Representation of Ethnic Identity in North American Social Work Literature: A Dossier of the Chinese People

A. Ka Tat Tsang

Ethnic and cultural identities of people who are not white in North America are conceived as natural and fixed categories. Such conceptualizations are associated with a tendency to take ethnicity as a client characteristic instead of understanding ethnic and cultural differences as constituted by the engagement between social worker and client. Using Foucault's dossier approach, the author uses the Chinese people as a case example to illustrate the politics of identification and identity assignment in professional social work literature in North America. The literature was selected from the Social Work Abstracts database from 1977 to 1997. The article reveals how Chinese people are "essentialized," "otherized," and negatively positioned as an ethnic construct. Four major arguments are presented together with their implications for cross-cultural social work practice.

Key words: *Chinese; cross-cultural training; ethnic identity; social work literature*

As a profession, social work has been paying increasing attention to issues of ethnic and cultural difference. Competence in cross-cultural practice is now a standard requirement of social work training programs. Practitioners and researchers are actively reporting their experience of working in an ethnically and culturally diverse environment. Values such as justice and equity are being emphasized, and racist attitude and practice are under attack. The profession is, however, not totally immune to the influences of the dominant discourses of society that have ethnocentric or even racist elements.

Some authors have performed the important function of critical self-reflection on the profession. McMahon and Allen-Meares (1992), for example, reviewed the professional literature to assess whether social work as a profession is racist. More recently, Dyche and Zayas (1995) critically assessed the cultural literacy approach as the dominant perspective in social work practice. Along the same line, this article examines professional social work literature as discourse. Using a discourse analysis method, I use the representation of ethnic identity as a site of engagement with the social work professional

229

literature to investigate how ethnicity is constructed as social reality, how social relations are maintained, and how social services are legitimized and controlled. I use Chinese people as a case example to examine the related discourses.

Professional Literature and Discourse Analysis

The importance of published literature in professional discourse and practice is widely recognized. Spender (1981), for example, noted the role of published work in conditioning the research agenda of a discipline. Berger (1990) also identified the power of professional publishing in shaping social work practice. Recognizing the importance of professional literature, McMahon and Allen-Meares (1992) attempted to examine "whether social work is intrinsically tainted by assumptions and practice that can be called racist" (p. 533) by performing a content analysis of the literature. McMahon and Allen-Meares believe that a critical analysis of the professional literature can elucidate how practitioners think about practice, how they perceive their relationship with clients, and what they think is important to the profession. Their analysis included articles published in four major U.S. social work journals from 1980 to 1989. In their analysis, McMahon and Allen-Meares emphasized the role of institutional and structural interventions, as opposed to individual interventions, in antiracist social work. Their assumption was that antiracist social work consists of interventions targeting structural changes in the sociopolitical environment to eliminate institutional racism. Based on the content analysis, they concluded that "the literature portrays the social work profession as naive and superficial in its antiracist practice" (p. 537).

As a method, content analysis focuses on professional literature as published texts and examines **what** is written. The method is capable of revealing the thinking and attitude of the authors. However, it does not focus on the mechanism of production or **how** these texts are constructed. It does not emphasize the relationship between how professional literature is produced and its relationship to the social, cultural, and political contexts. This article adopts a discourse analysis approach. Social work literature is examined as professional discourse, and its relationship with the dominant discourses is reviewed.

The word discourse is made up of two Latin roots: *dis,* meaning from, and *currere,* meaning run. It can be taken to refer broadly to any text and talk produced in a social context. The term discourse analysis has been used by authors in the social sciences and humanities in a variety of ways. It ranges from linguistic investigation of language use (Stubbs, 1983) to critical analysis of social issues and ideologies (Kress, 1985). van Dijk (1993a), for example, identified 12 dimensions or levels of discourse. Gee (1990, 1996) also offered different conceptions of discourse and documented different levels of discourse organization and analysis.

Given the broad and varied application of the term, there are nonetheless some common elements adopted by discourse analysts. *Discourse analysis* is first and foremost analysis of language in use (Brown & Yule, 1983). According to Hatch (1992), "Discourse analysis is the study of the language of communication—spoken or written. The system that emerges out of the data shows that communication is an interlocking social, cognitive, and linguistic enterprise" (p. 1). Emphasis is put on the interlocking relations between different components and domains and the relations between text and context.

I use discourse in this article as social texts and how they are produced. Social texts can be written, spoken, or symbolically articulated. These texts are produced by people who occupy particular positions in society who construct reality from the viewpoints of those positions. According to Rodger (1991), social work professional discourse includes "the knowledge, myths and received ideas as well as language, circulating within the professional world of the social worker" (p. 64). Discourse analysis aims at elucidating how social texts are produced, their relations to their sociopolitical contexts, the social reality they construct, the claims they make or the agendas they advance, the assumptions they contain, the social positions of the authors of these texts, and the social relations they assume or perpetuate.

Using Chinese people as a case example, this article investigates how ethnic minority groups are constructed as social categories in North American social work literature and in the process identifies a number of important issues for cross-cultural social work. The analysis follows the "dossier" approach described by Foucault (1975), which is most relevant to situations in which there are different constructions of reality and competing claims. A *dossier,* according to Foucault, is

> a case, an affair, an event that provided the intersection of discourses that differed in origin, form, organization, and function. . . . All of them speak, or appear to be speaking, of one and the same thing; . . . But in their totality and their variety they form neither a composite work nor an exemplary text, but rather a strange contest, a confrontation, a power relation, a battle among discourses and through discourses. And yet, it cannot simply be described as a single battle; for several separate combats were being fought out at the same time and intersected each other. (p. x)

The dossier approach is one of the many methods of discourse analysis. It is most useful when a relatively well-defined domain and a collection of texts can be identified. In other forms of discourse analysis, the domain can be more open-ended, and additional materials are included in the process. In the analysis of a dossier, materials are examined as constitutive of discourses. Such a method is very different from the conventional literature review, which attempts to take stock of the current status of professional knowledge in a given area. In this method, the social work professional literature is seen as a body of material articulating a discourse of its own.

