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Section B: Critical Reviews

A Critical Review: S. Harris (1990) *Two-Way Schooling: Education and Cultural Survival*

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Introduction

This paper reviews the research work of Dr Stephen Harris in his 1990 book entitled *Two-Way Schooling: Education and Cultural Survival.* It is not possible to review the book in its entirety in great detail, so an overall view will be taken and the following key questions will be answered:

- who is doing the talking?
- what kind of Indigenous subjects are being constructed?
- how is the construction of world view achieved?
- are there any alternatives?

In answering these questions, it is hoped an in-depth understanding and critique will be gained of Harris's work in the light of post-structuralist understandings of discourse. This paper will demonstrate that Harris's structural-functional and sometimes Aboriginalist discourse adopts the construction of Indigenous people as 'Other', and advocates a separation of domains in the schooling system in order to perpetuate 'traditional' Aboriginal culture and identity. Harris says '... the most effective strategy for Aboriginal culture survival is to construct two separate culture domains in each school' (1990: 158).

Who is Doing the Talking?

In finding the answers to this question one must also ask why this research was undertaken. As stated in the Forward written by Paul Hughes and Bob Teasdale, members of the South Australian Education Department and the School of Education at Flinders University were researching and developing projects in the field of Aboriginal Education. As an academic and educator of extensive experience in this field, Harris was approached and asked to assist in a project of 'national significance'. He was encouraged to write from his own experiences and it was hoped that the final document would be a personal account of those experiences, including his theories and intuitions about Aboriginal education. Harris himself wanted to explore the 'theoretical analysis of the concept of Aboriginal bicultural and two-way schooling and its implications for classroom practice' (Harris, 1990: ix). Although he had little formal classroom teaching experience, Harris's earlier work, in Milingimbi particularly, had provoked considerable 'debate, analysis and change' (Harris, 1990: ix). It was primarily because of this that Harris was approached to undertake the research. Hughes and Teasdale, in the Forward of the book, say of Harris 'His perceptiveness and sensitivity when crossing cultural boundaries are quite remarkable' (Harris, 1990: x). It is the opinion of Hughes and Teasdale that further experiences in Oenpelli, Papua New Guinea and New Mexico have allowed Harris to provide a comparative perspective that gives depth to his analysis.

Harris's own hope for the research was that it act as a catalyst for further discussion and debate on the issue of Aboriginal self-determination. The widespread concern that 'academic success in the Western school system could seriously undermine Aboriginal identity' (Harris, 1990: xiii) led the researcher to aim selectively for the development of a 'theory of schooling for simultaneous Aboriginal cultural maintenance and academic success' (Harris, 1990: xiii). Harris states quite clearly that his study:

> ... is limited to schools in isolated, remote areas where Aboriginal people, while changing, still experience varying degrees of traditional orientation ... It includes schools in communities in which Aborigines are in the majority; where an Aboriginal language is spoken by all age groups; where social organisation still largely determines appropriate behaviours, ... where religious consciousness and its supporting ceremonies are still present and practised; and where the group still lives on or has unrestricted access to its traditional land (Harris, 1990: xiv).

These 'traditional' Aboriginal people are a small selective group which Harris identifies in an essentialist manner and in relation to the 'Other'. The word 'traditional', according to Eve Fesl, is a term which perpetuates the belief held by many non-Aboriginal people that 'our society was fossilised in some undefined reference point in the past' (Fesl, 1990: 46). She says that:

> our society is changing and adapting to meet the differing needs created by environment and, in the past 200 years, the changes caused by invasion of our lands. Everything we do that is not European is, therefore, 'traditional': this is regardless of where we live ... [so] ... drop the useless, non-descriptive term 'traditional' (Fesl, 1990: 460).

Jackson (1989) has found that where there is promotion of the preservation of a 'culture', misrepresentation of what is actually happening can occur — writers often find it 'academically or politically expedient to use **culture** to describe continuities between the past and the present... Such continuities may ... exist only superficially, the underlying meanings being radically different'. Jackson goes on to argue that:

> Most often 'traditional culture' is seen as a good thing, something that should be safeguarded. But in order to be thought of as good, culture must not be seen as invented or created, except over a long period of time (Jackson, 1989: 127).

In order to remove himself from his somewhat essentialist view of Australian Indigenous people, Harris, in his Preface acknowledges that his book is:

> a distillation of personal speculation and intuition resulting from lengthy personal experience in remote Aboriginal settlements and Aboriginal education, a broad but selective use of well-established educational, sociological and sociolinguistic theory, and anecdotes related to Aboriginal schools (Harris, 1990: iv).

To accuse Harris of being Aboriginalist is perhaps a little harsh. Attwood (1992: xi) considers Aboriginalism as rendering 'Aborigines as inert objects who are spoken for by others, by Aboriginalists who claim that this knowledge is a representation of the real'. In the field of Aboriginal Studies, Aboriginalism exists as a discourse which displays 'knowledge about indigenes by European scholars who claim that the indigenous peoples cannot represent themselves and must therefore be represented by experts who know more about Aborigines than they know about themselves' (Attwood, 1992: i).

Walton suggests that 'Harris's construction of culture could be read as a synthesis of structural-functionalism and evolutionary models ... [where] change was constructed as slow, culture was constructed as a homogeneous whole' (1995: 37).

Underlying the chapters of Harris's book is an opinion that a move away from the 'traditional' culture is detrimental to the survival of the people he identifies as belonging to that group. This structural-functional model of culture has been critiqued for 'assuming change to be dysfunctional and threatening to culture' (Walton, 1995: 37). Harris proposes that the perpetuation of traditional culture is threatened by White domination and that in order to maintain their culture, remote Aborigines can and in some cases are developing differing models of education for their children. The model which Harris sees as becoming most successful is that of two-way schooling. Patrick McConvell (1981) wrote that:

> the term 'two-way schooling' comes from Aboriginal English, not from academic 'high' English, like 'bilingual education' Not only the phrase, but the concept itself ... came from Aboriginal people — an example of 'language planning' being carried out by Aboriginal people independently of white authorities, to deal with a new situation (1980: 60).

In advocating culture domain separation, Harris explains that he is not proposing:

> another way to manipulate Aborigines into disempowering social isolation or to restrict their freedom to participate in Western society. Rather, ... clear-cut culture domain separation in two-way schools, and the curriculum approach in the Western domain of role learning and role adoption, may be the current strategy most likely to preserve Aboriginal identity because the Aboriginal child would not be learning Western culture by unconscious osmosis (Harris, 1990: 64).

What Kind of Indigenous Subjects are Being Constructed?

It was suggested earlier that Harris has constructed his Aboriginal subjects as 'Other'. As Hughes and Teasdale anticipated, Harris developed a 'comparative perspective' (Harris, 1990: I) of Aboriginal education. He discusses degrees of difference between Aboriginal and European culture saying that they are 'largely incompatible' (Harris, 1990: 9), and he admits that in accepting this 'truth' he was theoretically liberated and was able to develop his more effective theory of two-way or bicultural schooling for Aboriginal schools. In Foucault's terms 'truth' is closely affiliated to 'power', and 'any truth depends on power to make it true' (Attwood, 1992: ii). It is this position of power which has enabled Europeans to construct Aborigines as 'Other'. Harris's construction of remote Aboriginal people as Other — 'the two cultures are antithetical' (Harris, 1990: 9) — implies to the reader that this difference can only continue where a separation of the cultures occurs and that the perpetuation of this difference is essential to the maintenance of an Aboriginal identity. Throughout his work, Harris emphasises the 'significance of cultural differences, and the damage that could be done by ignoring them' (Walton, 1995: 37). However, the danger of emphasising differences can also lead to the construction of Aborigines as lacking or deficient. Bernstein describes this deficit position as:

> one in which it was assumed that there was an 'absence of attributes (cognitive, linguistic, cultural) in one group' while they existed in another group, and that this absence led to 'educational failure'. He suggested this position falsely displaced 'responsibility for failure ... from the school to the family/community'. In Bernstein's view school failure should not be attributed to characteristics of the family/community, but rather to characteristics of the 'school's dominant curriculum, which acts selectively upon those who can acquire it' (Bernstein in Walton, 1995: 99).

Harris's attention to difference is not an accusation of deficit, but merely an attempt to highlight the need for Aboriginal communities to develop curriculum which is suitable for their children and be delivered in a way which is identified by them, and under their control. Of his alternative model for education, Harris says:

> Two-way schooling makes pedagogical and administrative sense in the context of remote Aboriginal settlements (Harris, 1990: 20).

Walton says of Harris's theory:

> For Harris, a model of bicultural education that attempted to create a new form derived from both cultural sources, would lead to 'a loss of distinctive Aboriginal identity' and that 'to meet European Australians halfway' was 'to self-destruct'. He argued this on the relative sizes of the cultural groups and the assimilationist nature of Western schooling (Walton, 1995: 38).

Harris's reasons for identifying differences between Aboriginal and Western cultures and world views was to help eliminate damage done through ignorance, particularly in the schooling system. Of this construction of difference, Hodge (1990: 202) says that although the intrinsic complexity of Aboriginal language and culture is recognised and highly valued, 'the terms of opposition are absolute'. Because of this:

> ... Aboriginals remain forever encapsulated in a self-contained universe, unable to speak or even understand their own meanings. This closed universe guarantees their authenticity and identity as Aboriginals, as worthy of Aboriginalist reverence, but any departure from its terms condemns them to angry denunciation for having betrayed their essential identity, as inscribed in their culture (Hodge, 1990: 202).

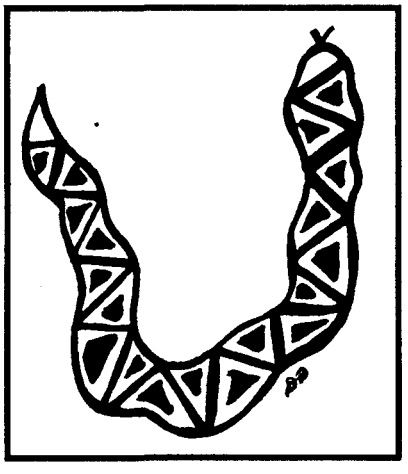
It is Harris's belief that 'European Australians and Aborigines don't understand each other very well. Even when there is a high degree of mutual understanding, there has not been, so far, much desire on either side to change their ways of seeing the world' (1990: 21).

How is the Construction of World View Achieved?

In discussing world views, Harris points out that the degrees of difference between Aboriginal and Western world views is 'fundamental' (1990: 21). He quotes Stanner as saying, 'We are dealing with two distinct logics of life' (1990: 21). As the focus of the book is on the appropriateness of a two-way/ two domain schooling system for the preservation of Aboriginal identity, Harris has chosen nine 'divergences' to discuss in some detail:

1) religious *versus* positivistic thinking
2) relatedness *versus* compartmentalisation
3) cyclic *versus* linear concepts of time
4) being *versus* doing
5) closed *versus* open society
6) contrasting view of work and economics
7) contrasting views of authority
8) culturally distinctive styles
9) continuity in change.

Here, Harris has relied on binary oppositions to dichotomise differences between the two cultures. Walton (1995: 50) suggests that while there may be value in dichotomising, the truth value of the 'us and them' construction is problematic; as is, according to Hodge, the 'Aboriginalist commitment to cultural maintenance and preservation of traditional languages' (1990: 204). It is because of these differences that Harris has 'proposed a form of compartmentalised biculturalism, based on domain separation, as a way to ensure the survival of Aboriginal culture and language' (Walton, 1995: 38).



In pointing out cultural differences, Harris says that an understanding of:

> remote Aboriginal world view has considerable explanatory power in understanding happenings in contemporary Aboriginal Australia where the two cultures meet ... Aboriginal world view does not imply that all that happens to Aboriginal people is to be understood in terms of Aboriginal culture (1990: 43-44).

In later writings, Harris explains his domain separation theory in terms of a 'soft' and 'hard' theory and explains that this theory of bicultural schooling is based on his belief that the 'Aboriginal world view and the Western industrial world view are largely incompatible' (Harris, 1992: 142). He explains that in situations where Aboriginal people are recognising cultural differences and accepting that the job of schooling is not to try to teach the dominant culture but to teach children how to maintain their identity while operating effectively in both worlds, two-way schooling is a workable alternative to the current situation. In his concern for the preservation of identity through culture and language, Harris has been criticised for ignoring the significance of change. Walton says that 'a distinct cultural identity can exist that is less dependent on language than other social, historical, economic and politically shared experiences' (1995: 40).

Are There Any Alternatives?

In studying the Tukanoan people, Jackson (1989) developed a different view about culture and cultural change:

> The cultural forms that are retained in earlier traditions can ... totally change in meaning. This poses problems when we talk about cultures using an organic model, because we find we cannot describe these processes in other than negative language. Both anthropologists and ... activists at times find it academically and/or politically expedient to talk of culture as enduring over time: while changing, these cultures are nonetheless seen as remaining the same in some fundamental ways. But, when ... traits are retained, cast aside or redefined as part of a self-conscious awareness and promotion of a particular kind of ... identity as a political strategy, the meaning of these traits has often radically changed (1989: 137-138).

Jackson's argument was partly designed to get over the romantic nostalgia of much current thinking about culture, where we 'mourn the loss of Indigenous culture and language' (1989: 133). The biological model assumed cultures were 'natural', in the sense that they were 'fixed by natural processes', rather than created by people (1989: 136). A more dynamic model of culture and

> culture change would challenge these biological/ organic models or metaphors. In Jackson's view we should think of 'culture and identity as something in flux, something negotiated and grasped for, as opposed to something acquired or possessed' (Walton, 1995: 42).

Harris expands on his view of remote Aboriginal culture by saying that it 'will change, but will not lose its distinctiveness' (Harris, 1990: 44), and it is this prediction which Harris clings to throughout his discourse.

In considering Harris's theory of domain separation and compartmentalisation, one Aboriginal community has proposed an alternative. The elders of Yirrkala community and the staff at the school have suggested that separation is not necessary. They have used their 'Ganma Theory' to explore areas of the curriculum where the two cultures meet—they are developing a both-ways curriculum which appropriates Western knowledge for their purposes and attempts to create a new, two-knowledge system, rather than divide and preserve the old systems.

Perhaps the most critical of Harris's discourses, and of his own early writings is that of Michael Christie. Christie now takes a more post-structuralist position, particularly in his construction of an Aboriginal identity. He questions the construction of Aboriginality in relation to the language and culture of the person who is doing the constructing. In a dialogue between Harris and Christie (1994), Christie questions Harris's position and suggests that through post-structuralist theory Aboriginal people would construct their own identity through their own truths and positions. Christie says that past theorising about Aborigines has been exposed by post-structuralists as merely the production of stories about ourselves — comparisons made between 'them' and 'us'. 'Poststructuralism represents the Western intellectual world finally coming to grips with exactly why that is the case, and what must be done about it' (Christie and Harris, 1994: 164). Christie argues with Harris that it is time for Aboriginal people to speak for themselves, because non-Aboriginal people can only talk about their own experiences of Aboriginality and about how they construct Aborigines from their perspective and other people's constructions. 'Poststructuralists... represent structuralist theory as colonising or appropriating Aboriginal realities ... [and] and are suspicious of old fashioned theories because they come from a place and time in which theory was seen as language about reality' (Christie and Harris, 1994: 2-3). Patrick McConvell (1994: 243) suggests 'that the way Aboriginal people talk about "both ways" education is a far cry from the idea of "cultural domain separation".'

Conclusion

In reviewing this work of Stephen Harris, I have concentrated not so much on his idea of domain separation in schooling, but more on his representation of remote Aboriginal people and his concern for the maintenance of 'traditional' languages and culture:

> the problematic of our representations lies not in the fact that we speak but in the particular nature of how and what we speak. This is what determines whether the effect of European representations are reprehensible or not (Attwood, 1992: xiii).

For Harris, Aboriginal self-determination is the key factor in the maintenance of an Aboriginal identity which will continue to exist despite the increasing domination of our Western culture. A separation of the cultural domains at the school level; in a school which is administered and controlled by the Aboriginal community, is seen by Harris as the only possible way to assist remote Aboriginal people to operate effectively in both cultures and to maintain their identity. Harris's closing words are as follows:

> I do not think that European Australians or Aborigines have any positive choice other than biculturalism for more harmonious culture contact without loss of Aboriginal identity in the long-term (Harris, 1990: 158).

Many academics share Harris's concern for the development of ways to promote Aboriginal control of their destiny, and although post-structuralists would say that Aboriginal people should be speaking and writing for themselves, if it has done nothing else, this work has promoted discussion and debate.

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