Narrative Confetti - Subjects, Truth and Ethics:

Extended Review of "Diversity and Rights in Care", Moonie, Bates and Spencer-Perkins, paperback, Heinemann, 2004. 246 pp. 0 435 40126 2

Stephen A. Webb, *University of Sussex*

Imagine three budding authors taking time off from their busy consultancy work, meeting for a coffee to discuss drafting a proposal for this book. Whilst the more experienced writer, is taking the lead, this is very much conceived as a joint project of equal partners. So the three of them sit down and begin the process of sorting and classifying a potential outline for the book proposal. They might even have struggled for a while with the notion that writing a book on rights and ethics under the auspices of a "care management" series is a bit of a contradiction in terms. Never mind. Ploughing on they consider the Heinemann format for these little books. Lashings of case studies, cartoon characters, bullet-point summaries, half-tone box inserts, diagrams that represent "real life" scenarios, mixing of font sizes etc.. Herein lays the typical postmodern hypertext marriage of high and low, iconic and textual, surface and depth (Harlow, 2003). So far so good. Next they begin to consider critical decisions about their various contributions, who will write what and how they will share the workload. After a successful meeting in which everyone is cheered by the prospect of such an exciting project, they go their separate ways, agreeing to exchange emails. On the way home, one author has the bright idea that diversity is really reducible to "three-world views". Stealing on the old German mandarin tradition of *"Weltanschauung"* as a generative system for explaining historical and cultural continuity, s/he feels to have captured the organic unity of diversity in a nutshell. Enthused, s/he quickly texts the co-writers "had a great idea about how we can overcome the diversity problem". Later that night paging through a copy of Freedman and Combs's *Narrative Therapy: The Social Construction of Preferred Realities,* s/he is astonished to find they've developed a similar conceptual schema. Cryptomnesia, fate or chance? "Who knows, after all it only ever amounts to 'preferred realities' that we choose even though they are socially constructed for us", s/he muses.

What I've just described are the first steps in the construction of an ethnographic fiction. But not only mine. To be candid, this book, like so many that falls within this genre, is little more than an ethnographic fiction. The end product of which is a pot boiler book.

This genre is rapidly expanding within the social work literature - especially since the inception of the new UK degree and the overriding emphasis of publishers on the textbook market - so it is worth considering its various merits and deficits at some length. To return to the definition of ethnographic fiction, this book is ethnographic because it entails some sort of fieldwork involving "informants" (e.g. secondary source material) resulting in a bricolage effect of diverse (sic) bits of material. It is also ethnographic because it involves relations between people (the authors, their spouses and friends) and things (computers, case scenarios,

telephones, and coffee). Fiction because apart from the smatterings of rehashed facts and statistical data that inevitably intersperse this sort of text, it has little bearing on any reality, imagined or real. In the technical sense it is fiction because it is something false that is presented as true. I shall develop this point further on, but for now let's note that developing the self story for the final product is what counts. Taking the authors at their own words "personal identity … depends on the ability to develop a 'self story'" (p.iv)

But good fiction relies on style, well-developed characters, absorbing events and a plot that gets under the skin. Perhaps the best form of nuanced, imaginative contemporary fiction is the magical realism of Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges. In a famous essay "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins", Borges quotes a passage from "a certain Chinese encyclopaedia" called the *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge* which divides the universe into strange categories and sub-classes. This method may be instructive in guiding our understanding of the fiction at work here.