It has been observed that professional discourse in social work is shaped by the dominant discourses in the enveloping social context (Chambon, 1994). It has also been pointed out that academics and professionals, as elites in society, participate in the generation of and maintenance of dominant discourses (van Dijk, 1993a). *Dominant discourses* refer to social texts and their mechanisms of production, which are created and maintained by the more powerful groups in society. These discourses dominate the ways in which social reality is constructed, including how "minority" groups are produced as social categories and the positions assigned to them in relation to the helping profession. To elucidate the discursive characteristics of this literature, publications are not necessarily taken as authoritative sources of information, research findings, theoretical knowledge, or professional opinions. Instead, professional publications are examined with reference to their discursive effects or the ways they guide and influence conceptualization and practice in social work. These include how ethnic and cultural differences are conceptualized, the relative positioning of social workers and clients within their sociopolitical contexts, and how particular power relationships are created or maintained. There is not a single method of discourse analysis. Actual procedures adopted by analysts vary widely, and a number of different procedures have been documented by different authors (Coyle, 1995; Parker, 1992; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Seidel, 1985). The current analysis has incorporated a number of commonly used procedures, including the following six steps:

1. composing a dossier of selected texts relevant to the object of analysis
2. reading and rereading of the dossier to look for recurrent discursive patterns
3. formulation of hypotheses
4. testing the hypotheses against linguistic evidence in the texts, including active engagement with incompatible or disconfirming cases
5. wherever indicated, considering additional texts to examine contextual relationships
6. modifying hypotheses in relation to steps 4 and 5.

It should be emphasized that although a systematic method is adopted, discourse analysis does not claim to objectively **discover** discursive patterns that are embedded in the dossier. In line with the basic assumption of discourse analysis, the analysis report itself is, like other social texts, a linguistically constructed social reality and can itself be subjected to discourse analysis (Coyle, 1995). The position of the analyst, in this case grounded in antioppressive and

antiracist social work, conditions the selection of substantive issues as well as the emphasis on power positions and relations.

The value of a discourse analysis report is assessed not in terms of objective discoveries as claimed by positivistic scientific methods, but in terms of its articulation of an alternative understanding of the selected texts. In social work it is important that the reality constructed by this alternative understanding is relevant to informing professional conceptualization and practice.

Social Work Literature Base

This article takes the representation "Chinese" people in social work literature as a dossier, a case example to examine how an ethnic group is constructed in professional discourse. A set of data for the present exercise was selected from the *Social Work Abstracts* electronic database (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 1997) from 1977 to September 1997. This database covers journal articles and doctoral theses relevant to social work practice, theory, and research and does not include books and book chapters. This selection, although obviously not representing the totality of professional social work discourse, can be taken as reflective of some of its major structures. I used "China" and "Chinese" as keywords, and out of the more than 35,000 items, 189 citations were obtained (about 0.54 percent). Only articles dealing with the North American context were selected. This selection was mainly made on the basis of abstracts. In cases where the abstracts did not provide clear and sufficient information, the decision was made after reading the actual articles (Au, 1996; Fung, 1994). Most of the items excluded deal with other geographical and sociopolitical places (for example, China, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong). As a result, 84 items (67 journal articles and 17 theses) were included in the analysis. The actual journal articles were used in the analysis, but only abstracts were used for the theses because of the substantial time and cost required in obtaining them. Because of the same accessibility issue, readers who consult the literature database are also more likely to use these abstracts than the actual theses themselves.

Ethnic Categories and the Politics of Representation

The current analysis focused on discursive patterns in the dossier. Four major patterns were identified: (1) the tendency of social work authors to construe ethnic identity as essential, neutral, and unproblematic categories; (2) "otherizing" the client and the adoption of a cultural literacy approach, which deals with clients as members of homogenous groups; (3) negative social positioning of Chinese people; and (4) the mechanism of professional knowledge production and how the research agenda is controlled.

"Essentializing" Ethnic Identity

In the selected items, Chinese people are usually represented as a generic group with little additional information on within-group differences. Only eight of the 84 items specify countries of origin such as the People's Republic of China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Vietnam. Most of the other items just label them Chinese. It is not uncommon for Chinese people to be discussed under the more generic category of Asian Americans (Chan, 1976; Hong & Tsukashima, 1980; Kitano & Chi, 1986; Lorenzo, 1988; Ma, 1995). Such use of the label "Chinese" is rarely questioned in the social work literature. Most authors are comfortable with putting individuals under the category and assume that they share a common ethnicity and a common culture.

This practice of representing ethnic identity as essential, fixed, and stable is very common in the dominant discourses in North America. As an essential identity, ethnic identity is thought to have unequivocal and universal meanings that transcend historical and cultural boundaries

> As an essential identity, ethnic identity is thought to have unequivocal and universal meanings that transcend historical and cultural boundaries.

(Brah, 1992). Such an essentialist understanding of ethnic identity detracts from the point that ethnic identity is not a neutral empirical fact, but a socially constructed reality with definite values attached. Authors like Brah and Bhabha (1994) have argued that ethnic identity is never fixed and stable, but is rather constructed by the discursive practice of social groups and constantly contested and renegotiated. The term Chinese, for example, does not have the standardized, stable, and unproblematic characteristics implied by the apparently neutral use of the term by social work authors.

An examination of how the label Chinese is used in different discursive practices provides an interesting contrast to its use in social work, thereby connecting the meaning of the label to a broader context. Different speakers and authors use the term to refer to different realities and for different, and sometimes competing or conflicting purposes while political and personal interests are negotiated. Outside the context of North American social work discourse, the term constitutes a site of contestation with multiple participants driving a variety of political agendas.

