

# The Epistemological Challenges of Social Work Intervention Research

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## Abstract

We argue that the dominance of an empiricist epistemology in social work research steers much of the research away from studying and explaining the structural forces that cause the conditions of oppression, exploitation, and social exclusion that are at the roots of the social problems addressed by the profession. It does so because it assumes that the research enterprise can be insulated from the broader cultural, socioeconomic, and political forces that inherently slant the research to echo dominant ideologies that celebrate individualism. In contrast, we present the feminist standpoint epistemology, which directs researchers to start from the daily lives and conditions of the oppressed and marginalized. Such strong objectivity leads the researchers to interrogate the structural determinants of the oppressed and marginalized. We propose that it provides a more effective starting point for social work intervention research that supports the mission of the social work profession.

## Keywords

epistemology, empiricism, intervention research, feminist standpoint epistemology

## The Mission of Social Work Research

At its core, the mission of social work has always been to identify and combat causes of oppression, exploitation, and social inequality; to eliminate conditions that lead to human suffering; and to advocate for social rights (NASW Delegate Assembly, 2008). Social work intervention research is expected to support such a mission by undertaking studies that identify the causes and mechanisms of oppression, exploitation, and inequality that lead to human suffering and thwart human capabilities. Such research should provide the basis for policies and practices that alleviate these conditions and advance social rights (Marshall, 1964; Witkin & Shimon, 1988). We propose that, with few exceptions, the “normal” science of social work fails to meet these objectives. Rather, much of the research focuses on individual-level risks and protective factors in coping with environmental adversities. Consequently, both the policy and the practice implications of such research are to promote personal transformation via individual-level intervention modalities rather than to inform structural changes.

An insightful example of where social work research has gone wrong can be found in the critique of resiliency studies by Davis (2014). Such research takes as its primary focus the determinants of African American children’s capabilities of coping and even thriving in stressful environmental conditions such as poverty, school violence, and family disorganization. As Davis points out, our attention to factors that allow “exceptional” children to thrive, despite their exposure to adverse conditions “seems to have blurred our vision and taken our eyes off the big picture, which is to reduce suffering by

promoting greater social justice and social equity” (p. 5). In other words, by focusing on exceptional children, researchers have ignored the “structural forces that are completely overpowering their personal strengths, their cultural strengths, or both” (Davis, 2014, pp. 5–6).

This atomistic orientation also manifests itself vividly in the current dominance of evidence-based research (EBR), which centers on testing the efficacy of alternative intervention modalities via experimental design. Most often, these modalities (i.e., evidence-based practice [EBP]) aim to alleviate social problems by bringing about desired individual, family, organizational, or community change (Gilgun, 2005; Hawkins, 2006; Jenson, 2005; Okpych & Yu, 2014; Proctor, 2002) while ignoring the structural sources of those problems. The leading peer-review research journals of the profession are saturated with EBP studies. A Google Scholar search shows that since its inauguration in 1991, *Research on Social Work Practice* has had about 413 entries mentioning EBP, 8 on social inequality, and only 2 on structural change. Similarly, since its first issue in 1996, *Social Work Research* published over 90 articles mentioning EBP and only 6 articles on social inequality or on structural change.

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We argue that the fundamental cause for researchers' inattention to the structural causes and remedies of oppression, exploitation, and social inequality is their failure to recognize that all knowledge is socially situated (Harding, 1992). Therefore, when researchers are situated in a social context that frames social problems from a politically and culturally dominant ideology (e.g., neoliberalism), their knowledge production will tend to be shaped by and to reproduce dominant cultural, social, and political values and ideologies which attribute social problems to individual rather than structural causes. This is especially true when their epistemological stance does not give them the tools to critically challenge and overcome the biases arising from their social position (Harding, 1992). We propose that social work researchers' adherence to a positivist epistemology fails to provide them with these critical tools to question the validity of dominant knowledge claims.

There are three key weaknesses of the positivist approach. First, positivism treats the attributes of its research subjects as objective realities, and in doing so decontextualizes them from the broader cultural, political, and economic forces that shape the lives of the subjects of the research (Benton & Craib, 2001). Second, empiricism assumes that the researchers can maintain political and cultural value neutrality. In fact, the ways they conduct the research are to a degree prejudiced by their own social and institutional location, their social values and interests, and the scientific community to which they belong (Harding, 1992; Kuhn, 1970). These forces define the topics of their research and constrain their methodologies, findings, and interpretations in ways that give prominence to individual-level factors and mask the structural sources of social problems. Third, empiricism fails to recognize that the subjects of the research have agency capacity: They are reflexive about their social circumstances, can respond and react, and may negate the very assumptions made about them that guide the researchers' agenda, methodology, and findings (Archer, 2003). Importantly, when the subjects are members of an oppressed or marginalized group, they are socially situated in ways that make it more possible for them to be aware of the political, cultural, and social forces that oppress and exploit them than it is for the nonmarginalized researcher.

