Home-Made Social Work: starting in the ontological

Fran Crawford

Imagining Futures for Social Work Education and Research

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Abstract

• ‘Ontological’ sounds like one of those esoteric and abstract concepts so annoying to those of us embedded in the real world of practice. Yet ontological questions are those that relate to matters of actual existence and action. In this paper I argue that starting in the ontological or lived experience offers a site for the continuous renewal of the social work profession and broader social policy. Reflecting on my doctoral research and that covered in doctoral and masters research projects I subsequently supervised, a common thread is that most were generated out of a specific context and the lived experience of the always-embodied researcher. Drawing from narratives of these research projects, the presentation maps how particularly located experiences of gender, indigeneity, practitioner-being, migration and other possibilities, can usefully inform the ongoing project of social work. Connecting these projects (which were driven by the use of ‘local knowledge’) identifies how the global project of social work is able to remain responsive to the diversity of problematic issues that people identify in the always-changing world. In this the potential of qualitative inquiry to be a shared, global endeavor to serve the ends of social work is explored.
Overview

- Narrative/interpretive Inquiries
- Staller’s Epistemological Boot-camp
- Home-made social work
- Seven studies in working the social involving personal/political/policy research
- So what?
Narrative Inquiries

• . . . are always strongly autobiographical. Our research interests come out of our own narratives of experience and shape our own narrative inquiry plotlines. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 121)

• Connects to relational knowing and the importance of this in regard to the development of disciplinary knowledge.

• Social work as a practice discipline in the ‘field’ of an ever-changing world. Need to research what is happening ‘here’.
Staller’s Epistemological Boot camp: the politics of science and what every QR needs to know to survive the academy

• Conflict with objectivist epistemological assumptions deeply embedded in university cultures

• Seeks to make transparent underlying epistemological and methodological issues producing conflict so students better prepared to negotiate politics of science, of evidence and of methods.
Homemade Social Work

• My doctoral research ‘Emic social work: A story of practice’ 1994

• Flowing from the centrality of culture is fact that there may be many social works even in what seems to be the monolithic west.

  Nimmagadda, J & D. Martell (2010) Home-made social work: The two-way transfer of social work practice knowledge between India and the USA.
Home-made Social Work

- It is home-made in the sense of emerging from where I found myself and from my ... reading of that particular context. Home-made in the sense of my deciding what is to be done given the purpose of my engagement in the local setting (Crawford, 1994, p. 38).
Seven Social Work (or related) Studies

• Jacquie Dodds 1992
• Ian Percy 2003
• Jennie Gray 2007
• Andrew Turnell 2007
• Dawn Bessarab 2007
• Marilyn Metta 2010
• Liz Caddy 2011
Honours 1992
Dr Jacqui Dodds PhD (W.Aust); BSW Hons (Curtin); AASW (Accredited); AMHW(Medicare)

• (1995) Collaborative group inquiry-a blend of research and therapy
  *Australian Social Work* 48, 3 pp 37-44

• (from abstract)
• a collaborative group inquiry that successfully combined the
  separate goals of research and social work practice in the same
  project... (the) approach used to explore the impact of meditation
  on the lives and health of six people diagnosed with cancer. ... The
  paper ...focuses on the group's use of a post-positivist, open-
  ended and empowering inquiry mode that participants reported as
  more relevant, supportive and stimulating than the other cancer
  support groups they had attended.
This study explores the place of spirituality in the personal and professional lives of six counsellors and psychotherapists in Perth, WA. . . . An interpretive and reflexive narrative approach was adopted in this project to draw attention to the relational and negotiated aspects of storying lived events . . . all respondents witnessed each other’s performances of meanings around the central topic with opportunities to explore and comment on shared and differing viewpoints. . . The researcher . . situates himself as co-author of the storytelling. . . By embracing an inclusive view of spiritualities, group members encouraged complexity and reciprocity in their relationships guided by notions of human dignity and environmental sensitivity.
Dorothy Smith (1987) says investigations often begin with ‘a feeling of uneasiness’. Smith’s insistence of the importance of starting with women’s standpoint, to redress the way in which women’s lives have been negated or neglected in research, informs the methodological premise of this inquiry. The unease that prompted this project emerged in conversations I had with women diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder whilst working as a practitioner at a women’s health centre. The frequency with which the discourses of biomedicine figured in these women’s narrated experiences engendered a collective commitment to make problematic ‘living with a label’. Loosely connected as mental health service recipients, the women I researched with are often positioned as ‘subject’ to an objective medical gaze. Disrupting dichotomies that these women are accustomed to in clinical settings, and destabilising notions of neutral and detached research, our investigations were contingent, reflexive and relational. . . .this project was cast in the feminist ‘with’, rather than the ‘on’. Together we explored how women read and respond to a psychiatric diagnosis in their daily lives . . .
This article considers some of complexities around a feminist imperative of `voice'. It follows the possibilities and problematics encountered in a social inquiry aimed at creating space for the women who participated to `give voice' as a collective. Our explorations about the ways that these women, diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder, come to experience their everyday worlds as they do, involved identifying the social processes and practices shaping their lived actualities. Speaking together and back to the discourses of biomedicine that work to position these women in fixed and universal ways was also central to our researching. That the woman's voice goes largely unheard when spoken from `madness' made such work more urgent.
Dr Jennie Gray has practised in Broome since 2004

- Anglicare WA, Geoffrey Sambell Award Employee of the Year, 2008
- Anglicare Australia, Partnerships 2010 - West Kimberley Family and Domestic Violence Project
- Billard Blank Page Summit, Stand Up for Life 2011
- Suicide Prevention Australia, Communities 2011
- Anglicare Australia, Innovation 2011 - Kununurra Women's Fishing Group
- Anglicare Australia, Excellence and Innovation 2011
- DCP Community Awards 2012
- Australian Crime Prevention Award, Aust Institute of Criminology, 2005 - Broome HYPE Project
- Commonwealth Award for Excellence in Women's Health, 1999 - the Mental Health Community Outreach Project
Dawn Bessarab (2007) A study into the meanings of gender for Aboriginal people living in urban (Perth) and regional (Broome) WA

• This interpretive study . . .positioned within an Aboriginal standpoint applies 'yarning' as a cultural research tool, to gather participant's stories on the experience of becoming female and male. . . This study establishes that even though many Aboriginal women and men appear to be living a Westernised lifestyle, their beliefs, values and aspirations still connect to Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing. To talk about gender is to also talk about culture. It becomes essential for social workers and others working with the Aboriginal community, to acknowledge and engage with Aboriginal meaning systems when providing a service. The development and implementation of policy and programs must acknowledge the intersectionality between gender, race and class and be grounded in the dynamic diversity and lived experience of Aboriginal people.
Professor Dawn Bessarab

- Publications extensive including:

- Encouraged me to use my Indigenous knowledge in my thesis and was always supportive when I faltered in the face of western academic theories and process. . . (This built my) confidence to trust my Indigenous process and incorporate it into my thesis. p. 7
Andrew Turnell 2007 Enacting the interpretive turn: narrative means toward transformational practice in child protection social work

- This PhD project is undertaken by publication . . . The exegesis 'frames-up' what has been an ongoing interpretive inquiry exploring constructive frontline child protection social work undertaken by the author in collaboration with practitioners in Europe, North America and Australasia that has given rise to the publications and DVDs. Taking the lead from Geertz's ideas of interpretive anthropology the aim of this inquiry and publication work is to develop descriptions and theories of practice drawing upon insiders' local knowledges and sense-making of what constitutes good child protection social work. 'The natives' or insiders toward which this interpretive project directs its attention are first and foremost, frontline child protection social workers and wherever possible the child protection service recipients who have experienced the practice of those workers.
the usually overlooked, often deemed 'tacit' knowledges of service delivers and recipients are brought into the formal domain and made accessible to others. This project is undertaken with transformative intent. The first intent being to distil the wisdom of insiders' knowledges into richly detailed formal accounts of good practice that speaks directly to the practitioner's condition thereby enhancing their professional reflexivity, hope and capacity. The second intent is to provide constructive on-the-ground 'news of difference' for a child protection field that is over-organised by anxiety, worst-case outcomes and an obsession with managers' measures. The exegesis is formulated around the research question, What potential does interpretive social theory have for transforming child protection social work?
My conclusion is that while interpretive social theory offers significant epistemological and methodological resources for transforming the practices and orientation of child protection social work, this potential will not be realised until the social work displays renewed ontological commitment and faith in the knowledges and everyday experience of frontline practitioners.
Keeping the rumour of good child protection practice alive!

Seventh International Signs of Safety Gathering

UK 9–11 April 2014

- Presentations from the leading Signs of Safety practitioners and agencies around the world
- Presentations from many of the 20+ English and Welsh local authorities who are implementing the approach
- Sessions on management and organisational process that builds the Signs of Safety approach. Terry Murphy, the Director General of the Western Australian Department for Child Protection, will lead this.
- Session on Safety Planning by Susie Essex
- Concluding session by Professor Eileen Munro
An exploration of the processes of writing personal life narratives as a way of doing critical reflexive feminist research. Using reflexive feminist modes of lifewriting as the research methodology, the thesis focuses on three life narratives written in different narrative styles: my mother’s biography, which I have written from oral sources; my father’s biography, which I have written from my own memory and imagination; and my autobiography/autoethnography. I will be exploring the reflexive, creative and imaginative journeys in writing my parents’ lives and my own life as ways of doing reflexive feminist research.
• As a Chinese-Australian woman engaging in reflexive, creative and imaginative lifewriting, my aim is to create new spaces and add different voices to the small but emerging Asian Australian scholarly literature. . . . this thesis aims to challenge and problematise some of the prevailing Orientalist assumptions
Dr Marilyn Metta received the 2011 Outstanding Qualitative Book of the Year Award for her book, *Writing Against, Alongside and Beyond Memory: Lifewriting as Reflexive, Poststructuralist Feminist Research Practice*.

The awards were presented at the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry in Illinois.

Liz Caddy

So What?

1. Recognising what interpretive research does!

1. Framing research as part of everyday practice – cultivating curiosity

1. Articulating and pushing for development of practice research criteria in Australian and global research cultures.
References


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