what next?” What ought social work and social workers to do about racism? How can we become ‘anti-racist’ or ‘non-racist’? How do we even decide which of these two possibilities to pursue? Are they sequential, in that having somehow become ‘anti-racist’ one can then transcend this state to become entirely ‘non-racist’? Can we opt to become one but not the other? Does the idea of **being** ‘anti-racist’ or ‘non-racist’ start us off on the wrong journey anyway, looking for a new, fixed - albeit ideologically more correct - subjectivity⁹? In terms more directly to do with social work, we can ask what form would/could a critique of ‘traditional’ social work take? How can we think about the move towards ‘anti-racist’ or ‘non-racist’ social work, and what is the conceptual and moral nature of this process? What implications are there for the ‘interim’ relationships between social workers and their clients?

To start to address some of these questions and try to understand what, in practice, follows from the attempt to adopt an anti-racist position on social work, I would like to concentrate on one text, and use it to illustrate the possibilities of textual criticism within this field. It is through close reading that we can begin to articulate how social work writing either leaves ‘key’ questions unanswered or ‘self-deconstructs’ by presupposing the very concepts of language-practice that it seeks to disown.

If - as I have suggested above - the current stance within social work is to promote the development of anti-racism within social work education, training and practice, then what understandings of such terms as ‘racism’ and ‘anti-racism’ are there in operation? What understandings does the current literature point towards? I will suggest that the current debate turns on usages of these terms that freeze them within a logocentric order¹⁰ and that

⁹ Post-structuralism has challenged the idea of a fixed subjectivity, an essential ‘centre’ around which the individual’s identity is structured; see, for example, Weedon (1987:74-106) and Belsey (1980:passim) for discussions of subjectivity.

¹⁰ In this discussion, I draw on a number of ideas and terms that have featured within deconstructive analysis and have not (yet) found wide currency within social work; two related ideas - logocentrism and phonocentrism - merit some provisional, though necessarily brief, explanation: logocentrism “refers to a system of thought or habits of mind which are reliant upon what Derrida, following Heidegger, terms the metaphysics of presence - that is, a belief in an extra-systemic validating presence or centre which underwrites and fixes linguistic meaning but is itself beyond scrutiny or challenge” (Hawthorn, 1992: p94). One of the concomitants of logocentrism is a favouring of speech / the voice over writing / inscription; speech is held to be the form which most nearly meets the logocentric ideal of full, self-present meaning. “Speech is seen as in direct contact with meaning: words issue from the speaker as the spontaneous and nearly

therefore promotes a particular kind of activity or attitude in response. I argue that these kinds of activities are largely counterproductive in view of the stated aims of the project - the development of anti-racist practice. My case example is a standard social work text addressing social work educators and practitioners, *Anti-Racist Social Work* (Dominelli, 1988). I find this an interesting text - and not just because of the obviousness of its title - but because it offers a very particular view of both racism and anti-racism which does not seem to have been either critically examined or challenged within the social work 'orthodoxy'.

Anti-Racist Social Work is a powerful and crusading attack (and I choose the word carefully) on the whole edifice of white social work - the bureaucracy, the legal framework, the practice found at all levels, the education and training. No aspect of social work escapes Dominelli's critical gaze and, in the main, her attack is well targeted. As indicated earlier, evidence exists to suggest that social work has not responded adequately to the challenge of providing appropriate and effective services to ethnic minority groups. Dominelli's book attempts to change this situation by exhorting social workers to take action to develop a dynamic anti-racist practice - to join with others in the struggle against racism, and to change the structures and organisations that permit racism to continue.

At the moral and emotional level, it would be hard to argue against Dominelli - and indeed, I would not wish to challenge her claim as to the urgency and necessity of moves to challenge racism. My difference with Dominelli is rather at the level of frameworks, philosophical or theoretical. Her emphasis is on structures, mine is on language, and how we use language to understand, to shape and change our world. My approach in what follows is to explore two dimensions of the work in greater detail, offering a deconstructive reading of particular sections of the text. The two dimensions are :

- i. rhetorical style;
- ii. her treatment of the issue of power.