Let's take a brief guided tour of a few chapters of this other emporium of benevolent knowledge, otherwise known as *Diversity and Rights in Care*. *Chapter One* comprises 11 tables mainly derived from UK National Census and Social Trend statistics that variously identify types of disability; household tasks; the EOC's "sex and power" indicator; problems with geographical locations; ethnicity and religion. Having established some quick fire credentials in secondary data analysis the authors move to another form of secondary analysis. After presenting the facts, *Chapter Two* begins with the statement that "diversity cannot be reduced to the collection of factual information" (p.18). It's thirty odd pages include sections: theory of self narrative; a model for interpreting diversity; social constructivism; three world-views; case-study on "fantasy group membership"; the concept of self; creating a plausible self-story; making sense of "I"; emotion and diversity; building a self; agency and empowerment; narrative work; case-study "whose fridge is it anyway?"; respect, dignity, privacy and choice; case-study "the protective power of narrative"; vulnerability and motivation; dominant narratives; prejudice; case-study "an example of the discriminatory power of 'dominant narrative'; the dominant narrative as a means of understanding power and oppression; case-study "a depressing conversation"; and the implications of narrative theory for care work.

Chapter Three after a few paragraphs of discussion opens with two case-studies. I shall comment briefly on these because they are indicative of the quality of scholarship involved here. Each of the case-studies mirrors respectively, but with no reference point, fashionable aspects of high literary theory and structuralist linguistics. The first "What is a Text?" is indicative of the protracted structuralist literary theory debate between the likes of Stanley Fish and Hayden White; and the second "What is Discourse?" by writers such as Michel Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge* and *The Order of Things*. Incidentally, this latter case study on discourse is supplemented with a black and white photograph of four elderly men seated and playing dominos whilst an elderly woman is standing, appearing to be taking orders on her note-pad. The sub-title of the photograph reads "The discourse at a day centre can be quite distinctive". Needless to say in *Mythologies* mood Roland Barthes would have had a field day with this strange juxtaposition of rebus to sub-title. There is no room for inquiry of analytical distinctions between "text" and "discourse", or for that matter contrasts with other key terms used throughout the book such as "language", "narrative" and "story". What is most alarming is that the deep context of debate and controversy in history, philosophy and literary theory - as it finds its way, say into, Holocaust studies - is wiped out at a stroke. There is no single reference to any scholarly lineage that underpins this important

tradition. The link between knowledge, or better still information, and its intellectual origin is lost. Indeed, the only reference given is to a very much lesser known work of Graddol, Cheshire and Swann (1994) and their student primer cum introductory textbook *Describing Language* published by the Open University. It's important to note that a distinctive pattern begins to emerge here about the over-reliance on other textbooks and particularly those published by the Open University. From the frugal 81 references cited, if we deduct 5 Social Trend and 2 Department of Health reports that make up the statistical references for chapter one, and 2 newspaper articles, leaving 72 references for the remainder of the book, Open University citations make up 20% of the references, which seems a high and rather disproportionate figure compared to other textbooks. It is clear Open University texts lend themselves nicely to this kind exercise, given the content is readily transferable and because the formulae for interactive workbooks was established by them back in the 1980s. Questions of how much primary source material is researched and read by authors writing within this genre remain an open one. A cynic might suspect a rag-picking exercise at work.

Anyway, back to the discourse on discourse. Evidently, more practical questions about which univocal discourse might be at work in the day-centre, how it got there and coalesced out of a diversity of discourses (assuming there maybe more than one?), or even the typical Foucauldian injunction about how the day-centre's "self-story" resists the dominant discourse, are left to one side. Moving on, the authors - staying close to their point of reference, David Graddol, with the addition of a further Open University textbook by Maybin and Mercer (1996) – proceed to skip through the following sections: language and worldviews; models of language description; variety in language: speech communities and discourse; ethnography: the work of Malinowski (extracted from Jayne Maybin's Open University textbook); speech communities and the creation of meaning: the work of Hymes (also extracted from Maybin); application of Hymes model to everyday work situations; different types of English; case-study on "Sol: one person, many voices"; equality in variety: monolingual and multilingual communities; linguistic repertoire; a cartoon of a Pearly King inquiring about Queen Victoria's well-being; variety, prejudice and power: devaluing diversity; varieties of English; small talk; closing a conversation; losing face; turn-taking; language use among people with disabilities or mental health problems; the expression of power through language; scripted conversations; deafness and discourse: disability or difference?; models of deafness; sign language systems; concept of register in BSL. And so on and so forth...

