Qualitative Social Work

Research and Practice

CONTENTS
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Critical Social Work The Current Issues
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One of the aims of this journal is to promote qualitatively informed methods of practice and inquiry. Qualitative approaches to social work research and practice are intertwined with the concerns of critical perspectives on the profession. Questions about new ways of knowing, the politics of knowledge creation, and how to attain some of the long-standing ideals of the social work profession amidst changing and challenging contexts, are shared in both qualitative and critical thinking.

This issue aims to explore some developments in critical social work perspectives within the context of qualitative social work issues, in order to help inform our thinking about approaches to research that allow us to better attain the ideals of our profession. The editorial aims to provide some context for the articles in this issue through a brief overview of critical social work. After some discussion of the nature of critical social work, the main themes and issues in current writing on critical social work, and a summary of the implications of these for research and practice, are covered.

WHAT IS CRITICAL SOCIAL WORK?

It might be argued that the critical traditions of social work began with radical critiques of social work in the 1960s. Writers such as Bailey and Brake (1975) and Corrigan and Leonard (1978) in the LJK, and Galper (1975;1980) extended the critique. However, critical social work, as a coherent term, has only been

used more explicitly in the last few years, mostly in literature from Canada (e.g. Rossiter, 1996) and Australia (e.g. Ife, 1997). It is possible to trace the critical traditions of social work from early radical critique based on Marxist analysis (e.g. Corrigan and Leonard, 1978), through feminist (e.g. Dominelli and McLeod,1982) and structural (e.g. Mullaly,1993) additions, to a further development of the perspective based on critical theory and postmodern perspectives (e.g. Pease and Fook, 1999). While it is not easy to identify a single definition of radical social work (Reisch and Andrews, 2001: 5-7), earlier formulations of radical social work share the following themes:

- a structural analysis of personal problems

- an analysis of the social control functions of social work and welfare

- an ongoing social critique, particularly regarding oppressive functions

- goals of personal liberation and social change (Fook, 1993: 7)

The idea of `empowerment' (e.g. Solomon, 1976) has also run parallel to these traditions, and has perhaps been better developed in its practical application than these broader theories (Rees, 1991; Parker et al., 1999). Healy (2000: 3) also notes other related models ranging from anti-oppressive practice to forms of participatory and action research, and including some forms of community work. In any case, the discourse and concepts involved have been many and varied. For this reason, we have accepted articles on diverse topics as part of the special issue on critical social work, recognizing that although the discourse might differ, there are nevertheless some identifiable commonalities.

What most of this writing (from early radical critiques to present day critical perspectives) shares is a commitment to several key principles, mostly derived (directly and indirectly) from critical social theory (Healy, 2000; Ife, 1997; Mullaly,

1997: 108). The key tenets of critical social theory are paraphrased below from Agger's (1998) outline (Fook, 2002a: 17):

- a challenging of `domination' and oppression in all forms - structural, interpersonal and personal. Domination is achieved through both external exploitation by ruling groups and also internal self-deception - individuals participate in their own oppression. From a critical perspective then, it is important to recognize that domination can take many forms and that the personal level can be a site for a challenge and change of relations and structures of domination.
- the idea that processes of `false consciousness' can operate to occlude the idea that social relations and structures are constructed, and therefore changeable.
- a critique of positivist ideologies, since these are based on attitudes of fatalism and passivity, i.e. the individual sees him or herself as distanced from the power to influence their social situations.
- the need to develop ways of knowing which transcend the dominant constructed ways of knowing, including the recognition that knowledge may reflect `empirical

reality' but is also socially constructed. Self-reflection and interaction therefore become important processes in creating knowledge, and this places emphasis on the transformative potential of communication processes themselves.
- a value is placed on the possibilities for social change in challenging domination. In emphasizing the transformative or emancipatory possibilities of social actions, critical social theory is `voluntaristic' rather than `deterministic'.

