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Critical social work: A performance ethnography

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A glimpse from the performance: Social Work for Change

A general description of the article

This performance ethnography presents a multi-vocal dialog of a group of Israeli social workers and social work students dealing with personal and professional issues of critical social work.

Method: Performance ethnography

Performance ethnography is an innovative qualitative research method that uses a dramatic medium, in this case a multi-vocal dialog, to bridge between theory and personal experiences and between research, teaching and learning (Denzin, 2003; Diversi & Moreira, 2009; Moreira, 2013).

Main ideas

Through a reflexive discussion bridges are created between the personal and the professional, between theory and practice, and between thought, talk and action. Using personal writing and a discussion over one story of professional intervention, the group members places social work in the context of power relations, bring to life theoretical concepts that lie at the heart of critical social work, and struggle with the questions what critical social work and critical practice are for them. Issues dealt with include for example, Resistance, Speaking truth to power, Critical containment, and Politics of hope.

Never-ending text

In addition to a silent reading of the text, this article has the potential of becoming an action by performing it with a group, with or without an audience. From our experience in doing so in various professional and academic settings, the performance of the article with an audience sitting in a circle with the researchers/performers raises involvement of all the participants and a discussion naturally develops at the end of the performance, making it a circular, constant and never-ending text.

References

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Voice of theory: Introduction

It is not the goal of critical social work to discover or establish the finite answers for 'correct' social work theory or practice. Rather, the goal of critical social work is to identify the multiple possibilities of the present in order to contribute to the creation of a more just and satisfying social world. (Hick & Pozzuto, 2005, XI)

Email exchange. Date: July 11, 2013. Subject: Social work thinks change

Hi, we're social workers and graduate social work students at the Spitzer Department of Social Work, Ben-Gurion University. During the past year, we took two classes with Prof. Michal Krumer-Nevo—"Critical Theories in Social Work" and 'Casework for Social Change'. At the end of the year, we felt we still needed to learn more. Moreover, we felt the need for further support in order to create a critical alternative to the current prevalent discourse and practice in our social work [...] we learned that there are other social workers who are searching for such a space, and decided to create a group that would meet regularly [...] **Come and join us!**

Hadas: Since this first email message in August 2013, we have met regularly. Once a month we share questions, silences, intervention stories, and written reflections. We are 16 women and four men, all Jewish, from different ethnic backgrounds. We work in heterogeneous social services; one is a BSW student, 17 are MSW students, two are PhD students, and one is a professor. We are limited by our social positions, but we challenge and expand these limits by reflecting on them. **Social Work for Change—a group for critical and subversive thinking and practice**

Lilah: So what we're doing today?

Kfir: The last time we met we said that each one of us would write down what critical social work meant for her. Did anyone write anything?

Liora: Yes, I would be happy to share with you.

Voice of theory: Unsettled practice: Questions and doubts

An orientation to unsettled practice means privileging the question over answers, so that we can guard ourselves from the seductive belief that the acquisition of knowledge... makes us professionals. (Rossiter, 2011, 992)

Liora: I encountered the term critical social work for the first time when I was a BSW student. I remember that when we began talking about it, I experienced an epiphany, a feeling of "See! This is exactly what I feel". Critical social work provides a space for asking questions and having doubts. It feels like a beneficial place, but also a tiring and difficult one[...] for example, when I feel that the term "free choice" is misused in a way that doesn't reflect the real lives of the young women I work with. Then I begin to think about the young woman sitting in front of me and I begin to ask myself, and later her, why she doesn't want to leave home and go to a hostel. And what good is it to stay at home with her mother? And why has she decided to continue her pregnancy?[...] Critical social work is not only a professional method. It's a standpoint regarding my relationships with service users – what is there between us? What do I understand about their lives? What do they think about me? What is a social worker for them? What is welfare? I try mostly to highlight their knowledge for me and for them. And moreover, to emphasize that this knowledge can give them power, a lot of power [...]