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ARTICLE

## Social Work in the Seventh Moment

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### ABSTRACT

My intentions in this article are fourfold: (1) to show how the discourses of qualitative inquiry and cultural studies in the seventh moment can be put to critical advantage by social work researchers; (2) to discuss the cultural studies assumptions that define a critical social work research agenda; (3) to offer a set of interpretive, methodological and ethical criteria that can be used by social work researchers; thereby (4) establishing the relevance of this approach for the practices of critical social work research in this new century. Throughout I use examples from the Black Arts Movement of the 1970s.

### KEY WORDS:

critical theory

cultural studies

feminist ethics

qualitative  
research

The case-based focus of social work has traditionally embodied the commitment to address 'the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable and oppressed and living in poverty' (Reamer, 1998: 7). This focus has been historically and more recently connected to an emphasis on the 'processual', qualitative understanding of an individual's problems and crises within a social context (see Padgett, 1998: 4-9 for a review; see also McMahon, 1998; Reissman, 1994: 113; Sherman and Reid, 1994: 2). Within social work there has always been a desire to 'capture lived experience from the perspective of those who live it' (Padgett, 1998: 8; see also Reamer, 1998: 9). In turn, social workers are ethically committed to promoting social justice and social change, while honoring cultural and ethnic diversities (Reamer, 1998: 7).

I want to locate these practices and concerns of social work within the recent discourses on qualitative inquiry in the human disciplines. Qualitative inquiry, as Schwandt (2000: 189) argues, is a name for a 'reformist movement that began in the early 1970s in the academy'. The interpretive, feminist and critical paradigms, in their several forms, are central to this movement, as are complex epistemological and ethical criticisms of traditional social science research. Qualitative inquiry, as a field, now has its own journals, scientific associations, conferences and faculty positions (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000a: x).<sup>1</sup>

This movement, in its feminist, post-structural and postmodern forms, has made significant in-roads into many social science disciplines, including social work, community health, disability studies, and qualitative medical research (see Chambon and Irving, 1994, 1999; Davis, 1997; Margolin, 1997; Miller and Crabtree, 2000: 609; Padgett, 1998; Ruckdeschel et al., 1994; Sherman and Reid, 1994).

The transformations that gained momentum in the 1990s continue into the first decade of the new century. The narrative turn is now taken for granted. It is now understood that writing is not an innocent practice. Men and women write the worlds of everyday life differently. Many social workers, sociologists and anthropologists are exploring new ways of writing ethnography, and some are writing fiction, drama, performance texts and ethnographic poetry (see England, 1994; see also Chambon and Irving, 1994). Anthropology journals are holding fiction contests. Civic journalists are experimenting with various forms of critical ethnography.

The appeal of a critical, cultural studies across the social sciences and the humanities increases (Chambon and Irving, 1999: xvi). Some term this the seventh moment of inquiry (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000b: 2, 12).<sup>2</sup> This is a period of explosion and ferment. It is defined by breaks from the past, a focus on previously silenced voices, a turn to performance texts, and an abiding concern with moral discourse, with conversations about democracy, politics, race, gender, class, nation, freedom and community (Lincoln and Denzin, 2000: 1048).

In the seventh moment there is a pressing demand to show how the

practices of critical, interpretive qualitative inquiry can be put to work in positive ways. This is the tradition necessary to examine new ways of inquiry central to the workings of social work. I need to bring these practices more into the interpretive practices of social work.

This is my agenda in this special issue. Qualitative inquiry can be put to work by social work educators and practitioners. I align my agenda to clarify and extend the implications of this issue for social work education, policy and practice.

My discussion unfolds in the seventh moment. I address the cultural studies assumptions that characterize social work in the seventh moment. I next outline the implications of the seventh moment when used in the seventh moment when it is not mentioned. I then address the implications for social work practice.

## SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Within a cultural studies framework, social work is situated in the complex educational, political and social structures of everyday life. The personal troubles and issues in personal life become public issues in the public arena (Mills, 1952). Issues of the economy, poverty, racial and gender inequality, domestic violence (Reamer, 1998), power, ideology, gender and social justice are central.

Social work practitioners must negotiate how to exercise power over it by implementing policies of surveillance and normalization. The surveillance of social work with the state, serve to regulate a desire and addiction. The recent reorientation of social work to a postmodern 'logic of management' has fragmented practices and knowledge (Chambon and Irving, 1999: xvii). The goals of social work and empowerment have been eroded away from its liberal commitment to 'the grassroots level' (Chambon and Irving, 1999: xvi). There is too much concern for 'promotion' (Chambon and Irving, 1999: xvi).

But social workers' clients

practices of critical, interpretive qualitative research can help change the world in positive ways. This is the traditional calling of a critical social work. It is necessary to examine new ways of making the practices of critical qualitative inquiry central to the workings of a free democratic society. Further, there is a need to bring these practices more centrally into the curricula and into the interpretive practices of social work research and education.

This is my agenda in this short article, to show how the discourses of qualitative inquiry can be put to critical advantage by social work researchers, educators and practitioners. I align this project with other recent attempts to clarify and extend the implications of a critical, interpretive social science for social work education, policy and practice (Chambon and Irving, 1999: xvi).<sup>3</sup>

My discussion unfolds in three parts. I first make explicit the critical cultural studies assumptions that can help define a social work research agenda in the seventh moment. I next outline a set of interpretive criteria that can be used in the seventh moment when appeals to objective epistemologies are questioned. I then address the implications of these criteria for critical social work practice.

### **SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH AND CULTURAL STUDIES**

Within a cultural studies framework, the practices of social work are anchored in the complex educational, political, medical, economic and consumption structures of everyday life. The structural problems of everyday life create personal troubles and issues in people's lives. These problems, which become issues in the public arena (Mills, 1963), include de-industrialization, a weak economy, poverty, racial and gender discrimination, alcohol and drug abuse, and domestic violence (Reamer, 1998: 7). Everyday life represents a site where power, ideology, gender and social class circulate and shape one another.

Social work practitioners mediate and intervene in this life world. They exercise power over it by implementing their versions of truth, social control and normalization. The surveillance apparatuses of social work, in conjunction with the state, serve to regulate approved forms of family, intimacy, sexuality, desire and addiction. The recent reshuffling of the welfare system has produced a postmodern 'logic of management characterized by decentered rationality, fragmented practices and knowledge, and the dispersal of the individual subject' (Chambon and Irving, 1999: xvii). According to some critics, the norms of care and empowerment have been eroded. They contend that social work has strayed away from its liberal commitment to work with 'disenfranchised populations at the grassroots level' (Chambon and Irving, 1999: xvi). For these critics there is too much concern for 'promoting psychotherapy for middle-class clients' (Chambon and Irving, 1999: xvi).

But social workers' clients are the products of the structural problems

created by the forces of neo-liberal 'governmentality' and consumer capitalism. The client's personal troubles are stitched into the fabrics of the larger consumer culture. Social workers, accordingly, address the relationship between personal troubles, for example, wife battering, or alcoholism, and the public policies and public institutions that have been created to address those personal problems. Interpretive scholars speak to this interrelationship between private lives and public responses to personal troubles, working outward from the biography of the person to the larger institutional and structural contexts that frame the person's life (Mills, 1959: 8).

Social work's clients are consumers of the valued cultural objects that circulate in the marketplace. The consumption of these cultural, educational and medical objects carries positive and negative effects, for consumption can empower or demean, disenfranchise or liberate, 'essentialize' and stereotype. Consumers are trapped within a hegemonic marketplace. Ironically, as Holt (1997) observes, consumers who challenge, or resist these hegemonic marketing and consumption practices find themselves located in an ever-expanding postmodern market tailored to fit their individual needs. And often social workers are asked to tailor their practices to the needs of such individuals.

The interpretive rituals and practices surrounding consumption and consumer culture are anchored in a larger system, called the 'circuit of culture' (du Gay et al., 1997: 3). In this circuit meanings are defined by the mass media, including advertising, cinema and television. This circuit is based on the 'articulation' or interconnection of several distinct and contingent processes, namely the processes of representation, identification, production, consumption and regulation (du Gay et al., 1997: 3). These processes mutually influence one another, continually shaping and creating consumers who conform to post-modern market conditions.

