

Response to Chapter 5

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There was a time when there were no words for the complex interplay of ideas and beliefs, symbols and social rituals that constitute the ways of being in the world that we call “culture” today. Culture was just people living their lives and expressing their humanness in familiar patterns. But as homogeneous local communities expanded outward, they encountered others whose histories and values were unfamiliar, whose ways were strange. *Difference* became manifest, and the language of “culture” emerged to create distinctions never made before. This made it possible to talk about, to think about, and even to act in relation to each other in novel ways.

As John Austin (1965) reminded us, words help us *get things done*, not the least “thing” of which is what Goodman (1978) called “worldmaking.” Language introduces distinctions to make sense of the “great blooming, buzzing confusion” that William James described infants as perceiving until language helps them organize their experience (1890/1981, p. 462). This is all useful stuff when it comes to counseling and therapy. The dizzying complexity of persons’ lives is organized in critically helpful ways through the language we bring to our work. Of that language, “culture” (along with many other words, meanings, and constructs that reverberate around it) has been eminently serviceable for alerting us that therapeutic conversations always take place across a

divide. The introduction of culture as a key term awakened the field to its own traditional ethnocentricity. It reminded us that difference characterizes the social world and that homogeneity is an unattainable myth.

These reflections on words as tools for getting things done bubbled up in me as I read through Chapter 5. I see the chapter, indeed this book, as a generous offering of additional tools for practitioners to share with the persons who consult them as they construct new paths forward in complex lives. The chapter takes on theory of distinguished vintage but with a reputation for opaqueness and distills it to the point of transparent clarity. And it does so for some eminently practical purposes. Monk, Winslade, and Sinclair suggest that the trusty tool that is the word *culture* may not always be enough to take on the increasingly complex task of counseling in the 21st century. They offer *discourse* as a valuable addition to counselors' repertoire of worldmaking implements. In what remains of my response, I would like to reflect briefly on three of the many aspects of culturally rooted lives that discourse helps us to engage, and to share an example to illustrate the ideas.

Discursive Multiplicity

Where "culture" reminds us that the persons who consult us come from distinct backgrounds, it's been less helpful in illuminating the many strands of often contradictory ideas and practices that converge simultaneously, like threads of alternate histories, in persons' lives. This may be because the word *culture* has echoes of past meanings that located persons in one *or* another culture, usually separated geographically. In recent years, globalization has brought a massive intermingling of cultures, and contemporary uses of *culture* in counseling transcend the notion of a fixed geographic location. Not only that, but the word now encompasses categories like gender, class, and sexual orientation in addition to race and ethnicity, opening things up further.

But *culture* falters in trying to capture how the myriad influences that surround us (someone once said, “We are the fish; discourse is the water”) are present *at the same time*, and recede in and out of the foreground as contexts shift. In “cultural” terms, this would be like saying we are both members and nonmembers of particular cultures concurrently: a confusing idea. Understanding persons as at the crossroads of multiple discourses helps to clarify things and opens conversational options not available when we view them as rooted in particular cultures.

Power and Dominant Meanings

I have leafed through the indexes of dozens of contemporary counseling texts in search of the word *power* and found to my dismay that it is rarely included. There is a rich thread of social analysis that comes with the introduction of the word *discourse* to the counseling lexicon. It makes it more possible to join with people in identifying how certain meanings (and the thoughts, feelings, and actions accompanying them) have taken hold because they are attached to powerful stories circulating in the broader culture. It trains the eyes and ears for alternative meanings obscured by dominant versions of “the way things are.” And, equally useful, the attention to discourse leads counselors to turn a mirror on their practices and to consider the way that their theories and models, and the institutions in which they are embedded, can be at the service of maintaining normative standards versus opening the door to new possibilities.

The Coconstruction of Meaning

As this chapter reminds us, discourse refers to “both the process of talk and interaction between people and the products of that interaction” (p. ?). Here’s another way to put it: discourse is both a verb and a noun (Strong & Paré, 2004). We don’t just “draw on” existing meanings generated elsewhere when we talk with each other—talking itself brings new meanings into the

world. The importance of this distinction may be easier to understand if we revert to the language of culture. The implication is that our work doesn't just happen *in* culture and isn't just talk *about* culture. Counseling conversations are in effect sites for joining with others in "culture making."

Alain is a working class, 18-year-old French Canadian (known as a Francophone in Canada), self-identified as gay, enrolled in an English-speaking high school mostly attended by wealthy Anglophones. His slight French accent just adds to his energetic, extroverted charm, and he is popular among his circle of mainly gay friends at the school. Alain wants to speak to a counselor not because of problems associated with familiar "cultural" categories like sexual orientation, class, or language group. Rather, he has found he derives more joy in impersonating celebrities and making people laugh than he does in sitting still for hours reading, writing, and working out equations. Alain's gifts are invisible to his father, an electrician, who expects his son to take up the trade that he himself learned from his father. And they are frowned on in a school system that assigns merit according to its own scorecard. Increasingly, Alain feels like a failure.

The construct of "culture" in the broadest sense helps to locate Alain in society. But it is less useful for identifying the meanings that position him as not meeting up and thus unworthy. Those meanings are threaded through the wider culture he inhabits and can be traced intergenerationally through his family. They are a "dominant discourse" that exists alongside *other* versions of events that become more available to Alain as we explore his gifts, connecting them to his Uncle Jacques, who made a career as an actor. There is a multiplicity of stories in Alain's life, and our conversations help to foreground useful ones overshadowed by dominant meanings.

At the same time, it is important that we pay attention to the language of "attention-deficit disorder," which could be taken up in ways that position me as the expert assessor of pathology and Alain as the holder of the deficit. This is where the tool of discourse helps alert me to the risks of

merely reinforcing normative prescriptions that Alain is already finding problematic. This is not to say we ignore the possibility that his learning style presents challenges in the school context. But it allows us grab on to alternative threads and to construct new meanings. In asking Alain, “How have you been able to hang on to your creativity in the face of these messages that surround you?” I am not merely seeking information. This is discourse as verb: Alain and I are coconstructing culture and we speak, and over time it becomes a home for his abundant gifts.

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