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# Is Cultural Sensitivity Always a Good Thing? Arguments for a Universalist Social Work

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## Introduction

The requirement for social workers to be sensitive to cultural difference has now become accepted as an essential component of best practice – indeed, social workers failing to display sensitivity to cultural differences would most likely be seen to be in contravention of most professional ethics frameworks. However, closer scrutiny as to exactly how and to what degree one should display cultural sensitivity in practice reveals a complex set of ethical and philosophical dilemmas for social workers; and this is the main focus of this chapter. Specifically, we argue that the largely uncritical acceptance of the concept of ‘celebrating diversity’ as an inherently ‘good thing’, has undermined Universalist approaches to ethics within social work. That is not to say that assertions of the function of social work are not based on universal principles; the problem lies in the way that these are often proffered alongside intimations to cultural relativism. A good illustration can be found in the definition of social work offered by the *International Federation of Social Workers* which argues that whilst ‘The holistic focus of social work is universal, the priorities of social work practice will vary from country to country and from time to time depending on cultural, historical, and socio-economic conditions’ (IFSW, 2000, Para 5). Whilst the IFSW is perhaps not as guilty as some, it is precisely this kind of dualistic thinking that seeks to cover all possibilities that we argue has led to confusion amongst practitioners, particularly when working with service users from different cultural, religious or ethnic backgrounds.

We begin the chapter by exploring the linked and opposing ideas of ‘cultural relativism’ and ‘universalism’, which we suggest provide the underpinning philosophical foundations for arguments for and against cultural sensitivity. In brief, cultural relativism represents the idea that each identifiable culture group and its practices can and should be judged by its own norms, whereas universalism seeks to base its principles on the identification of overarching aspects of all human cultures. Whilst one could approach the problem from a purely philosophical perspective, we suggest that to fully comprehend both sides of the argument one needs to situate the analysis in the broader historical struggles of minorities for social justice. In doing so, we offer a consideration of the way the discourse associated

with cultural sensitivity developed out of anti-racist struggles from the 1970s; struggles that identified both the way processes of racialisation were built upon deep-rooted ‘white European’ assertions of cultural superiority (Said, 1978, 1994; CCCS, 1982) and attempts to develop an alternative positive affirmation of non-white minority culture, which has in the social work literature been conceptualised as ‘black perspectives’ (Ahmad, 1990; Singh, 1992; Robinson, 2009). However, our account of this notes the way in which what was essentially a critique of power, became transmuted into an orthodoxy in which the celebration of cultural and religious differences came to be seen as an end in itself; in other words historic struggles by oppressed minorities from former European colonies for equality and justice became reduced to a problem of tolerance and ‘managing diversity’. In this chapter we address these problems both theoretically and also through a case study. We conclude the chapter by arguing that while recognising cultural difference forms a crucial basis for maximising communication, building trust and negotiation, within this, there is a more fundamental moral duty to develop an approach that is capable of offering a universal ethics whilst at the same time avoiding the kinds of cultural pathology that have historically characterised the experience of minoritised service users. Here we consider the work of Martha Nussbaum and her attempt to establish a Universalist framework that avoids some of the pitfalls of cultural imperialism.

## **Universalism, Cultural Relativism and Social Work**

The debate between universalism and relativism is quite an old and extensive one and to some extent maps across the two major approaches to ethics; the ‘deontological’, based on a fixed and universal rules based approach, and the ‘teleological’, which emphasises the contextual nature of ethical decision making (Pullen-Sansfacon and Cowden, 2012). As Healy (2007) points out these conflicting perspectives lie ‘at the heart of the heated debates in the arena of human rights, where they are often labelled as the Universalist and cultural relativist positions’ (2007:12). Whilst debates surrounding these two divergent perspectives can be located within a much broader sweep of history, the emergence of a public policy approach from the 1970s that sought to accommodate plurality of cultural standpoints known popularly as ‘multiculturalism’ (Singh and Cowden, 2011) led to a renewed impetus surrounding debates about how best to respond to the needs of minority groups. Whilst the intention of this policy was to foster respect for different cultures and therefore to give minorities a sense of belonging, as Malik

(1996) notes, it actually led to collusion between the (racist) state and opportunistic religious and cultural organisations in the guise of self-appointed community leaders. By offering financial and political support for different communities to develop projects to address their specific cultural needs, not only did these policies undermine the anti-racist movement that struggled for the much bigger prize of justice and equality, it actually encouraged segregation and inter-ethnic conflict.

