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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).¹

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).² 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 qualitative inquiry for social work education, policy and practice.

My discussion unfolds in the seventh moment. I address the cultural studies assumptions that call for a change 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 research in the complex educational, political and social structures of everyday life. The focus is on personal troubles and issues in personal life and issues in the public arena (Mills, 1986). Issues include the economy, poverty, racial and gender inequality, domestic violence (Reamer, 1998), and the intersection of power, ideology, gender and social justice.

Social work practitioners must be able to exercise power over it by implementing policies and normalization. The surveillance and control with the state, serve to regulate and manage a desire and addiction. The recent reorientation to a postmodern 'logic of management' has fragmented practices and knowledge (Chambon and Irving, 1999: xvii). The concepts of power 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 'promoting the grassroots level' (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).³

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, she is locally and historically situated within the circuits. Her historical self is brought to this process. The researcher has its own history with the situated processes of consumption of cultural goods and commodities. She 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.⁴

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

Complex discursive and ideological circuits 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.⁴

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.⁵ 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 and is 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-hierarchical 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 shared ethic of care, and shared governance. How this ethic 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

