

Episode 125 - Dr. Michael Reisch: The State of Social Work Education (part 1 of 2)

[00:00:08] Welcome to in social work. The podcast series at the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at www.insocialwork.org We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of in social work is to engage practitioners and researchers and lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice to research. We're inSocialwork. Insocialwork is celebrating its fifth anniversary. Five years are bringing to you the important topics of social work education policy and practice. I'm Charles Sims your host for this episode. The National Association of Social Workers describes in its code of ethics social justice as one of its professional values and challenging social injustice as one of the ethical principles. They represent some of the core beliefs that help separate social work from other human service professions to discuss the role of social work education in preparing social work students to address these professional ideals. Is our guest Dr. Michael Reisch. Dr. Reisch is the Daniel therm's distinguished professor of social justice at the University of Maryland. Dr. Reisch has held faculty and administrative positions at the University of Michigan the University of Pennsylvania San Francisco State University and SUNY Stony Brook. He has also been a visiting professor at the University of California Berkeley and the New Bulgarian University in Sofia as well as a Fulbright senior scholar at the University of Queensland in Brisbane Australia. A former Woodrow Wilson fellow. Dr Reisch is the author or editor of more than 25 books and monographs over 100 articles and book chapters and has presented nationally and internationally on the history and philosophy of social work.

[00:02:17] Additionally the University of Buffalo School of Social Work was pleased to have Dr Reisch as its commencement speaker at its 2013 graduation ceremony. In today's discussion Dr Reisch calls on the profession to reconnect with his earlier work in understanding and specifically addressing the institutional and structural inequalities facing oppressed and disenfranchised people nationally as well as the importance of moving this work into the international arena. In the first of two parts Dr Reisch describes the role that social work education has in helping the emerging professional understand these disparities and their impacts on the aforementioned populations as well as the imperative to address them. He further outlines a role for the social work researcher and calls for moving that developing knowledge beyond the academy and into the greater social discourse and the development of social policy. For this podcast Dr Reisch was interviewed by Dr Hilary Weaver professor at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. It's my pleasure today to be speaking with Dr. Michael Reisch. The topic of our podcast is the state of social work higher education. Now this is a topic that you have observed and commented on over the decades. And in fact you have that forthcoming article in social work education. I believe that's coming out in September of 2013 called social work education and the neoliberal challenge the U.S. response to increasing global inequality as a foundation for our discussion today. I'd like to begin with a couple of quotes from your forthcoming article. One of the things that you say is that educational programs play a critical role in shaping the character of social welfare and the social work profession in the United States.

[00:04:22] They define the meaning of Social Service create knowledge that informs its development influence the public's perception of social work and produce the profession's leadership. You also remind us that in U.S. history two contrasting interpretations of the purpose of Social Work Education have mirrored persistent tensions between charitable and justice oriented perspectives on social welfare. One view regards social work as an instrument that supports existing institutional arrangements assimilates marginalized populations into the dominant culture and attempts to ameliorate the excesses of a market economy. An alternative view social work practice and education is areas for social struggle. Now when I think about the social work profession one

factor that I believe distinguishes us from some of the other professions is our emphasis on the importance of the social environment. In fact we as a profession are both shaped by and have the power to shape our environment. You mention several key external challenges currently facing social work education. I'd like to ask you about several of these in have you expand on how each of these challenges affects social work education and how in turn social work education could address these challenges. The first one that I'd like to raise is one that people would not necessarily think of in terms of social work education. You comment on the widening gap in income and wealth both within the United States and between the global north and the Global South. Could you expand on how that's relevant for social work education and how in turn we might have an impact on that. Sure I'd be glad to.

[00:06:11] Well first in terms of what's happening domestically in the United States I think it's very well established that over the past several decades both in terms of income and in terms of wealth. The divide between the so-called haves and have nots has gotten much wider in this country that has an effect on virtually every area in which social workers are involved from children to the elderly from healthcare to employment housing environmental justice and so forth. But one of the things I think unfortunately that's happened is that while we acknowledge this at least in our rhetoric in terms of promoting social justice there is less attention now than there used to be around issues of poverty and socioeconomic inequality than before. And I think unless we understand that at the root of almost every problem that we address with our clients and constituents are the issues of poverty and inequality that not only will our students be worthwhile prepared to be effective practicing professionals but also I think the nature of our research will be somewhat distorted. I mean many of the issues that we are addressing now in our research are issues that are symptoms of this poverty and inequality and yet we tend not to focus on that as we did in the past. I mean if you look at various periods of social work history of history of social work education many prominent scholars were investigating both the depth and the various manifestations of poverty and inequality in different communities. There is much less of that kind of research going on right now within social work. I think that the fields that are doing that kind of research not scholars from the social work field. And I think that's very unfortunate and it changes the nature of how we practice how we look at our research and what we teach our students.

