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# Reflections and the Narrative Turn in Social Work

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# REFLECTIONS ON REFLECTIONS: NARRATIVE TURN IN SOCIAL WORK

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When I think about *Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping*, I am reminded of the love, care and passion for social justice which the best of social work is about. I am also reminded of the complicated relationships social work has to people's lives and stories. Rather than deny the messiness of this experience, many of these stories found a venue in *Reflections*. The last article I wrote for the journal was born with Dr. John Oliver, the former director of the School of Social Work at California State University, Long Beach. We were talking about Jillian Jimenez, the journal's long time editor, who had passed. John reminded me there was a special issue coming up and suggested I write something, which I did. I recall the editorial process with Paul Abels, one of the journal's founders, as he put together a commemorative issue for her. *Reflections* was a labor of love for so many.

It was also a place to consider the ways social work policy and practice are actually conducted in all their not so simple dimensions. This is what the practitioner narratives published in the journal highlight. Jimenez was a historian of social policy, so many of the issues she edited included interviews with policymakers and scholars of social welfare policy, including luminaries of the field such as David Gil, Mimi Abramovitz, and Richard Cloward. Each interview helped explain where the field had come from and was going. My first article for *Reflections* was an oral history of Housing Works, a New York housing program which helped create the harm reduction model of care for homeless people with HIV/AIDS and later advocated for the policies which created funding lines to support such programs. Few other journals are open to long interviews which bridge the divide between policy and practice. The last conversation I had with Jimenez was over margaritas. We talked about the journal and ways to keep the policy interviews going.

I mentioned that I had loved the Cloward interview reviewing his life work and that perhaps we could conduct an interview with Frances Fox Piven. She said go for it. That summer I reached out to Piven and, within a year, the life story interview with Piven was published in *Reflections*, with a portrait of the controversial author by my wife, Caroline. I'm grateful to the executive board and editors of *Reflections* for keeping the journal going so long.

*Reflections* is one of a kind social work journal. While other journals in the field embraced positivism and evidence-based practices of care, *Reflections* moved further into a post-modern direction. It embraced the creation of social reality through social discourses more consistent with a new philosophy of living and social work practice. This is a form of practice which reflects a multicultural world, with few monopolies on truth. Much of this was on my mind when I presented on the significance of personal narratives with Jillian Jimenez to the research committee at Cal State University, Long Beach in December of 2006. The point of the talk was to highlight that social science researchers increasingly have come to recognize that stories matter. This development is often described as, 'the narrative turn' in social research. It helps us consider life stories as narratives to be studied in terms of the ways they are created, heard, and understood. These stories reflect how different individuals, groups, families and people find and create meaning. As *Reflections* transitions, it is worth noting why it is important that the journal was framed in terms of narratives.

In the last decade, there has been a vast conversation in the social sciences about the efficacy of life stories. Practitioners now use narratives for clinical assessments. Anthropologists use them as a tool for research into social conditions, and pastoral

counselors often ask patients to review their lives at the end of life. Philosophers suggest narratives offer insights into world making. And community organizers seek to build community through storytelling. Philosopher Richard Rorty (1979) demonstrated that, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, questions of knowing have shifted from notions of truth to notions of significance and meaning. Neither science nor theology are outside the influence of cultural bias or interpretation. No one has a monopoly on the truth. Instead, we have stories to help us interpret and create meaning in a rapidly changing world.

"Throughout history, story has been used to teach, to entertain, to express, to advocate, and to organize," note Natasha Friedus and Ceasar McDowell. "It is through the sharing of stories that communities build their identities, pass on traditions, and construct meaning." Here, narrative is an approach to assessing the ways groups of people make sense of their lives and cultures. Community plays a key role in story-telling. As Ken Plummer (1995) pointed out, stories bring people together, attracting audiences while building a common language and perception. Mair (1988) concurred, suggesting, "We inhabit the great stories of our culture. We live through stories. We are lived by the stories of our race and our place." John McNight's (1987) point follows, "In communities, people know by stories." In these ways, stories and oral histories can be used to assess changing conditions of communities. They also help us define and identify with our communities.

The proliferation of new stories has helped support the creation of a participatory democratic political culture. After all, narrative perspectives are increasingly finding a place in studies of social movements. Here, movements are considered as bundles of intersecting, overlapping, diverging and converging stories signifying different aspects of meaning within both culture and political economy (Fine, 1995).

In a diverse society, stories help us make sense of an increasingly complex social fabric. A recognition of the narrative turn also influences social work practice. When people come to you for assessments,

do they tell everything the first time they see you? No. Why not? Because we are all born into power relationships. Stories thrive or are suppressed in relationship to power in which honestly has consequences on who is deemed worthy and unworthy for services. For this reason, Plummer (1995) highlighted the relational field in which stories are produced, heard, and understood. Shifting understandings and interpretations of stories of power have everything to do with definitions of illness, health, and human feeling. Here, story creation has everything to do with community organizing, especially when current cultural narratives fail to account for diverse perspectives on reality, community building, and cultural life. Philosopher Richard Rorty (1982) posited that some of the most important philosophy taking place today occurs within these transformative narratives and practices of self, these texts of peoples' lives and struggles.

The story is defined as the presently recorded lessons of the past that make sense of experience. The point for social workers to consider is how our clients reconcile their experiences within the storied form. When someone tells their life story, this is when the past, present, and future are recorded. Resiliency is like a river, if it flows to a dead end tributary, it will flow back and find meaning elsewhere (Cohler, 1982). The social worker who is conscious of narrative listens for plot lines, themes, including tragedy, and comedy. Have they made peace with their lives, stories, or illness, or have events taken meaning from their lives? Building on the principles of Victor Frankl's logo therapy, it may be valuable to listen for the ways meaning is created, or seems to be lacking within the clinical narrative. Some may ask if there is there room for different spaces, meanings, and directions for their life stories?

Thank you, *Reflections*, for making space for these questions and stories.

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