

inSocialWork Podcast Series

Episode 68 - Dr. Michael Reisch: How Did Social Work Get Here?: The Historical Narratives That Shape Social Work Research and Practice (part 2 of 2)

[00:00:08] Welcome to living proof a podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. We're glad you could join us today. The series Living Proof examines social work research and practice that makes a difference in people's lives. I'm your host Adjoa Robinson and I'd like to take a moment to address you our regular listeners. We know you have enjoyed the living proof podcast as evidenced by the more than 130000 downloads today. Thanks to all of you we'd like to know what value you may have found in the podcast. We'd like to hear from all of you practitioners researchers students but especially our listeners who are social work educators. How are you using the podcasts in your classrooms. Just go to our Web site at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu forward slash podcast and click on the contact us tab. Again thanks for listening and we look forward to hearing from you. Hi from Buffalo. The robins are back and spring can't be far away at all. I'm Peter Soba in the second episode of this two part podcast. Dr Michael Reisch continues his discussion of how the past is the present and how master narratives about history have come to frame priorities in social work research and how that research has influenced social practice and education. Continuing a historical journey he began in part one. Dr. Reisch moves on to explore the class based analysis of society that dominated social work research from the 1930s to the 60s where gender and race were relegated to low level status.

[00:02:04] He describes how the era of McCarthyism and associations drawn to Marxism led social works research agenda to shy away from proposing alternative research and narratives about the importance of race and gender. Finally Dr.Reisch explains the impacts of scientific positivism and postmodernism over the past 30 years. Dr. Reisch concludes his historical review with challenging observations about how the previous master narratives continue to influence the presence the widespread conservatism and social works attempts to legitimize their professional status through quote emulation unquote of other professions quantitative methodologies increased specialization and evidence based practice provocatively. Dr. Reisch posits how social work may be in contrast to its rhetoric perpetuating the status quo by framing its research questions based on these unexamined but prevalent historical narratives. He challenges social work by advocating for significant effort in our willingness to pose new questions and question prevailing assumptions by developing alternative narratives and new alliances. Dr. Michael Reisch is the Daniel Thiers distinguished professor of social justice at the University of Maryland. He's held a number of faculty positions including at the University of Michigan University of Pennsylvania San Francisco State University and SUNY Stony Brook. His appointments include a Fulbright senior scholar at the University of Queensland and Australia. Dr Reiscg is the author or editor of over 20 books and numerous articles and book chapters is lectured widely all over the world. Dr Michael Reisch was interviewed by Dr Hilary Weaver professor here at the UB School of Social Work. Dr Weaver interviewed Dr Reisch by telephone.

[00:03:59] We'd like to mention that this episode contains some background distortion that is due to technical problems we experienced while recording thanks and we hope you like the podcast I think as you have described this era for us you have given this really important information about parts of our professions history that we are not comfortable acknowledging or examining. For instance you said early social workers truly scientific research was neutral while on the other hand you know social workers from the dominant culture to use the instruments of scientific research to establish maintain control over a demographically diverse population. So I think one of the most important contributions to press forward from this is your discussion of culturally and racially diverse populations social workers interact with that time. And in fact our interactions were not neutral. Is

there anything else you would like to say before we move on. HARRIS That's a very good question and the answer to that has to be somewhat shaded and complex. Let me start back with the 1930s. The dominant historical perspective that influenced this period particularly that of those social workers interested in social change was the class based analysis of society and a class based analysis of society by definition sort of subordinates the issues of gender and race. In fact if you look at the publications both inside and outside of social work while there was greater attention to the impact of socioeconomic conditions and policies on African-Americans and to a lesser extent Latinos during this period they are still seen as a subset of an overall class analysis of society. Some of the specific issues that affected African-Americans were just seen as exacerbations of issues that affected low income or working class whites.

[00:06:15] And I think that there's a difference that even while New Deal programs were clearly discriminatory against African-Americans and women there was very little investigation of that and very few voices within the social work field apart from some African-Americans and a few radicals who pointed that out. So I think that's very important. The other is that the profession still was dominated by an assimilationist perspective which hadn't been applied previously to European immigrants but was now applied to women and people of color. So if they were going to make it in society or even within the social work profession they had to adopt the values beliefs behaviors of the dominant culture. So I think that that existed the one time in this period that you begin to see an opening in that was during the Second World War and perhaps just immediately after it you begin to see a growing awareness of the importance of racial equality in the United States and of that differential experience of persons of color in this country. There are some papers given at the National Conference by both white and African-American speakers that address this. The YWCA and other organizations were really attempting to not only fight racial segregation in the south but also other features of institutional discrimination. And there were some social workers particularly more radical social workers who were pushing for greater efforts to include ending discrimination against persons of color as part of a broader social policy agenda. What undermined it however was the McCarthy period.

