In our previous paper (Gray & Allegritti, 2002), we examined the issues involved in developing indigenous social work practice and noted the contribution of several African writers to the important debate on indigenisation in the social work literature in Africa. We suggested that this work was at an exploratory stage in that while certain African writers (Bar-On, 1998, 1999; Mupedisiwa, 1992, 1997; Osei-Hwedie, 1995) had introduced and probed questions relating to indigenisation, they had not yet developed fully the way in which Western social work differed from relevant indigenous social work practice in Africa. We viewed social work as a Western invention and a product of modernity, and indigenisation as a post modern notion, a form of resistance to the cultural homogenising and universalising effects of globalisation. As such we suggested that in Africa indigenisation could be seen as a reform process involving the reactivation or reclamation of customary culture. We argued that the difference between Western and African understanding of culture was an integral aspect of the indigenisation debate and that, to advance the debate further, it was necessary to establish a framework for a clear and logical articulation of the values located in each set of cultures. We explored the notion of "indigenisation as cross-cultural practice" in the belief that, for a truly cross-cultural world to take shape, there needed to be an extensive dialogue between cultural groups on principles, ethical norms and appropriate practice. Hence we suggested that cross-cultural or intercultural dialogue needed to precede any ideas about cross-cultural practice. We expressed the belief that there was still a long way to go in developing indigenous social work practice in Africa and we made some suggestions as to how indigenous practice models might be developed. Among other things, we suggested the need for a dialogical approach and clear articulation of African culture.

In this paper we stress the importance of cross-cultural or inter-cultural dialogue within the indigenisation debate. To this end, we explore the notion of culture further and examine how we might begin to articulate particular cultures, such as Australian, African and North American culture. We argue that, while there might be such a thing as a dominant Australian, African and North American culture, in truth these are a host of minority cultures which may or may not conform to the dominant culture or, if they do, there are varying degrees of conformity and harmony between cultures. As Dean (2001:624) observed, the reality is that "...we live in a multiethnic, multiracial, multiclass society". Having developed certain ideas about culture, we offer our ideas about Australian culture. We then examine the literature on "cross-cultural social work" and the idea of "cultural competence". Our purpose is first to build on earlier work on "cross-cultural social work" which identified the need to consider the interest of African social workers in finding ways to articulate how indigenous cultures differed from dominant Western culture as a first step in devising indigenous approaches to social work practice (Gray & Allegritti, 2002; Gray & Fook, 2002). Secondly, in the light of existing sociological and social work literature on this subject, in this paper we examine some implications of current thinking on culture for social work practice.
The issues involved in developing several African writers to the West. We suggested that this practice (Gray & Allegritti, 1999) and probed questions relating to Western social work differed from the sociocultural framework of the modern world. In Australia when I was asked by my schoolmates why I preferred red to white bread, why I ate pirsags instead of pies and why I spoke that "foreign language" with my brother. Of course, Latvian was not a "foreign language" to me. It was just another language. Today I live in a diaspora in Australia, that is, in the "third space" so eloquently described by Professor Ien Ang as the new form of culture which lives in a creative tension between "where you're from" and "where you're at". I still calculate my time in Latvian!

TOWARDS A WORKING DEFINITION OF CULTURE

International and national scholars, renowned for their work on culture, have noted several characteristics, aspects, levels, and varying interpretations of culture. Some view culture as "a system of beliefs and practices" (Webster's Dictionary, cited in Dean, 2001:624). It is a "concerted activity" based on shared ideas and understanding (Dean, 2001:625). "Membership in cultural categories can be assigned according to particular aspects of identity, such as race, ethnicity, class, age, gender, sexual orientation or able-bodied-ness" (Dean, 2001:625).

Most writers on culture would agree that it is articulated at several levels. At the most basic level, it is reflected in language (syntax, grammar and vocabulary; proverbs, jokes and myths); communication (verbal and non-verbal); rituals, customs and traditions; symbols; and institutions (Parekh, 2000:143; Poole, 1999:118; Kymlicka, 1995:84-92). At a slightly different level, it is embodied in art, music, and oral and written literature; moral life and the vision of the good life; ideas of excellence and exemplary individuals; rules and norms governing basic activities and social relationships, such as "...how, when and with whom one eats, associates and makes love, how one mourns and disposes of the dead and how one treats one's parents, children, wife, neighbours and strangers" (Parekh, 2000:144).