Within the relatively short history of social work this tension was manifest through two specific approaches. The first and arguably predominant tradition up until the late 1970s is rooted in the Enlightenment tradition and is based on a Universalist understanding of human functioning. In this context, universalism can be defined as constituting both a set of beliefs and moral imperatives underwritten by the idea that despite outward differences, all human beings share a broad set of fundamental needs, hopes and desires. These sorts of commitments to safeguarding and maintaining equality were very much in keeping with the aims and aspirations of the post-war welfare state.

Specifically in relation to minorities, the predominant social work approach of this period can be characterised as one of 'cultural assimilation'. Though well intentioned, in seeking to enable migrants to 'fit into' the majority culture, this approach largely resulted in the pathologising of minority clients based often on crude racial stereotypes (Singh, 1992). Such pathologising historically resulted in the positive strengths of black families of, for example, surviving the trauma of migration, discrimination and disadvantage being underemphasised. On the other hand, conceptions of minority cultural forms as being overly structured and therefore incapable of respecting individual rights (e.g. extended Asian patriarchal families) or lacking structure and therefore at risk of failing (e.g. black single parent families) became overemphasized. As Williams (1996) notes: 'The characterization of individuals, families or communities being to blame for their deprivation because of their way of life, their culture, has long been part of common-sense ideas in social work (1996: 68). In doing so the complexity of family life experienced by minorities seeking to retain dignity and self respect in the face of rapid transition, widespread racism and social exclusion became, as Gambe et al. (1992: 26) noted, 'reduced to simplistic, catch all explanations, such as "endemic cultural conflict"'.

It was in the face of such pathologisation of minority cultures that a new approach emerged which, amongst other things, sought to emphasise the positive aspects of minority cultural life. Associated with the *postmodern turn* within the social sciences, this approach is based on a cultural relativist

framework as the basis for determining human need and action.

The UK Health Professions Council's *Standards of Proficiency for Social Work* (2012) encompasses both of these traditions, often in quite contradictory ways. For instance Standard 2.7 outlines the need for social workers to 'understand the need to respect and uphold the rights, dignity, values and autonomy of every service user and carer'. The demand to 'uphold the rights' of an individual represents a Universalist aspiration, whilst the demand to 'uphold the values' of an individual, points toward a relativist position. While on the surface this may appear laudable, the problem resides in how one understands the requirement to uphold the 'values of every service user and carer', particularly in situations where those values themselves are anything but accommodating of individual rights and freedoms. For example, should a social worker uphold the values of racist service users and carers?

A central problem here lies in the imprecise nature of the concept of 'respect', which has broadly speaking two distinct meanings. One conception builds on the well-established concept of 'tolerance'. Historically speaking, the idea of tolerance came to the forefront in European societies following the Reformation in the sixteenth century when it was seen as a means of ending the bloodshed between difference religious denominations (Grell and Scribner, 2002). Essentially, the idea of tolerance was a response to the need to establish social cohesion through a combination of pragmatism and idealism. Hence, this constituted a conditional acceptance of difference in the short term, with the longer-term aim being one of assimilation through the development of common values and culture.

It was the sense that tolerance represented a kind of cultural imperialism by stealth that led to the turn to 'cultural relativism'. This was first articulated by the anthropologist Franz Boas over 100 years ago, and in suggesting that there was nothing absolute about human civilisation or culture and that cultural plurality was a fundamental feature of humankind (Boas, 1974), was seen as challenging Enlightenment notions of human progress. In sociology, the principle is sometimes practised to avoid cultural bias in research, as well as to avoid judging another culture by the standards of one's own culture. For this reason, cultural relativism has been considered an attempt to avoid ethnocentrism or the tendency for people to negatively judge others on the basis of an assertion of a perceived superiority of one's own cultural identity.