[00:08:01] So while efforts within the African-American community continued often below the radar screen ultimately producing the historic judicial decisions of the 1950s and the demonstrations of the 50s and 60s of the modern civil rights movement the social work field largely retreated from this not only in its advocacy but also in the kind of research it conducted social workers who advocated for what now seems like such benign non-discriminatory policies such as open housing in the late 1940s were attacked as communist and were blacklisted from schools of social work social work agencies national conferences. Some of them weren't allowed to speak. They couldn't get their articles published. So you can imagine what effect that had on the kind of research questions that were posed. So I think that you cannot. And the more I've done research on that period of history which would begin as early as the late 1930s through the mid 60s and in some ways beyond. You cannot underestimate the effect that that had on how the social work profession and its research agenda evolves. And ironically you know you point out the contradiction between the important role of women in social work throughout its history including in the 1930s and the New Deal many important positions were held by women. And the fact that the profession largely ignored the really the issues that affected women and when it looked at them looked at them through lenses that clearly by today's standards were stereotypical it's very hard to explain that even among people who consider themselves progressive as a radical. They often reflected the behaviors and values that we would now view as sexist. I guess they could not overcome the effects of the dominant culture even within social change oriented institutions. The 1960s and 70s a time of again great social change. You've got war on poverty. You've got the Great Society. You have social work involved in many many different programs of that era. How would you characterize the social work research going on during that particular timeframe.

[00:10:24] The events that we were just discussing ultimately produced certain different conditions which gave rise to new forms of research. So for example the focus on issues of deviance during the post-war decade particularly issues like juvenile delinquency ultimately led to research on the relationship between poverty and delinquency. And two investigations as to why poverty persisted in an era of unprecedented prosperity you begin to see outside of the field of social work the emergence of new interpretations of American history I think for example of Richard Hofstadter's work on anti intellectualism and on social Darwinism in American life. And these also inevitably had an influence on the direction of social research. One notable shift in the social work field was exemplified by the work that Richard Cloward and Lloyd Olin did around delinquency which they explained not in terms of morality or deviant cultures but in terms of opportunity theory. So the implied emphasis here on the structural barriers to opportunity within American society was a theme that was at the forefront of the development of what became known during the 1970s 60s and 70s as a revisionist history inside and outside of the historical profession including within social work which cast the experiences of people of color women poor people working class Americans ultimately gays and lesbians in a totally different light. Now what's interesting here is that the new social history appeared concurrently with the civil rights movement and the reforms produced by the war on poverty and great society.

[00:12:17] They produced greater awareness of the impact of historical forces such as slavery immigration industrialization and shaping contemporary conditions such as inequality and whether or not social movements emerged and to what extent they were successful they promoted new areas of research urban and rural fields research utilizing what we would now call mixed messages approach they understood the hidden histories of people and communities use new forms of documentation and they gave individuals and groups at the grassroots level a more active voice in defining their circumstances. You begin to see the emergence of what we now call participatory action research. This led to a split not only ideologically in society but also within the field between more traditional academic researchers and community activists engaged in action research. At the same time changing historical and contemporary circumstances altered society's view of things like childhood because as evidence became increasingly clear and not all children in the United States shared a common experience. The high proportion of children in poverty for example which was a reflection of the increased polarization of income and wealth service began to challenge some of the research and practice that was based upon this idea of common human needs. I mean even to go off on a slight tangent here. Even models of practice the life model the ecological perspective which emphasized the import of different cultures and diversity do so and this is a quote from one of these books to improve the level of fit between people in their environments especially between human needs and environmental resource sources. So what that did was it didn't inadvertently focus social work research and ultimately practice on the adaptation of people to their environment based on the assumption that the work of transforming the structural features of the environment will be addressed by people outside of Social Work.