In what is geopolitically defined as China, or the People's Republic of China, there are many people who do not belong to the dominant Han ethnic group and have different levels of identification with the label Chinese. Some of these people identify themselves as Chinese, but many of them contest this label actively, sometimes violently. In Tibet, for example, being Chinese is a contentious issue involving citizenship, ethnic membership, religious affiliation, cultural identification, and political allegiance. Many Tibetans, therefore, do not identify themselves as Chinese whereas the government in Beijing insists that they are Chinese citizens (Hout & Goldstein, 1994). During the racial riots in early 1997, the Uighur people in Xinjiang were trying to assert who they are while expressing their discontent with the Han Chinese who are the dominant ethnic group in the territory ("Trouble In," 1997; Woo, 1997). In 1996 Taiwanese and Chinese identities were negotiated within a context of military and political tension during an election in Taiwan, or

the Republic of China. The Beijing government ordered a war game targeting Taiwan, including the launching of unloaded missiles, to threaten the political parties and the voters in Taiwan who were accused of advocating independence or secession from the *zhu-guo* (ancestral-country) ("Lee Declares," 1996; "Taiwan's People," 1996). On Taiwan, many local Taiwanese define themselves as different from the mainland Chinese who moved in with the Nationalist regime in 1949. There is an active political party in Taiwan advocating a politically independent Taiwan that is totally separate from China. Many of its supporters do not regard themselves as Chinese (Rubinstein, 1993; Wachman, 1994).

Outside of this geopolitically defined China, there are many people who cling to their Chinese identity as the primary definition of self. These people refer to themselves as *Huaqiao* (Chinese emigrants) or overseas Chinese (Wang, 1991). Such identification is sometimes associated with personal and political risk. In Indonesia, for example, ethnic Chinese people were targeted for assault and looting during the riots that led to the resignation of President Suharto in 1998 ("Protests, Violence," 1998). In contrast, for many people in Hong Kong, the once British colony handed back to China in July 1997, separating citizenship and ethnic identity is an effective strategy of social and political survival. Hundreds of thousands of Hong Kong people who are ethnically Chinese have adopted foreign citizenship through emigration to Canada, Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom to ensure some form of protection of their political and human rights after the handover (Skeldon, 1994, 1997).

Following the analysis of Bhabha (1994), national or ethnic identity, instead of being assured of stability and constancy as an essential identity, is actually contingent on complex processes through which people occupy different sites of identification. I argue that being Chinese involves complex processes of identification, which are site-specific, varying across different sociopolitical contexts.

Instead of connecting with these intersecting discourses, North American social work literature constructs an apparently neutral and unproblematic category of Chinese. Chinese

people so defined often are compared with other "ethnic" groups such as African Americans, Mexican Americans, and Japanese Americans, who also are conceived in terms of generic categories. It is of interest to note that Mexican Americans and Hispanics are usually grouped alongside the Chinese but distinguished from "white people" The term "white non-Hispanics" is sometimes used to reinforce this distinction (Becerra & Iglehart, 1995). This treatment of ethnic categories reveals the politics of ethnic identity construction, which is seldom based on objective characteristics that naturally distinguish one group from another. People from Mexico and South America, disregarding their ethnic heritage and country of origin, have to be separated from the other white people who constitute the dominant group in North America. In this instance, language, cultural, and socioeconomic differences are probably more critical than perceived skin color.

The more powerful individuals in society use the politics of identity to maintain their privileged positions. First, they use their own discretion to select characteristics such as skin color, gender, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, historiography, and so on and make them criteria for constructing social group memberships. Socially constructed values usually are attached to one or more of these characteristics, usually with positive values assigned to the defining characteristics of the powerful group and negative values assigned to the groups defined as different. The powerful group then issues exclusionary and oppressive policies and actions to people defined as different. Individuals who have less effective claims to power often are located or relocated to sites of identifications where they are recipients of social and political practices that marginalize and oppress them. Such identity assignment usually perpetuates the power structure, which is built by the groups in power and reinforced by the dominant discourses (Stanfield, 1984; Van Den Bergh, 1995, van Dijk, 1993a, 1993b).

"Otherizing" the Client: The Cultural Literacy Approach

Among the 84 selected items, most have taken Chinese people as a group sharing common characteristics. Many authors believe that their Chinese clients or subjects, as a group, share "unique cultural values" (Fung, 1994; Mui, 1996). Intergroup comparison, which reinforces the notion of discrete ethnic categories as well as the assumption of homogeneity within any given group, is commonly performed (Chi, Kitano, & Lubben, 1988; Hong & Hong, 1991; Matsouka & Ryujin, 1991). There are many incidents of general characterization of aspects of Chinese culture such as hierarchical family structure (Li, 1988), filial piety and familism (Hong & Hong, 1991), self-control and moderation (Ryan, 1985). By comparison, attention to intragroup differences and diversity is relatively rare. A number of items distinguish Chinese people according to their country or place of origin but treat these subgroups as relatively homogenous (Colon & Woullet, 1994; Land, Nishimoto, & Chau, 1988; Nishimoto, 1986, 1988).

Dyche and Zayas (1995) described this approach as the "cultural literacy model," which they think is the dominant approach in cross-cultural social work. Within this model, clients are categorized as members of specific ethnic groups. Individuals thus categorized are assumed to share sufficient personal, social, or cultural characteristics to be subject to some common description or methods of professional intervention (Ewalt, Freeman, Kirk, & Poole, 1996; Green, 1995; Lee, 1997). General descriptions of ethnic groups, their cultural traditions and practices often are offered together with general guidelines for working with individuals categorized as members of these groups (Aranda & Knight, 1997; Castex, 1994; Rhee, 1996).

Social work authors writing with this approach often assume that ethnicity belongs only to the client. It is not unusual to read social work publications focusing on specific ethnic groups such as Chinese, Korean, South Asian, Hispanic, African American, and Native or Native American without a chapter or section on white or Anglo-Saxon peoples. Such an arrangement in professional texts reveals an ethnocentric bias that projects ethnicity on to the less powerful groups as well as a professional bias that assumes that the worker is white. In the present analysis, at least 40 of the 67 journal

articles clearly adopted cultural literacy assumptions or methods. Assessment on the theses is less definite, because it is based only on abstracts. Nonetheless, many of them (nine of 17) contain statements that clearly articulate a cultural literacy stance.