Rhetorical style

In Dominelli's analysis, anti-racist practice demands a degree of self-awareness, and self-awareness cannot be easily won. What is at issue is

transparent signs of his present thought, which the attendant listener hopes to grasp. Writing, on the other hand, consists of physical marks that are divorced from the thought that may have produced them. It characteristically functions in the absence of a speaker, gives uncertain access to a thought, and can even appear as wholly anonymous, cut off from any speaker or author. ... [It] can give rise to all sorts of misunderstandings since the speaker is not there to explain to the listener what he has in mind" (Culler, 1983: p100).

our way of thinking about ourselves and others - and the language we have available to structure our thoughts and relationships is critical. This paper presumes, but then explores the language-dependent nature of our understanding - what has been called the “linguisticity” of human existence (Dallmayr and McCarthy, 1977: p287). Dominelli’s text, written from a structuralist perspective, while robustly anti-metaphysical, is committed to an approach to, and use of, language that is quite specific.

Dominelli adopts a style of argument by exhortation: she asserts, rather than discusses; she demands, rather than negotiates. Language is treated as an essentially transparent medium for the expression of certain truths. Words have a direct, one to one relationship to ‘things in the world’, about which there can be no dispute. Thus, she can maintain a position where racism is wrong, anti-racism is right, and we have a moral obligation to fight the one and support the other; there is no acceptable alternative. This puts Dominelli in an apparently unassailable position, for challenging her call to join the anti-racist struggle in whatever terms (for example, by taking issue with her definition of and assumptions about ‘anti-racism’) looks suspiciously like covert racism. But, as this paper suggests, the question of language use and rhetorical style is not trivial, and my engagement with her text at this level is intended to acknowledge the seriousness of her concerns. I do not disagree with the overall project, then, but take issue with the way it has been conceived and described.

Odd comments that Dominelli makes suggest that she does attach some importance to the use of language. But language is not, by and large, interesting in itself; it is not, to borrow from her own arsenal of oppositional images, the main site where the battle against racism is to be fought. She indicates that there are problems associated with certain patterns of language use, but only hints at the difficulty that may be associated with changing them. The oppositional imagery that saturates the text seems to depend for its force on the belief that racism can somehow be “eradicated” from language and, by implication, from social relations. But I think that there are enough examples in her own text to show that such a belief cannot be sustained - or at least that the **process** of eradication may be less of a once and for all shift than the text often seems to suggest. Language is inherently more ambiguous than this.

But ambiguity has no place in Dominelli’s anti-racist scheme. On reading *Anti-Racist Social Work*, one cannot help noticing that she has adopted a very particular rhetorical style. She talks of “transformation”, “eradication” and “elimination” in relation to racism and racist attitudes, and the recurrent imagery is of battle and opposition. Dominelli’s text operates within a logocentric economy of difference; a world of ‘either/or’; a world of clear

alternatives: on the one hand there is 'racism' and on the other, 'anti-racism', and one must overwhelm the other. Although there is a chapter entitled "Deconstructing racism ..." (p71)¹¹, it seems to use the term as synonymous with 'destruction' or 'elimination' and thus points to a very different set of activities from those that would be recognised as 'deconstructive' from a Derridean perspective.

I stated earlier that this text is tightly bound by the logic of logocentrism, and now offer three examples to illustrate this point. Firstly, I will consider the deployment of what I have elsewhere likened to 'thought reform' slogans (Lesser, 1994); secondly, I turn to her analysis of reported statements by white social workers which she uses to expose the alleged racism behind much social work thought (pp85ff) . The final example deals with her treatment of contradiction.

The slogans I refer to appear as chapter headings or sub-headings throughout the book, and include: in chapter one, the title "**Racism permeates social work ideology and practice**", and the sub-heading (p29) "**Racism exacerbates and extends social control in social work.**" Chapter two proclaims in its title that "**Social work training is imbued with racism**", while chapter five maintains, in the form of a sub-heading, that "**Endorsing an equal opportunities policy requires the commitment of additional resources**". These slogans are not out of place in a text that is conspicuously declamatory and reinforce the unequivocal nature of the task that has been assigned to social workers - to oppose, overthrow or otherwise extirpate racism from the institution of social work and from the wider social system.