[00:08:09] So that's the first half of your question the second half is that since probably over the last 15 or 20 years there's been a push in social work to internationalize our curricula and I think that that's a very healthy direction for the field because more and more the problems of the world cross national boundaries and that we are living in a multipolar multi dependent world. So I think that's a very healthy direction. But one of the things that I think we don't seem to recognize is how economic globalization over the last several decades has not only increased the gap domestically in our country between the rich and the poor but it is also widen the gap between rich and poor nations and this creates a whole series of problems in terms of how people from those nations can relate to each other and how certain issues are manifest in those particular nations. So for example problems that are sometimes thought of as universal problems issues of gender for example in domestic violence or child welfare or aging or AIDS HIV services and so forth need to be understood in the particular context of these nations not only in terms of the cultural context of the nations which is very critical but also in the context that developing nations are increasingly impoverished and that the poverty changes the dynamics of all of these issues and also influences the amount of resources that are available in these nations to address these problems.

[00:09:43] So I think that if we don't start out with our work both domestically and internationally with an understanding of what are often the root causes of these problems and often transform the way the problems are realized and perceived and acted upon in various parts of the world that we're not getting a full picture neither in our practice nor our research and our education. So I see that as an important reminder to all of us that social work educators that we really need to think beyond our

little piece of the world and make sure that we are educating our students as well as ourselves to be able to focus on this more global context. I completely agree. And it's interesting that there has been a healthy movement in the internationalization of Social Work and Social Work Education to make sure that students and practitioners and researchers are sensitive to the impact of cultural difference among various nations. And I think that that's a very positive trend. But it's ironic that at the same time as we're doing that rather than taking more culturally imperialist stances toward practice that we're ignoring the differential impact of globalization on different nations and cultures in terms of the impoverishment of nations and communities and the effect that that impoverishment has on how various social and economic issues are reflected in their particular societies. I think that that's a very serious shortcoming since we have made some progress in being coming more aware of cultural diversity and to use a commonly used phrase becoming more culturally competent in an international sense. I think that we also have to add to that of being more aware of how political and economic forces have different levels of impact in different parts of the world. Very very good. We need to remember to draw from these other disciplines like political science and economics.

[00:11:58] Now you also focus on things here at home you talk about the growing racial and class disparities in health and mental health care education employment and housing. Could you speak to how that is something that social work education really needs to be paying attention to be shaping and in turn how those factors shape us. I'd be glad to have a very good question. And it also relates to the previous question the growing poverty and inequality in the United States for example has differentially affected communities of color over the last 30 years. African-Americans Latinos Native Americans have all been two and a half to three times more likely to be impoverished than white Americans. That's a fact and that has manifestations in both rural and urban areas. And it also has a ripple effect on people's health life expectancy infant mortality rates patterns of various diseases mental health issues opportunities in terms of education employment housing issues of environmental justice and so forth. So there's a direct relationship between the distribution of poverty and inequality in the United States and probably in other nations as well and how that distribution has disproportionately negative impact on certain communities in our society. It's ironic that almost at the same time that this pattern became even more severe over the last 30 plus years that the social work education has shifted from an early recognition and focus on issues of racism and ethnocentrism to a more broadly defined and somewhat diluted emphasis on cultural diversity. Now I understand that there are certain positive components of that that we've included under the umbrella of diversity issues of sexual orientation ability status and so forth and those are very important that we include. Because those are important issues as well.