Dyche and Zayas (1995) thought that there were a number of problems with the cultural literacy model. The first problem is the practical impossibility of being conversant with every cultural system with which an individual has the possibility of engaging professionally. The other difficulty is the risk of overgeneralization, which draws the attention of the practitioner more to the client's cultural group membership instead of individual characteristics. There is also the risk of the practitioner using stereotypic "culture specific" technique, which may not be appropriate for all clients in any given cultural group.

Dyche and Zayas (1995), focusing more on direct practice issues, offered an alternative approach that is more experiential and phenomenologically oriented. However, they did not emphasize the political significance of such discursive practice. The cultural literacy approach puts the practitioner in an expert position. The practitioner learns about the culture of the client to reinforce superior knowledge and professional expertise. Ethnicity, or ethnicity other than being white, is constructed as a client characteristic and therefore part of the problem situation to be dealt with by the helping professional. Such discursive practice effectively excludes the view that ethnicity is something that everyone has and shifts the focus of social work practice from the similarities or differences between worker and client to the ethnicity of the client.

It should be noted that this issue is not resolved even when the cultural literacy model is cast aside and intragroup diversity is recognized. In the few articles that addressed intragroup difference and diversity (Arenas, 1978; Li, 1994; Murphy, 1978; Sancier, 1982; Wu, Enders, & Ham, 1997), ethnicity and associated characteristics were still located within the client group with no attempt to assess the similarities and differences between client and practitioner. As will be elaborated later in this article, this structure of professional discourse reinforces the location of less powerful social groups—social work clients who are not white—in positions of inferiority.

Negative Positioning

A central issue in discourse analysis is social positioning (Bordieu, 1990). *Social positioning* refers to the discursive practice of assigning individuals or groups of individuals to particular positions in relation to others. These assigned positions are associated with particular power relations and conditions. There is some consistency among the 84 selected items regarding the positions assigned to Chinese people as a social category. Positions of marginality and inferior power such as "immigrant" and "minority" frequently are assigned to them. There is also disproportionate representation of Chinese people as clients or potential users of social services rather than producers and providers. This is not very different from the popular image of ethnic minority people represented in North American media. When Chinese people are represented as professional helpers or service providers, they are working with Chinese clients. There are only four exceptions to this pattern. Two of them are studies on Chinese social work students focusing on recruitment and adjustment issues (Mei, 1989; Ryan, 1991), again presenting them as individuals in need of help. There is a simulated study to compare how a Chinese counselor is perceived differently from a white one (Lee, Sutton, France, & Uhlemann, 1983). Another is a case account by a Chinese psychotherapist working with a white boy (Tung, 1981), which is a rare example of professional report on ethnic minority practitioners working with white clients.

This disproportionate representation of Chinese people in client rather than practitioner positions can be attributed, at least in part, to the actual underrepresentation of people of color in the social work profession (Gibelman & Schervish, 1993). This discrepancy nonetheless highlights the barriers for people of color in gaining access to positions of power and influence (van Dijk, 1993a, 1993b). Within the context of social work, the restricted access of ethnic minority groups to professional status and the tendency to assign ethnic minority members

to work with clients from similar ethnic background perpetuates the marginalization of this population.

Apart from the unequal representation of ethnic minority groups in practitioner and client positions, another example of negative positioning can be found in the differential application of the term "immigrant." To identify individuals belonging to ethnic minority groups as "immigrant" is not a neutral description of empirical fact but a discursive strategy supporting the political claims of the European colonial settlers who were technically immigrants themselves. Historically, all white people coming to North America were initially immigrants, whereas black people who were brought here against their will were not. After the Anglo-Saxon group had established their dominance and legitimated their own status as residents, the immigrant label became much more transient for them as they easily assimilated into the mainstream. The "immigrant" label was then applied more frequently to European ethnic groups other than the dominant Anglo-Saxon group. There was also a period of harsh anti-immigrant or antialien policies and legislations directed at groups seen as undesirable by the dominant groups. People of Chinese heritage, for example, were subject to discriminatory treatment such as quota system, head tax, and systematic exclusion of women (Devore & Schlesinger, 1999). More recently, the immigrant label is more often applied to Third World settlers in the First World than to First World settlers in the Third World.

Among the 84 items selected for the present analysis, the term immigrant is often applied to the Chinese people. At least 20 articles focus on the immigrant status of the Chinese people they studied. Often they are compared with other groups similarly characterized as immigrants. One interesting example revealing how the social position of Chinese people is conceived is a study comparing the Chinese in San Francisco with the Turks in Germany (Suzuki, 1978). To determine if Chinese people are more frequently represented as immigrants than white people, another search was conducted on the same *Social Work Abstracts* database (NASW, 1997). Only three articles were found on white people as immigrants. Two of them were on Irish immigrants (Hout & Goldstein, 1994, Metress, 1985), and the other one was on immigrants from Eastern Europe (Baker, 1989).

White settlers in North America are much less likely to be represented as immigrants. They are naturalized as legitimate residents or occupants of the land much faster than are people who are not white. From a global perspective, North Americans who live and work in Third World countries are not treated the way immigrants are typically treated in North America. They are seen as investors, visiting experts, professionals, or "expatriates," who are usually given more privileges than the locals. They are rarely blamed for increased unemployment, crime rate, or welfare expenses. When immigrant policies and services are discussed in North America, white people usually are not included.