It is fair then, to characterize (in broad terms) current critical perspectives on social work as including early radical formulations, as well as later feminist and structural approaches. However, Ife (1997) correctly observes that currently it is possible to identify two major perspectives in critical social work that can roughly be differentiated as the structural and poststructural. In broad terms the former is based on Marxist analysis (e.g. Mullaly, 1997), emphasizing the role of social structure in the determination of class and power differences. The latter approach tends to incorporate more Foucauldian analysis (e.g. Healy, 2000; Leonard, 1997), which involves recognizing more personal, dynamic, and multiple ways in which power differences are created and maintained. Ife himself shies away from the possible combination of the two perspectives (Ife, 1999), preferring to see all the necessary possibilities within established conceptions of critical theory. However, there have been attempts to develop a `postmodern critical' approach (Pease and Fook, 1999) that emphasizes social justice ideals at the same time as recognizing and developing the importance of difference and multiple perspectives. Fook's later work (2002a) attempts to develop this combined perspective in more detail, including less static understandings of knowledge, power, subjectivity, narrative and context. It is outside the scope of this editorial to debate the more detailed differences between these perspectives; however, some of them underpin some of the debates covered in the following section on current debates in critical social work. In particular, it is worthwhile noting that each perspective entails quite divergent implications regarding the nature of knowledge and knowledge creation. This aspect alone has important implications for social work practice and research methodology, and the implications for research are perhaps more immediately striking.

CURRENT DEBATES IN CRITICAL SOCIAL WORK

Aside from the major differing perspectives on critical social work, the fact that it is still in its relative infancy means that there are several major questions which require further attention. These include debates about the global applicability of critical social work; the

problem of upholding universal ideals simultaneous with incorporating differences; the issue of standpoint; and the problem of practice and research in uncertainty.

It is worthwhile noting that the interest in, or perhaps discourse about, radical social work has largely been confined to the English-speaking world (Powell, 2001: 84), and that in certain areas, this may take specific forms. He notes, for instance, that in Europe the concern has been more with issues of social exclusion. It may also be that in developing countries, models like social development are seen as more applicable than approaches based on western social theories and practices (Payne, 1997: 205).

In addition, there are other marked international differences. 'Antioppressive' and `anti-discriminatory' perspectives (Payne,1997) are perhaps more a feature of UK social work, whereas structural social work as a term originated in Canada (Moreau, 1974). While the term `radical' social work has been written about in the UK, Canada and Australia, it is less used in countries like the USA, perhaps because of the relative repression of the approach in that country (Reisch and Andrews, 2001: 3-10). The term `progressive social work' is sometimes used in its place (e.g. Mullaly, 1997: 25). A noted exception is Reisch and Andrew's own book, *The Road not Taken: A History of Radical Social Work in the United States,* which is reviewed in this issue.

Any complex understanding of critical social work may therefore need to take into account global differences in its development and usage. In this issue of the journal, for instance, we have asked authors to locate their ideas and research in relation to national context. For example, Joan Orme writes particularly about feminist social work in the UK, and makes references to some international differences. Mark Furlong also examines issues of cultural universality through his analysis of the concept of self-determination, and the need to renegotiate this idea in achieving a more critical casework practice.

A major impediment for critical social workers seeking to incorporate postmodern understandings is how `universal' ideals like social justice can be upheld simultaneously with an inclusion of multiple and differing perspectives. How do we uphold a metanarrative of `social justice' while at the same time deconstructing it? There is concern that this latter `relativism' works against a political struggle to change social structures in a unified way. Amy Rossiter (2001) encapsulates some of these concerns with deconstruction in her reflections about whether we can actually assist victims of the system, when we as social workers are part of the very structure that defines that victimhood. In this sense, a post-structural awareness (deconstruction) of how we construct social situations as professional social workers may in fact only serve to obstruct our ability to make any change. Is a critical social work, in theory and practice, possible in the light of these concerns?

Feminist social workers also raise the question of standpoint. Joan Orme discusses this issue to some extent in her article. If we recognize the importance and validity of multiple and diverse perspectives, is it possible to privilege the standpoint of women themselves over that of others? In'more general terms, can we, or should we, value the perspectives of the more marginal groups over

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that of others? What guidelines are there about whose perspectives are more valid? These of course are vital questions for any researcher or practitioner. The challenge to universality is also a challenge to certainty and the ability to act. How do critical social workers, who recognize the influence of change and contextuality, also maintain a clarity of direction and a certainty of practice? Is it possible to conduct research that can directly inform practice, or give practice some certainty amidst changing contexts?

How do we research in ways that give us confidence in our findings, and how do we use research in ways that give us confidence in our practice? How do we know whether social justice for one group will functions as, or will be experienced as, social justice by another? To what extent can our findings and practice be generalized across contexts and changes?

These are some of the questions addressed in the following section.

CRITICAL SOCIAL WORK AND RESEARCH

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What Approaches to Research, its Methods and its Focus, Does a Recognition of the Debates Surrounding Critical Social Work Indicate?