Kymlicka (1995:76) suggests that one way of viewing these, i.e. art, morals, rules and norms, is to see them as societal culture since they are institutionally embedded in education systems, the media, the economy and politics and so on. Societal or mainstream culture in Australia is linked with the process of modernisation and the need for high levels of solidarity within the modern democratic state. Societal culture, then, is used to integrate people into the nation-state (Kymlicka, 1995:77).
Postmodernists note the "...continually changing and evolving nature of cultural identities" (Dean, 2001:625). They emphasise that, since culture develops over time it remains complex. Immigration and globalisation contribute to the movement of people around the globe, giving rise to what Ang (1994:9) refers to as a new form of culture among immigrants which lives in "creative tension" between "where you're from" and "where you're at" which she termed "living in a diaspora".

To add to this complexity, every culture is internally varied, speaks in several voices, and its range of interpretative possibilities is often indeterminate (Parekh, 2000:144). Parekh (2000) draws attention to the notion that, contrary to traditional Western thinking about culture, each culture consists of a variety of cultures, there are a number of cultural positions within the one culture and often different and indeterminate interpretations about a culture reside within the nation-state. For example, British culture in Australia is often thought of as one homogenous unit but upon analysis it becomes clear that it is made up of discrete groups comprising the English, Irish, Scottish, and the Welsh who each have their own language, myths, symbols, histories and so on. Australian culture is a mixture of British, indigenous and other immigrant influences. In noting that cultures are not internally homogeneous, Tully (1995:11) points out that "...they are continuously contested, imagined, reimagined, transformed, and negotiated both by their members and through their interaction with others".

Hence Benhabib (2002:viii) says that cultures "...are constituted through contested practices". In terms of this modernist view of culture, cultures are not pure entities (ix); they are not discrete wholes (ix); they are "...complex, human practices of signification and representation, of organization and attribution, which are internally driven by conflicting narratives" (ix); they are "formed through complex dialogues with other cultures" (ix); and "have internal differentiation. Dialogue with other(s) is internal, rather than extrinsic to, the culture itself" (ix).

In another sense, culture is also often used as a synonym for "a nation" or "a people," that is, culture is also used as a word for "...an intergenerational community, more or less institutionally complete, occupying a given territory or homeland, sharing a distinct language and history" (Kymlicka, 1995:18). Likewise Bottomley (1992:32) suggests that culture "...develops in close association with the concept of nation". In this political meaning of culture, it is important to recognise that, while culture is often presented as national, that is, as though there were one national culture, no such entity exists. In fact, historically developing cultures, such as the one in North America, all have a dominant culture and "a relatively small number of minority cultures". The same point could be made for Australia and Africa. Kymlicka (1995:79) also points out that "...as a general rule, both in the United States and in other Western democracies, dominant cultures have had far less success accommodating national groups than ethnic groups", that is, dominant Western cultures have been less successful accommodating indigenous peoples, such as the Australian Aborigines, than immigrants. This is certainly true for Australia. Is this true of Africa?

Writing in the South African context, Swartz (1998:7) points out that the concept of culture is often concerned with growth and change and some definitions of culture are concerned with value judgements about refinement or sophistication and the inferiority or superiority of some cultures over others. "Culture ... is about the process of being and becoming a social being, about the rules of a society and the ways in which these are enacted, experienced, and transmitted". As such it cannot be static since "...interpretations of rules change over time with different circumstances. Many political movements ... concern themselves with ... the preservation of culture ... (and in this sense culture is) about trying to implement and/or maintain a set of power relationships in a contemporary context".

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In conclusion, it is important to recognise that culture has a political dimension (Tully 1995; Hage 2003). As Bottomley (1992:12) contends, "...not only do people reconstruct, dismantle and resist" what Wolf calls "cultural sets of practices and ideas" (1982:391), but they do so in the "...context of competition for economic and symbolic capital". Hence culture refers to "...commonalities around which a group of people have developed (or are developing) values, norms, family styles, social roles, and behaviours, in response to the political, economic and social realities they face" (emphasis added) (Pilger Christensen, in Martin 1998:3).