In relation to social work, from the 1990s, assertions of cultural relativism are most clearly evident within the influence of postmodernism which sought to present culturally and morally relativistic approaches as a major step forward against the oppressive predominance of modernist

conceptions of social work. Jan Fook, an advocate of this perspective, argues that given the fragmented nature of knowledge and the multiple ways in which one might construct meaning, an emphasis on a diversity of approaches and perspectives becomes crucial (Fook, 2002: 23). Like much of the rhetoric of the cultural diversity/sensitivity based approaches, this sounds inclusive and progressive on the face of it. However, an embrace of multiple perspectives easily runs the risk of disarming social workers who are invested with the task of making ethical judgements and interventions based upon this. This is particularly the case when it comes to exercising moral judgement about the actions and behaviours of ‘cultures’ other than one’s own. It is one thing to talk about the value of different realities, but which realities are we talking about. It is in this way that culturally relativist arguments – although not exclusively the product of postmodernism, but which have been given a massive boost by it – have contributed to the quagmire of confusion in which much social work theory and practice is currently mired (Herz, 2012).

Alongside the ethically confused nature of these arguments, we also want to make some practical political points about the impact which cultural relativism has had on social work. The main beneficiaries of these ideas at an organisational level have been religious organisations and discourses, since this language has allowed them move into the space previously occupied by ‘modernist’ universalism and secularism. In an earlier piece of work looking in more detail at the way this has happened we noted that:

... a general consensus within contemporary public policy has emerged in which an uncritical engagement with “faith communities” has ceased to be seen as problematic, and where being sensitive to faith-based “difference” is seen as an end in itself. (Singh and Cowden, 2011: p. 347)

One can see examples of this policy in the government support for a rapid expansion of faith based schools, and in the form of the preventing violent extremism (PVE) agenda, where we have seen significant sums of money being specifically ring fenced for Muslim faith groups to develop their provision.

The key point here is while religious groups and indeed fundamentalist groups may not be the kind of ‘diverse approaches’ that Fook (2002) and other proponents of postmodernism in social work envisaged, these groups have been without doubt one of the main beneficiaries, and opposition to their increasing influence has in part been stymied by the predominance of postmodernist ideas. Ironically, in the UK at a time when minorities have been suffering most in terms of the economic crisis, and where far right

extremism and hostility to minorities and Muslims in particular are on the rise (Amnesty International, 2009), we now also have the presence of powerful minority groups, almost entirely defined in terms of faith allegiances, being regularly feted by Government departments. It is almost as though the anti-racist movements that emerged out of the minority experience in the 1970s never existed (Singh and Cowden, 2012). Indeed, as Gilroy (1990) noted over two decades earlier in his essay provocatively entitled *The End of Anti-racism*, it was the policies of successive governments from the mid 1980s that sought to define the problem of racism in cultural terms that resulted in a mirroring of the very categories upon which racist stereotypes and ideologies were constructed in the first place.

It is in this light that we seek to pose the question of whether focusing on culture is always a good thing. Given that such a perspective could be considered somewhat contentious, it is also important for us to be absolutely clear about what we are not arguing for. We are not seeking to argue that social workers should go back to an updated version of what was termed the 'colour blind' approach where professionals were encouraged to see clients as individuals only (Dominelli, 2008). Nor are we advocating that social workers should be intolerant to cultural differences. On the contrary, our argument is 'cultural differences' must always be understood as arising out of particular material conditions. Thus the way to develop a genuine understanding of people, in the situations where social workers encounter them, requires a dialectical approach that allows us to see the dynamic relationship between human agency and social structure as the basis for practice interventions. Hence, such an approach seeks to articulate the ways in which cultural identities and discourses of 'otherness' are produced and reproduced through and from structures of oppression, power and privilege; and it in this sense that we argue in favour of Universalist approaches.

## **A Brief History of Social Work and Cultural Sensitivity**

Having set out our broader philosophical position, we now want to turn to the specific history of social work and consider how the idea of 'cultural sensitivity' has become so embedded within social work. In doing so we want to argue that, whilst problematising the idea, it is important to simultaneously acknowledge the ways in which anti-racist struggles, both within and outside of social work, have historically been intimately linked with a critique of the hegemonic associations of cultural pathology, family dysfunctionality and minorities, as a basis for justifying racist practices (see Singh, 1992, 1999 and 2002). Hence, both in the ways that the problems of

black and minority ethnic (BME) clients and communities were understood and worked with, we now have well documented critiques of what was in effect a form of social work underpinned by a profound *cultural imperialism*; where the role of welfare and education professionals was seen as one of enabling children and families from ‘immigrant’ backgrounds to overcome their ‘culturally backward’ ways and assimilate into the more civilised world of the dominant British culture (Dominelli, 2008).