A complementary phenomenon that highlights the politics of negative positioning is the tendency to discuss issues related to ethnicity, immigration, cross-cultural social services, and so on in connection with issues related to the Aboriginals, the Native Americans, or the First Nations (Chambon & Bellamy, 1995). Whereas the aboriginal communities can articulate different and often more powerful, political claims, lumping them together with "immigrant minorities" serves to position them negatively, or to marginalize them and weaken their claims against the dominant white groups. In the selected items, grouping of Native American people with other immigrant groups, such as the Chinese, also can be found (Arenas, 1978). Positioning these diverse groups together as ethnic and cultural minority groups who are "different," while selectively emphasizing the immigrant status shared by some of them, serves to minimize their claim vis-a-vis the dominant white groups who are, by implication, positioned as legitimate citizens.

Controlling the Research Agenda

As I mentioned before, unlike content analysis, discourse analysis pays attention not only to the content of the texts, but also to the mechanism of their production. Because those in power have better access to the center stage of secure

and legitimized position and to the discursive mechanisms that put the less powerful "others" on the periphery, they also control the agenda of professional discourse. Effective discourse structures systematically transform social texts and the reality they construct. To understand the mechanism of how professional discourse is produced, I performed an examination of the authorship of social work literature on the Chinese. The first step was a tally based on the first authors' last names. I recognize that this method has a few sources of error, including the ambiguity of certain names such as Lee and Tom, the possibility of Chinese people taking on non-Chinese last names through marriage or adoption and the possibility that some of the Chinese last names do not belong to Chinese authors. Authors also can be biethnic or bicultural and do not fit in the simple category of Chinese. Granted these caveats, this procedure was intended as a means of obtaining an overall picture rather than a precise quantification of the distribution of authorship. The tally shows that out of the 84 selected items, 43 were first-authored by Chinese people. Chinese last names are found among the coauthors in another eight items. It is noted that among these 84 items, there is a high proportion of doctoral thesis, 20 percent ($n = 17$), compared with the 8.6 percent rate in the overall database (about 2,930 theses in over 35,000 entries). Among the 17 theses, 11 (about 65 percent) were written by Chinese authors. In contrast, among the 67 journal articles, 32 (48 percent) were written by Chinese first authors. These figures, granted that there may be inaccuracies, reflect that studies on Chinese people are more often done through doctoral dissertations or theses than expected. This, together with the fact that there are only 0.54 percent of the database that deal with Chinese-related issues, can be taken as a reflection of the relatively unimportant position occupied by Chinese people in professional social work literature. There is also a higher participation rate of Chinese authors as doctoral students than as independent researchers, possibly reflecting their comparatively disadvantaged position as authors of social work literature.

Associated with this situation is the way that the research agenda is driven. For example,

Chinese people are known to have low rates of alcoholism-related problems (Chi et al., 1988; Yu & Liu, 1987), and the use of substances such as heroin and cocaine or addictive/compulsive gambling may represent more serious problems in this community. In the literature items selected, however, there are nine reports of research on alcoholism involving Chinese people but none on the other addiction problems. The participation of Chinese researchers and authors in this particular research area reflects the discursive power of agenda setting over individual researchers. It is easy to understand that the research agenda is conditioned by institutionalized mechanisms such as funding and personnel recruitment. The particular research program reflects the social position occupied by Chinese people in an agenda dominated by the interests and concerns of the white majority. It raises the question of who are involved in the generation of knowledge for whom. How the research agenda is driven is to a large extent conditioned by who is controlling it. Universities in North America have a long history of excluding ethnic minority members (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Henry & Tator, 1994; Henry, Tator, Mattis, & Rees, 1995; Persico, 1990). The social work profession, similarly, is dominated by white people (Gibelman & Schervish, 1993). The politics of occupation of academic and professional positions are intimately tied to those governing the construction of "social problems," the legitimization of needs, the design of service programs, and the allocation of resources.

Discussion

The current exercise in discourse analysis represents an alternative use of professional social work literature, which interrogates its status as a body of legitimized knowledge claims. Instead of simply being products of disciplined professional or scientific procedures, social work literature reconstructs reality according to the structures of the dominant discourse. Terms such as ethnic or immigrant, as argued earlier, are not neutral descriptors but are signifiers originated from sociopolitical positions and relationships. Although discourse analysis itself cannot escape totally from the language conventions of

its own context or automatically lead to liberating consequences, it opens up the possibility of a more reflexive process in which the hope of an alternative reality to be constructed can be found. Bringing this reflexive process into social work practice, a number of issues have to be recognized.

Ethnic Identity Is Not Essential

The first issue is the recognition that concepts such as ethnicity, race, nationality, or culture are not neutral descriptors of essential, objective, and stable characteristics, but are socially constructed notions used to serve multiple purposes. When such categorical labels are applied to individuals, the social worker should be aware of the discursive effects they have. Understanding that when clients are categorized they can often be put in a disadvantaged position, social workers may have to negotiate such labels with caution. The descriptor "ethnic," for example, should not be applied only to clients who are not white. It should be recognized that everyone, including the social worker, has ethnicity. If the ethnicity of clients of color is differentially emphasized, respect for individuality and personal uniqueness may become a white privilege. In addition, ethnic background cannot be confused with cultural affiliation and cultural orientation. People with similar ethnic backgrounds may not internalize the same cultural elements; and many people internalize cultural elements from multiple cultural systems (Ho, 1995). People also may have different levels of identification with a particular culture depending on the extent of acculturation (Ward, 1996).

Not only do individuals internalize selected aspects of different cultural systems; they may not always have the same identifications across all social situations. Which aspect of one's identity becomes the most salient in any given site of social or political engagement depends on the particular circumstances of that site. In different social work practice situations, a client's gender, sexual orientation, religious belief, political conviction, age, socioeconomic status, family status, or any other dimension of identification may become especially relevant. Maintaining that the ethnic or cultural identity is always important or even central in all situations is likely to be erroneous. Clients should be able to participate actively in defining the context of engagement with the worker and the service delivery system and decide what aspects of their identity and experience are the most relevant.

