


REVIEW ESSAY

Leslie Brown and Susan Strega (eds), *Research as Resistance: Critical, Indigenous, and Anti-oppressive Approaches*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press/Women's Press, 2005. 303 pp. including index. ISBN 1551302756 (pbk).

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Since its inception, social work has been plagued with its dual claims to legitimacy as a discipline and a profession. In seeking to promote its knowledge claims, social work research has increasingly relied heavily on positivism, where objectivity is defined as '... detached, unbiased, impersonal, and invested in no particular point of view' (Lloyd, 1995: 352). Yet, as a helping profession, social work is dedicated to the causes of social justice, and thus, by definition, it is a profession (and a discipline) that is not value-free. Indeed as an applied social science, social work research is about social change that reflects social and economic justice. It is against this backdrop that Leslie Brown and Susan Strega's edited book, nicely entitled *Research as Resistance*, provides us with a timely challenge of recognizing the role that research plays in legitimizing knowledge claims and the socio-political realities facing social work practitioners and researchers in advancing the causes of social justice. Their collection of works targets a wide audience, from undergraduate students to experienced researchers. Contributors, comprising researchers and practitioners who adopt critical, Indigenous, and anti-oppressive approaches in their theoretical stance, aim to provoke discussion and 'explore the emancipatory possibilities' of their research and scholarship (p. 1).

In their introduction, Brown and Strega explain that the book provides readers with an understanding of the methodological, epistemological, and ontological assumptions of critical, Indigenous, and anti-oppressive approaches to research. A common theme that binds these approaches (and the different chapters in this book) is the contributor's appreciation of the value-laden nature of knowledge creation and knowledge claims. Each author questions the neutrality of the positivist researcher, and argues that an unexamined approach

to research can potentially replicate and reify the oppression facing marginalized groups. Hence, this book aims at empowering social work researchers with resistance to injustice so as to exert individual and collective changes in the lives of the researchers and the researched.

Kovach's chapter on Indigenous methodologies starts with a personal account of her experience in a graduate seminar and how she chose to avoid dealing with potentially contentious topics in her presentation. Her account points to the challenges that Indigenous (and other critical approaches) researchers face in conducting emancipatory research in academia. Indeed, she points out that interrogating the established views 'provokes defensiveness' (p. 21), a conflict that is shared by other contributors whose works challenge the establishment. She clarifies that Indigenous methodology is not so much about methods per se, but more about a philosophical stance: one that is concerned with issues of social justice for Indigenous populations. In her discussion of Indigenous methodology, Kovach asserts the importance of research projects that are 'purposeful and relevant' to the needs of Indigenous peoples. Interestingly, a criterion for good research would then be whether or not the research serves the needs of the researched.

In the second chapter, Moosa-Mitha excellently compares and contrasts the ontological and epistemological assumptions of anti-oppressive theories against a spectrum of social theories such as Marxist, White Feminist, Liberal, and Postmodern theories. She examines each theoretical approach along two axes: one that examines the normative/difference-centered orientation and the other that examines the critical/mainstream orientation. This examination provides the reader with a useful but brief clarification of the differences in the assumptions inherent in these critical traditions.

Kimpton's chapter deals with her experiences as a disabled woman in graduate school, and the disconnection she experienced between her reality ('messy, disordered, and incongruent') and the requirements of positivist research ('ordered, observable, and congruent') (p. 86). In keeping with the importance of having a good fit between method and topic, she chose critical autobiographical narrative to examine her experiences. Like other contributors to the book, Kimpton notes that although the 'university is the site of higher learning', it only valued certain types of scholarship, and that her method of choice was not one of these valued types. Also, in reflecting on her experiences, she concludes that there is not one single experience of marginality.

Absolon and Willett use a dialogical method to discuss their ideas about location in Indigenous research. According to them, locating oneself includes tracing back one's personal origins and the connections one has to the community, as well as recognizing the socio-political context of one's life. Specifically for Indigenous peoples who endured colonization, research in the western scientific tradition has to be examined as another tool of colonization.

They believe that to locate oneself is to make explicit one's identity as well as one's investment in the research, including one's research intentions. Absolon and Willett argue that locating one's self serves many functions: it establishes the commonalities and distinctiveness between the researcher and the community; it serves as a tool to gain trust; and, it helps the researcher contextualize his/her research.

Fairn Herising draws from queer theory and extends the thesis on location by use of the threshold motif. She argues that the threshold is both the point of interaction as well as the place of transition, i.e. we may sometimes not know where one thing ends and another begins. This thesis informs her argument against the arbitrary distinctions we make between social work research and practice. She contends that the arbitrary distinction allows us to 'ignore the inherent flaws of social work', though she does not clarify what these flaws are. One can assume that she might be inferring the objectification that is common in both practice and research. In her chapter, Fairn Herising offers us ways in which we can critically explore the stances we might adopt when working with/in marginal communities. An important point that she makes is that self-reflexivity should not be a personal cognitive exercise, but should lead the researcher to engage with the complex socio-political conditions affecting marginalized communities. She believes that queer theory provides researchers an oppositional stance that helps them avoid 'attempts at assimilation, co-optation, exploitation, and appropriation' (p. 141).