These approaches were of course not only found in social work, but were part of the whole way the relationship between BME communities and the British state was articulated in post war Britain (CCCS, 1982). Ultimately, with what might be seen as new forms of cultural imperialism (contrasted to the more direct form inherent in the colonial policies of the British and other European empires from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries) we saw major social tensions emerging between BME communities and the state and this was nowhere manifested more than in the relationship between these communities and the police (Hall et al., 1978; Bowling et al., 2003). In 1981 these tensions revealed themselves in riots, which occurred across predominantly black areas in several British cities – St Paul’s in Bristol, Moss Side in Manchester, Toxteth in Liverpool and Brixton and Tottenham in London. The Government’s response at the time was to commission what came to be known as the *Scarman Report* which concluded that BME communities were indeed subject to institutional racism on a large scale and that public authorities had a key role in addressing this issue. Along with the Police Service and Education, the social work professional, which at the time had few black staff, became a key site for the unfolding of the anti-racist challenge (Singh, 2004).

It was in this context that the predominant ethical stance adopted by social work practitioners came to broadly support the rights of minority groups to assert different cultural values. The social work literature of this period was characterised by a concern with developing a critical praxis in working with BME services users, one that was sensitive to the various manifestations of power and powerlessness and cultural diversity (Cheetham, 1981; Ahmed et al., 1986; Devore and Schlesinger, 1991; Robinson, 2009). Often, the starting point and arguably the main strength of this approach was its emphasis on complex psychosocial processes as a basis for connecting individual behaviour to wider socio-cultural and material processes. For instance, in debates surrounding the placement of black children in care, Barn (1993) has demonstrated, in an analysis of over 500 cases, deep rooted problems both in the way black children were inappropriately entering the system and then in the widespread racism and



dehumanisation they encountered in and through it.

The emergence of anti-racist initiatives in social work thus took place in a context of a politicised black community which had fought off both attacks from the far right on one hand and challenged institutional racism on the other (see CCCS, 1982; Gilroy, 1987a, 1987b; Sivanandan, 1990 and 1991). McLaughlin also notes that social work's taking up of these ideas was additionally facilitated by the adoption of 'equal opportunities' policies by left wing Labour-led Local Authorities which had significant influence throughout the 1980s in inner city areas of Britain (2005: 286). Looked at from the vantage point of today it is clear that as this radicalism has subsided, the space once occupied by secular black and anti-racist organisations has gradually come to be replaced by groupings which are defined by ethnic and faith based allegiances. The fertile soil in which these organisations grew was, as we have noted earlier, tilled and watered by postmodernist discourses of difference, and their influence in social work is presently manifest through the growing prevalence of books concerned with culture, faith and spirituality (see for example, Graham, 2002; Gilligan and Furness, 2009, Gray and Webb, 2010, Crabtree, Hussein and Spalekv, 2008). Indeed it would appear that the idea of faith and the culture based around that have now become the predominant mode of expression for multicultural social work. Gilligan and Furness' work typifies this trend in its claim that:

We would argue that those involved in a profession such as Social Work need to recognise the likely, but not always obvious significance of religion and belief to many service users and colleagues. We suggest that Social Workers need to be ready and open to explore these subjects with people and to recognise that they may be significant sources of personal values, of serious dilemmas, of motivation and support, and of anxiety in relation to issues very relevant to Social Work practice. (2009: 4)

While this book is clearly opposed to religious absolutism and to the abuses of power carried out within religious institutions, its language of 'understanding' embodies a sense of faith as essentially benign. Hence for Gilligan and Furness an increasing level of religious identification, which they cite as part of the rationale for their work (2009: 15–18), is presented as though it were simply something for social workers to be more 'aware of'. Our concern with this approach is that it is completely silent on the historical, ideological and material conditions in which religious identities and the social relations which accompany them are being produced, asserted and in many cases imposed. The sense in which this is presented simply as

a 'given' has, we would argue, major implications for women, disabled and gay people particular those within BME communities at the present time.