Considering Australian Culture

Having introduced some ideas about how we might consider culture, it might be timely to see how the ideas introduced earlier help to locate Australian culture. If culture develops historically over a period of time and is not homogeneous, but consists of a dominant culture and minority cultures, if it is located in the institutional framework of society and provides the basis for social life, solidarity and nationhood and if it is continuously contested, then it is possible to arrive at the following conclusions about Australian culture. Australian culture is complex and it is located in a number of sites. The first is our Aboriginal heritage. It is one of the oldest cultures in the world. Aboriginality is reflected in the stories about Dreamtime, Aboriginal spirituality and Aboriginal links with the land. It is part of Australian history, the stories about race relations between Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders and European squatters and pastoralists (Reynolds 1999). Today, Aborigines are reclaiming their culture and history and remind us that they are its guardians and custodians, and that it is their responsibility to pass it on to future generations (Read, 2000:66). Their contribution to Australia’s national culture continues in the form of Aboriginal paintings, music, craft, dance, and theatre.

Another dimension of Australian culture is its more recent Western, industrial aspect introduced by the United Kingdom. The British introduced the English language, Protestantism, a liberal value system, an English system of law and a parliamentary system of government which formed the institutional basis of Australia’s national life. Capitalism was established as the dominant economic practice and in the process Aboriginal hunting and gathering was severely marginalised. Because the English were successful in colonising and displacing the Aborigines, as well as subjugating the working-class Irish to an English way of life, they were able to represent themselves as the dominant culture in Australia. Today the Anglo-Celtic presence is viewed as Australia’s "core culture" (Dixson, 1999:6-8; Poole, 1999:114-142; Coleman & Higgins, 2000:51-76; Kalantzis, 2000:99-110) because the nation’s major institutions (legal, political, educational, and media) still reflect a strong monocultural (English) focus or bias despite its multicultural overlay. Tensions exist between the dominant culture who wish to retain the English heritage of Australian culture (the dominance of English language, constitutional monarchy, Protestantism, and a class system based on wealth rather than merit, which continues to support their present position of power in Australia) and other cultures (or cultural positions), who argue that Australia’s culture is more accurately reflected by cultural pluralism, since it is one of the most multicultural societies, demographically if not institutionally or structurally, in the developing world outside Israel.

The Australian historian Miriam Dixson (1999:7), author of The Imaginary Australian: Anglo-Celts and Identity - 1788 to the Present, argues that the Anglo-Celtic core culture "...must continue to function as a "holding" centre for an emerging and newly diverse Australia". This is a realistic position, given Australia’s commitment to globalisation and the increased cultural diversity this brings (Castles, 2000:119-134; Collins, 2000:302-316; Kalantzis, 2000:99-110).
The other reason that the dominant culture is hanging onto its traditional cultural power base is the fear that Australian culture as we know it, English-speaking and British-based institutionally, will eventually disappear and be replaced by an alien or foreign multiculturalism influenced by Asian migration to Australia. There is a historical, conservative fear in Australian culture about the Chinese. Although it originated in Australia's colonial past, it reigned in 1984 when the historian Geoffrey Blainey argued that Asians were "...people from a variety of cultures who don't belong to our present mainstream culture" (Stratton, 1998:78). His comments gained support from the conservative sector in sport, Returned Serviceman's League (RSL), media and so on, and in 1986 even John Howard went so far as to promise to reduce Asian immigration to Australia, if he were voted in as Prime Minister. Today this fear has been transferred to all Asians as well as to newcomers who were not of European descent. Consequently, it can be argued that Australian culture manifests elements of racism.

Clearly the dominant culture in Australia is hanging onto an outmoded, Enlightenment notion of culture as a static entity that does not change over time. It gives scant recognition to other cultures in Australian society and fails to realise that our current economy is designed to globalise and encourages immigration from all around the globe, provided that immigrants are skilled and wealthy. Actually, the wealth criterion is more important than skill (Collins, 2000:302-316) and it is the Asians who fit the bill of the favourable immigrant (Jakubowicz, 1989) so tensions within Australian culture will continue.