What sense can we make of all this? Here is the first methodological claim. In Hayden White's terms we might best approach the form of the content through an appreciation of the general operation of the geography of heterogeneity in space and time. Within the appearance - that apparent simplistic formulaic exercise of classification and ordering that structures this kind of interactive genre from beginning to end - there is a perverse form of disorder at work that is worse than that of the incongruous. We can easily establish throughout that singular concepts are poorly defined, out of context, without ever broaching a more difficult engagement with conceptual relationships (e.g. text/discourse and ontology/ethics). Moreover this conceptual thinness along the obsessive collage design of the genre contributes to the narrative/image confetti, the structural disorder which due to its disorientating inserts and discomforting temporal pull does not allow for contemplative reading. In fact we are witness to a structure of broken narrative. If anything the readers' inner voice is overwhelmed by the increasing ration of fragmented non verbal, mingling elements. But something else is happening here. Not only does the text/icon configuration do away with the intellectual site,

the taciturn ground upon which it is possible for entities to be juxtaposed, like some hypertext, it displays the geometry of the *heteroclite* taken in its literal and etymological sense. Taking our cue from Foucault (1970), the heteroclite is a state in which things are simply "laid", "placed" or "arranged" in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible to identify a place of residence, to define a common locus beneath them (p. xviii). Graveyards are something akin to this. Let us revisit the arrangement given in Chapter Three, starting with "language and world views" commonly analysed as abstract, universalizing synthesis, ending with the "concept of register in BSL" as a particular codification of rules with their own independent structure and grammar. The various exercises in "reflective practice", diagrams and cartoons, continually disrupting and fragmenting the text only serve to harden this effect. Taken together what we have is either a shattering or entangling of terms, concepts and derivations, which prevent things from "holding together". The field of identity as structured through the material that sustains this text is unstable. Having no centre it borrows constructs and then disperses them, arranging things that are incongruous and superimposing different criteria to construct similar cases. To paraphrase Foucault, this leads to a kind of regulatory thought without space to think, to terms and categories that lack all life and place, an impoverished text that is overburdened with tangled paths and monolithic communications (p. xix).

Before moving on to the second more theoretical claim, let's change tack to examine a few typical assertions made about diversity and rights. First, as a background observation, many of the supposed theoretical claims are oxymoronic. Second, there are no references in the book to the human rights literature, either contemporary or historical [see Micheline' Ishay's (2004) The *History of Human Rights* and Michael Ignatieff's (2001) *Human Rights* for good introductions]. Naturally one would expect this kind of textbook to assert that diversity and rights were necessary constitutive social goods. Here are a few typical statements: (1) "We believe that celebrating diversity should result in service users receiving emotional support in order to control their own story" (p. iv), the inherent contradiction here is that "celebrating diversity" is set up as an absolute value, whilst "controlling their own story" is an agent-relative value. Absolute value assumes that things are good, simply because they are a property of the good and good for all, agent-relative values assume that things are good for or relative to certain individuals; (2) "no single perspective provides an adequate basis for defining moral rights", this bald assertion seems to be false, especially if we concentrate of the word "adequate". For instance, Ayn Rand, the famous ethicist, considers her objectivist perspective on rights to be adequate, so do her supporters, as do many of her critics, even if not a good one. Of course the "anything goes" matter of moral relativism also looms large with this kind of statement. If we can't agree on an adequate basis for defining moral rights, how can we agree that they are a good thing which the authors assert they are?; (3) (a) "The right to develop and maintain a personal identity … has to be central to … a human rights culture" (p.19) and (b) "Equality (and) the celebration of diversity are seen as key human rights" (p.112) are both tautological and contradictory. The first (a) is false and oxymoronic. For the latter (b) to be diverse may be inegalitarian and to be egalitarian may be to shun diversity in the name of equality. Diversity and rights are often used to refer to things which are good. So if they say "equality is an important right", what they are saying is that equality is one of the important goods. We can unpick the difference, then: the difference between *believed to be good* and *is good*. As Huemer (2001) points out, no rational perspective on ethics can afford "to overlook this distinction, since if one does, one will be forced into an extreme ethical subjectivism" (p. 52); (4) "Communication in care is central to respect for persons" (p. 19) is also false and oxymoronic, but wholly misrepresents its source - Kantian

deonotological ethics, the centrality of the categorical imperative and individuals as ethical ends-in-themselves in establishing duty-bound moral rules (Webb and McBeath 1989).

In fact *Diversity and Rights in Care* constantly moves, contradictorily, between ethical subjectivism and objectivism without ever picking up on the distinction. This is possibly because "the subject" or self is, on the one hand, regarded as a self-identical substance that underlies change, and on the other hand, a correlate of constructed narrative stories. Moreover, throughout the caricatures and equivocations of moral rights the fundamental moral question of why one person, especially from an egoistic foundation, should respect someone else's right is never addressed. Neither does the reader learn that there are at least three competing perspectives within moral philosophy that take very different stances on moral rights: the deontological; the consequentialist; and the objectivist perspectives. Moreover, it is generally accepted in moral philosophy that any principle of rights, properly understood, function as moral constraint, or "side-constraint" and not a moral goal. A lasting memory one takes from all of this despite the gushing sentimentality for rights and diversity is where the authors conclude "that moral rights can be established by prescription… the rights of service users can be derived from codes of practice" (p. 112). I would contend that it is simply unbelievable to conceive of regulatory governmental codes of conduct as the sole champions of moral rights.

Let us now return to heterogeneity and the second claim. Diversity taken in conjunction with rights implies heterogeneity in terms of the specific relationship between theoretical discourse and the objects of that discourse. However, as a thought experiment, if we push this exercise as an instance of heterogeneity over homogeneity, (doubled-up in the organization of text/icon to principle idea) to its end point there is an implosion into pure difference. In Deleuzian terms we have "the difference machine" that is always politically neutral and ethically immune. It is only difference - dressed up as the celebration of diversity and competing rights claims - that counts. To couple "diversity" to "rights" in this way, without analysis, is more than carelessness, it is arguably dangerous. Now I am aware that is far from the authors' intentions, which potentially makes it even more worrying because it represents the "unthought of thought" within this genre.

We may ask what the value of homogeneity at stake is. The homogeneity of a text or place, the way they "hold together", signifies the commensurability of elements and a sensibility towards this. Texts, as opposed to hypertexts, are sustained by recognition of encumbered principles based on the affirmation of the possible identity, or "sameness" of delineable arguments, theses, explanations and reasonable claims. On this note, the literature on social work values may learn something from the theorist of "sameness", Alain Badiou. Badiou, a French socialist and former Maoist, has no truck with fashionable postmodern ideas of discourse, otherness, diversity, and narrative. More relevant for our purpose is his attack on the contemporary discourse of human rights. In his review essay, Terry Eagleton (2001) captures this evenly:

"Ethics, he believes, have now come to displace politics (one might say much the same about culture), as a bogus humanitarian ideology of victimage, otherness and 'human rights' thrusts aside collective political projects. The ideology of human rights divides the world between helpless victims and self-satisfied benefactors, and implies a contempt for those on whose behalf it intervenes. The idiom of difference and otherness that accompanies it reflects a 'tourist's fascination' for moral and cultural diversity; it accepts only those others who are

'good' others—which is to say, those like myself; which is to say, not other at all. It has no respect for the difference of those who do not respect its own cherished differences" (p. 157).