[00:14:42] Now to pick up on the theme of the civil rights movement which ultimately spawned as you know other movements the contemporary feminist movement the gay rights movement the welfare rights movement and so forth. So during the 1970s influenced by the growth of these identity based social movements the new social history as it became called really expanded it and spurred greater research within social work on the specific economic social and psychological conditions that affected women and racial and ethnic minorities. So one thing was that the underlying political and ideological dimensions of this research led to a focus on the sources symptoms and solutions to depression and the Arjun's nature and outcome of social movements and social justice struggles. These were terms that were not used until this period and questions that were not investigated. On the other hand researchers with their feet in the Family Service camps those began to emphasize in their investigations also influenced by social history which look at the experience of ordinary people. They began to investigate features of everyday life and the

experiences of ordinary people. So you begin to see studies about work about marriage about divorce and so forth. And what the implications were for practice. And on another vein the role of the women's movement produced gendered approach to history which opened up a whole new intellectual horizon by exploring the role of patriarchy in society and the impact of power language and other structures of domination and ultimately these developments were linked by the impact of postmodernism in the last 30 years and its rejection of grand historical narratives of postmodernism stimulated the emergence of critical race theory neo feminist theory and queer theory each of which to varying extents have influenced the direction of inquiry in social work. For the last 30 years.

[00:16:59] So I think you've painted a very clear picture of this era where there's so many different social influences coming in with a gender history really leads us to look at different areas issues as we used the 60s and 70s we get into a different political era as we move into the Reagan and Bush years the 1980s and 1990s. Things changed in terms of social work research. OK. Well again to put that question in the broader context of what was happening in the field of research in history or historical research particularly in general by the election of Ronald Reagan in the early 1980s both inside and outside the academy the field of social history had fallen into disarray and to some extent was discredited or I should say not discredited but attacked for several reasons. One was that the very kind of research that it stimulated identity oriented research produced division not only within departments of history but also within schools of social work that made the notion historically of a unified national experience. And in terms of practice of a unified practice experience almost impossible to sustain. So the very diversity that was a promising step in the history of the departments and in schools of social work fragmented individuals and institutions in ways that made it very difficult to focus on a common agenda or common agreed upon role for research or use research methodology.

[00:18:50] So another reason was that this absence of an image of the whole whether it was the whole of the historical experience or the whole of the contemporary society or the whole of social work practice exacerbated trends that had existed for a long time toward think we narrow specialization in research and in practice. If you compare for example research in the social sciences in the United States to that in Western Europe or Latin America it's huge differences there in terms of in Western Europe and Latin America is much more of an integrated synthetic interdisciplinary approach than in a narrow specialization in research in the United States is not as common. Finally the conservative climate of the period made social history and the kinds of research that it produced less persuasive and less popular because of the Association of this kind of research with historical materialism which is equated of course with Marxism or socialism or things like that. It's interesting that the criticisms of the Reagan administration of certain social revolutionary movements of the 1980s attacked them because they were Marxist whereas the previous decades had talked about communists or Bolsheviks or reds. So I don't know of any many people picked up on the subtlety there but it was not just attacking people for their political membership or their social goals but for their interpretation of society and history. So what this did both inside the social sciences in general and within school of social work was to increase evidence on non historical even a historical research. And that affected the social work field as well. Another thing that I'm doing which is a small project is to look at where the schools of social work teach history in their curriculum and this is just a completely subjective anecdotal impression is that over the last 10 20 30 years that the amount of attention paid to history within schools of social work has declined significantly.

[00:21:06] Now in the 80s and 90s these developments are abetted by the combined impact of economic globalization and the neoliberal intellectual rationale that emerged by the latter. I'm referring for example to Francis Fukuyama's notion of the so-called end of history. The whole notion that in a liberal democracy and market economies everywhere is the apotheosis of the historical experience and that everything else is just going to be tinkering with within that framework. At the same time there was also a resurgence of interest in professionalization within

social work. As I and other historians of Social Work pointed out in conservative times the field tends to turn inward and become more concerned with professional status now particularly as it relates to research. One of the consequences of this was that by the end of the 1980s the conservative environment and this professionalizing impulse which emerged within it was reflected in the drive of within the social work profession to emulate research practices that were embraced by institutions like the National Institutes of Health which control the lion's share of funds and define the hierarchy of academics that is no coincidence at this time. You see things like the taskforce on social research emerge. You see the establishment of the Institute for the advancement of social work research and the Society for social work and research in a swor and the creation of the so-called Saint Louis group by research oriented schools of social work. Now these developments produce several significant consequences in the area of social work research which continue to be felt today. One is greater emphasis on the role of methodology especially quantitative methods in shaping social work research rather than in looking at the substance potential uses or exploring the ideological assumptions of research or of policy makers.