Another aspect of Australian culture is its urbaneity. Despite its myths about the bush, Ned Kelly and films such as Crocodile Dundee and now The Crocodile Man, Australian culture is an urban culture located in towns scattered around the coast. Despite nostalgia or yearning for the bush or country, most Australians live in cities and have done so since the 19th century. The base of this urban culture is a material or economic one, located in consumerism and a middle-class lifestyle, linked to globalisation. Contemporary urban Australian culture also reflects, a love of the outdoors, e.g. beach, picnics, barbecues, and camping; informality, e.g. calling people by their first names rather than titles, even in academia, a practice unheard of and quite disrespectful in some cultures, dressing down rather than dressing up, "taking a plate" to a function; recreation over work, e.g. long weekends (much has been written about Australian’s great love for holidays rather than work, e.g. The Land of the Long Weekend and The Land of the Great Stupor); and mobility, i.e. people on the move either moving from southern states to Queensland for retirement, interstate for cheaper housing and overseas after university for better pay.

**Overview of the literature on cross-cultural social work**

In reviewing the literature on cross-cultural social work, the authors have not encountered any elements of such practice which did not pertain to social work practice generally. For example, Weaver (1998, 1999) writes that cultural competence involves being knowledgeable about the cultural group in question, being self-reflective and sensitive to one's own biases and integrating this knowledge and reflection with practice skills. Lum (1999:3) refers to a similar body of culturally-specific knowledge, value and skill brought together through "bicultural integration" presumably that of the social work and client from another culture. Clark (2000:1) talks about developing "practice guidelines for working with diverse populations" and understanding the client's worldview or "cultural frame of reference".

Several social work themes are emphasised in this body of literature and seen as central to culturally sensitive social work practice:

1. The notion of self-understanding, especially awareness of one's own cultural biases (Dean 2001; Devore & Schlesinger 1996; Lum 1999; Weaver, 1998, 1999).

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2. Listening to the client's story and learning from clients who are seen as experts of their own culture (Dean 2001; Lee & Greene 1999; Voorhis 1998; Weaver, 1998, 1999).

3. Adopting a social work stance of "not-knowing and curiosity" (Anderson & Goolishian 1992; Dean 2001; Laird 1998; Lee & Greene 1999).

4. The idea that there is a particular body of cultural knowledge, values and skills and "layers of understanding" (Schlesinger & Devore, 1995:904-905) which the social worker can and must uncover or master (Clark 2000; Lunn 1999; Weaver, 1998, 1999) so as to implement "culturally appropriate interventions" (Boyle & Springer 2001:56).

There seems little difference in the knowledge, values and skills required for "cultural competence" from that characteristic of social work practice generally for self-understanding, empathic listening, reflection, curiosity, layers of understanding, and appropriate interventions are surely hallmarks of good social work practice. Culturally sensitive social work practice, therefore, simply involves examining issues and viewing experience from a cultural perspective as well as from a psychological, social, economic and political perspective and seeing the inter-relationship between these various perspectives. The dominance of one culture and subordination of another results from complex social, political, historical, and cultural forces just as the marginalisation or oppression of various groups in society results from a similar combination of forces.

Towards culturally sensitive social work practice

As social workers we operate within a cultural context and there are levels of culture in the helping process. Beginning with their social work education, and moulded by the practice context, most social workers within Western contexts are acculturated into a professional social work culture which values people, respects their ability or potential to make their own decisions and judgements, to act autonomously, and so on. Within this value framework, such independent thinking and behaviour is seen as laudable, worth striving for, a goal of the helping process, and a measure of client progress. What happens then when the client says "I can't make this decision without asking my husband" or "I can't decide what to do without asking my family"? Does the social worker persevere until the client is ready to make his or her own decision or does she explore the cultural context in which this situation arises? Hopefully the answer is the latter for there are certain cultures where the collective is valued over the individual and where respecting people's ability to decide for themselves is not part of social work. Instead, clients expect social workers to give advice, partly because their university education is seen to give them authority in the helping situation (see, for example, Ow 1991).

