Human Diversity and the Meaning of Difference

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"There are probably differences of all sorts in the world [. .] there is no reason to deny this reality or this diversity [. .]. It is only when these differences have been organized within language, within discourse, within systems of meaning, that the differences can be said to acquire meaning and can become a factor in human culture and regulate conduct."

Stuart Hall (1997) *Race, the Floating Signifier.*

Abstract

There is possibly no other field in more urgent need for research than in the tolerance and understanding of human difference. This paper is a critique of psychology's focus upon the psychometric measurement of individual differences, which has been at the expense of the study of the meaning of human differences. The discussion builds upon the radical position adopted by the British sociologist, Stuart Hall, who argues that human differences need to be approached from a discursive perspective. I will argue that this can provide the basis for a completely revised program of research into the psychological understanding of the *discourses of difference*. This has immediate relevance to a critical psychology approach to the fields of intelligence, gender, class, race and disability. In this paper I will focus more closely on the last of these, with particular emphasis on a radical re-interpretation of the Social Model of Disability.

Introduction

The study of human differences has always been a central topic in the discipline of psychology. Until now, the major focus of this field has been on the *measurement* of human differences, and the subsequent emergence of a range of psychometrically conceived theories of human intelligence and human personality, etc. However, this is not a field of study without its controversies, viz. fixed vs. fluid intelligence, the hereditability issue, the race and intelligence debate, types vs. traits, etc. These controversial issues have expanded to such an extent that there are some who have labeled this area of psychology at worse a pseudoscience, or, possibly at best, an industry driven by the political need to establish an *ordinality* of differences. That is, a "science" that has achieved little more than a classification and pigeon-holing of people for the efficacy of our health, education, immigration and employment systems, etc, etc. This paper sets out to add yet another controversy to this field of study.

One consequence of such a focus on the descriptions and measurements of individual differences is that there is a serious blind spot to one crucial issue, which is concerned with a focus upon the *meaning* given to these differences in our everyday world. The argument here is that what really matters, is not whether or how these differences can be measured, but with the way in which these differences take on meanings, what they end up signifying, and how they have come to be used in our social, cultural and professional practices. The issue that then arises is whether we should be less concerned with the differences *between* people, and rather more concerned with the study of human differences themselves, particularly in terms of *the ways in which such differences do make a difference in people's lives.*

Unfortunately, as soon as we focus on the theorizing of human differences in this way, i.e. on the *meaning* of human differences, we must confront a fundamental problem. The problem is that the meanings of human differences are not inherently fixed, but are open to manipulation. Where they do become apparently fixed, then this is largely the consequence of ideological processes at work. But this problem is precisely the issue. It is a serious blind spot for psychology, and this is the focus of my paper.

## Stuart Hall: *Race as a Floating Signifier*

> *"The model being proposed here is closer to that of how a language works than of how our biologies, or our physiologies work – that race is more like a language than it is the way in which we are biologically constituted."* (Stuart Hall, 1997).

The inspiration for the approach that I want to adopt stems from the work of Stuart Hall, who was Director of Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University, and Professor of Sociology at the Open University.

In 1994, at Harvard University, Hall delivered the *W.E.B. Du Bois Lecture*, entitled *"Race, Ethnicity, Nation."* Although this landmark lecture never made it into print, it was redelivered and recorded at Goldsmiths College, London, in 1996, and then published by the Media Education Foundation, in 1997, as a video entitled *"Race, the Floating Signifier."*

In his lecture, Hall focuses upon race, but he stresses that his position can be generalized across the entire field of human differences. Hall proposes that what really matters is not the ways in which human differences can be measured, but with how these differences are being used in our culture, what they signify, what they have come to mean, and, in particular, how certain branches of science have been complicit in establishing such meanings. Moreover, Hall argues that these meanings of human differences are not fixed, instead they float, they slip and slide, and it is this problem that Hall makes his central issue (Hall, 1994, 1997).