Rutman, Hubberstey, Barlow, and Brown reflect on the challenges and triumphs of adopting participatory action research (PAR) with youths transitioning from care. Rooted in the social justice and change tradition, change efforts that are inherent in PAR occur at multiple levels: from the 'development of critical consciousness' among the stakeholders in the research activity to the 'transformation of fundamental social structures' (p. 153). In their account of research, they revisit the themes of conflict and tension between the demands of academia and funding agencies and that of upholding the principles of PAR. Rutman and her collaborators highlight the tension of being in charge, between that of her training and experience as the researcher, and wanting to create a non-hierarchical work environment with the youth in the research project. A useful aspect of this chapter is the honest account of the contradictions that the researchers faced in implementing PAR principles. Indeed the power differential between the researchers and their allies creates an inherent hierarchy that challenges the true practice of PAR. While the researchers were conscientious in creating a non-hierarchical workplace, what was interesting was that the youth collaborators were apparently frustrated at the lack of structure and direction they experienced in such an environment. Despite the challenges, they reported some successes in their efforts to include the youth in a policy making process, where these youths experienced themselves as experts.

In her chapter on institutional ethnography, Miller examines her 'everyday experiences' as a wife of a terminally ill man and more specifically, as a consumer of supportive services from a local hospice organization. The data she collects comes from her journal, her memory, and documents that include a care manual and her late husband's case file. In her analysis of the case file, she discovers that the hospice professionals have re-ordered her life into a series of problems for their possible intervention. Like many clients, she has become an object. While an interesting and useful piece, I am left with the question of how we can minimize (if not eliminate) the objectification of social work clients or research participants.

Strega opens her chapter with the examination of the fundamental issue that plagues researchers from the margins: can we use the traditional tools of inquiry to do critical research and in turn, challenge the dominant ideology? Her chapter focuses on post-structuralism as a tool for the practice of critical social research. She highlights three important concepts in post-structuralism, namely discourse; subjectivity; and power. Additionally, she offers three useful standards in evaluating post-structural research: that the research has social justice implications for, and relevance to, the marginalized communities; that the research has spoken 'truth to power'; and that the researcher avoids complicity with the dominant and oppressive ideology. Notwithstanding the importance of reflexivity in post-structural research, Strega throws us a necessary caution: we ultimately must learn more about the topic of the research than about the researcher.

Thomas explores her use of storytelling as a research methodology and asserts that storytelling is a useful method to resist colonial hegemony and uncover the injustices inflicted upon Indigenous peoples. Her interest in documenting the stories by ex-students from residential schools in Canada led her to use a method that captured the inherent complexities of residential school life for Indigenous peoples. Her work draws heavily from other qualitative methods, namely the use of unstructured interviewing and multiple dialogic interviews. These allowed her to emphasize the storyteller's voice. Though they report feeling better after the interviews, because of their traumatic experiences, she reports of her difficulties in listening to the stories and the difficulties that her storytellers experienced in sharing their stories. Like the other transgressive researchers in this collection, Thomas highlights the disconnection between her Indigenous traditions and the demands of academia.

In the concluding chapter, Potts and Brown underscore some important tenets of the practice of anti-oppressive research. For one, they emphasize that anti-oppressive research should not be a matter of semantics; indeed, at times it does seem that way to me especially when the authors create their own vocabularies (to sidestep the inadequacies of the current language!). In presenting three basic tenets of research, they remind readers to recognize the

potential that research has for bringing about change, as well as its power to maintain the status quo. This chapter ends with a case study that highlights the experiences of a student and her co-interviewer in their practice of anti-oppressive research for a research course.

I found the theoretical chapters, specifically by Kovach, Moosa-Mitha and Strega, well written, in that they provided the reader with enough background information on the different critical theoretical positions as well as their epistemological and ontological assumptions. The chapters by Rutman et al. and Thomas were especially informative in providing us with a sense of the how to and the challenges in adopting transgressive methodology. Unfortunately, I did not think that all the chapters on methodologies were well organized, and I found parts of them to be repetitive of other chapters. As a textbook for undergraduates, this book might not be substantively sufficient in providing students with the necessary tools for inquiry from (or in) the margins. Indeed it provokes more than it prescribes. I wondered if this is because it might be antithetical to critical research to offer prescriptions on the tools of inquiry. Nonetheless, on the whole, I believe that it is a useful text to provoke us to examine our research stance/beliefs.

References

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