For Badiou the blanket deployment of the various aspects of difference (by the likes of Deleuze, Derrida and Lyotard) can only lead to a perverse cultural relativism. In order to overcome the infinite multiplicity of difference, which forever posits alterity and Otherness (Levinas, Heidegger, and Nietzsche) as ontological separateness of the very substance of what is, the real question for Badiou is about reaccommodating at a fundamental level of recognition the essentiality of the same. In his book *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (2001), Badiou, against postmodernism, wishes to reinsert the absolute value of truth through his category of the Same. In discussing the subject/Other as the substance of social relationships he postulates this quite remarkable, anti-Thermidorian statement:

"Philosophically, if the Other doesn't matter it is indeed because the difficulty lies on the side of Same. The Same, in effect, is not what is (i.e. the multiplicity of differences) but what *comes to be*. I have already named that in regard to which only the advent of the Same occurs: it is a *truth*. Only a truth is, as such, *indifferent to differences*. This is something we have always known, even if sophists of every age have always attempted to obscure its certainty: a truth is *the same for all* (p. 27).

In rejecting Thermidorian political morality (i.e. the state that prevails over the postrevolutionary reaction founded on objective, measured notions of self-interest, that equates property and individual calculation: see Hallward, 2003, p. 27), Badiou goes on to say that whilst the industry of producing cultural difference is massive, it is only our capacity for truth that really counts, "our capacity to be *that 'same' that a truth convokes to its own sameness"* (p. 28). As Hallward notes "against the politically correct identity politics that focuses on 'the right to difference', Badiou emphatically insists that the justification of any political demand by the substantial features that define the contingent particularity of a group ('We want some specific rights because we are women, gay, members of this or that ethnic or religious minority' etc.) violates the fundamental democratic axiom of principled equality, that is, the right to be defended today is not the 'right to difference', but on the contrary and more than ever, the right to Sameness" (p. xi, op.cit). It's beyond the remit of this review but important to note that the figures of truth, equality and sameness conjoined within a system of political theory are particularly significant for Badiou, who considers freedom to be an exceptionally fragile and rare achievement.

To finish off this part of the review, and shift down some gears, let us return to the notion of fictional truth. As far as the technical designation of the text as fiction is concerned consider the misleading usage of the term "post-modernist". Of course glossaries are only abbreviated definitions and never exhaustive, but this one is quite startling. In it post-modernist is defined as:

"Post-modernist: a theory or work that has moved beyond the assumptions of 'modernism'. 'Modernism is associated with the 'technical rational' idea that human experience is straightforward and can be quantified, controlled and measured" (p. 241).

If we disregard the problematic notion of "moved beyond" in terms of a developmental phase we have reached, what we are given is a definition of what post-modernist is not. That it is, it is not modernism. But what is most startling about this negative definition of modernism (and thus by implication, that post-modernist is preferable) becomes most apparent when we

simply contrast it with other basic on-line encyclopaedias. To give a representative feel the following extracts are respectively taken from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia and the Catholic On-line encyclopedia:

"Modernism, is a trend of thought which affirms the power of human beings to make, improve and reshape their environment, with the aid of scientific knowledge, technology and practical experimentation… Broadly, modernism describes a series of progressive cultural movements in art and architecture, music, literature and the applied arts which emerged in the decades before 1914."

"In general we may say that modernism aims at that radical transformation of human thought in relation to God, man, the world, and life, here and hereafter, which was prepared by Humanism and eighteenth-century philosophy, and solemnly promulgated at the French Revolution. J.J. Rousseau, who treated an atheistical philosopher of his time as a modernist, seems to have been the first to use the word in this sense."

Without wishing to labour this point it may be suggested that similar aberrations would be evinced if one did a similar exercise with other key terms such as discourse, speech-act, worldviews, social constructivism and narrative. As Borges noted in (true) magical realist vein "Let us admit what all idealists admit: the hallucinatory nature of the world. Let us do what no idealist has done: seek unrealities which confirm that nature" (p. 243).