Hall locates race as one of those major concepts which organize the great classificatory systems of difference which operate in human society. In Figure 1, I have adapted the diagram he uses to set out these major categories of human difference. I have re-drawn this to include (and highlight) *ability/disability* which he overlooks, and I have grouped *Gender/Class/Ethnicity* together because these are much more arbitrary in their

Figure 1: Categories of human difference (Revised from Hall, 1997)
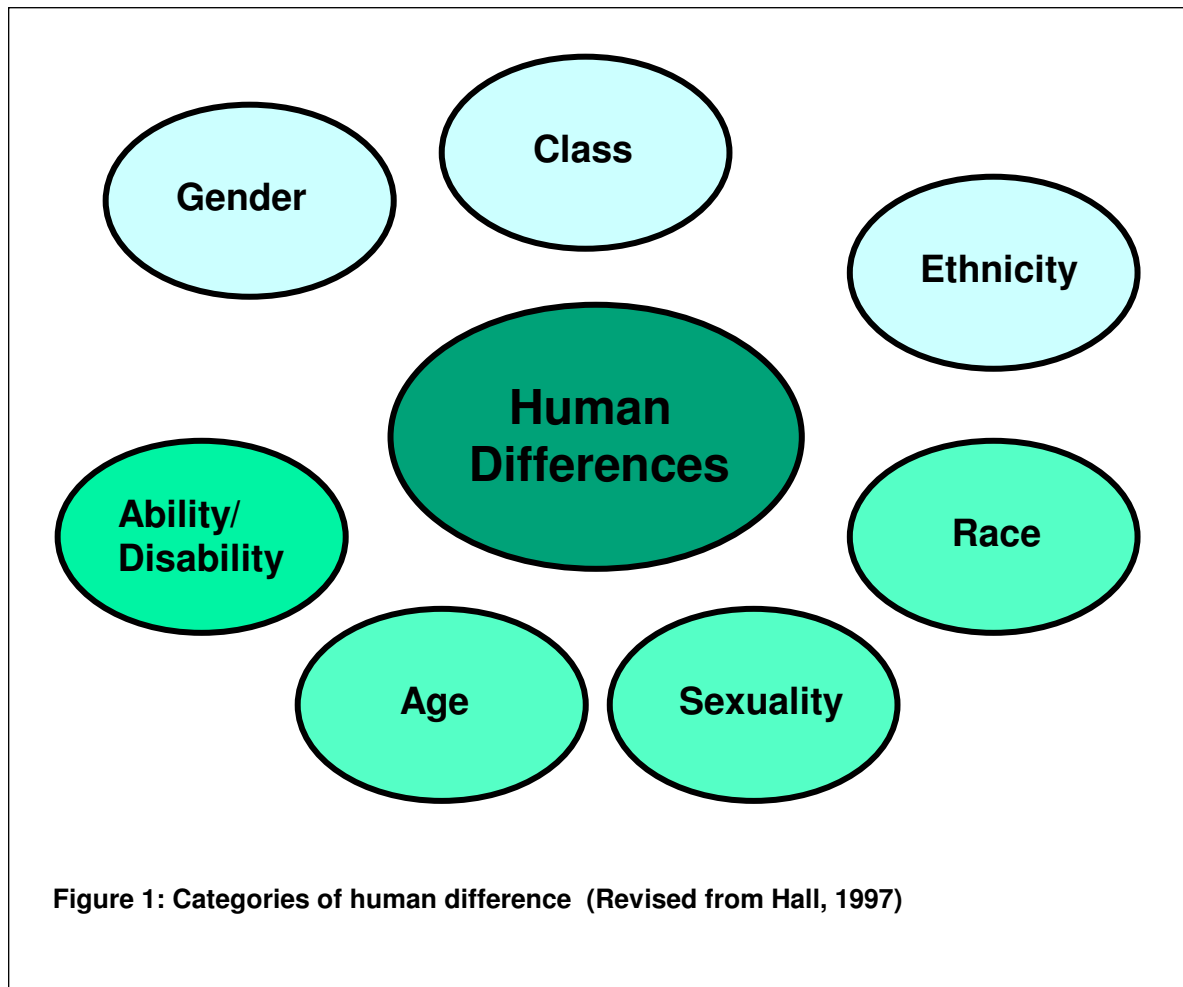
construction of differences. While the other four categories could be argued to be more grounded in the "body" (a point that Hall clearly does make), the categories of *Gender, Class* and *Ethnicity* are clearly constructions. The implications of this I will briefly consider later, however, a more in-depth discussion will have to be left to be taken up elsewhere.