Argument by slogan reduces the complexity of the problem under discussion at a stroke, and suggests that solutions to what have hitherto been seen as intractable problems can be conjured up if the correct form of words is invoked. In fact though, as soon as these slogans are put to the test, difficulties become apparent. Take, for instance, the statement "**Autonomous black organisations must be respected by white anti-racist educators and practitioners**" (p56) which heads a section of chapter five. What is this to mean in practice? Are all autonomous black organisations to be treated with the same respect, regardless of their aims and aspirations? Who decides whether sufficient respect has been shown to particular organisations? What should the white anti-racist educator or practitioner do in a situation where members of one group denigrate or denounce another? Factional infighting is not unknown in radical politics, but the blanket prescription above offers little guidance to white social workers

¹¹ This and all subsequent page references relate to Dominelli (1988), unless otherwise indicated.

when confronted with disagreement or even antipathy between black or other minority groups¹².

In the same vein, we could consider the claim made in the final section of chapter six: “**Anti-racist social work practice is good practice**”. At first glance this seems an acceptable, even uncontentious, assertion. Racism is after all bad, and anti-racism, good, so therefore practice that is anti-racist must - almost by definition - also be good. But closer investigation suggests that statements of this kind are altogether less clear than they first appear. In Derridean terms, statements of the form ‘A is B’ belong firmly to the logocentric order, where meaning is fixed, and held in place by powerful hierarchical mechanisms which keep alternative understandings at bay.

By contrast with Dominelli’s approach, a deconstructive reading of the slogan “**Anti-racist practice ...**” would immediately want to put the main terms ‘under erasure’, to indicate their provisional status, and open up for discussion the understanding on which such definitional statements are made. Reading deconstructively, one could find in this slogan not an all - purpose statement of the truth about social work, but rather the suggestion that a certain line of enquiry could usefully be pursued. It expresses the hope that both ‘anti-racism’ and ‘social work’ can be re-defined in accommodation with each other - though working out what this might mean in practice will be a lengthy task.

Attention to stylistic detail of this kind invites investigation of a second feature of Dominelli’s text: the use of statements made by social workers in a “brainstorming” session as a tool for the exploration of racism. These statements (pp85-87) are treated as significant in the book as they “reveal both the subtlety and variety of ways in which racism expresses itself in the actions and attitudes of social workers” (p85). A deconstructive reading, as the following discussion suggests, might question the relation between the expressed words and the meaning derived from each example and see this as an example of phonocentrism, belonging firmly to a metaphysics of presence; and it is the commitment to this metaphysics of presence that deconstructive reading seeks to challenge and subvert.

Phonocentrism, in elevating speech at the expense of writing, claims for speech a closer, less equivocal relation to meaning. As Derrida suggests, speech is taken to be the closest we can get to the self-identical meaning that logocentrism dictates: it provides a moment of coincidence between

¹² The difficulty with the position supported by the slogan can perhaps be illustrated by asking what, from this perspective, would be a proper response to the anti-semitism of some of the pronouncements from Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam or to the anti-Arab positions of some Jewish organisations ?

articulation and intention, a moment where meaning is fully present. But, as Derrida also strongly suggests, this search for pure self-presence is a fantasy, and even the experience of speech lacks the full immediacy claimed for it. So reliance on the (reported) speech of a group of social workers to demonstrate the racist attitudes and actions of the speakers is, again, perhaps less straightforward than Dominelli allows. Either she is claiming that racism somehow inheres in those particular combinations of words or that it lurks, in a way yet to be defined, 'behind' the words used, in the intentions of the speakers. Either interpretation poses problems for a structuralist analysis and, from a deconstructive point of view, both look equally untenable.

To conclude this discussion of logocentrism in relation to *Anti-Racist Social Work*, I would briefly like to consider the treatment in this text of contradiction. I have already suggested that the text is framed in 'either/or' terms which are characteristic of logocentric discourse - and contradiction has no place within such a framework. This is reflected in, and has implications for, the understanding of social work as a social activity. There is no room for ambiguity or debate: we must "cut the Gordian knot of social work as a complex and contradictory form of social control" (p35). The search for a transcendental signified is rejoined: social work must be one thing or another; it cannot be both and it cannot contain these two contradictory impulses. From this position, we have no choice but to "oppose", "transform", "eliminate", in the attempt to move social work from one definition or state (racist and controlling) to the preferred alternative (anti-racist and caring).