[00:14:16] But I think what's happened is is that we've neglected what we recognized in the 1960s and 1970s was that we need to look not only at the issues of diversity because that can be kind of sugarcoated and glossed over and look at fundamental racism sexism ethnocentrism and so forth classism and how those are institutionalized in society so that they have an impact not only at the individual level but in the very structure of the systems that determine people's life chances opportunities and well-being in our society. Now those things haven't changed the institutional racism that existed when social work began to recognize that in the late 1960s and 1970s is still present. There's loads of data in virtually every field in virtually every social indicator to demonstrate that despite some progress in that area despite the fact that we have an African-American president and so forth that those issues are still very strong. The same thing could be said about issues of gender or ethnocentrism or classism and so forth. But we seem to have strayed from that focus focus which would lead us to more in-depth structural analysis of the problems that people in communities face toward a more general look at issues of diversity and cultural competence and things like that. And I'm not diminishing those things as important but I think it sort of softens our approach and takes us away from examining the structural roots of the problems that people experience on an individual and community basis.

[00:15:58] To me it's hard for me to understand how we could work on any of the myriad issues that social workers address in the United States at the level of direct practice community organizing and policy without understanding the relationship between those issues and what's going on in the area of institutional racism and so forth. When we work with youth in the foster care system when we work in the mental health system or the criminal justice system or in the differential experience of aging among our population and a whole host of other issues those issues are really a reflection of both of the institutional forces in our society and also those issues of poverty and inequality that I mentioned before. Yeah we don't pay enough attention to it. If you look at the curriculum schools of social work with certain exceptions I think we have cut down on those emphases. If you look at the publications in major social work journals there's less attention paid to those issues. We don't call things as we used to where we tend to shy away from those sharper criticisms and tend to filter them through a softer lens. And I think that that's unfortunate but I think it diminishes the impact that we could have on public discourse about these problems and diminishes the way we can address these problems at the source. I think you've highlighted a very important trend for us on how over the years our profession has been moving away from some of these tougher issues looking at the structural pieces the institutional forces that are behind so many of the social issues that we try to assist with. I think another trend that you point to happening at the same time that we need to be more attentive to is a shift within policymaking circles toward fiscal austerity and policies that emphasized market oriented and individually focused solutions. Could you speak to that trend a bit.

[00:18:08] Well that's an aspect of neo liberalism. I mean all of those things are looking at the importance of making public policies structured in such a manner so that promote the competitiveness of nations and even regions in a global economy. And I think that an ideological component that is that we have adopted in virtually every area of our society including social work a market mentality. I mean if you look at the vocabulary that nonprofit agencies use now we talk about marketing our social services. We talk about branding our programs and I know that it sounds like it's trivial and it's superficial but that vocabulary affects the way in which we are thinking about our work and its relationship to the community and society. Another aspect of neo liberalism is its focus on developing individual human capital as opposed to developing collective social capital. I think that that's reflected in a lot of the trends in social work research which look at the individual as a autonomous unit within society and how that individual is responding to various social psychological economic pressures. So there is research for example on resiliency right now which is basically an individual phenomena and we don't talk about community resilience. We talk about individual resiliency. One of the folks I have of public policy is to develop individual development accounts to help people acquire certain assets but we don't talk much about creating community banks or community development accounts. These are just a few examples of this but other folks have written about this terms of the marketization of welfare and so forth.

[00:20:02] So there's been a subtle shift in our emphasis in what we choose as the focus of our research and how we teach in our relationship to the public and nonprofit sector away from more community and societal oriented analyses and approaches toward more individually oriented approaches and I think that's all conforming to this model of neoliberalism that has become predominant in the United States and for much of the world. Now the other aspect of it and this is a relatively recent one is focus on fiscal austerity as the solution to the nation's problems. I mean I think that the jury is really in on that already as some commentators like Paul Krugman in The New York Times have pointed out that both in Europe and the United States the proponents of fiscal austerity have been proven to be wrong in terms of their analysis of the relationship between government budgets and economic growth. The effects of this promotion have not gone away and in fact the vocabulary of our policymakers hasn't really changed at all despite the fact that they've been proven wrong and we can see at the local level at the state level at the national level how cutbacks in government programs is affecting the growth of our economy the growth of employment and also the ability of social service agencies and both the public and private sector to have sufficient

resources to deal with the growing amount of social and economic problems that they're confronting on a day to day basis. I mean non-profit agencies are struggling more than ever. Public sector agencies have insufficient staff. They haven't been able to hire new staff. They haven't been able to expand their services.