Concluding remarks

Many in social work are deeply concerned about various changes taking place, indicative of a narrow instrumental rationality, euphemistically described as "tick box culture", coupled with a sinister politics of regulation. (Webb 2006). Frank Furedi (2004) in his polemical *Where have all the Intellectuals gone?* locates these changes in a wider cultural context of education and learning. He claims that the market economy is less corrosive than the social inclusion agenda, diagnosed as a perverse "dumbing down" culture. "The imperative of social engineering, rather than the market, today represents the greatest threat to the integrity of intellectual and cultural production. Compared to the politics of inclusion, the problems posed by the entertainment industry pale into insignificance" (p. 11). Whilst widening access to higher education without the resources necessary to maintain standards is part of the problem, the wider issue for Furedi, in Nietzschean vein, associates with the transvaluation of value, the degeneration of high culture and its accession by low culture. The real culprit for Furedi is the deepening popularist culture of learning (including problem-solving approaches, user-participation rhetoric and life long learning) where flattery and imitation meet, with standards being undermined in order not to exclude people. In *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*, Sven Birkerts makes similar claims but focuses on electronic media, such as hypertext, on-line blogs, chat forums, and student-friendly electronic workbooks. This leads to a 'dumbing down' and impoverishment of language. He is particularly critical of multimedia in education referring to it as anti-contextual and "a flexible and encompassing teaching tool that threatens to overwhelm the linearity of print with an array of option-rich multimedia packages" (p. 134).

It's difficult to judge with any precision, at least empirically, whether textbooks such as *Diversity and Rights in Care* are illustrative of this dumbing down process in social work. What is significant is that the derivative issues are very pressing for social work, and debate about the over-arching effects of this phenemonon in both research and practice is urgently needed. A journal such as this with its emphasis on values and ethics in social welfare would

be ideally placed as a platform to launch a serious, balanced and uncompromising debate. As part of such a levelling-down debate, we may consider whether the net effect on social work is hardened by other interweaving variables: such as information over-load, where skim-reading and short-circuiting become the norm; the agenda-setting power of greedy publishers, with obsessions for market niches, simple formats and cost efficiencies; the advent of problem-solving learning with formulaic techniques and processes. Once a problem can be solved easily by a standard method, it usually ceases to be a problem. However, the kinds of problems posed by the Heinemann publication of this kind of project will not go away very easily, and cannot be solved by standard methods. Social work needs to decide how it will respond to this emerging literature of narrative confetti publications.

References

Badiou, A. 2001: Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil. London and New York: Verso Press.

Birkerts, S. 1995: The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age. New York: Ballantine Books.

Borges, J. L. 1970: Labyrinths. Harmondsworth: Penguin Modern Classics.

Eagleton, T. 2004: Too clever by half? - Review of Frank Furedi: Where Have All the Intellectuals Gone?, in: New Statesman, 13. September 2004, pp.48-49.

Foucault, M. 1970: The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences. London: Tavistock Publications.

Furedi, F. 2004: Where have all the Intellectuals gone? Confronting 21st Century Philistinism. London: Continuum Books.

Hallward, P. 2003: Badiou: A Subject to Truth. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Harlow, E. 2003: Wired Wonderland or Hypertext Hell: ICTs in the Welfare Services, in: Harlow, E. and Webb, S.A. (eds.): Information and Communication Technologies in the Welfare Services. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Huemer, M. 2001: Skepticism and the Veil of Perception. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Ignatieff, M. 2001: Human Rights: As Politics and Idolatry. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Ishay, M. 2004: The History of Human Rights: From Ancient Times to the Globalization Era. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Latour, B. 1987: Science in Action. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Webb, S.A. and McBeath, G.B. 1989: A Political Critique of Kantian Ethics in Social Work, in: British Journal of Social Work, 1, pp.491-506.

Webb, S.A. 2006: Social Work in a Risk Society: Social and Political Perspectives. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Author´s Address:
Stephen Webb
University of Sussex
School of Social Work and Social Care
Essex House
Falmer, Brighton
UK-East Sussex, BN1 9QQ
United Kingdom
Tel: ++44 1273 606755 2269
Email: S.A.Webb@sussex.ac.uk

Social Work & Society