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What is This?
The use of ethnography in social work research

Guest Editors: Jerry Floersch, Jeffrey Longhofer and Jacob Suskewicz

The subjects of social work practice – clients, communities, families, groups, and organizations – exist in real-time and in open systems where the social worker is faced with the immediacy of the present. Much of what matters to our clients is how we come to know them in their natural settings or lived contexts: social class, family, gender, ethnicity, neighbourhood, and sexual orientation. Each client represents a particular, a case, and it is never that a social worker confronts a client as a generalized other (the client is an N of 1); in practice, a statistical average is an abstraction. Yet social workers must use theory to understand how layers upon layers of social, psychic, political, and economic contexts condense to produce the kind of person our client presents. Theory strives to understand a client’s sense of personhood (i.e. the knowing, feeling, seeing, and acting self) or a community’s sociocultural structure (i.e. economic, political, and cultural) and without theory, practitioners would be inclined to make a fatal and incorrect assumption: facts speak for themselves. Moreover, the immediacy of the present requires practical action without knowing beforehand how or if theory actually applies. A gap inevitably results between theory and practice, and the craft of expert knowledge and practice is largely grounded in the work of interpreting and managing these gaps (Longhofer and Floersch, 2004). The in-vivo, contextual, and open systems reality of social work practice requires social workers to be astute participants and observers of the client in context – person-in-environments (Longhofer and Floersch, 2012).

Indeed, theories provide the social work participant-observer with the flexibility to see clients, social problems, organizations, or institutions from multiple points of view, allowing the practitioner to take into account the immediacy of the present reality and then weigh its specifics against theories that posit how contexts shape us. It follows, of course, that theories can be wrong or practitioners can make mistakes in applying theory, and there is no theoretical standpoint where the practitioner can know reality ‘exactly.’ Practitioners must accept the uncertainty of theory, and learn how to respect the limitations and appreciate the potential inherent in this uncertainty.

The participant-observation aspect of social work requires us to ask, observe, listen, and read symbolic systems, including the oral, the written, and the image. The perceptual skill that a practitioner uses in any given instance depends largely on their targeted level of practice. Someone who studies the history of social
welfare policy may depend heavily on reading legislative and organizational documents, and use these data to derive a theory of social welfare. Another may read the hundreds of memos and manuals associated with a particular welfare office and with these data, theorize how welfare policies are organizationally implemented. Still, other practitioners are engaged in front line work; they listen, ask, and observe clients who seek welfare support, and they determine the type of assistance to be given. Social work is the act of using practitioner perceptual capacities to gather – seeing, hearing, thinking, and feeling – the contextual data relevant to a client’s situation.

Enter ethnography. Of the three cognate disciplines that social work has heavily drawn upon – anthropology, sociology, and psychology – it is anthropology’s case-based emphasis and ethnographic method that fits with our need to theorize the particular-in-context. The need for context-dependent knowledge requires research and practice methods that produce and disseminate such knowledge. Ethnography produces empirically rich case studies of complex social problems, sheds light on contradictions in social policy, attends to change across multiple scales of human action, and assists in the process of translating theory-to-practice (Floersch et al., 2012).

Ethnographic research among occupational therapists, anthropologists, nurses, sociologists, social workers and others in educational, medical and social service settings has focused on human services, social, and psychological problems. The range of subjects for these investigations is broad, including, for example, child welfare (Aarre, 1998; De Montigny, 1995), homelessness (Connolly, 2000; Desjarlais, 1997; Wagner, 1993), drugs in the urban context (Bourgois, 2002), rural community life (Christensen et al., 1998), individuals with disabilities (Davies, 1998), substance abuse (Alverson et al., 2001), treatment for drug dependency (Carr, 2010; Skoll, 1992), juvenile criminal justice (Abrams and Anderson-Nathe, 2012 – reviewed in this issue) and the effects of the policy of deinstitutionalization for those with chronic mental illness (Rhodes, 1991; Townsend, 1998; Weinberg, 2005). Hoyt Alverson, Elizabeth Carpenter and Robert Drake (2006) have, similarly, used participant observation to explore job seeking for people with severe mental illness. Tom Hall (2003) gives readers the feeling that they are travelling through the daily lives of homeless adolescents in Britain. Ian Shaw, in Evaluating in Practice, highlights the use of ethnography in social work assessment, planning, practice, and evaluation (Shaw, 2011). He writes, ‘dimensions of place and space are deeply embedded in all social work practice’ (2011: 82–83). For Shaw, ethnography is both a source and model for social work practice. Harry Ferguson (2010) looks at child protection services with a unique eye for studying, ‘what I call practice by looking around homes, walking towards children to properly see, touch, hear and walk with them to ensure they are fully engaged with and safe, here and now, on this home visit, or in this clinic or hospital ward’ (2010: 1100). Victoria Stanhope (2012) investigates the ties that bind service users with practitioners, and Cunningham and Diversi (2013) study aging out foster youth.
Although participation and observation over time are the cornerstones of ethnographic research, researchers often draw from a broad array of research strategies. These include interviews, ranging from formal to informal, structured to unstructured; charts mapping community systems, such as informal or formal economies; the collection of life histories; focus groups; the review of community texts and records; and the development of relationships with ‘key informants’ within a community. Similarly, ethnographers use multiple strategies for recording their data, including audio recording, filming, photography and, especially, copious field notes. Ethnographers combine data gathered via these techniques with direct observation, to create a person-in-environment representation of their subjects.