[00:23:16] Second heightened specialisation which was an inevitable consequence of this has led to more fragmented approaches to research and produce scholars of great depth but rather narrow depth rather than synthetic breadth and if you look at the kind of articles that are published and leading journals in the last 20 years I think that this is reflected or papers that are given at work conferences for example. At the same time the growing significance of Intervention Research has reflected an implicit acceptance of the structural status quo. Instead of seeking data to challenge it and these approaches to research have been seamlessly integrated into the professions master narrative about its current status and also about its history. Final point about this is that you begin to see even though it's not dominant a persistent influence of postmodernism particularly in the continuing emphasis on issues of identity and the underscoring of the importance of racial and gender hierarchies and disparities the existence of post-modern and critical perspectives of art history and contemporary issues. While it is illuminated and underscore the importance of issues such as race and gender have also ironically made it more difficult to create a comprehensive integrated framework that incorporates diverse historical viewpoints and acknowledges the value of diverse research methods. So here we are in the 21st century. The debate over research and social work is currently polarized between proponents on the one hand of a scientific positivist largely empirically driven so-called objectivity and seemingly relativist and fragmented alternative accounts not only of the profession's history but of explanations for the processes of individual and social change which clearly have implications for the kind of research that we do. So while the former perspective the positive perspective dominates the fashion.

[00:25:33] They even complain as a recent book review states that they bemoan the Andu serious influence of postmodernism and Critical Theory. So that's the saddest. As a result of events of the last 20 or 30 years you've clearly illustrated the impact of the social and the political environment has had on our profession as well as the type of research that we do. He's talked about that through different areas and it's clear from your discussions these past errors are the foundation for where we are today. In that sense it's rather sad that schools of social work appear to be doing less in terms of teaching about our history because that lessens our understanding of where we are today and where we go in the future. You've talked about where we are today contemporary social work research. I wonder if you'd like to see a little bit more about that and the significant consequences that we feel today as a result of the past forces you've outlined. OK well obviously the current environment is one of rapid change. We can all list all of the forces that are changing the demography of this country is changing dramatically. The economy is changing in ways in which even policy makers don't have a handle on it. We're in the midst of economic and environmental crises et cetera et cetera et cetera. But my opinion again is it's an opinion is that the field has not responded particularly effectively to that. I don't think many institutions of society have.

[00:27:13] But we keep getting wrapped up again because I would argue whoever's in the White House that this remains a fairly conservative time that we keep looking at ways in which our research agenda our quest to expand knowledge can legitimize our professional status. And again this is how we define the research process. What constitutes a researchable question what are appropriate methodologies. And this occurs in the selection of articles peer reviewed journals jury papers at conferences promotion and tenure decisions and so forth. And I've had the good fortune to be on the faculty of about half a dozen universities and this trend is not confined to any one particular school. How we interpret data how we assess the implications of that data and how we disseminated. So I think that have had enormous effects on the conceptualizations production and dissemination of knowledge in social work with major implications for the theory and practice. Let me just touch on something again that I said before there's a growing emphasis in schools of social work and professional journals our intervention research and so-called evidence based practice and then often get equated with the use of increasingly sophisticated quantitative methodology. And I think there's a dual rationale for that. Partly it's designed at least hypothetically to enhance the quality of Social Work Scholarship. But it's also designed to improve and demonstrate the effectiveness of social work and social work services and the need to strengthen the competitive position of social workers in an increasingly difficult occupational and academic marketplace. But what happens as a result of that is that power and knowledge are decides through the discourses that underlie this particular perspective on research. How we construct our understanding of knowledge and research is different.

[00:29:20] If we use positivists methods because such methods take for granted that practice can and should be based on so-called proven facts that are generated only in certain ways rather than through so-called less rigorous research design. Now this affects what we consider to be valid forms of social work practice how we structure our social service agencies and how we apply the result of social science research to practice and policy so changes in how the profession constructs the meaning of knowledge research and evidence have been introduced to the field over the last 20 years with very little assessment or even reflection on their on the effects of this on the long standing mission of social work and on the character of schools of social work and social service agencies and their relationship to the surrounding communities. And it's ironic that this has occurred although some proponents of this form of research have acknowledged that there is an ill suited application of physical science methods which underscore a lot of NIH oriented research to the field of social work. There are fundamental the pistol logical question such as What is knowledge. How do we know what we know this truth equal validity which only a few scholars are examining in any kind of depth. So in its current form the definitions which underlie those for research reflect the context of the time and unacknowledged biases about how such terms as evidence knowledge and knowing are defined. And perhaps this is to get back to this point about why I think there are broader social implications of this by promoting research largely on the effectiveness of established interventions which are attempting to ameliorate contemporary social problems.