Chetan Bhatt has argued that this inability to talk about the 'will to power' inherent in the rise of religious identification is made possible through what he calls a 'mesmerising culturalism' which has allowed 'the embedding of a ubiquitous cultural-communitarian orthodoxy across varied intellectual, political and policy fields' (Bhatt, 2006: 99). Simply put, he suggests that diversity policies throughout the late 1990s cleared the path for the assertion of religion as the most important dimension of cultural identity. Bhatt details the ways in which a number of highly reactionary fundamentalist groupings managed to secure considerable influence over the cultural representation of particular minority communities by situating themselves within this language of cultural sensitivity and difference. This is related to the way 'culture' comes to be defined, within the faith-awareness literature in social work, as something which happens in a context which is seen to be entirely separate from wider social, political and economic issues. It is also interesting to note that it is the culture of minority groups which are seen most to envelop and enclose their members – as Bhatt notes while 'today, we are all cultural subjects', it remains the case that 'some of us are more culturally imbued than others' (Bhatt, 2006: 100). Indeed the social work literature on these matters, for all its concern with identity, says almost nothing about respecting the cultural identities of white majority populations. If respecting cultural sensitivity is such a good thing, why is it so unlikely that one would encounter such a suggestion?

Related to this injunction to 'respect culture', one also finds a preoccupation with 'tolerance'. The social theorist Slavoj Žižek has been one of the few to ask why this term has such significance and influence at the moment:

Why are so many problems today perceived as problems of intolerance, rather than as problems of inequality, exploitation or injustice? Why is the proposed remedy tolerance, rather than emancipation, political struggle or even armed struggle? The immediate answer lies in the liberal multiculturalist's basic ideological operation, the "culturalisation of politics". Political differences – differences conditioned by political inequality or economic exploitation – are naturalised and neutralised into "cultural differences"; that is into different "ways of life", which are something given, something that cannot be overcome. They can only be "tolerated". (2009: 119)

The point here is that this discourse of 'tolerance', like the confused cultural

relativist arguments on which it is based, acts to obfuscate dealing with things that might be otherwise seen as abuses of power. For example, the suggestion that Asian families choose to look after their elders justifies not developing services, or that violence is in some sense a ‘normal’ aspect of Black family life, and thus not protecting children appropriately. Our concern here is that the imperative to be ‘respectful’ to the other’s culture, can create a situation of almost wilful blindness toward oppressive relations, particularly towards women and children, which come to be naturalised and rendered beyond criticism through the often conjoined category of ‘culture’ and ‘religion’.

### **Cultural Sensitivity and Neo-Liberalism**

We have noted so far that culturally relativist arguments, particularly those associated with postmodernism, have presented ‘multiple ways of knowing and constructing meaning’ (Fook, op. cit.) as something which challenges the dominance of modernist universalism, again suggesting that the recognition of cultural difference is self-evidently good. When it comes to thinking about the way this agenda of ‘respecting culture’ has inserted itself as the dominant version of multicultural social work we also need to ask who are the beneficiaries of these policies?

We have outlined elsewhere how in a very short period in the aftermath of 9/11 we have seen not just increasingly forceful demands for recognition and influence from within all major religions, but in the context of neo-liberal state policy, increasing receptiveness by the state to faith based community, welfare and educational initiatives (Singh and Cowden, 2011). In contemporary policy and rhetoric there are almost surreal contradictions in the way in which minority ‘cultures’ are discussed. On one hand it is entirely typical to hear Islamic identities and movements blatantly pathologised and presented without question as a ‘threat to democracy’. The news that it was home-grown Islamist militants who had bombed London on 7/7 prompted a wave of concern and liberal soul-searching about the way cultural sensitivity may have contributed to or even caused these actions. Hence within the new rhetoric, migrants who wanted to enter Britain needed to stop living in the specificity of their cultural and religious ghettos and start learning how to be British. Yet on the other hand in the context of the state seeking to divest itself of its social responsibilities in education, health and social care, a faith based social policy and social care agenda is being extensively promoted. This contradictory discourse compounds the sense of uncertainty and confusion that we see within contemporary social work.

