



PARTNERSHIP

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YOUTH RESEARCH

RESEARCH SEMINAR REPORT

RESITUATING CULTURE: REFLECTIONS ON DIVERSITY, RACISM, GENDER AND IDENTITY IN THE CONTEXT OF YOUTH

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Introduction

The Resituating culture seminar was a resounding success. It brought together an interdisciplinary group of researchers, educational practitioners and representatives from youth non-governmental organisations from across the wider Europe. The seminar critiqued the commonly assumed conceptual framework of culture in relation to understandings of the complex and multiple identities, histories and experiences that comprise the lived realities of Europe today. It explored the limits of widely employed notions of culture, multiculturalism, diversity and tolerance in explaining racism, and for understanding how to develop a fairer and more equal society for all.

The programme was followed a structure of key-note address, individual papers presented on thematic panels followed by discussions, and a concluding panel commenting on the import of the research papers. The keynote speaker, Professor John Tomlinson, began by arguing that globalisation has become a complex and disputed term, and needs to be approached as a way of conceptualising the world today from particular standpoints. In terms of cultural analysis, he argued that to a great extent cultural experience can no longer be only related to geographical space, and that the *deterritorialisation* of people, finance, images, information, ideas and products has led to situations where people increasingly experience involved connexity in their daily lives.

The four panel discussions were: Multi-culturalism and Inter-culturalism, Racism(s) and Anti-Racism(s), Gender and Culture, Youth, Culture and Youth Culture?

A summary of some of the main points to emerge from the seminar

The language used to discuss racism and cultural difference was argued to construct and restrict how these issues are discussed, thus in many cases sustaining the core problems and the failing approaches currently being implemented. Critiquing the conceptual terminology opens possibilities to finding new perspectives and approaches to deal with these issues. In particular an over-reliance on terms such as multiculturalism, and an uncritical acceptance of emerging ideas such as diversity management, was contended to be based on static and out-moded concepts of culture, and at best partial in understanding how identities are constructed in terms of gender, youth culture and other individuated factors.

The policies behind the term *multiculturalism* have – in many states - been used to celebrate and promote minority cultures, and to enact laws holding people responsible for individual discriminatory acts. Multiculturalism has often been considered as a bottom-up phenomenon, stemming from the demands of identity politics, whereas it is often a creation of official policies and initiatives. A key observation at the seminar was that while state institutions that have turned to culture to combat racism, they have continuously failed to critically engage with how racism manifests itself in state institutions, and even in the racialised nature of nation-states themselves. The implicit multiculturalist focus on culture and difference has led to what was termed consumer multiculturalism, where some cultures and practices become highly trendy - e.g. Irish culture, black musicians of all varieties. The other side of this is the way that certain ‘cultures’ – most obviously now Muslim people and their religious practices - become stereotyped and symbolic of unacceptable difference in the West.

A crucial difficulty with multiculturalism was held to be that there are no distinct, fixed and equal units of culture to work with, despite the assumptions of multiculturalist thinking. Instead power dimensions between groups are constantly at play and internal differences within supposed cultural groups are often as or more important than the logic of cultural difference. In the seminar it was suggested that cultural leaders in the different communities may in some instances serve their own personal interests in the guise of cultural leadership, and that it is often the case that they have contested validity in the communities that they present themselves as representing.

However, this analysis did not underestimate the need to emphasise diversity when it is marginalised or oppressed. When two or more cultures hold different values, beliefs and practice the intersections of these cultures become impossible to live and sometime contravene basic human rights. For example, there are often conflicts between gay and lesbian identities, cultures and practices and some religious groups cultural beliefs. Reconciling differences between cultural groups is a difficult dilemma that needs to be faced in the context of human rights.

Similarly, policies based on the concept of Republican citizenship - that recognise the equality of citizenship for all and see it as a neutral category - may in fact inherently favor not just secularism but also Christianity while excluding other religions. A much-discussed example was that of young people in schools forbidden from wearing of culturally symbolic clothes regardless of the significance to their identity. An alternative to both multiculturalism and republican citizenship, it was contended, is focus on the concept of equal opportunities in

diverse societies, and on human rights for women and men of all faith and cultural backgrounds.

In examining these issues in relation to work, *diversity management* was identified as the latest buzzword to dominate management thinking and practice. This idea has been used to stress the benefits for productivity in having people from many cultural backgrounds working together. Research presented at the seminar argued that in many instances organisations involved in diversity management may actually be involved in programmes of immigrant training, making cultural allowances or combating discrimination, these did not constitute a policy and practice of diversity management. It was also argued that pushing a rationale of productivity and business benefit in exchange for rectifying ethnic discrimination and increasing equal opportunities was not a solid basis for a strategy of this importance.

Further panels argued that culture has become the dominant framework of analysis to the extent that other factors of identity and experience, such as gender and class, have become neglected. The seminar emphasised the importance of examining the intersectionality of identities within specific contexts, and the interplay of power and identity within these contexts. Assumptions are often made within classifications of gender and these can impose meaning on to young people's lives. When researching young peoples lives the dominant features should emerge from their own expression rather than a predetermined ideas of categories of gender or culture.

Women have traditionally experienced being represented in language that 'others' them in relation to the normal identity of a man. The process of establishing what a society considers normal has been to compare it to an opposite of what it is not for example: man/woman, white/black, western/ non-western. The 'normal' has been privileged in that society whilst 'the other' has experienced prejudice and discrimination. The normal and privileged has been associated with the term culture, referring here to rationalisation and civilised high culture whilst 'the other' have been associated with nature, the wild and non rational behaviour. Prejudice within language is deeply embedded and in practice is rarely noticed by the users.

The expression 'youth culture' carries with it its own wide set of connotations, and it was similarly critiqued during the seminar for contemporary relevance and robustness. It was argued that youth culture has tended to be associated with UK based research traditionally focusing on Anglo-Saxon male working class culture. Subsequent tempts to devise collectives for youth formations have also been critically analysed; for example it was argued that notions such as 'tribes' or 'neo-tribes' are complicit in replacing the imagery of the street with images of early ethnographic constructions of Africa. Among other implications, this may cement negative conceptions of youth cultures as unruly, dangerous, predominantly male behaviour. Discussing these issues also emphasised that theoretical models and approaches developed in particular national centres of knowledge production are often influential beyond their borders, but inappropriate to these wider contexts.

Suggestions for follow-up from the seminar in youth work

- Key ideas need to be transmitted to the youth field in clear and concrete form, as in a *Coyote* article for example.
- Further work is needed to translate knowledge from research seminars to youth work strategies, in particular how to challenge language and attitudes.
- Exploring whiteness as an assumed identity and working with majority youth is crucial in doing anti-racist work.
- Youth work on anti-racism should explore the historical context of racism.
- Youth work should take into accounts that racism cannot be separated from other prejudicial attitudes, such as sexism, and youth work needs to be able to explore the interplay between these and other discriminations.
- Youth work should confront the link between emotion and racism.
- There should be relevant training for other professionals that work with young people, such as the police.
- A handbook should be created for youth policy-makers outlining key questions and issues in the use of terminology.
- It would be useful to create a list of good practice on anti- racist youth work.
- Youth workers should be conscious not to place young people in set categories of identity, and facilitate those they work with in avoiding this approach.