Hall's argument

> *"The body is a text, and we are all readers of it. We are readers of race, we are readers of human difference. Race works like a language" (Stuart Hall, 1997).*

I will first try to summarize Hall's basic argument. He begins with an apology for raising the issue of racial differences yet again, but states his aim of intending to offer a radically different view of the whole field. He rejects the biological theory of racial differences, and instead argues that it is the meaning of racial differences that is the central issue. He propses tha race is a *discourse*, and that race needs to be seen as working like a *language*. This does not deny the reality of the physical differences that exist between people, but it stresses that the meanings given to these physical differences is what matters.

He points out how first religion, then anthropology, and most recently science (e.g. genetics) have offered their guarantees of how racial differences should be interpreted. His attack is as much on the wider functions of science in our culture, as it is an attack on racialism itself. His point here is that the sciences have unwittingly offered guarantees for the meanings given to racial differences. But it is crucial to realize that these meanings can never be fixed permanently. The claim that race is a *discursive* category lies at the centre of his argument that all attempts to ground this concept scientifically have largely been shown to be untenable.

The implications for psychology

Hall does not say this, but I think he would agree, that it is perfectly consistent with this argument, that psychology can be seen to have all too readily agreed to develop the psychometric tools for the measurement of human differences. Moreover, psychology has all too conveniently ignored the way meanings have subsequently been given to these measurements, and, has naively accepted the meanings that have emerged from the use of these measurements as fixed. At the heart of this is psychology's confusion of two ontologies: *realist* and *radical constructionist* (which I have discussed in an earlier paper, see Hiles, 2006). The position that I have argued for is that psychology must fully accept a *radical* constructionist perspective, i.e. that it is *not* the differences themselves, but it is the *meanings given to human differences* that matters.

Of course, the reality of human diversity in terms of the physical, social and psychological is not being denied. Instead, the model of human differences that we need to develop must also include the idea that human differences have *meanings*, and as Hall proposes, this works very much like a language. I have also argued that this should be leading to a completely revised program of research into our understanding of the *discourse of difference*. Furthermore, I have argued that it is essential that this research is approached from within a human science paradigm of inquiry (Hiles, 2006).

In that previous paper, I proposed that what we need is a fresh approach to theorizing human diversity. This an approach that would draw upon the theories and ideas of discursive psychology, narrative psychology, cultural psychology, critical psychology, as well as queer theory, to place closer attention on key several issues, including:

  (i)   the ways in which *measurement* of human differences, contributes to the construction of the meaning of difference within language and discourse;

  (ii)   how constructs of difference inform human action and become embedded in various cultural, social and professional practices;

  (iii) the model of culture that is needed, within which intra- and inter-cultural differences can be properly understood;

  (iv)   the need to challenge the over-simplification and polarization of differences, both in the wider political arena as well as within the discipline of psychology;

(v) the exploration of the narratives of difference that are designed to appropriate, and ideologically fix, the meanings of human difference, as well as the consequences that then can follow from this.

My concerns in this area have previously been focused more upon the last two of these issues (Hiles, 2006), where I have argued that there is no other field in more urgent need for research than in the understanding and tolerance of human differences. Progress in education, health, technology and cross-cultural understanding will be of little benefit if the issue of the human acceptance of differences is ignored. Psychology has the potential of being an empowering discipline, i.e. using human inquiry to empower individuals to make informed choices, express themselves freely, and challenge oppression and discrimination in its many subtle and not-so-subtle forms, especially when based on the manipulation and confused understanding of human difference.

In the present paper, my focus will be upon the first two key issues raised above, i.e. upon the critical issues arising from measurement of difference. My second focus, using the Social Model of Disability, will be upon how constructs of difference can become embedded in various cultural, social and professional practices, manipulating the meaning of difference, something that requires urgent critical attention.