What now follows is a case study, which seeks to consider these issues in context. Please note, to maintain confidentiality, all names are fictitious.

### **Case Study: The Ali Family**

The Ali family are asylum seekers who have recently arrived in the UK from Somalia. Along with Mr and Mrs Ali, there are five children ranging from the ages of two to thirteen. They have a strong Muslim identity, speak little English and communicate mostly in their mother tongue Swahili. They are presently being helped by a charity which befriends and advises refugees and asylum seekers on welfare related matters. Mrs Ali has been attending a drop in session once a week and her case has been assigned to Adila, a social work student in her final placement. Adila's manager, John, felt that of all his students, with her African and Muslim background and the fact that she spoke Swahili, Adila would be most sensitive to Mrs Ali's cultural needs.

At their first meeting Mrs Ali's main concern was to discuss how she could change benefit payments from her husband's bank account of his wife's as he has retained control of all monies, leaving her without enough money for the family's needs. Concerned by how isolated Mrs Ali is, Adila begins regular weekly visits to Mrs Ali. Over time she notices how much Mrs Ali looks forward to her visits but also how uncomfortable, and even hostile, Mr Ali is toward her presence. On one visit when Mrs Ali was alone in the flat, Adila was completely taken aback when Mrs Ali burst into tears. When she asked what the matter was, Mrs Ali asked her first to promise her that she would not tell anyone as this information would bring shame to her and isolate her even further from her husband's family, who already had a very negative view of her. Caught in the emotion of this moment Adila gave this assurance. Mrs Ali then explained that she had for some time suffered regular beatings from her husband, but that these had recently become much worse as a consequence of their thirteen year old daughter Fozia's refusal to wear a headscarf. Mr Ali has justified these beatings to her failure to bring Fozia up as a good Muslim. Mrs Ali also informed Adila that her husband's family were encouraging these beatings as they blamed her for allowing Fozia to become 'corrupted by Western values'.

In this instance we see a social work student allocated a case on the basis of cultural identification, and yet it is this very cultural identification, and Adila's awareness of Mrs Ali's vulnerability, that has created a number of dilemmas for her:

- The first issue and ethical dilemma concerns Adila's personal integrity – if she reports Mr Ali to the police or other authorities, she is breaking her word to Mrs Ali.
- The second concerns the response those authorities have toward Asylum Seekers, whose legal status in the UK remains precarious. If Mr Ali was convicted by the police for his violence to his wife, it is entirely possible within existing Immigration legislation and policy that he could be deported back to Somalia.
- The third revolves around how questions of gender and women's rights can be balanced against question of cultural and religious prescriptions of women's roles and duties.
- The fourth concerns Fozia and the kind of expectations she will have as a young woman growing up in the UK, against cultural and religious conceptions of 'honour' and 'dignity'.

The first priority in seeking to deal with this situation is to understand it as a complex and dynamic exchange concerning the denial of rights and opportunities. Specifically, one needs to focus on patriarchal violence, racism and the personal traumas which are caused by wars and other geopolitical conflicts, whose impact is primarily but not exclusively, on populations originating from the former European colonies. This is not to say that culture is unimportant; on the contrary, discerning the way culture is produced and reproduced in time and space is critical to understanding why people act the way they act, and the ways in which they might rationalise and normalise certain behaviours. If social work is anything it is about reading culture, but this must not be in a shallow sense. The key lesson is that external expressions and assertions of cultural identity always reveal deeper processes associated with struggles, with loss and separation, as well as manifestations of symbolic power and tangible violence, legitimacy and privilege.

In seeking to resolve these dilemmas it is necessary to decouple principles of human rights from the imposition of a 'white' Western cultural frame, or any other dominant framework for that matter. In other words one is seeking to combine principles of universalism with the insights developed by anti-racists about avoiding the kinds of ethnocentric practices that Devore and Schlesinger (1991) are at pains to point out. Whilst not an easy task, we think that the work of the moral philosopher, Martha Nussbaum and her conception of *capabilities* can be of particular relevance in this regard (Nussbaum, 2011). Used extensively in the field of 'development studies', this approach has yet to be taken up within social work. In collaboration with the Nobel prize winning economist Amartya Sen, Nussbaum sought to

develop an approach to universalism that avoids the pitfalls of both cultural relativism on the one hand and cultural imperialism on the other (Nussbaum and Sen, 1993). Deeply concerned with the plight of minorities, the starting point for the *capabilities approach* is the view that human development, traditionally seen purely in terms of economic growth, needs to incorporate other dimensions of life.