Moving Beyond the Cultural Literacy Approach

When clients are considered first and foremost as members of a particular ethnic or cultural group, they are understood and treated as such. For example, when a client of Chinese background asks for help, some social workers may consult academic or professional literature on what characteristics Chinese people have, what their culture is like, and specifically on how to work with Chinese clients (Christensen, 1987; Matsouka & Ryujin, 1991; Sue & Sue, 1991). Even when parts of this literature are written by Chinese authors, the social worker runs the risk of stereotyping the client, assuming uniformity that may not exist, and assigning particular significance to a selected aspect of the client's identity in a matter-of-fact manner. Such practice emphasizes the client's group membership instead of the client's individuality. When a Chinese client's experience and actions are understood with emphasis on his or her being Chinese and a white client's experience and actions are understood as unique and individual, the individuality of the Chinese client is compromised.

Instead of following the cultural literacy approach and trying to apply a set of group-specific techniques to all clients belonging to a particular ethnic group, social workers may adopt procedures that recognize the wide variability of client experience and presentation. An experiential-phenomenological stance has been advocated by Dyche and Zayas (1995), and specific procedures have been recommended by a number of authors (Green, 1995; Kadushin & Kadushin, 1997; Tsang & Bogo, 1997). These procedures usually emphasize the following: practitioner self-awareness, understanding of the limitation of stereotypes, openness to learning directly from the client instead of assuming expert knowledge, and attention to engagement or alliance building.

Repositioning Workers and Clients

As shown in the current analysis, Chinese people, together with other people who do not belong to the dominant white group, are often negatively positioned in professional social work discourse. The representation of white people as legitimate citizens, professionals, and service providers and people who are not white as immigrants, and clients with ethnicity is a discursive practice that maintains a certain social construction of reality. To counteract these trends, a discursive practice with more equitable and inclusive representation of people with different ethnic backgrounds has to be developed. Instead of focusing on client ethnicity, social work literature should represent the multiple dimensions of similarities and differences **between** worker and client. The participation of ethnically diverse people in service provision should be more frequently reported. In practice, social work research and practice reports should include similar information on the ethnicity, cultural identification, and cultural orientation of both clients and workers, instead of focusing only on the ethnicity of the client.

Access to Control of the Research Agenda

Associated with negative positioning of people of color in professional discourse is their actual underrepresentation in positions of power. Whereas social workers are openly committed to social justice, the reality of power cannot be underestimated. It has been suggested that professional purpose, values, knowledge, and methods are the core elements of social work practice (Hepworth, Rooney, & Larsen, 1997). What has to be emphasized more often is power. Social workers mostly function on the basis of institutional mandates and are funded or supported by the more powerful social groups in society. Professional purpose and values are articulations grounded in the dominant discourses of particular societies in particular historical times. Antiracism or multiculturalism are themselves products of social discourse that have recently gained more popular support in North America.

The knowledge base that social workers use, as the analysis shows, is also a product of social and political processes. Given that access to the profession and therefore access to the control of resources, positions of influence, and mechanisms of knowledge production is not equally opened to individuals belonging to different social groups, knowledge claims made by professionals have to be assessed with reference to the social positions they occupy. One of the ways to empower individuals who are currently disadvantaged is to facilitate their articulation of their own identities, experiences, and agenda and to increase their participation in public discourse as well as in knowledge production. This requires major changes in the way the profession is currently organized, including the redistribution of power and resources. Whereas specific procedures for change have been proposed by a number of authors (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Issacs, 1989; Dominelli, 1993; Persico, 1990), the challenge for the profession is to mobilize substantial action demonstrating its commitment to its values.

Conclusion

Using the representation of Chinese people in North American social work literature as a dossier, this article examines the notion of ethnic identity as a discursive strategy. The assumption that ethnic categories such as Chinese have stable meanings and significance across social situations is shown to be problematic. The ethnocentric nature of the dominant professional discourse also was revealed in the analysis. Social workers practicing in an increasingly diverse cultural context have to be aware of the assumptions on which professional purposes, values, knowledge, and practice are built. Discourse analysis is inherently ideological (Gee, 1990, 1996), and the value orientation and ideological commitment of the analyst influence the analysis and the conclusions drawn. The hope is that the analysis will open up a more reflexive process, which may produce alternative ways of professional thinking and practice. A critical engagement with professional discourse, as shown in this article, can open up new directions of practice that are more respectful of the individuality of clients as well as their claims to reality construction and political participation. ∎

References

Aranda, M. P., & Knight, B. G. (1997). The influence of ethnicity and culture on the caregiver stress and coping process: A socio-cultural review and analysis. *Gerontologist, 37,* 342–354.

Arenas, S. (1978). Bilingual/bicultural programs for preschool children. *Children Today, 7*(4), 2–6.

Au, C. F. (1996). Rethinking organizational effectiveness: Theoretical and methodological issues in the study of organizational effectiveness for social welfare organizations. *Administration in Social Work, 20*(4), 1–21.

Baker, R. P. (1989). Eastern European refugees: Implications for social work. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare, 16*(3), 81–94.

Becerra, R. M, & Iglehart, A. P. (1995). Folk medicine use: Diverse populations in a metropolitan area. *Social Work in Health Care, 21*(4), 37–58.

Berger, R. M. (1990). Getting published: A mentoring program for social work faculty. *Social Work, 35,* 69–71.

Bhabha, H. K. (1994). Interrogating identity: Frantz Fanon and the postcolonial prerogative. In H. K. Bhabha (Ed.), *The location of culture* (pp. 40–65). London: Routledge.

Bordieu, P. (1990). *The logic of practice.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Brah, A. (1992). Difference, diversity and differentiation. In J. Donald & A. Rattansi (Eds.), *Race, culture & difference* (pp. 126–148). London: Sage Publications.

Brown, G., & Yule, G. (1983). *Discourse analysis.* Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Castex, G. M. (1994). Providing services to Hispanic/Latino populations: Profiles in diversity. *Social Work, 39,* 288–296.

Chambon, A. S. (1994). Postmodernity and social work discourse(s): Notes on the changing language of a profession. In A. S. Chambon & A. Irving (Eds.), *Essays on postmodernism and social work* (pp. 61–75). Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press.