Figure 2: Manipulating the meaning of differences (Adapted from Hall, 1997)
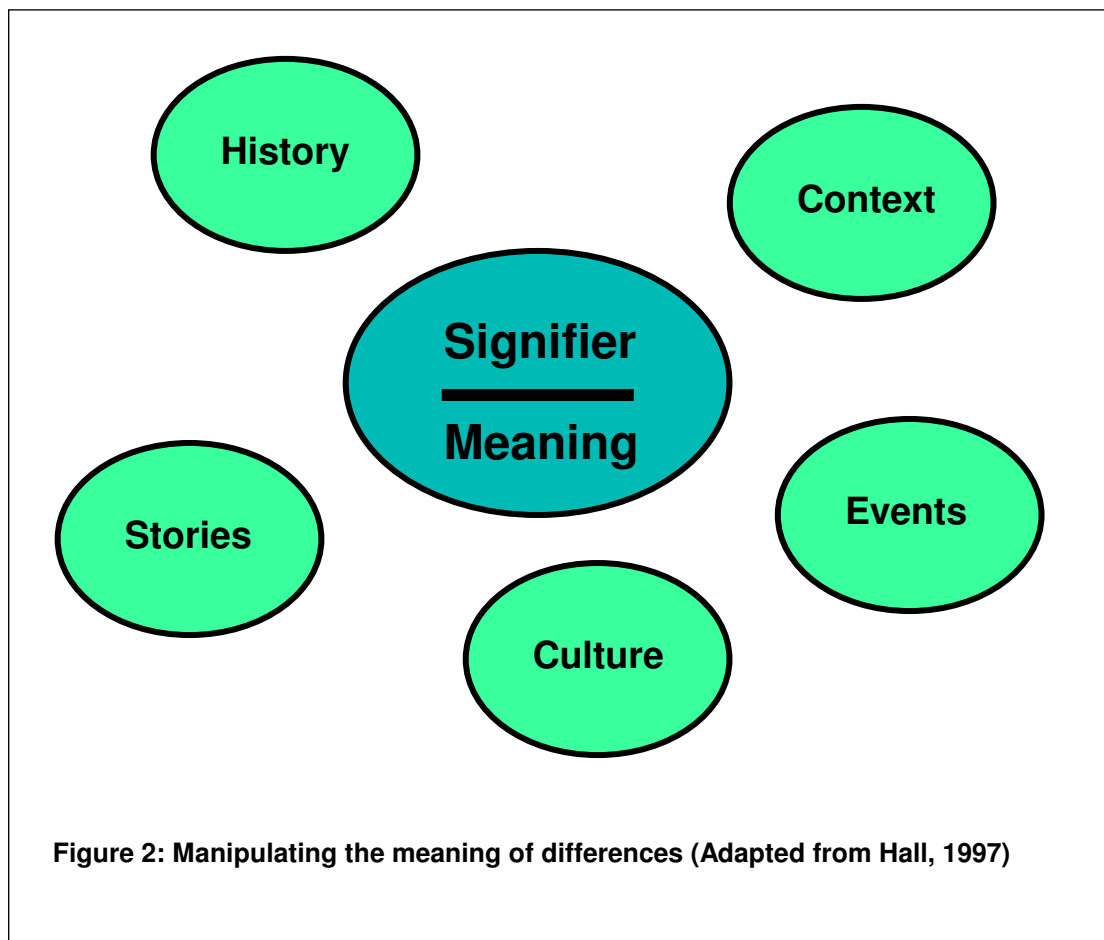
Psychology and the meaning of differences

If we take Hall's arguments at face value then we need to accept that human diversity cannot simply be equated with measurement. And some of the critical psychology issues that then might emerge would include:

(i) Why does our discipline focus so much upon the psychometric measurement of individual differences, at the *expense* of the study of the meaning of human differences?

(ii) How does measurement itself contribute to the "*fixing*" of meaning?

(iii) Why has psychology hardly made any serious study of the *meaning* of human differences, but instead has focused almost exclusively upon the psychometric study of intelligence, personality, achievement, ability/disability, etc, etc?

(iv) Is it not time that we outlined a completely revised program of research into the tensions between psychological measurement and the *discourses of difference*?

My aim is to get this debate rolling, so my focus here will be on the second of these critical psychology issues, and to do this I need to briefly return to the issue of racial differences, adding one further point to Hall's argument.