A convenient way to think of this range of ethnographic strategies is to recognize that participant observation (a term often used interchangeably with the ethnographic method) means that the ethnographer might participate alongside an individual in their everyday routines, while, at other times, only observe routines. Many factors, both practical and theoretical, determine why the ethnographer chooses some combination of participation and observation over another.

In this Qualitative Social Work (QSW) special issue on ethnography, researchers use different combinations of analytic techniques, yet they similarly gathered data through participant-observation in a natural setting – the latter, in our opinion, is how researchers assist in building the ontological power and positioning of social work’s signature concept: person-in-environment. Toward this end, Yvonne Smith studies clinical decision-making as it occurs in a residential treatment center for children and adolescents. In the era of evidence-based practice, how do mental health workers negotiate the gap between research, manuals, treatment contexts, theory, and the client’s unique circumstances? Matthew Spitzmueller examines how mental health policy affects practice, and explores practice at the street-level to determine how workers negotiate the real-time conditions of policy reform. His work understands policy not by asking what it claims to be, but by examining what it actually produces on the ground. Hannah Jobling combines a critical realist perspective with ethnography, to study causal mechanisms in a specific policy to practice context. Instead of asking how outpatient community treatment orders (CTO) work in general, she effectively uses ethnography to address whom, in particular, might CTOs work for, in what circumstances, and why. Gayatri Moorthi explores the relationships between peer educators and injecting drug user clients in Delhi’s harm reduction programs, and how peer workers, themselves drug users, work with other injecting users. In presenting such complicated relationship power dynamics, the policy and practice of the peer outreach worker is shown to have limits and possibilities.

Antonio Lopez stretches the imagination of our methods with his application of netnography, ethnography applied to Internet interactions. Starting with the assumption that the online context is both live and a natural setting, Lopez analyses climates of opinion in relation to the consumption of generic drugs in Spain, and uses linguistic theory to understand the myriad ways that Internet information is related to a reduction in the use of less expensive generic drugs – a particularly
remarkable finding in an era of climbing healthcare costs. Kathleen Powell describes a year-long ethnographic study of a university campus neighbourhood where tensions between student and full-time resident interests and concerns inhibit the exercise of collective action. She concludes that better community organizing could close the gap between the general theory of how collective efficacy functions and the particularity of university campus neighbourhoods. Misa Kayama uses ethnographic studies conducted in the US and globally as illustrative cases of the opportunities and challenges of ethnography in social work. The first illustrates the role ethnography plays in designing culturally sensitive interventions, as well as the risks that such methods may pose to traumatized and marginalized participants. The second demonstrates the valuable interplay of insider and outsider perspectives as applied to international social work. The third exemplifies the importance of cross-cultural conversations, as well as the ethical challenges of entering into the lives of stigmatized individuals. In the issue’s final piece, Debbie Gioia reflects upon her classroom experiences in teaching ethnography for the purpose of building community participatory practices. We hope you enjoy and learn from these works as much as we have.

We wish to thank the two-dozen reviewers from many places around the world that generously offered their time and insights to improve these manuscripts. This special issue originated from a panel of papers presented in 2012 at the annual meeting of (USA) the Society for Social Work Research: ‘Mining the Gaps: Using Ethnographic Methods to Study the Interface of Policy, Administration, and Clinical Social Work Practice’. Lastly, we thank the QSW editors for their confidence in recognizing that ethnography is a key research method in qualitative social work research and for the study of social work practice.

References