Rooted in the Aristotelian notion of the 'good life', the key to this approach is to delineate a theory of 'social good' or 'well being' that resides primarily but not only within the individual. A 'good life' is not derived from the accumulation of material resources alone but from being able to develop opportunities resulting from a set of fundamental political entitlements or what she refers to as *central human functional capabilities*. Her aim, according to Charusheela, is 'to ground a specific conception of the core features of human experience that lets us identify the basic functionings that we will agree are universal, that is, essential for each individual to have in their capabilities set, regardless of their social location or cultural background' (2008: 5). In this sense, she offers a challenge to dominant claims that people may make to defend traditional cultural assertions on such matters as the role of women and the welfare of children. She argues that assertions of tradition and culture are 'simply the view of the most powerful members of the culture' and once this is understood one begins to think of traditional values in a completely different way (2011: 107).

Stemming initially from her work on women and human development Nussbaum identifies ten *human capabilities* which she argues can be applied in a universal way. These can be summarised as: avoiding premature death, having good health, being able to move freely, being able to cultivate one's imagination, being allowed to love, being able to develop critical reflection about one's life, having dignity for self and others including non-human species, being able to play and having control over one's environment (Nussbaum, 2010). She warns against adopting the model in a rigid manner and suggests that the list should be viewed as flexible, open-ended, and that the abstract principles will need to be interpreted for specific situations. She also sees the list as available for appropriation by both secular and religious groups in their own way.

The key point of Nussbaum's argument is that she believes that much of what passes as 'authentic culture' is simply hegemonic (i.e. powerful, ideologically-based assumptive truth) and therefore is an incomplete basis for knowing what minorities and oppressed groups in general may think and desire. In contrast the *capabilities approach* is a self-conscious normative framework built on an awareness of the existence of widespread cultural

differences that invites critique and revision, and hence it cannot be seen as 'colour blind'. Further, given that the practical implementation of the framework is always more 'messy' than what can be delineated in the abstract, the abstract generality of the framework deliberately allows implementation into particular places and contexts. For example, taking the issue of 'freedom of speech', there is recognition that there may be different contexts in which this will be precisely defined and implemented. Because the approach focuses on 'capabilities' and not 'functioning', it allows the individual to develop what Nussbaum terms 'a zone of freedom' (2011: 110). And so in this sense the capabilities approach is not seeking to offer a prescription for life but a basis for determining how somebody can be enabled to live their life to the fullest. Similarly, given the statements are primarily offered for broader political ends aimed at securing rights for oppressed groups, there is no judgement made of the veracity of religious beliefs as such. Importantly this then offers respect for expression of diversity and religion in particular, whilst at the same time allowing a principled challenge to oppressive beliefs, whatever their genesis. It is in this sense that Nussbaum argues that paradoxically, the best way to defend diversity is precisely to argue for universal capabilities, such as freedom of conscience, belief and expression.

The challenge that Nussbaum offers for the social work professional is clear; whilst paying attention to the way in which minority group identities and cultures may become constructed over time, professionals also need to deploy critical insights into the way cultural identities are not only formed but 'enforced' within a complex web of power relations. In this regard, cultural identity is not seen as something that is to be either preserved or destroyed, but to be tested and engaged with, from a concrete universalist reference point such as the *human capabilities* framework.