By contrast, a deconstructive reading looks specifically for points of contradiction, for gaps in the 'logic' of the text, and finds in these a starting point for further enquiry. Having abandoned the search for univocal meaning, deconstruction exploits the multiple possibilities 'within' the text and explores the contradictory pairings around which that particular text is organised. From within this understanding of language and text, contradiction is unavoidable, and the desire to finally 'pin social work down' by attempting to remove its inherent contradictions is but one more manifestation of logocentric thinking.

Power

In this section, I would like to consider how power is treated in *Anti-Racist Social Work*, and how a deconstructive reading can illuminate some of the tensions that can be found in the text. The dimension of power in Dominelli's work is explored here initially in the context of the "egalitarian relationships" that she urges white social workers to form with black clients. Power is recognised as a central feature of social relations within racist (and also

patriarchal) capitalist society. Racism is held in place through the exercise of particular power relations which favour the white-British majority population. Dominelli therefore talks of the need to “reverse” the hierarchical power relations between white and black, and of “equalizing power differentials” between them (p125). By forming “anti-racist collectivities”, white people can change their practice and make moves towards overcoming racism. With typical rhetorical punch, she states that “anti-racist social work has got to introduce change at both personal and institutional levels. Individual conduct in interpersonal relations and the allocation of power and resources in society have got to be transformed if racism is to be eliminated” (p162). One of the recurrent ideas in this book is that of reversing power relationships, for example through the “apprenticeship model”, where social work students would be required to work in placements with black supervisors or practice teachers. Dominelli argues that white and black students would benefit from this arrangement, though in different ways. The black student would have a valuable role model, the white would have the experience of working with a black person in a position of authority and seniority, perhaps for the first time. In terms of some of the oppositions that are ‘contained’ within the concept of racism - white/black, power/dependence, superior/inferior - an area of practice has been identified where a concrete reversal of power relations could be initiated.

But a lot is expected to follow from a procedural change of this sort - more, perhaps, than it can deliver in the form proposed. Again, a switch or ‘transformation’ is being offered as a solution to an entrenched situation, potentially leaving as many problems as it attempts to alleviate. Other writers (e.g. Harding, 1986:58ff) have drawn attention to the drawbacks associated with an ‘equal opportunities’ position, and made the point that simply increasing the number of staff from a particular under-represented group does not mean that equality of opportunity has been achieved. Increasing the numbers of black practice teachers (which would be entailed by adoption of the apprenticeship idea) would not in itself necessarily have the power to bring about the changes envisaged here. Who will be appointed? If it is not being argued that blackness is itself the defining criterion of suitability then how will ‘suitable’ candidates be selected? Are all black people anti-racist in the sense favoured by Dominelli? Is it not possible that some black people will have made a personal accommodation with the status quo such that they do not see themselves as directly personally affected by racism - a position that might in turn affect their ability to impart ‘anti-racism’ to their white students? Who would decide whether a black supervisor was challenging a white student’s racism in an ‘appropriate’ way? None of these questions is asked, let alone answered, but each would have a significant impact on an understanding and use of the apprenticeship model.

It could also be said that this shows a curious faith in the power of hierarchy: in itself, reversing black and white positions does not obviate the 'original' problem. At the most basic level, one could ask whether a white person who had difficulty working with black clients would find it any easier to engage with a black practice teacher. Dominelli might answer that it was never meant to be easy. The experience could well be both difficult and painful, but this would not be a reason to forego it. The apprenticeship model seems to assume that this new relationship between black practice teacher and white student will provide a context for change - that the act of reversing the white/black hierarchy will in itself promote certain desirable changes in behaviour and attitude on the part of the student. Indeed it might. But a deconstructive view of this model suggests, yet again, that the hoped-for transformation may be harder to achieve. To deconstruct an opposition involves more than a moment of reversal, which in itself leaves the broader conceptual field or economy of difference unchanged. And it is a sense of that move 'beyond ... ' that is missing from Dominelli's account. Without it, there is a risk of remaining stuck with mere rehearsal of the same, stale antinomies. My analysis of Dominelli's text suggests the impossibility of the task of anti-racism as it is conceived there. Opposing racism is not the same as removing racism, whether personal or institutional, and it is here that the text breaks down. I argue for a different understanding of racism that does not treat it as a discrete item to be somehow slotted in to or removed from a system or individual at will.