To some extent, the interest in critical reflection, and forms of action, collaborative and participatory research can be seen as a response to the dilemma of how to facilitate change in the face of uncertainty. These forms of research methodology allow researchers to engage in a creative interplay in the development of knowledge that actually uses the changing context as part of the research experience.

The article by Bradbury and Reason on action research takes up some of these issues. While not explicitly a model of `critical' social work, the action research approach as identified by Bradbury and Reason acknowledges some similar elements - the empowerment of research subjects, the mandate for social justice, and the commitment to social change are the most prominent. In addition, the `first person research practice' identified by them shares similarities with the use of self-reflexivity in research (Fook, 1999), and therefore with the theory and process of critical reflection.

Critical reflection provides a useful way of self-researching experience. Fiona Gardner's article in this issue illustrates how critical reflection can also be used as an evaluative research method with some community-based organizations, and in some ways her approach shares some commonalities with action research.

Because of the adaptability of critical reflection as a self-researching tool, reflective processes may be successfully adopted by indigenous groups in researching their own experiences. Narrative methods share some commonalities, in that personal stories or accounts may now be seen as legitimate sources of research data, and narrative methods allow these accounts to be recreated as

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closely as possible to the original expression. One of the books reviewed in this issue, *Decolonizing Methodologies* (Smith, 1999), addresses the issue of finding new approaches to research that are more accessible to, and reflect the experiences of, formerly colonized and marginal groups.

In the imperative to include new voices and perspectives, the development of critical social work also indicates a need for newer forms of research methods which might allow for newer, and also multiple, voices to be heard. New ways of expressing experience are needed so **that researchers (and participants) can better represent their** experiences in ways that might be more accessible to other audiences. Stan Witkin (2001), in vol. 1, no. 2 issue of this journal, calls for `New Voices' to contribute to a column which aims to encourage and profile the perspectives of people who have previously been marginal - those who may not have published before for a variety of reasons.

Use of multiple methods may be a partial answer to the dilemma of standpoint. The process of knowledge creation may involve the need to incorporate several different

perspectives, which may be most faithfully represented or included through the use of different and multiple methodologies. In this sense a more inclusive approach to research methods may be crucial in developing a critical social work perspective. While the idea of triangulation is not a new one, an inclusive approach to research might be broader in that it incorporates an inclusive approach to research paradigms and ways of knowing (Fook, 2002b), rather than simply a commitment to using different methods.

Critical social work also raises the difficult question of whose needs does research serve? Critical social work research should contribute to challenging the domination of marginal groups, yet it is not always easy to separate (or control) the differing functions of any one research act. Some of these issues were bravely tackled by Martin Hammersely in the last issue of this journal (Hammersley, 2003). It is useful to attempt to make some distinctions between the purposes of research and the types of knowledge being sought, but more categories may be needed if we are to further develop our practice and research as critical social workers. Bradbury and Reason's article illustrates how these distinctions are in fact blurred in action research. For instance, it is not easy, or perhaps desirable, to distinguish between producing knowledge or having a com-mitment to practical improvement (as Hammersley argues) - the latter itself involves the production of knowledge, albeit of a practical kind. This is the type of knowledge that is well recognized within the critical reflection field - it is the knowledge that is enacted, and created for action, which is in itself of importance. In this sense, the practice of social workers is a legitimate focus for basic research questions - this is especially the case for critical social workers, where there can be a significant contribution to a cumulative body of empirical knowledge about critical social work practice simply by conducting systematic research on their observable practice. Indeed, such research could go some

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way to developing our responses to our theoretical dilemmas - to investigate the outworkings of these dilemmas in practice might in fact contribute to the development of workable critical practice models.

Inherent in these questions are also questions of power - whose knowledge counts as legitimate, and whether practical knowledge is implicitly devalued. Along with this go questions of how and whether we should distinguish between researchers, practitioners and research subjects or participants. Shaw and Gould (2001: 168-76) review the major arguments surrounding these questions, and whether in fact there should even be a preoccupation with method in critical social work.

As critical social workers interested in informing and developing their practice in systematic ways, I would argue that we need to recognize different forms of knowledge, and different ways of creating that knowledge, if we are to begin to gain a better representation of our own experiences, and that of the many different groups with whom we work. In this respect, qualitative approaches to social work, which recognize the political, changing and multiple dimensions of research situations, share the same concerns with critical social work.

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