The "Geometers" of difference

I want to refer to a short essay written by Stephen Jay Gould, entitled *"The Geometer of Race"*. In this essay, Gould points out that the taxonomy of "race" dates back to the work of Carolus Linnaeus, who in 1778 mapped human "racial" groups onto four geographical regions. The issue here is that Linnaeus' approach was unequivocally *nominal.*

However, it was his student, Blumenbach, who in 1795 introduced a fifth racial group, by introducing the term Caucasian. What was significant was that Blumenbach's proposal of a five-fold classification was an <u>ordered</u> taxonomy of these "racial" groups. This subtle change from a *nominal* to an *ordinal* scale of measurement was to change the scientific meaning of race, and the direction scientific research was to take, for the next two centuries (Gould, 2003).

The point is that this introduction of *ordinality* into the study of human racial differences was ideological, because it introduced *value* into the range of human differences, by placing them in *order*. It is important to realize that the scales of measurement scientists use are not neutral at all. These scales bring with them assumptions and presuppositions that can easily go unchallenged. How something is measured can influence the meanings that follow from this process of measurement. There is a critical psychology issue here that is concerned with the fact that measurement is not neutral, but is clearly an issue for meaning, and therefore that the use of measurements is fundamentally ideological.

Psychology and the measurement and meanings of difference

In Table 1, I have tried to summarize some explorations into the meaning of differences beyond just racial differences, extending this to such areas as intelligence, gender, class and disability. My approach here is to characterize these areas of human differences in terms of the negative meanings and their potential consequences. I have also inserted, in the middle of the table, the concerns with measurement and embodiment. My purpose is to point out that measurement makes a major contribution to the meaning-making process for human differences, and must be critically explored much further than psychology has been prepared to undertake at this present time. The issue of embodiment relates back to how I organized Figure 1, where *Race, Sexuality, Age* and *Ability* are grounded in the human body. While by contrast, *Gender, Class* and *Ethnicity* are arbitrary constructions, that may be expressed through the human body, but are not grounded in it. This is particularly relevant to the field of disability that I will now go on to discuss.

Table 1: Exploring the meaning of differences

	Meanings (-ve)	**Measurement**	**Embodied**	**Consequence**
Intelligence	"failure"	interval?	genes, brain	psychometrizing
Gender	fixed	binary(?) vs. nominal	arbitrary (material culture)	polarizing
Class	disadvantage	explicit ordinality	arbitrary (material culture)	privileging
Race	inferiority	ordinality?	*"skin, hair and bone"*	politicizing
Disability	exclusion	ordinality vs. nominality	body	pathologizing

Theorizing the meaning of disability

With the exception of the study of the social construction of gender, (although this is rarely discussed within the sort of radical perspective that Hall advocates), there is possibly only one other area where some real progress has been made, and this is the *Social Model of Disability*. The Social Model was developed by activists in the 1970s, and was then later to be taken up academically by Finkelstein (1980), Oliver (1990, 1996) and Barnes (1991). The model offers a powerful way of theorizing disability, and has become a major focus within the fields of disability studies and disability politics. It has become of particular relevance to changes in practice, attitudes, government policy, and especially changes in legislation.

The Social Model sets itself up in opposition to the traditional view of disability, which is usually called the *medical model*. This medical model sees disabled people defined by their impairment, and as basically passive receivers of social and medical services. This results in a society that creates special facilities that are segregated and separated from the rest of the community.

By contrast the Social Model sees the person as disabled *by* society. It is the failure of society to recognize and address the different needs of disabled people, rather than impairment itself, that is the problem. It is therefore society that is responsible for the barriers that disabled people must face, for the images of disability in circulation, as well as for the professional and more general prejudices that are frequently encountered.

At the heart of this Social Model is the issue of meaning, i.e. *the meanings of disability that circulate in a particular society.* It is the *meaning* given to impairments, (and to, I would suggest, the degree of impairment, i.e. its measurement), rather than the needs of the disabled person that is highlighted as the critical issue. I would like to approach this from a critical psychology perspective, and two questions come to mind:

> (i) *With respect to disability, how can studying the meaning of differences rather than their measurement help unfix these meanings?*

> (ii) *Taking a radical constructionist position, and applying Hall's ideas to the area of disability, what possibilities are there for refining the social model so that it can resist some of the recent criticisms it has been receiving ?*