Chambon, A. S., & Bellamy, D. F. (1995). Ethnic identity, intergroup relations and welfare policy in the Canadian context: A comparative discourse analysis. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare, 22,* 121–147.

Chan, D. C. (1976). Asian-American handicapped people: An area of concern. *Journal of Rehabilitation, 42*(6), 14–16.

Chi, I., Kitano, H.H.L., & Lubben, J. E. (1988). Male Chinese drinking behavior in Los Angeles. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol, 49*(1), 21–29.

Christensen, C. P. (1987). The perceived problems and help-seeking preferences of Chinese immigrants in Montreal. *Canadian Journal of Counselling, 21,* 189–199.

Colon, I., & Wuollet, C. A. (1994). Homeland, gender and Chinese drinking. *Journal of Addictive Diseases, 13*(2), 59–67.

Coyle, A. (1995). Discourse analysis. In G. M. Breakwell, S. Hammond, & C. Fife-Schaw (Eds.), *Research methods in psychology* (pp. 243–258). London: Sage Publications.

Cross, T. L., Bazron, B. J., Dennis, K. W., & Issacs, M. R. (1989). *Toward a culturally competent system of care: A monograph on effective services for minority children who are severely emotionally disturbed.* Washington, DC: Georgetown University, Child Development Center, CASSP Technical Assistance Center.

Devore, W., & Schlesinger, E. G. (1999). *Ethnic-sensitive social work practice* (5th ed.). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Dominelli, L. (1993). *Anti-racist social work.* London: Macmillan.

Dyche, L., & Zayas, L. H. (1995). The value of curiosity and naiveté for the cross-cultural psychotherapist. *Family Process, 34,* 389–399.

Ewalt, P. L., Freeman, E. M., Kirk, S. A., & Poole, D. L. (Eds.). (1996). *Multicultural issues in social work.* Washington, DC: NASW Press.

Feagin, J. R., Vera, H., & Imani, N. (1996). *The agony of education: Black students at white colleges and universities.* New York: Routledge.

Foucault, M. (Ed.). (1975). *I, Pierre Rivihre, having slaughtered my mother, my sister, and my brother . . . : A case of parricide the 19th century* (F. Jellinek, Trans.). New York: Pantheon.

Fung, L. W. (1994). Implementing the Patient Self-Determination Act (PSDA): How to effectively engage Chinese-American elderly persons in the decision of advance directives. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work, 22*(1/2), 161–174.

Gee, J. P. (1990). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses.* London: Falmer Press.

Gee, J. P. (1996). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses* (2nd ed.). London: Taylor & Francis.

Gibelman, M., & Schervish, P. (1993). *Who we are: The social work labor force as reflected in the NASW membership.* Washington, DC: NASW Press.

Green, J. W. (1995). *Cultural awareness in the human services* (2nd ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Hatch, E. (1992). *Discourse and language education.* Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Henry, F., & Tator, C. (1994). Racism and the university. *Canadian Ethnic Studies, 26*(3), 74–90.

Henry, F., Tator, C., Mattis, W., & Rees, T. (1995). *The colour of democracy: Racism in Canadian society.* Toronto: Harcourt, Brace & Company.

Hepworth, D. H., Rooney, R. H., & Larsen, J. A. (1997). *Direct social work practice: Theory and skills* (5th ed.). Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Ho, D.Y.F. (1995). Internalized culture, culturocentrism, and transcendence. *Counseling Psychologist, 23*(1), 4–24.

Hong, G. K., & Hong, L. K. (1991). Comparative perspectives on child abuse and neglect: Chinese versus Hispanics and whites. *Child Welfare, 70,* 463–475.

Hong, L. K., & Tsukashima, R. T. (1980). Asian/Pacific Americans. *California Sociologist, 3*(2), 184–196.

Hout, M., & Goldstein, J. R. (1994). How 4.5 million Irish immigrants became 40 million Irish Americans: Demographic and subjective aspects of the ethnic composition of white Americans. *American Sociological Review, 59,* 64–82.

Kadushin, A., & Kadushin, G. (1997). *The social work interview: A guide for human service professionals* (4th ed.). New York: Columbia University Press.

Kitano, H.H.L., & Chi, I. (1986). Asian-Americans and alcohol use: An exploration of cultural differences in Los Angeles. *Alcohol Health and Research World, 11*(2), 42–47.

Kress, G. (1985). Ideological structures in discourse. In T. A. van Dijk (Ed.), *Handbook of discourse analysis* (Vol. 4, pp. 27–42). London: Academic Press.

Land, H., Nishimoto, R., & Chau, K. (1988). Interventive and preventive services for Vietnamese Chinese refugees. *Social Service Review, 62,* 468–484.

Lee declares victory in Taiwan's first presidential election. (1996, March 23). *CNN Interactive* [Online]. Available: http://www.cnn.com/WORLD/9603/taiwan_elex/23/lee_wins/index.html.

Lee, D. Y., Sutton, R., France, H., & Uhlemann, M. (1983). Effects of counselor race on perceived counseling effectiveness. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 30,* 447–450.

Lee, E. (Ed.). (1997). *Working with Asian Americans: A guide for clinicians.* New York: Guilford Press.

Li, P. (1988). *The cultural perspectives of help-seeking of the lower east side family union's Chinese clients.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Columbia University, New York.

Li, S. H. (1994). *Initial adaptation experience of Chinese American immigrants.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Howard University, Washington, DC.

Lorenzo, M. K. (1988). *Social support networks of Chinese-American chronic psychiatric patients.* Unpublished master's thesis, Simmons College.

Ma, S. P. (1995). *Psychological distress among Asian college students.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, New York University.

Matsouka, J. K., & Ryujin, D. H. (1991). Asian American immigrants: A comparison of the Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare, 18*(3), 123–133.

McMahon, A., & Allen-Meares, P. (1992). Is social work racist? A content analysis of recent literature. *Social Work, 37,* 533–539.