The use of race categories has such a long history that there is a tendency in our (Western) thinking to treat them as given, necessary and therefore unavoidable. Despite the lack of reputable scientific evidence for the existence of separate and immutable racial groupings, race remains in use as a powerfully obvious organising principle. It is a culturally significant category and is therefore amenable to the same kind of deconstructive treatment as other such items. A deconstructive approach acknowledges the presence of this category in our thinking, accepting that, while technically 'empty', we nonetheless use this term to mean something on our cultural map. We deploy the language of race as though it does indeed signify - and as though we know what it means.

In terms of a Derridean dynamic, the use of race terminology is unavoidable, in that ideas of race structure and infiltrate many of our basic contemporary conceptual hierarchies. So any attempt to re-figure these hierarchies must engage with race as a constitutive part of Western thinking. Race has a role in the maintenance of certain binary oppositions, which can only be challenged from within, as it were, by using the language of race itself. We are always grounded within a particular social, historical, political and cultural configuration - a tradition, in Gadamer's terms (1979) - which provides us

with the language with which we think the world around us. A deconstructive approach makes clear that there is no neutral place to stand. Understanding cannot be divorced from the idea of involvement in a tradition. It is the tradition that provides the basic tools, the concepts with which we can think about ourselves and the Other, and through which we can define the phenomena and events we encounter and the relations between them. The idea of unmediated perception is, in the end, literally meaningless.

Derrida's analysis lays bare the terms on which the engagement with Otherness takes place: within logocentrism, the hierarchical ordering of concepts dictates that it is always already construed as an absence, a loss or lack, as the repository for that which the Self is not. The 'Other' is not a neutral term, but already carries with it a freight of meanings. It already occupies a position of inferiority, secondariness (supplementarity?), in relation to the superior term, the Self.

For deconstruction, the fact of cultural embeddedness is inescapable; the point at issue however is, simply, where does the cultural critic - of whatever denomination or conviction - stand, while formulating her criticism, and what are the implications of this situatedness? Debates within feminist criticism offer some interesting insights, drawn from consideration of women as readers and writers, as producers and consumers of 'knowledge' in a system that is deeply androcentric (Harding, 1986; Culler, 1983:43-64; Moi, 1985). Deconstruction urges an acknowledgement of the extent to which even critical thinking is beholden to the very conceptual apparatus it seeks to destroy. The point has been made over and over again - there is no place outside language from which to apply one's critical lever. We read and write from within a dominant tradition, however flawed we would claim it to be: in the end, "there is simply nowhere else to go" (Moi, 1985:81).

And recognition of this unavoidable location in a particular linguistic network can be used to understand the efforts that have been made to remove racism from language - the phenomenon of 'political correctness', which seems to fit with the rhetorical stance of Dominelli's text. Stuart Hall (1994) captures very effectively the essentially contested nature of this concept, and explores how - through a combination of doctrinaire over-use on the left and vilification on the right - it has been re-inscribed in political language: 'PC' has become a term of abuse for the right and a gag for the left. The former need point to only one instance of school-children being made to sing "Baa baa, green sheep" whilst sitting in front of the whiteboard, and use this to discredit other, perhaps politically more significant, moves to challenge racism in our institutions and elsewhere. In this way, anti-racism can effectively be trivialised or dismissed as the rantings of a few politically extreme left-wingers.

On the other hand, though, the political left has not necessarily made better use of 'PC' in pursuit of anti-racism. Language is never static, but is always in a state of *dissemination*. (Derrida, 1981). Therefore attempts to somehow 'freeze' a particular set of expressions as either 'correct' or 'incorrect' are at best misconceived, and at worst run the risk of becoming seriously repressive. Attempts to control language, to rule in certain forms of words and rule out others, lead to a closing off of debate and a fear of being denounced by the 'language police'. While this may appear slightly flippant, I cannot overstate the power of the epithet 'racist' to silence. 'Political correctness' is predicated on a misapprehension of what, in this case, racism (and hence also anti-racism) is. This statement does not imply a new definition of what racism essentially **is**, because that would be to fall back into precisely the logocentric trap into which political correctness has fallen. Rather it is to reinforce an idea that deconstruction has already pointed us towards - namely, that language is altogether more complex and subtle and cannot be 'cleansed' of racism by creating what in effect would be just another (new) logocentric space in which the play of meaning had temporarily been arrested.