Thus even within social work cultures there are situations where collective rather than individual interests need to be taken into account, where group or family interests, when taken into account, promote a supportive environment for individual decisions. The "me" culture has sometimes been very disruptive of group interests. For example, I cannot live harmoniously with my husband or children, or even my work colleagues, if I continually make decisions without consulting them or without taking their interests and opinions into account. We are all social beings and if we want our social environment to nurture us we too must play our part in nurturing it. This is a mutual process of constant interaction and engagement, moulding and shaping our decisions, thoughts and actions in relation to others within our social environment. So there are limits on self-determination. There are constraints in every situation. Sometimes these have to be accepted and worked around. At other times, change is called for, even where culture is concerned as for example where cultural practices are demeaning to women.
The interaction between the worker and the client or community is very important when we think about culture. For besides our chosen ideologies and professional culture, there’s our own personal culture and the culture within the organisations or contexts within which we work or operate. Universities have what is often referred to as an academic culture. If you were a social worker working in a hospital setting you might find the medical culture very different from your professional culture, especially if you operate from a strengths perspective!

As we noted in attempting to define culture, it is not a static, fixed, determinate entity. It is fluid and changing, moulded by history and events, by social contexts, by political forces, and so on, and culture is not always easy to articulate. Sometimes it is much easier to describe someone else’s culture than to describe one’s own. Consider the following questions in reflecting on your culture.

- What is your culture?
- What are the most important features of your culture?
- How have your values been moulded and shaped by your culture?
- How would you describe the source of your values - are they religious values, social values, personal values, professional values?
- Can you see a connection between these values and the institutions that have moulded and shaped who you are, your family, your religion, your school, your peers, and so on?
- Do you have friends from different cultures?
- What are their cultures and how are they different from yours?
- Is your culture determined by your family origin or is it rooted in where you were born?
- Have you ever been in a place where you have felt really uncomfortable and wondered why?
- Have you ever thought that you might have felt uncomfortable because you were in a foreign cultural context, where you did not know how you were expected to behave?
- Finally, how would you describe the culture of your age group - youth culture, baby boomer culture, yuppie culture, and so on?

I am an Australian citizen, born and raised in South Africa, where I lived until three and a half years ago. My father was born in Mauritius and my mother in Liverpool, England. I was raised a Catholic and went to Convent High School in Durban. I studied at the University of Natal in Durban where I worked for twenty years until moving to Australia. I am an amateur photographer and social worker with some experience. I am also an academic, teacher and scholar. So what is my culture?

Australian anthropologist Gill Bottomley, who has been researching Greek identity in Australia for the last 40 years, claims that one does not start thinking about one’s culture until one is confronted by another culture. So it was that I became intensely aware of my cultural identity when I visited Hong Kong in 1996. For the first time I encountered a totally alien environment where I could not understand the language – even though I had travelled to many places where I could not speak the language and had lived in a country where there were many African languages I did not understand. So language, by itself, was not the key, although I feel most at home where English is spoken. Then I met a friend of mine who had married a Chinese man and was living in Taipei. She came across to Hong Kong and together we went to Macao, an island off Hong Kong which had been colonised by the Portuguese. What a relief. I suddenly felt at home again and I realised for
very important when we think of how the world operates. If you were a social worker, you would have
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determinable entity. It is fluid from political forces, and so on, reflecting on your culture.

religious values, social values, and peers, and so on?

where you were born?

Portable and wondered why?

Because you were in a foreign country to behave?

Youth culture, baby boomer

I lived until three and a half years old, England. I was raised at the University of Natal in Durban, and an amateur photographer and scholar. So what is your identity in Australia for culture until one is confronted with the social reality when I visited Europe where I could not speak the language fluently. I did not stay at home where English is used, but was living in Taipei. She left Hong Kong which had one again and I realised for

the first time that my culture was European. There were cobbled streets and Catholic churches. Even though I am not a practising Catholic these days, I realised that Catholic symbols and rituals were part of me, part of my culture. My culture was Western, English more than French, for my enduring family relationships are part of the culture that we inherit, and so on. So I concluded that I was a mix of cultures, moulded and shaped by diverse influences, not least my professional and academic culture, with photography the main source of my creative ways of being, though I have learnt to use that to shape my ideas about creativity in social work education and practice.

In some contexts I have learnt that Western notions of social work are at odds with local and indigenous cultures. Here social work leaders are trying to reclaim their customary practices. Africa, the context with which I am most familiar, being a case in point. In contexts such as these there is an opportunity for a new role for social workers as ethnographers – helping people to reclaim and articulate local cultures and to use their indigenous (or rural) culture as a form of resistance against universalising Western cultures (Gray & Allegritti, 2002; Gray & Fook, 2002). For this reason I am sceptical about attempts within social work to find a single universal definition or to define global standards for social work education. Sometimes I even wonder whether social work is relevant to contexts like Africa where poverty, AIDS and unemployment require very different solutions than social work has to offer. However, despite my scepticism I accept that there is room for shared definitions (and discourse) provided there is acceptance that the actual form and expression social work practice takes in particular contexts might be quite variable (Gray & Fook, 2002). Hence, while social work might be relevant in Africa, it is highly likely that Western-oriented social work interventions are not (Gray, 2002).

So where culture is concerned I do not think that the terms used in the social work literature, such as inter alia cross-cultural, multicultural or ethnic-sensitive social work practice, fully encompass my understanding of culture as a living thing, constantly being moulded and shaped by diverse influences at play at any one time. Like Dean (2001) and others (Laird 1998), I am sceptical of much of the literature pertaining to culture in social work, not least the idea of cultural competence. As Dean (2001:623) says, "...cross-cultural competence has become a byword in social work. In a postmodern world in which culture is seen as individually and socially constructed, evolving, emergent and occurring in language ... becoming "culturally competent" is a challenging prospect. How do we become competent at something that is continually changing and how do we develop a focus which includes ourselves as having differences, beliefs and biases that are inevitably active?" She suggests that the "concept of multi-cultural competence is flawed" and questions Goldberg's (2000) notion that "one can become competent at the culture of another" and that we can prepare students to be "competent to practice with members of many groups". Instead Dean (2001:624) proposes a model based on acceptance of one's lack of competence in cross-cultural matters "...in which maintaining an awareness of one's lack of competence is the goal" and where working cross-culturally is not so much "knowledge" as about "understanding".

With "lack of competence" as the focus, a different view of practicing across cultures emerges. The client is the "expert" and the clinician is in a position of seeking knowledge and trying to understand what life is like for the client. There is no thought of competence – instead one thinks of gaining understanding (always partial) of a phenomenon that is evolving and changing.

Writing from her North American experience, Dean (2001:624) believes that the idea of "competence" is a "...typically American myth that is and located in the metaphor of American 'know-how'. It is consistent with the belief that knowledge brings control and effectiveness, and, that this is an ideal to be achieved above all else".

Within the literature on multicultural practice in social work, cultural competence or the ability to work with people from cultures different from one’s own is seen as an important goal. This modernist idea treats "...cultural categories or groups as ... static and monolithic with defining characteristics that endure over time and in different contexts" and "involves learning about the history and shared characteristics of different groups ... using this knowledge to create bridges and increase understanding with individual clients and families" (Dean, 2001:625). However, more contemporary postmodern views see culture as individually and socially constructed, as "...always contextual, emergent, improvisational, transformational, and political ... and a matter of linguistics" (Laird, in Dean, 2001:625). Thus postmodernists like Dean (2001), Fook (2002) and Laird (1998) ask: How can we become competent at something that is continually changing? How do we shift the focus in our discussions of culture to differences in ourselves that must be encountered in some way?

Dean (2001) provides an interesting overview of the modernist, postmodern, psychoanalytic-intersubjectivist and socio-political perspectives on cross-cultural practice in the social work literature.

The modernist view, which is still supported in the clinical community, is rooted in ethnological and anthropological studies based on static views of ethnicity and culture, whereby members of a cultural group are seen as sharing some essential characteristics that defined them. In terms of this view clinicians could develop schema that allowed them to interact "more competently" with members of the group.

The postmodern view highlights the continually changing and evolving nature of cultural identities which require social workers to be "informed not-knowers" (Laird, 1998:30), aware of their own cultural baggage, with the ability to separate themselves from their own cultural biases as much as was possible so that they would not interfere with their efforts to get to know another. Drawing on Ian Ang’s (1994:9) notion of living in a diaspora, it follows that as social work clinicians "...sift through and sort out different impressions, layers of meaning and awareness as we concurrently learn about others and ourselves" (Dean, 2001:625) both self and others could be in the process of themselves getting to understand the blend of culture from "where they came" to "where they are".

The psychoanalytic intersubjectivist position takes a psychological perspective on cross-cultural clinical work that focuses attention on the clinician’s self-knowledge (Perez Foster, in Dean, 2001). The mixture of knowledge and feelings which social workers bring to their work with their clients at conscious and unconscious levels forms an "inerradicable" part of the therapeutic exchange (Gerhardt, Sweetnam & Borton, in Dean, 2001). Together with clients’ thoughts and feelings, this becomes a field of interaction operating on multiple levels, within which the client and social worker work to construct meaning together. Ethnicity, culture and race activate deep unconscious feelings which "...become matters for projection by both patient and therapist, usually in the form of transference and countertransference" (Comas-Diaz & Jacobsen, in Dean, 2001:625).

A socio-political perspective on oppression and social justice shifts the conversation about culture from a micro, clinical level to a macro, socio-political level of analysis that challenges some of the basic assumptions of society. Green (in Dean, 2001) asserts that issues of "minority group oppression" are at times confused with "minority group differentness". He states that it is not just the traditions, norms and patterns of behaviour that influence the functioning of a member of a cultural group, but also the way that group is treated within the larger culture. This treatment is based on various racial ideologies operating in the larger society that attribute particular cultural...
competence or the ability to as an important goal. This id monolithic with defining involves learning about the vledge to create bridges and 2001:625). However, more y constructed, as "...always logical ... and a matter of an (2001), Fook (2002) and continually changing? How in ourselves that must be ostmodern, psychoanalytic-practice in the social work
ty, is rooted in ethnomethodological ure, whereby members of a predefined them. In terms of this t "more competently" with
ture of cultural identities 398:30), aware of their own n cultural biases as much as get to know one another. allows that as social work "meaning and awareness as oth sel and others could be from "where they came" to respective on cross-cultural ge (Perez Foster, in Dean, ring to their work with their le" part of the therapeutic with clients’ thoughts and el, within which the client torture and race activate deep both patient and therapist, Diz & Jacobsen, in Dean, 2 conversation about culture that challenges some of the issues of "minority group He states that it is not just actioning of a member of a π culture. This treatment is attribute particular cultural traits to certain groups (Wilson, in Dean 2001). "Cultural, racial, and sexual orientation differences are not problems in and of themselves. Prejudice, discrimination and other forms of aggressive intercultural conflict based on these differences are problems" (Green, in Dean, 2001). Furthermore, the "dynamic interplay" between the lack of economic opportunities and characteristics that are observed in individuals and families who are systematically oppressed is often overlooked as these characteristics become defined as cultural differences. If we start with this socio-political or structural analysis, we are likely to inquire as to the ways in which various forms of oppression have resulted in racial and economic stratification and limited opportunities for our clients and ourselves. This perspective brings in issues of power and the ways that some cultural groups are positioned to control other groups in society. Limiting our focus to studying the beliefs, customs and historical traditions of individual groups can obscure the oppressive relations between groups (Dean, 2001).

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE It is questionable to assume that "... one can become competent at the culture of another" (Dean 2001). This position sits very comfortably with Young’s (1999:127) view that we do not always "... comprehend the perspective of ... others differently located". The focus on "the lack of competence" rather than the assumption that cross-cultural competence is possible is a sociologically realistic and fruitful position because it shows that:

- One way of gaining an understanding of the other’s culture comes through the process of communication. As the international scholar on cultural diversity James Tully (1995:133) points out in Strange Multiplicity, "... understanding comes, if it comes at all, only by engaging in a volley of practical dialogue".
- The process of cultural understanding is ongoing and is never complete.
- It proceeds in stages. As we gain an understanding of the other’s culture, it changes our previous ideas, interpretation and we redefine our knowledge base, be it in social work or in any other discipline or profession. As our understanding changes through cross-cultural or intercultural interaction, communication or dialogue, we then strive to gain further knowledge about the other’s culture.

Clearly, culturally sensitive social work practice requires that we understand the meaning of culture we are using as our starting point. Dean (2001) uses the Webster’s New World Dictionary Enlightenment definition of culture which is discredited today and takes the contemporary postmodernist view of culture as "individually and socially constructed", as "always contextual, emergent, improvisational, transformational, and political". However, while culture might be individually and socially constructed, it also constructs us. Culture is not something over which we have that much say initially. We are born into a culture in the same way that we are initially born into a class or gender order which shapes us until we are knowledgeable enough and old enough to choose for ourselves. Even then aspects of our original and initial culturalisation remain with us at both the subconscious and conscious levels. The contemporary view of culture emphasises the role of language and discourse, as Dean (2001) points out, but it is precisely the emphasis on dialogue, discussion and communication which directs our attention to the fact that our interactions are intercultural, transcultural or cross-cultural, whichever term one prefers. There is an ongoing international debate about intercultural or cross-cultural communication which talks about what happens in the process of talking to the cultural other (Benhabib, 2002; Habermas, 1994; Taylor, 1994; Tully, 1995; Young, 1999).
Implicit in most basic sociological texts is the notion that change is part of life. Hence the point that culture changes is not a particularly original one, given that everything around us is changing. What is original about the postmodernist position on culture is that it argues that culture is not homogeneous, it is not internally consistent and bound and that, in fact, "a culture" is always made up of a number of cultures because historically cultures have not existed alone or in isolation. Since the beginning of history, people from different cultures have interacted in a voluntary capacity. They *inter alia* exchanged goods, intermarried, fled from religious or political persecution, fled poverty, and emigrated. Other cultural relationships have been historically imposed, e.g. colonisation and imperialism in Australia, Africa and South America. In the process there has been a greater blending of cultures than national histories have made out. This is the strength of the postmodernist position. It has discredited the Enlightenment notion of culture and the view that individuals are located "in independent, closed and homogeneous" cultures and societies (Tully, 1995:14). It has introduced the idea that individuals are members of cultures that are "densely interdependent" and which overlap, interact and are *negotiated* (Tully, 1995:10-11).

Hence, while Dean (2001) demonstrates good insight into the shift in understanding of culture from the Enlightenment position to a postmodernist one, she does not go far enough possibly because she is still looking for congruencies, commonalities and similarities rather than recognising that intercultural interaction, even in professional settings, requires that we leave behind our cultural comfort zones, listen to the different ways, philosophies and practices of the cultural "other" and change and expand our established views on their cultures and, most importantly, keep an open mind. One of the starting points in discussing culture from a contemporary, postmodernist position is to recognise that culture is a contested concept or, as Benhabib (2002:viii) points out in *The Claims of Culture*, "cultures are constituted through contested practices".

**ARTICULATING AFRICAN CULTURE**

From the above it follows that articulating African culture and what makes it different from Western culture can only result from "intercultural dialogue" where people from diverse cultures - for there are many African cultures - agree on the nature or content of "indigenous practice" for social workers in Africa. It is not just a matter of tolerating different cultures or "tolerance of difference". Many see this liberal notion of tolerance as a passive and indifferent response to cultural difference (Young, 1999:246; Hage, 1998:80-104). Intercultural practice is about creating a collective culture where people from different cultures can live together in harmony. This requires more than tolerance or cultural sensitivity or even knowledge of other cultures. It requires mutual understanding of the cultural "other/s" which includes respect and dignity for the others' culture. It also requires reflexivity - knowing how your culture moulds and shapes who you are and how you want to influence the moulding and shaping of indigenous social work. Here again power comes into play. Whose culture is dominant? Will the dominant culture mould and shape indigenous practice or will the diversity of cultures be accommodated? These are complex questions. The point is that being a creative, reflective and transformative practitioner involves intercultural practice which by its very nature means countering the universalising effects of globalisation or universalising forces within social work. Thus intercultural practice is also required within national contexts not only to counter globalisation but also intra-societal unification tendencies.
CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to advance the discussion on culture in social work in the belief that culture is central to the notion of indigenous social work practice. In order to advance the work on the indigenisation of social work theory and practice in Africa generally, and in South Africa in particular, it is necessary for South African social work writers to articulate African cultures and to make explicit the inadequacies of Western social work models in responding to African cultures. It is hoped that the definitions of culture herein proposed will assist South African social work writers in this endeavour and result in an indigenous form of social work uniquely responsive to local cultures, contexts and problems. It is believed that South Africa’s “rainbow nation” offers fertile ground for intercultural dialogue and agreement on indigenous social work theory and practice.

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