Whilst we recognise much work needs to be done to thinking through the implications that Nussbaum's theory has for social work, we finish our discussion by offering a brief comment on the value this framework has for social work by applying it to the case study above. Our initial dilemma concerned Adila's professional integrity. The reality is that the lack of an intervention in this situation has the potential to lead to highly adverse consequences for the well-being of the entire family, so Adila must act. While she needs to be aware of issues of culture, language and religion, she needs to interpret these through the realisation of the profound levels of change and disorientation the whole family will be experiencing. In this sense, both Mr and Mrs Ali need to be worked with on an understanding of the multiple levels of trauma they have experienced, both in terms of why



they have had to leave their country of origin, as well as the anomie of becoming ‘asylum seekers’ in another country. The key issue here for the social worker is not to work with the family to reconstruct their previous cultural order, but rather to enable the family to engage in a transformative process whereby they develop a new identity. This does not have to be seen, as it so often is, as built around a negation of Islam or being Somalian, but is about situating the universal capabilities which Nussbaum identifies into a particular situation. In saying this it is crucial to bear in mind that questions of women’s rights and gender roles need to be seen not as Western constructs, but as universal constructs upon which cultural and religious identities can, and will continue to be, created. It is in this sense, as we have argued elsewhere, that social workers need to see themselves as *transformative intellectuals* (Singh and Cowden, 2009). This involves Adila utilising a range of pedagogical strategies to enable, as Nussbaum suggests, the capability of developing critical reflection about one’s life and enabling her to develop her own voice or extend her capacity to express her freedom of speech.

## **Conclusion**

The main thrust of this chapter has been to explore the limits of cultural relativism and in doing so assert the need for social work to develop and articulate a clear Universalist standpoint. We have pointed out that the emergence of demands for a cultural relativist approach are reflected both in the critiques made by minorities of cultural imperialism and ethnocentrism, and also link with postmodernist assertions of the contingent nature of reality. Interestingly, taken to their extremes both positions, relativism and universalism, become untenable; to assert that reality is wholly fluid is in itself to adopt a form of absolutism. It is also deeply ironic that many of the beneficiaries of these culturally relativist arguments are groups that advocate various forms of religious absolutism. In order to find a way through these paradoxes and problems we have sought to outline the capabilities approach developed by Nussbaum. The distinctive quality of her arguments for Universalist approaches is her idea that irrespective of cultural differences, of which there are many, it is possible for human beings to identify a set of fundamental political entitlements as the basis for making moral and ethical judgements. Whilst we have only taken initial steps in elaborating this approach here, we hope to have indicated the relevance this can have for social work and clearly much more work is needed on this.

If one accepts that culture is a prerequisite for any kind of human



exchange, in the final reckoning, the issue is not about whether or not we should adopt a cultural perspective, but how one can avoid drifting into a cultural relativism which discounts the possibility of making judgements about others. We argue that in seeking to respect cultural diversity, there is also a moral imperative to celebrate aspects of our common humanity. Even if for a complex set of reasons not always expressed, this is to be most readily found in the deep-rooted aspirations that all human beings have for freedom from oppression, as Slavoj Žižek asserts:

The formula of revolutionary solidarity is not “let us tolerate our differences”; it is not a pact of civilisations, but a pact of struggles which cut across civilisations, a pact between what, in each civilisation, undermines its own identity from within, fights against its oppressive kernel. What unites us is the same struggle. (2009: 133)

## Further Reading

Nussbaum, M.C. (2011) *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard University Press: Although surprisingly little reference of her work is made in social work, as one of the most preeminent moral philosophers of our time, Martha Nussbaum has written widely on human development and the ethics of social justice. This book provides an accessible summary to Nussbaum’s work which directly addresses the tensions associated with respecting cultural diversity and traditions whilst recognising the growing impact of universal human rights based culture.

Singh., G. and Cowden, S. (2011) ‘Multiculturalism’s New Faultlines: Religious Fundamentalisms and Public Policy’, *Critical Social Policy*, 31(3), August 2011, pp. 343–64: As well as reviewing the direction of multicultural social policy over the past this piece offers a critical examination of the tensions that have emerged amongst policy makers, activists and professionals surrounding the (re)emergence what can be termed the ‘faith agenda’. Using the case of Shabina Begum, a Muslim schoolgirl who demanded to wear the jilbab to school, the paper is interested in understanding the curiously paradoxical place of religion and faith based groupings in the contemporary multicultural polity.

Yuval-Davis, N. (2011) *The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations*. London: Sage Publications: This book offers a critical examination of the related issues of culture, identity, religion and State with a particular emphasis on questions of gender. In doing so it offers a contemporary framework for addressing the tensions related to issues of

cosmopolitan versus parochial identities. The way in which it links these to questions of both 'care' and 'autonomy' make it particularly relevant for social work.

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