Human beings live in a second-hand world. Existence is not solely determined by interaction, or by social acts. Mills puts this forcefully, when stating that, 'The consciousness of human beings does not determine their existence; nor does their existence determine their consciousness. Between the human consciousness and material existence stand communications, and designs, patterns, and values which influence decisively such consciousness as they have' (Mills, 1963: 375).

After Smythe (1994: 285), I understand that the basic task of the mass media is to make this second hand world natural and invisible to its participants. Barthes (1957/1972: 11) elaborates, noting that the media dress up reality, giving it a sense of naturalness, so that 'Nature and History [are] confused at every turn.' This is the case because the media's purposes are to 'operate itself so profitably as to ensure unrivalled respect for its economic importance in the [larger cultural and social] system' (Smythe, 1994: 285).

The prime goals of the mass media complex are four-fold, in order to

create individuals who: (1) become media; while (2) engaging in consumer culture; (3) adhering to a public opinion that is state (Smythe, 1994: 285). The fourth thing it can to make consumers this

### The Researcher and the Circuits of Culture

The critical qualitative social work researcher is not a neutral observer who stands outside of the processes and the circuits of culture. Rather, the researcher is locally and historically situated within the circuits of culture. The researcher's historical self is brought to this process. The researcher has its own history with the situation. The researcher's consumption of cultural goods and commodities creates the larger structural problems of discrimination, and addiction.

In the social sciences today the researcher guarantees absolute methodological rigor and the objectivity of the inquirer. All observation is the result of a value-free knowledge. The data are taken over. In their place stand critical and interpretive relativism. The criteria for evaluating the researcher's foundational position.<sup>4</sup>

Each process within the circuit of culture is critical, interpretive social work research. The researcher and disrupt the apparently unbreakable circuits of production, distribution, and consumption. The researcher are constantly intervening in the circuit of culture. These processes over-determine the existence of human beings. The moral ethnographer is illuminating and criticizing the conditions of the circuit that operate at specific points in the circuit.

Complex discursive and ideological formations of cultural production, and consumption. The researcher's preferred gendered self. These selves are situated within the circuits of representation, identification, and consumption. The scholar interrogates these formations. The question is always asked, namely 'How do the promises of a free democratic society and the processes contribute to the reproduction and repression in the culture?'

create individuals who: (1) become consumers of the products advertised in the media; while (2) engaging in consumption practices that conform to the norms of possessive individualism endorsed by the capitalist political system; and (3) adhering to a public opinion that is supportive of the strategic policies of the state (Smythe, 1994: 285). The fourth goal of the media is clear; to do everything it can to make consumers think they are not commodities.

### **The Researcher and the Circuits of Culture**

The critical qualitative social work researcher is not an objective, politically neutral observer who stands outside and above the study of these media processes and the circuits of culture. Rather, the social work researcher is historically and locally situated within the very processes being studied. A gendered, historical self is brought to this process. This self, as a set of shifting identities, has its own history with the situated practices that define and shape the consumption of cultural goods and commodities. These are the very processes that create the larger structural problems social workers address: poverty, violence, discrimination, and addiction.

In the social sciences today there is no longer a God's-eye view that guarantees absolute methodological certainty. All inquiry reflects the standpoint of the inquirer. All observation is theory-laden. There is no possibility of theory – or value – free knowledge. The days of naive realism and naive positivism are over. In their place stand critical and historical realism, and various versions of relativism. The criteria for evaluating research are now relative. This is the non-foundational position.<sup>4</sup>

Each process within the circuit of culture becomes a nodal point for critical, interpretive social work research. Critical researchers seek to untangle and disrupt the apparently unbreakable economic and ritual links between the production, distribution, and consumption of commodities. Critical researchers are constantly intervening in the circuits of culture, exposing the ways in which these processes over-determine the meanings cultural commodities have for human beings. The moral ethnographer becomes visible in the text, disclosing, illuminating and criticizing the conditions of constraint and commodification that operate at specific points in these circuits (see hooks, 1990).

Complex discursive and ideological processes shape the rituals of cultural production, and consumption. Each historical period has its racially preferred gendered self. These selves are announced and validated through these circuits of representation, identification and consumption. The cultural studies scholar interrogates these formations and the circuits they forge. A single question is always asked, namely 'How do these structures undermine and distort the promises of a free democratic society?'. Phrased differently, 'How do these processes contribute to the reproduction of systems of racial and gender domination and repression in the culture?'

An anti-foundational, critical social science seeks its external grounding not in science, in any of its revisionist, post-positivist forms, but rather in a commitment to a post-Marxist and communitarian feminism with hope but no guarantees. It seeks to understand how power and ideology operate through and across systems of discourse, cultural commodities and cultural texts. It asks how words, and texts and their meanings play a pivotal part in the culture's 'decisive performances of race, class [and] gender' (Downing, 1987: 80).

### INTERPRETIVE CRITERIA IN THE SEVENTH MOMENT

In the seventh moment, the criteria for evaluating critical qualitative work are moral and ethical. The following understandings structure this process. First, this is a political, ethical, and aesthetic position. It blends aesthetics, ethics and epistemologies.<sup>5</sup> It understands that nothing is value-free, that knowledge is power. Further, those who have power determine what is aesthetically pleasing, and ethically acceptable. Thus this position erases any distinction between epistemology, aesthetics and ethics.

Second, in a feminist, communitarian sense, this aesthetic contends that ways of knowing (epistemology) are moral and ethical (Christians, 2000). These ways of knowing involve conceptions of who the human being is (ontology), including how matters of difference are socially organized. The ways in which these relationships of difference are textually represented answer to a political and epistemological esthetic that defines what is good, true, and beautiful.

The feminist, ethical position challenges the utilitarian basis of many codes of ethics, those codes administered by Institutional Review Boards, and ethical review committees. Such codes attempt to implement atomistic ethical guidelines involving informed consent, deception and harm, confidentiality, and accuracy of reporting (Christians, 2000: 138–40).

All aesthetics and standards of judgment are based on particular moral standpoints. There is no objective, morally neutral standpoint. Hence, for example, an Afrocentric feminist aesthetic (and epistemology) stresses the importance of truth, knowledge and beauty ('Black is Beautiful'). Such claims are based on a concept of storytelling, and a notion of wisdom that is experiential and shared. Wisdom so conceived is derived from local, lived experience, and expresses lore, folktale and myth (Collins, 1991).

A feminist, communitarian social work ethic would address social work's core values of service, social justice, dignity and self-worth, empowerment, integrity and trust (Reamer, 1998: 14–15). This ethic would question the a priori relevance of a utilitarian ethical code. It would seek contextual, dialogical, local solutions to such traditional ethical issues as the disclosure of confidential information, eligibility for services, the right to refuse treatment, end-of-life decisions, termination of services to a client, informed consent, deception and so on.

Shedding the biases of Enlightenment, this ethical framework privileges the dialogical, understood as authenticity in a social context where keeping are no longer encumbered with rules (Christians, 1997: 16). Maintaining human dignity is an ethical goal. In these ways, the Institutional Review Board is transformed into a humanistic discourse that respects human rights.

Third, this is a dialogical epistemology that takes and ongoing moral dialogue as its core. This personal and community responsibility aesthetic imagines how a truly democratic society, free of race prejudice and oppression, would be. It is a rhythm, color and texture in which the aesthetic embodies an ethic of empowerment.

Fourth, this ethic presumes a moral universe that is shared to the person. This community has shared values of shared governance, neighborliness, and respect (Christians, 2000: 144–9). This ethic rests on a moral universe that locates persons in a noncompetitive, non-zero-sum moral universe. This ethic declares that all persons have status in the world. It stresses the value of non-violence (Christians, 2000: 147).

Fifth, this aesthetic enables social work to be (below-mentioned). It helps persons imagine new forms of human transformation through dialogue. If not, it is a form of civil disobedience (Christians, 2000: 147).