The attempt to 'purge' language in this way has the potential to be both regressive and repressive, proceeding in a spirit of intolerance that is far removed from the open and questioning stance of much of the post-structuralist thinking from which it draws. It becomes a way of stopping discussion, rather than opening up a discursive field for further exploration. In Derridean terms, it sets up a new opposition, creating a new centre of the linguistically 'pure' and banishing to the margins everyone else whose use of language does not - for whatever reason - conform.

But having challenged some of the workings of political correctness, I do not hold a brief for the linguistic status quo, and do not intend my remarks to offer a way of avoiding engagement with it. Language matters; it has the power to hurt and denigrate as well as to move us into new, and potentially more constructive, ways of thinking. Context, too, is significant and the only place where meaning can be determined. Acknowledging the inevitable involvement in a particular language-practice network does not invalidate the enterprise of criticism, or necessarily reduce the force of challenges to a particular tradition from elements at the social or intellectual 'margins'. Indeed, as Derrida's own writing makes clear, deconstructive criticism typically starts at the social and/or textual margins. A deconstructive approach directs us away from the search for a 'pure' language as a solution to the problem of racism and towards an understanding of the process of change which can be put in train when a range of unexamined assumptions and conceptual 'givens' are critically investigated. This process has few

signposts and no certain destination, but has the potential to lead to the emergence of 'new' and unexpected ways of thinking. I leave the 'final' comment with Derrida (quoted by Culler, 1983:179): "we are still at the stage of suspecting that *something* is going to have to change in our old ways of speaking, but not yet knowing *what*". So how in the meantime to proceed?

As I have already indicated, the textual nature of social work is unavoidable, and I have suggested that within a critical practice there could be a place for a form of textual analysis which could illuminate the discourses of racism. It is in this context that I am presenting racism as a 'linguistic resource', embedded in both public and interpersonal communications - written and spoken - and in social structures and institutions, shaping our categories of understanding. This usage of 'racism' accords it a significance in all forms of interpersonal contact in the sense that it is a 'given' part of the communicative framework within which we all function. It operates at the level of 'common sense' - largely implicit, unthought, and untheorised - relying on its 'everydayness' to maintain a purchase on a range of discourses, including those which structure and inform the organisation and practice of social work itself. This usage chimes with the idea of "everyday" racism developed by Essed (1991), and locates its meaning in relation to a whole complex of social relations and discursive practices.

The force of what can be called the cultural or linguistic resource position is that it locates racism (similarly sexism, classism, and so on) in a very particular way in the texts and more broadly discursive structures of society. From this perspective, racism is not something 'bolted on' to an otherwise fair and open society - which would carry the implication that with sufficient goodwill, energy and ingenuity we could somehow 'unbolt' it and consign it to the scrap heap. If racism inheres in a wide range of discourses including those of social work itself, then a different approach will be necessary: one which rethinks the task of anti-racism, and does not depend on trying to mechanically remove racism from 'afflicted' discourses.

The approach I have explored here, based on the understanding of racism as a linguistic resource, has been directly concerned with the operation of language, and I have suggested that the discourse of social work, of race and anti-racism, can be investigated through the deconstructive reading of chosen texts. Such reading and analysis is not designed to provide a racism-free version of social work, nor even a new understanding of what social work 'really' is. Rather it is an attempt to interrogate the 'everyday' or 'common-sense' understanding we have of both the phenomenon of 'race' and the activity designated as 'anti-racism', as this is operationalised in the practice known as 'social work'. Within a deconstructive reading, all these terms - which I have put here in inverted commas - would be placed "under erasure"

(*sous rature*), to indicate their provisional nature. It is only by accepting the way in which our understanding of such terms is continually open to revision that we can begin to ensure that the process of developing anti-racist social work practice is accessible to a true plurality of voices and traditions.

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