Mei, P.Y.B. (1989). *An exploratory study on the recruitment of bilingual Chinese social workers.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Hunter College, New York.

Metress, S. P. (1985). The history of Irish-American care of the aged. *Social Service Review, 59,* 18–31.

Mui, A. C. (1996). Depression among elderly Chinese immigrants: An exploratory study. *Social Work, 41,* 633–645.

Murphy, G. J. (1978). *The family in later life: A cross-ethnic study in marital and sexual satisfaction.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Tulane University, New Orleans.

National Association of Social Workers. (1997). *Social work abstracts* [Electronic database]. Washington, DC: NASW.

Nishimoto, R. H. (1986). The cross-cultural metric equivalence of Langner's twenty-two item index. *Journal of Social Service Research, 9*(4), 37–52.

Nishimoto, R. H. (1988). A cross-cultural analysis of psychiatric symptom expression using Langner's twenty-two item index. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare, 15*(4), 45–62.

Parker, I. (1992). *Discourse dynamics: Critical analysis for social and individual psychology.* London: Routledge.

Persico, C. F. (1990). Creating an institutional climate that honors diversity. In G. Stricker, E. Davis-Russel, E. Bourg, E. Duran, W. Hammond, J. McHooland, K. Polite, & B. Vaughn (Eds.), *Toward ethnic diversification in psychology education and training* (pp. 55–63). Washington DC: American Psychological Association.

Potter, J., & Wetherell, M. (1987). *Discourse and social psychology: Beyond attitude and behavior.* London: Sage Publications.

Protests, violence continues in Indonesia: Rioters set building on fire in Central Java. (1998, July 8). *CNN News* [Online]. Available: www.cnn.com/asiapcf/9807/08/Indonesia.01/.

Rhee, S. (1996). Effective social work practice with Korean immigrant families. *Journal of Multicultural Social Work, 4*(1), 49–61.

Rodger, J. J. (1991). Discourse analysis and social relationships in social work. *British Journal of Social Work, 21,* 63–79.

Rubinstein, M. A. (Ed.). (1993). *The other Taiwan: 1945 to the present.* New York: M. E. Sharpe.

Ryan, A. S. (1985). Cultural factors in casework with Chinese-Americans. *Social Casework, 56,* 333–340.

Ryan, A. S. (1991). Training Chinese-American social workers. *Social Casework, 62,* 95–105.

Sancier, B. (1982). Building on the strengths of minority groups. *Practice Digest, 5*(3), 3–19.

Seidel, G. (1985). Political discourse analysis. In T. A. van Dijk (Ed.), *Handbook of discourse analysis* (Vol. 4, pp. 43–60). London: Academic Press.

Skeldon, R. (Ed.). (1994). *Reluctant exiles?: Migration from Hong Kong and the new overseas Chinese.* New York: M. E. Sharpe.

Skeldon, R. (Ed.). (1997). *Emigration from Hong Kong: Tendencies and impacts.* Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Spender, D. (1981). The gatekeepers. In H. Roberts (Ed.), *Doing feminist research* (pp. 186–202). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Stanfield, J. H., II. (1984). Ethnic modeling in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 324–339). London: Sage Publications.

Stubbs, M. (1983). *Discourse analysis: The sociolinguistic analysis of natural language.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Sue, D., & Sue, D. W. (1991). Counseling strategies for Chinese Americans. In C. C. Lee & B. L. Richardson (Eds.), *Multicultural issues in counseling: New approaches to diversity.* Alexandria, VA: American Association for Counseling and Development.

Suzuki, P. T. (1978). Social work, culture-specific mediators, and delivering services to aged Turks in Germany and aged Chinese in San Francisco. *International Social Work, 21*(3), 13–19.

Taiwan's people begin historic vote. (1996, March 23). *CNN Interactive* [Online]. Available: www.cnn.com/WORLD/9603/taiwan_elex/23/index.html.

Trouble in the Empire? (1997). [Online]. Available: www.tao.ca./ainfos/A-Infos97/3/0467.html.

Tsang, A.K.T., & Bogo, M. (1997). Engaging with clients cross-culturally: Towards developing research-based practice. *Journal of Multicultural Social Work, 6*(3/4), 73–91.

Tung, M. (1981). On being seen as a "Chinese therapist" by a Caucasian child. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 51,* 654–661.

Van Den Bergh, N. (Ed.). (1995). *Feminist practice in the 21st century.* Washington, DC: NASW Press.

van Dijk, T. A. (1993a). *Elite discourse and racism.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

van Dijk, T. A. (1993b). Discourse, power and access. In C. R. Caldas-Coulthard (Ed.), *Text and practice: Reading in critical discourse analysis* (pp. 84–106). London: Routledge.

Wachman, A. M. (1994). *Taiwan: National identity and democratization.* New York: M. E. Sharpe.

Wang, G. (1991). *China and the Chinese overseas.* Singapore: Times Academic Press.

Ward, C. (1996). Acculturation. In D. Landis & R. S. Bhagat (Eds.), *Handbook of intercultural training* (2nd ed., pp. 124–147). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Woo, A. (1997, March). China-Xinjiang: "Great wall of steel" to quell ethnic unrest. *IPS News* [Online]. Available: www.carryon.oneword.org/ips2/Mar/China.html.

Wu, S. J., Enders, L. E., & Ham, M.A.D. (1997). Social constructionist inquiry in family therapy with Chinese Americans. *Journal of Family Social Work, 2,* 111–128.

Yu, E.S.H., & Liu, W. T. (1987). Alcohol use and abuse among Chinese-Americans: Epidemiologic data. *Alcohol Health and Research World, 11*(2), 14–17, 60–61.

A. Ka Tat Tsang, PhD, is assistant professor, Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto, *246 Bloor Street West, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5S 1A1; e-mail: k.tsang@utoronto.ca. Portions of an earlier version of this article were presented at the Joint Conference of the International Federation of Social Workers and the International Association of Schools of Social Work, July 1996, Hong Kong.*