[00:31:33] Rather than analyzing their structural roots as we once did social workers are inadvertently perhaps implicitly accepting these problems such as homelessness as inevitable as conditions to be managed rather than eliminated. And ironically this new ancestress contradicts the profession's repeated focus and its rhetoric on social justice and essentially is an acquiescence to the status quo. Now another irony here is that alternative conceptions of history first emerged in social work at the turn of the 20th century and in some ways modern social work itself originated through a counter historical narrative. Because the challenge prevailing conceptions of charity which were based on a hierarchical model of society and proposed an alternative set of goals based on principles of democracy with a small d and justice it promoted environmental rather than individually oriented explanations for human need and a more egalitarian conceptualization. To some extent anyway of the service relationship itself. So in today's increasingly conservative climate wherever the rhetoric and conservatism is not yet in the political arena it's in the intellectual arena and the cultural arena

in our society and it's certainly reflected in institutions of higher education. It's going to be particularly challenging to develop a viable alternative to the research models which prevail within the dominant master narrative. A key challenge for us though is not merely to create a new narrative but to forge a new kind of social discourse and new context both contemporary and historical within which narratives that are different that illuminates things that have previously been kept in the dark. Make sense and which we can use these narratives to influence alternative forms of policymaking and practice in the future. So by crafting different interpretations of history and informing our research with those different interpretations we can establish a new set of assumptions.

[00:34:08] And a new set of promises rather than simply reinforce existing rules and existing institutions. So again and this is reflective of a longstanding practice within social work. Our primary task is to pose different questions. That's true of us in practice in policy advocacy and in research to pose different questions not to prescribe or replace one form of rhetoric with another by posing different questions by challenging prevailing assumptions including those about history and what's happening all across the country in attempts to rewrite American history and the constitution will be open to the development of alternative frameworks for research and alternative kinds of theories to inform law practice by posing different research questions we can begin to clarify the ambiguity and are fundamental concepts and in our vocabulary. We can begin to reconcile the gap between our historical mission and the reality of our practice and ultimately and this is why I'm still doing all this stuff. We could take a step toward the formation of new alliances and develop new allies in the pursuit of social justice which more than ever I think is a worthy goal. While you have presented a very thought provoking analysis that has covered well over hundred years of social work history you've shared many thoughtful insights and comments on aspects of our profession's history that are often not critically examined. It is clear that your remarks come from a perspective of social justice that undergirds all of your comments which makes for very very rich content. Is there anything else you would like to share with her listeners today. Well just that I would love to hear within from any of the listeners about any of the ideas that they have or any questions or challenges for me.

[00:36:19] I have a coffee cup on my desk that has a quote from Michelangelo that says I am still learning and I feel that way. That's one of the things that keeps me interested in this field. The fact that I had the opportunity the privilege through my work to keep learning and the more I learn the more questions I have and I hope that that questioning attitude is something that I can maintain and that perhaps others will adapt as well. Because I think that that's absolutely critical for our efforts. Whether it's as researchers or practitioners in any form with individuals communities and the more I travel internationally the more questions I have and the more uncertainty I have. And I think that while uncertainty is sometimes a difficult attitude to maintain I think it's absolutely critical if we're going to stay open to the changes which are occurring so rapidly around us. So I want to thank you Hillary for your thoughtful questions for your careful reading of the material and for your courtesies throughout this whole interview. Thank you I will certainly be using your material and are required to stream policy course that we will be speaking here at University. OK well I hope I would love to hear how the students react to it. All right. Thank you so much for your time. I know you have many other priorities and things that you need to get to but that's certainly been a privilege to speak with you today. And I enjoyed it. I've learned a lot from your remarks. Thank you. Hilary. All the best. All right take care.

[00:37:58] You've been listening to Dr. Michael Reisch discuss historical narratives and their impact on social work research on living proof Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. For more information about who we are our history our programs and what we do we invite you to visit our website at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. At UB we are living proof that social work makes a difference in people's lives.