Fixing and unfixing meanings
We now need to return to the final part of Stuart Hall's argument in his lecture. The key to Hall's position is that meanings are not fixed in any essential way, but are what he calls *"floating signifiers"*. Of course, meanings do become temporarily "fixed" by ideological processes, and when fixed these will become the dominant meanings discursively circulating in a society or culture. My own focus of interest is: *How can these meanings become <u>unfixed</u>? What ways are there for unfixing social meanings?*

With respect to the *Social Model of Disability* it should be clear that this is not a model that sets out to explain or understand disability per se. It is also worth noting that the social model originates from disabled people themselves. It is a model for the identification and contestation of meanings of impairment. It is a model that explicitly sets out to challenge the meanings of disability, i.e. *the Social Model is designed precisely to <u>unfix</u> the meaning(s) of disability.*

This has particular relevance to recent criticisms of the Social Model, e.g. that it is being misunderstood, it is outdated, it is inadequate for research (cf. Shakespeare & Watson, 1997; Shakespeare & Watson, 2002; Dewsbury et al, no date). Of course, there are problems with the way the Social Model is being used, such as with the uncritical use of terms like: *social causes, social oppression, social barriers,* and *disabling environments,* etc. The point that I want to make here is that if Hall's perspective as I have set out above is adopted, then many of these criticisms and problems can be tackled, and the Social Model can be seen to be a *critical model* rather than an

explanatory model. What I mean by this is that as a *critical model*, it is a model of the *meaning* of disability, of the *discursive construction* of disability, of the ideological processes that at work in the *fixing* and *unfixing* of its meaning.

Two examples of thinking differently about human disability

I only have space to briefly outline just two examples of what might be considered the Social Model in action, helping us to think differently about disability, opening up spaces for the unfixing of meanings.

Art and thinking differently:
A primary purpose of art is to help people to see *differently*. Indeed, this of course can be expanded to literature, poetry, and the humanities in general. I am indebted to my colleague Simon Dyson for first introducing me to the work of the British artist, Donald Rodney (1961–1998). Throughout his life, Donald Rodney suffered from sickle cell anaemia, and it is through the impact of his highly original art, that a different meaning of

Donald Rodney – *Flesh of My Flesh (1996)*

Donald Rodney – *In The House of My Father (1997)*

his disability emerges. I include two examples of his work here, the first juxtaposes an image of an "overstitched" medical scar on his skin alongside electron microscope images of knots in his own hair. The second, is a small "house" constructed from his own skin, which he photographs placed on his hand, and provocatively entitles *In The House of My Father*.

I find the impact of Donald Rodney's work quite profound. I do not intend to interpret it here, except to say that it is difficult to not see the meaning of disability differently after viewing his work.

A second example:
Attending a conference in California last year, where I presented an earlier paper (Hiles, 2006) concerned with the issues I am discussing here, I saw the poster below at the Pleasant Hill BART station. This is I believe similar to an earlier campaign in the UK.

I think it is obvious that the Social Model is at work here. There is something quite profound in the challenges being made: "I see you – I see you as a co-worker – I see you as an equal – I see you as a friend – [*But*] Do you see me? – [*How do you see me? – Do you see me as different?*"]

Yes, of course there are issues about the use of the image in this poster which we could debate, but these seem to be secondary to the challenges being made to the constructions of difference in circulation in our culture. To call on a phrase used by Jonathan Sacks (2003), to me this poster asks, how do we honour *"the dignity of difference."*

In the end, I am left wondering, when will we psychologists care less about measuring differences and more about *"helping to make a difference."*

Theorizing human diversity

In summary, we need to interrogate the many representations of human difference, i.e. the discourses of difference expressed in numbers, images, language, etc., and we need to examine and support ways of unfixing the meaning these representations carry. In the work of Stuart Hall we can find a radical constructionism which proposes that what really matters is not how human differences can be measured, but rather it is what they have come to mean. Furthermore, Hall points to the way meanings of difference become ideologically fixed through their representation.

The Social Model of Disability has been used to illustrate these issues in action. Approached as a *critical model* it offers a powerful way of theorizing disability, with potential to clarify the fixing and unfixing of the meaning of difference. I have previously argued (Hiles, 2006) that the critical issue for psychology here is its need to separate two confused ontologies: *realist* and *radical constructionist.* If this could be properly achieved then the study of human diversity would not be reduced simply to the thought-less measurement of difference.

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