[00:21:48] They've had increasing caseload in areas like child welfare for example and so forth so that austerity is creating a real pain in these organizations but also in the communities that they serve. And even in schools of social work most of my colleagues around the country particularly those who work in public universities have experienced either hiring freezes or cutbacks or even salary reductions over the last five years since the recession began and they haven't made much recovery in that area. I think that has affected the climate of schools as well. We haven't been able to develop that many new innovative programs. There's more of a focus on people getting grants to help augment shrinking state support. And that changes the nature of scholarships so all these things are interrelated and have a very powerful effect on the climate of social work education and ultimately on the practitioners who graduate from schools of social work. Now as social work programs housed within larger universities of course the changing nature of universities changing nature of student populations and the educational process itself does have an impact on social work education. But I'm wondering if you might also speak to the flip side of that might social work education be able to exert a shaping rather than just adapting to change how can we have that shaping influence. Well I guess there are three ways that we can do that. I don't think we're doing any of these things sufficiently. One is in terms of the quality of our graduates and the knowledge and skills that they bring into their practice. I mean schools of social work graduate thousands of students each year at the baccalaureate and master's level in particular.

[00:23:47] They could have tremendous influence particularly at the local level if they came out with a set of skills that and an approach to using those skills that would be concerned with issues of community and social change and not simply adaptations to existing trends and structural pressures. That's one I think in the nature of our research we could have an enormous impact. There are two issues about that that I want to focus upon particularly right now. One of them is something that I've been concerned about for some time and you know the movement toward evidence based practice over the last 20 years has been important in establishing the credibility of social work research and in improving the effectiveness of various interventions. There's no doubt about that but it has also done and this gets back to his previous point that I was making about focusing on individually focused solutions to broader social problems. And that is that we tend to be focusing much of our research in terms of the assessment or evaluation of various interventions that deal with the symptoms of these broader structural problems. If you look back through the history of Social Work and Social Work Research in the past a greater proportion of research was looking at the root causes of people's problems. Analyzing who is poor. Why are people poor. What is the nature of poverty and so forth rather than the dressing well which programs to deal with certain symptoms of poverty are most effective. And while the latter is important but we tend to move away from the former. So I think that another way that we could have an impact on the world in our communities is by changing the focus of social work research we've done that in the past.

[00:25:38] Social work research in the past brought to the public's attention at various periods of history in the Progressive Era in the 20s and 30s and again in the 50s 60s and 70s. The nature of poverty the extent of poverty who is affected by poverty were brought to the attention of the public issues like domestic violence and racism in the child welfare system and a whole host of other issues the plight of the elderly. I can go on and on. These were the results not only of social activism at the community level but also of Social Work Research which highlighted these issues brought them to the attention and that brings me to my second major point. Another aspect of that research is that the research results were not confined simply to professional journals or Foundation reports. They were disseminated more broadly so that the illiterate public became more socially and

politically aware of these problems that they weren't simply things that were discussed among other academics or other researchers and that they heighten the public's awareness of all of these issues and then helped build mobilization to address these issues. And one of the things that's happened now and there's several explanations for it is that while I would say the average social work professor now is probably better at various forms of research than colleagues in the past that they do not for the most part make efforts to disseminate that research other than to an academic audience and so therefore the research may be of top quality. It may illuminate certain issues but few people know about it and I think that that's a serious problem.

[00:27:26] The third element that with schools of social work can do so I've talked about who we graduate the kind of research we do and how we disseminated in the third element of it is the extent to which schools are involved at the community level. Now we already have enormous involvement through our field placements and in the case of some faculty through community based research. But I think we can really expand that enormously by integrating our education and research with issues of concern to the communities in which schools are housed. There are examples of that around the country I could have time permitted to cite some of those examples but I think we need to do that much more extensively because those kind of programs whether they're pilot projects or projects that combine community based research with programmatic innovation and the education of students and community members could have a truly dramatic impact on local and regional socioeconomic issues and on the ways in which we attempt to.

[00:28:30] You have been listening to part one of Dr. Reisch's discussion on social work education. Thank you for listening. This is Charles Sims your host inviting you to please join us again for social work.

[00:28:51] Hi I'm Nancy Smith professor and dean of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school our history our programs and what we do we invite you to visit our website at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu.