Implications of stuart halls rethinking of human differences

Explain Stuart Hall's argument in his lecture: Race – The floating signifier. Discuss the critical implications of Hall's work for the rethinking of a psychology of human differences.

Stuart Hall first performed his lecture ' Race, Ethnicity and Nation' in 1994 at Harvard University; it was then presented again in 1996 where it was filmed as a video called ' Race, the floating signifier', (Hiles, 2006). The term ' floating signifier' is often related to concepts like race and gender; it shows the actual word is fairly concrete but the concept it describes is less stable and is not fixed, (http://uk. ask. com/wiki/Floating_signifier). This essay will first outline Hall's argument of explaining human differences and then consider the critical implications his work has on the rethinking of a psychology of human differences. Finally the example of disability will be used as a demonstration to support Hall's ideas.

Psychological research and theory into human differences has primarily focused on the measurement of these differences. For example measuring human differences in terms of personality or intelligence, (Hiles, 2006). Criticisms have been put forward suggesting that psychology when looking at human differences is a pseudoscience that merely attempts to group people into categories, (Hiles, 2006). There are problems when only considering the measurement of individual human differences and that is that it ignores the meaning of these differences. Hall (1997, as cited in Hiles, 2006) suggested that it is not how human differences are measured that is important its how these differences give meaning and shape the social world. He believed human differences should be approached from a

discursive perspective, to see how the meanings of human differences have been constructed.

Hall (1997, as cited in Hiles, 2006) proposed that there are many physical differences; this reality is not being ignored but these differences have to be organized within language to attain meaning that can be used with society. He used the term ' discursive' to demonstrate a move from more scientific ways of looking at human differences in terms of measurement to instead a consideration of how knowledge of human differences that already exists within society organizes and regulates human behaviour which in turn reinforces these human differences, (Hiles, 2006). Therefore, Hall demonstrates that the meanings of human differences are socially constructed and this is the important factor rather than the obvious reality of biological differences that can be measured.

Hall (1997) in his lecture focused on race; however his model can be applied to all human differences. Race is just one example of the many concepts that categorizes differences in the human world; other classificatory systems include age, gender and ability. Hall, (1997, as cited in Hiles, 2006) claims that race and all other classificatory systems are discursive; this means that it is impossible to define these concepts scientifically and it is unfeasible to permanently measure these differences as meanings and beliefs relating to these classifications constantly change due to changes inflicted by society. He suggested that what these differences mean, how they are used in culture is what is important, not how these differences can be measured. Hall also proposed that meanings can be manipulated, they are not fixed; they ' float, slip and slide', (Hiles, 2006). He placed less emphasis on the

biological theory of racial differences (the physical, observable differences) advocating instead that the meaning of racial differences which is socially constructed within culture is the important factor. Hall, (1997, as cited in Hiles, 2006) suggested race is a discursive construct that works like a language. Differences between people are not based on the biological differences between people but rather the social constructions and the meanings people relate to these. Obviously, the physical differences that are between people are still acknowledged but the focus on the meanings of these physical differences is of main importance. Hall (1997) demonstrated how first religion and now science is used as an interpretation of racial differences. His argument is a criticism against the use of science in its certification of how racial differences should be interpreted and what they mean. Meanings cannot be fixed permanently which means racial differences cannot be interpreted as fact based purely on science and genetics. The psychology of looking at human differences needs to consider the constructions of the meaning of these differences imposed by people within society which is the centre of everything. For example how certain people are treated depending on particular human difference classifications.

Hiles (2006) suggested from Halls' work that psychology, when measuring human differences, ignores the meanings given too these measurements and then assumes the meanings that are found from the results of these measurements to be fixed. In terms of the implications for psychology, Hall's theory takes a radical constructionist perspective rather than the alternative realist ideas. The radical constructionist approach focuses on the belief that it is not the differences themselves that is important, it is the meanings

given to human differences. Hiles (2006) put forward the idea that to fully understand human differences a new perspective is needed that implements more of a discursive way of theorizing. This method instead of measuring considers the ways in which human differences become socially constructed in language and how these constructions then influence human action within the social world. Halls argument centres around the theory that human differences cannot be measured to give a valid representation of these differences. Measurement attempts to fix the meaning of differences, but human differences is not something that can be fixed; they are changeable and able to manipulated. Hall (1997, as cited in Hiles, 2006) suggests research needs to focus on the discourses of difference to give a better understanding.

Race is a signifier of human difference; however the meaning of a signifier changes depending on culture, history, events, situational context and stories, (Hiles, 2006). A signifier cannot be fixed the meaning changes depending on these factors. For example the meaning of skin colour has changed throughout history; this is why Hall called race a ' floating signifier'. Hall (1997) proposes a signifier is more similar to how language works, it is socially constructed, rather than how people are biologically constituted; to say look at the human difference of race in terms of genetics means that it must be fixed, it is an unchanging fact. However, the human difference of race is not fixed the meaning of it constantly changes.

Hall (1997) discusses three positions available when looking at the human difference of race. The first is the realist; this proposed there are genetic differences that are the source for racial classification. The second is the

linguistic position; this suggests there are no real differences between races; all differences are created by humans in culture and language. The final position adopted by Hall is the discursive position; this proposed that there are many differences, when these differences are organized within language they then gain meaning and become a feature in human culture. This position focuses on the idea that differences exist in the world, but what matters are the ways in which people make sense of these differences and how this gives them meaning within society, (www. msu. edu/course/atl/125/fernandez/hall. html).

Hall (1997, as cited in Hiles (2006) showed that human differences and classifications where historically first linked to religion (a religious discourse), then anthropology and most recently science (a scientific discourse). Hall (1997) suggests that these ' knowledge's' of human difference do not act as fact or truth but they are a way to make people feel better, to know where they fit into the social system in culture. Classification ensures order within society; religion, anthropology and science all attempt to fix and secure human differences and guarantee a truth. It can be suggested that race needs to be considered more as a discursive (a social construction of difference) as efforts to fix the classification of race and other human differences have been unsuccessful in terms of scientific methods, (Hiles, 2006). Hall's approach to looking at difference accepts that all human difference classifications cannot be explained by measurement they cannot be fixed; meanings are changeable; therefore classifications are floating signifiers, (www. msu. edu/course/atl/125/fernandez/hall. html).

Hall (1997, retrieved from www. msu. edu/course/atl/125/fernandez/hall. html) gave the example that the physical attributes of race for example hair colour and bone structure indicate race in the world as a visible difference; the genetic code attempts to then fix this difference. He suggested that the things people can see are signifiers for things that can't be such as intelligence, personality and morality. This therefore shows that the physical surface attributes of human differences are taken to be the primary factor; however, people then read these differences to signify differences in other ways that cant be seen which are socially constructed through language, (Hiles, 2006). These differences can change as they signify different meanings depending on other factors. Hall (1997, as cited in Hiles, 2006) proposed culture is used to give meaning so people can make sense of and organize the world and human difference. Meaning can be changed because it can never be fixed as it is socially constructed it is not fact. Because meaning is open it allows change to be possible and demonstrates why meanings of culture and human differences change; it makes a discursive language possible.

Hall used the example of race as a signifier to demonstrate how human differences are socially constructed. This essay will now look at the signifier of disability as a further demonstration of how the meanings of human differences are constructed through language. The social model of disability has been very effective when initiating changes in attitudes towards disability which has in turn created changes in culture through new legislations and practices, (Hiles, 2007). The social model is in direct contrast to the medical model of disability which is the more traditionally held

approach. The medical model theorises that disabled individuals are defined by their disability; facilities and treatments are therefore created to aid them within society which causes them to be segregated and seen as different to others in the community who are more able bodied, (Eisley, 2001). The social model (the approach accepted by Hall) on the other hand theorises that disabled individuals are disabled by society. Hiles (2007) demonstrates that it is not the impairment that causes the difference it is the underlying lack of understanding and failure of society to successfully fulfil the needs of disabled people that causes them to be separated. This model therefore proposes that society is to blame for the barriers, stereotypes and prejudices disabled people receive as meanings are socially constructed to see disabled people in a certain way whereas the needs of that disabled individual is seen as a secondary importance. Traditional approaches (i. e. the medical model) focuses on the extent of the disability, it measures it which is why there are problems in society in terms of stereotypes and creating barriers. A more discursive approach (i. e. the social model) instead considers the meanings of these human differences which can be argued to be a more positive way when helping disabled individuals within society, (Hiles, 2007). This therefore shows that Halls ideas have positive implications for the rethinking of a psychology of human differences.

Hedlund (2000) looked at the conceptualization of disability through the discourses of the medical and social models. He considers disability to be a ' societal phenomenon' rather than signifying the individual experience of being disabled. Disability is a discourse created by society which provides a type of reality for the way in which culture to perceive it. The social model

doesn't ignore the reality of the individual experience of being disabled or of the disability itself but instead focuses on the communication within society that reinforces this disability and results in barriers and discrimination. Communication within society on the topic of disability creates a way for others to understand, perceive and respond to disability; the wrong type or negative communication can be the cause of disabling that individual within society. Hedlund (2009) concluded and proposed that the medical and social perspectives of the perception of disability are competitive in their theories one is not a more modern approach of the other.

The medical model of disability sees the disabled individual as being the problem. For example if an individual in a wheelchair has difficulty getting on a bus due to there being steps; the medical model proposes this is the fault of the wheelchair not the facilities of the bus. The social model of disability on the other hand considers the steps to be the barrier as this approach centres on the idea that it is society that disables individuals by not meeting peoples different needs to function in that culture. The social model is a much more positive approach to looking at human difference as it considers what society can do to changing the meaning of being ' disabled' to meet the needs of others and include them in society as equals to those more able bodied, (http://www2. le. ac. uk/offices/ssds/accessability/staff/supporting-students-with-disabilities/social-model-of-disability). The social model of disability believes the problem of disability can be solved by the ' restructuring of society', (Eisley, 2001). The medical model aims to develop cures which focus on individuals and their disability; whereas the social

model centres attention on changing the views of others and the meanings they put on disabled individuals to create a more equal society.

Scullion (2010) conducted research looking at the social and medical approaches of disability in the role of nurses. Findings suggested that the social model of disability is effective in avoiding discrimination and to promote equal opportunities. The social model focuses on the barriers disabled individuals face which is imposed by society, nurses taking into consideration this approach rather than just the medical model in a hospital environment may have positive implications for changes in meeting the needs of handicapped individuals and reducing discrimination.

McDonald (2009) conducted research analysing adults with dyslexia and how this disability affected their education and employment opportunities. The medical model looks at dyslexia as a learning dysfunction that is directly related to the individual; this research considers the social model of disability in causing barriers that are outside of that individual. It was found social class and discrimination was primary factors in affecting individuals' job and educational opportunities; this demonstrates that dyslexia is a societal issue based around inequality not something that is a specific individual's problem. Oliver and Barnes (1991, as cited in McDonald, 2009) developed the social model of disability as an explanation of how disability is not based around a biological impairment it is something (a discrimination) that is socially constructed that creates barriers and restricts equality in life opportunities. The research also showed that disabling barriers are often related to social class; those disabled individuals in a middle class environment have more equal life opportunities for education and

employment compared to those from a working class background. This again is an example of how it is society that disables people not the actual disability that is the problem.

Meanings are not fixed in a particular way they are ' floating signifiers'. Hall does however show that meanings can become provisionally fixed when that meaning becomes dominant in society, (Hiles, 2007). Whereas ideology attempts to permanently fix meanings of human differences this discursive fixation is temporary for that moment in time, the meaning can be changed as soon as the circumstance or situation changes for example. The social model of disability is not an attempt to understand disability; it aims to identify the meanings of impairment in the social world. Hiles (2007) suggests the model focuses on unfixing the meanings of disability which are assigned by society; it is more often seen as a critical model of disability and human difference rather than an actual theory. The social model focuses on the meaning of disability and how this meaning is constructed through language. If the concept of social construction and meaning is considered within all signifiers of human difference this would have significant implications in terms of actually looking at the changes of meaning across different contexts rather than trying to fix and measure human differences. This can be argued to be a more valid representation of looking at human differences as it not only take into account the social construction of the meaning of human differences through language it focuses on this as the main contributing factor whereas traditional measurements of human differences attempt to ignore the social constructive nature they themselves have when measuring.

The social model of disability aims to unfix meanings and encourage people to think differently. This is demonstrated in Hiles (2007) example of a poster used of an image with a disabled man with the words ' I see you, I see you as a friend, I see you as a co-worker... but do you see me? how do you see me? Do you see me as different?' This example is effective at first showing the social constructions given to disabled individuals and then demonstrating that the actual differences are not important it is the meaning given to these differences that is the underlying feature and these are socially constructed; the human difference of disability is therefore not centred on the medical model of being impaired.

Landsman (2005) looked at the opinions of the mothers of disabled children in relation to the medical and social models of disability. Results showed that generally mothers used a combination of both approaches. The medical model was used when looking for help and opportunities but the social model to describe meanings and the experience of being disabled within society. It was found when mothers where asked about that biggest fears for their children they time after time responded they were worried how the child would be treated by others in society not concerns about the disability itself. This shows that the social model of disability has bigger implications in terms of showing that society is the problem that disables the individual not the disability itself.

In conclusion, the ideas of Stuart Hall suggest the meanings of human differences are what are important not how these differences can be measured. Meanings of human differences are constructed through discourse and can be temporarily fixed when they are the dominant feature

in society at that point; however they cannot be permanently fixed they are floating signifiers that can be manipulated and change depending on history, context, events etc. The social model of disability is an example of a how disability is a signifier of human differences and that meanings can be fixing and unfixing as all human differences are the result of social constructions imposed by society. This view of looking at human differences has implications for the rethinking of psychology as it moves away from traditional ideas of measuring the actual reality of human differences and instead focuses on the meanings culture and society applies to these differences to make the world what it is.