Sixth, this aesthetic, as argued above, is always fitted to the contingencies of local contexts of those local understandings that flow from them (Christians, 2000). This ethic calls for a moral universe of care, and shared governance. How this ethic can be given cannot be given in advance.

Padgett (1998: 42–3) is clear on the need for a balance between accuracy and sensitivity. She is worried that our findings will be misinterpreted. She can help . . . frame the presentation of our findings (Further, the decision to intervene, or not, is based on foreseen consequences' (Padgett, 1998: 42–3)).

Seventh, properly conceptualized, social work is a participatory, collaborative project, a p

Shedding the biases of Enlightenment rationality, a feminist, dialogical ethical framework privileges the dialogical, I-Thou relationship. Truth now 'is understood as authenticity in a social context . . . Confidentiality and promise keeping are no longer encumbered with Enlightenment privatism' (Christians, 1997: 16). Maintaining human dignity in the face of adversity is a primary ethical goal. In these ways, the Institutional Review Board approach to ethics is transformed into a humanistic discourse on care, solidarity, and universal human rights.

Third, this is a dialogical epistemology and aesthetic. It involves a give and take and ongoing moral dialogue between persons. It enacts an ethic of personal and community responsibility (Collins, 1991: 214). Politically, this aesthetic imagines how a truly democratic society might look, including one free of race prejudice and oppression. This aesthetic values beauty and movement, rhythm, color and texture in everyday life. It celebrates difference. It embodies an ethic of empowerment.

Fourth, this ethic presumes a moral community that is ontologically prior to the person. This community has shared moral values, including the concepts of shared governance, neighborliness, love, kindness and the moral good (Christians, 2000: 144-9). This ethic rests on a sacred, existential epistemology that locates persons in a noncompetitive, nonhierarchical relationship to the larger moral universe. This ethic declares that all persons deserve dignity and a sacred status in the world. It stresses the value of human life, truth telling and non-violence (Christians, 2000: 147).

Fifth, this aesthetic enables social criticism, and engenders resistance (below-mentioned). It helps persons imagine how things could be different. It imagines new forms of human transformation and emancipation. It enacts these transformations through dialogue. If necessary, it sanctions nonviolent forms of civil disobedience (Christians, 2000: 148).

Sixth, this aesthetic, as argued above, understands that moral criteria are always fitted to the contingencies of concrete circumstances, assessed in terms of those local understandings that flow from a feminist, communitarian moral (Christians, 2000). This ethic calls for dialogical research rooted in the concepts of care, and shared governance. How this ethic works in any specific situation cannot be given in advance.

Padgett (1998: 42-3) is clear on this point, noting that there is a 'delicate balance between accuracy and sensitivity to respondents' needs . . . If we are worried that our findings will be misused by conservative powers-that-be, we can help . . . frame the presentation of results and discuss their implications' (Further, the decision to intervene, or not, is 'rarely easy and may have unforeseen consequences' (Padgett, 1998: 42).

Seventh, properly conceptualized, social work research becomes a civic, participatory, collaborative project, a project that joins the researcher with the

researched in an on-going moral dialogue. This is a form of participatory action research. It has roots in liberation theology, neo-Marxist approaches to community development, and human rights activism in Asia and elsewhere (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000: 568). Such work is characterized by shared ownership of the research project, community-based analyses, and an emancipatory, dialectical, and transformative commitment to community action (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000: 568, 598). This form of social work research 'aims to help people recover, and release themselves, from the constraints embedded in the social media' (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000: 598), and in their daily lives. This means that the social work researcher learns to take on the identities of public advocate and cultural critic.

Accordingly, eighth, consistent with the principle of empowerment, this ethic asks that interpretive work provide the foundations for social criticism, and social action. These works are called to action. As a cultural critic, the social work researcher speaks from an informed moral and ethical position. He or she is anchored in a specific community of moral discourse and attempts to act in the best moral interests of the individual and the community.

However, criticism moves in two directions. On this point Margolin is clear. Social work must not steer away 'making deep criticisms of itself for fear of destroying any illusion of unanimity' (Margolin, 1997: 180). Too often social workers 'are guilty of twisting facts and misdescribing them. They systematically dismiss evidence, producing a gap between their self-conception and action: they describe themselves as empowering while their actions disempower' (Margolin, 1997: 179).

### Moral Criticism and Taking Sides

Taking sides is a complex process (Becker 1967; see also Hammersley, 2001) involving several steps. First, social work researchers must make their own value positions clear, including the so-called objective facts and ideological assumptions that they attach to these positions. Second, they identify and analyze the values and claims to objective knowledge that organize positions that are contrary to their own. Third, they show how these appeals to ideology and objective knowledge reflect a particular moral and historical standpoint. Fourth, they show how this standpoint disadvantages, and disempowers members of a specific group.

Fifth they next make an appeal to a participatory, feminist, communitarian ethic. This ethic may represent new conceptions of care, love, beauty and empowerment. Sixth, they then apply this ethic to the specifics of a concrete case, showing how it would and could produce social betterment. Advocates of the Black Arts Movement in the 1970s, for example, asked how much more beautiful a poem, melody, play, novel or film made the life of a single black person (Gayle, 1971/1997: 1876).

Seventh, in a call to action, social work researchers engage in concrete

steps that will change situations in the lives of adults how to bring new value to identity, which is stigmatized by the larger culture. These are particular commodities or cultural objects new. They indicate how particular texts, discourses, and reproduce prejudice and stereotypes.

Eighth, in advancing this utopian vision, new standards and new tools of evaluation. This is the work of a theorist of the Black Arts Movement. He or she sets three criteria for black art. Such art, he or she is committed. Functionally, this art would be a reality of a revolution'. It would not be art for our sake, art for 'Sammy the shoes', art for the unwilling soldier' (Karenga, 1972/1997). He or she told blacks that 'we do not need pictures of a person innocently in the midst of a wasteland. If we must paint oranges or trees, let us paint them with strength and using those trees for cover'.

According to Karenga (1972/1997), art is shared from people, and must be returned to the people. It is more colorful than it was in real life . . . a color'. Such art is committed. It is devoted to personal and collective freedom. It is not just for workers be functional, collective and committed. It is for social work researchers. A single question is asked: how can social work to advance these utopian demands?

### BACK TO THE FUTURE

Critical social work research in the future will use the criteria outlined above. It will take social work texts, rich local ethnographies and 'ethnographic' researchers can show members of the community their homes within the shifting oppressive conditions.

Activist social workers will show how they use 'grounded aesthetics' within the space of their work (Laermans, 1993: 156). This grounded aesthetic deconstructs the images, appearance and meaning to make objects attractive to the client (Laermans, 1993: 49). Like *bricoleurs*, persons use cultural objects in the sensuous, embodied construction of their lives. Images, commodities and sounds are f

steps that will change situations in the future. They may teach children and adults how to bring new value to identities and experiences that are marginalized and stigmatized by the larger culture. They will demonstrate how particular commodities or cultural objects negatively affect the lives of specific people. They indicate how particular texts, directly and indirectly misrepresent persons and reproduce prejudice and stereotypes.

Eighth, in advancing this utopian project, the critical researcher seeks new standards and new tools of evaluation. For example, Karenga (1972/1997: 1973), a theorist of the Black Arts Movement in the 1970s, argued that there were three criteria for black art. Such art, he said, must be functional, collective and committed. Functionally, this art would support and 'respond positively to the reality of a revolution'. It would not be art for art's sake; rather it would be art for our sake, art for 'Sammy the shoeshine boy, T. C. the truck driver and K. P. the unwilling soldier' (Karenga, 1972/1997: 1974). Karenga (1972/1997: 1974) told blacks that 'we do not need pictures of oranges in a bowl, or trees standing innocently in the midst of a wasteland . . . or fat white women smiling lewdly . . . If we must paint oranges or trees, let our guerrillas be eating those oranges for strength and using those trees for cover' (see also Gayle, 1971/1997: xxiii).

According to Karenga (1972/1997: 1974), collectively, black art comes from people, and must be returned to the people, 'in a form more beautiful and colorful than it was in real life . . . art is everyday life given more form and color'. Such art is committed. It is democratic; it celebrates diversity, and personal and collective freedom. It is not elitist. These goals and the demand that works be functional, collective and committed represent a manifesto for social worker researchers. A single question guides the project, 'How can we use our work to advance these utopian democratic goals?'

## BACK TO THE FUTURE

Critical social work research in the seventh moment will use the interpretive criteria outlined above. It will take sides. Through story telling, performance texts, rich local ethnographies and 'ethnoscapes' (McCall, 2001: 50), social work researchers can show members of the underclass how to find their own cultural homes within the shifting oppressive structures of global and local capitalism.

Activist social workers will show persons how to fashion their own 'grounded aesthetics' within the spaces of the everyday world (Willis, 1990; Laermans, 1993: 156). This grounded aesthetic is at once political and personal. It deconstructs the images, appearances, and promises of happiness, that are used to make objects attractive to the client-as-consumer (Harms and Kellner, 1991: 49). Like *bricoleurs*, persons use cultural commodities as symbolic resources for the sensuous, embodied construction of social and personal identity. These images, commodities and sounds are fashioned into interpretive *bricolages*. They



This theory and this project dreams of a society where individuals 'freely determine their needs and desires' (Harms and Kellner, 1991: 65). In the seventh moment this society comes into focus through the use of the kinds of interpretive practices outlined above.

With John Sherry (2000: 278), I am convinced that critical interpretive research has 'a vital moral and political role to play in the new millennium'. I too am concerned with how our patterns, practices and philosophies of consumption estrange us from and threaten our place in the 'natural' world. And with Sherry, I believe we need to craft new humanistic 'interdisciplinary methods of methods of inquiry and inscription' (2000: 278).

A great deal is at stake. As participants in a larger system of governmentality, and social control, social workers, like their clients are also victims – victims of burnout, deception, denial, the repression of contradictions. There is a pressing need to ask questions and to seek ways of knowing that cannot, or will not, be asked. I agree with Margolin (1997: 180), that 'New radically different understandings must be explored if . . . we are to find a way out'.

This article has responded to this challenge. We need to develop new ways of evaluating critical qualitative work. The problem is clear. Critical inquiry work and critical social work must be focused around a clear set of moral and political goals that are connected to a clearly defined set of interpretive practices. I have attempted to outline one version of these goals, and practices.

#### Notes

- 1 New (and older) Sage journals in this area include *Qualitative Inquiry*, *Qualitative Social Work: Research and Practice*, *Cultural Studies–Critical Methodologies*, *Qualitative Research*, *Ethnography*, *Qualitative Health Research*, *Field Work*, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*.
- 2 Denzin and Lincoln (2000b: 2) define the seven moments of inquiry, all of which operate in the present, as: the traditional (1900–1950), the modernist (1950–1970), blurred genres (1970–1986), the crisis of representation (1986–1990) postmodern, or experimental (1990–1995), post-experimental (1995–2000), and the future (2000–).
- 3 This includes the implications of Foucault's project for social work (see Foucault, 1999; see also Margolin, 1997; and Chambon and Irving, 1999).
- 4 There are three basic positions on the issue of evaluative criteria: foundational, quasi-foundational, and non-foundational. Foundationalists apply the same positivistic criteria to qualitative research as are employed in quantitative inquiry, contending that there is nothing special about qualitative research that demands a special set of evaluative criteria. Quasi-foundationalists contend that a set of criteria unique to qualitative research must be developed (see Smith and Deemer, 2000). Non foundationalists reject in advance all epistemological criteria.
- 5 Definitions: Aesthetics: Theories of beauty; Ethics: Theories of ought, of right; Epistemology: Theories of knowing.

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COMMENTARY

The Nature  
of Qualitative  
Research  
Some Thoughts  
on Dialogue

Jane F. Gilgun and  
University of Minnesota

ABSTRACT

In this commentary, we discuss Denzin's article and our own experiences with research practices and approaches and values such as social justice of theories; and we agree with Denzin's emancipatory, and frames of reference to implement these approaches offer, contend with obstacles, and invite social work dialogue about research to social

KEY WORDS:

emancipatory  
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qualitative  
research

qualitative social  
work research

social work  
values