We show that intervention research guided by an empiricist epistemology has steered social work research away from its mission. We argue that such research lacks the critical perspective needed to uncover and interrogate the conditions of oppression, exploitation, and inequality—the major causes of human suffering—and reinforces the dominant ideologies of the neoliberal welfare state. We then present the standpoint feminist epistemology, which takes as its starting point the insight that knowledge is socially situated. We demonstrate that grounding social work research in such a perspective would meet the mission of the profession.

### *Epistemological Choices*

An epistemology is a set of rules that distinguish knowledge from belief, prejudice, and ideology. These rules differentiate

between justifiable and unjustifiable knowledge and define the demarcation between science and pseudoscience (Lakatos, 1978). An epistemology is always linked to ontology—assumptions about the state of being. It asks: What is the nature of reality? If we make an ontological assumption that there is an objective reality independent of us, then the epistemic rules assume that the only justifiable knowledge is that which can be shown to exist empirically and independently of us. In contrast, if we make an ontological assumption that the state of nature is not an objective reality independent of us but rather socially constructed, then the epistemic rules assume that knowledge is socially constructed, and the role of the researcher is to understand how and why such reality is constructed (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 1991). Therefore, the epistemic model we adopt will determine how we define the conditions of nature (ontology); what research questions we pose; how they are studied; what conclusions are available (epistemology); and by implication, what are the normative consequences for practice. In the field of social work research, the knowledge production about the state of nature, be it poverty, mental illness, or some other social problem, guides the practical decisions about how to respond to it, as expressed in the social policies and the interventions designed for it.

### *Empiricist Epistemology in Social Work Research*

The social work profession has a long history of embracing scientific methods in order to legitimize itself and to compete with other related professions (Abbott, 1988). It has always viewed medicine and its research paradigm as the prototype of a highly institutionalized profession to emulate. This pressure for institutional isomorphism has driven both the practices and the research of the profession (Okpych & Yu, 2014). When Mary Richmond, one of the founders of the profession, published her *Social Diagnosis* in 1917, it was based on the idea that social work investigation of families in need must be based on scientific methods, adopted by medicine, in which hypotheses about the family are formulated and evaluated against the data. With this foundation, the historical evolution of social work research has been to anchor it in an empiricist tradition (Kirk & Reid, 2002). Indeed, the gold standard for social work research has generally been an empiricist epistemology.

What are the tenets of an empiricist epistemology? Ontologically, it assumes that there is a state of nature or an objective reality such as poverty, income inequality, mental illness, child maltreatment, or substance abuse that is independent of the researcher. To explain the constituent elements of that reality and the forces that shape its substance, researchers are generally expected to formulate a theory from which they postulate causal relations that are the foundation of testable hypotheses. These must be stated in such a way that they can be falsified (Popper, 1972). While not all the elements of the theory need be observable, there must be empirical referents that are linked to or derived from these elements. Most importantly, the empiricist epistemology requires scientific objectivity that rests on clear separation of factual statements from value judgments.

The postpositivists do acknowledge that our theories and values influence our observations (i.e., theory-laden observations), but they argue that researchers are still able to make observations that can contradict their theoretical predictions and thus correct for the theory ladenness of their observations (Brewer & Lambert, 2001). Ideally, the researcher uses methods such as replication of studies or triangulation of different types of data to buffer the research enterprise from values and theories that become self-confirming when they are allowed to shape data.

The debate about the appropriateness of an empiricist epistemology for social work research has often been quite intense, particularly with the publication of its critique by Heineman (1981), which elicited a flood of counter arguments and replies (Brekke, 1986; Hudson, 1982; Peile, 1988; Schuerman, 1982). That dispute centered on the obsolescence of logical empiricism and on issues such as the merits of quantitative versus qualitative studies, the appropriateness of various measurement instruments, the place of theory in guiding the research, and the desirability of methodological pluralism. From our perspective, much of that debate is sterile because it is largely focused on methodological issues and fails to address how epistemological choices, particularly empiricism, influence the purpose of research, the research questions, and its content. Our critique enriches this debate by directing attention to the extent to which empiricism influences the aims and substance of the research and the role of the researcher.

*The cultural and sociopolitical context of social work research.* Consistent with the empiricist epistemology, social work intervention research treats the research enterprise as a closed system which assumes that all the elements of the research such as the research questions, research instruments, data collection and analysis, and the interpretation of the results are immune and buffered from the cultural, political, and economic conditions in which every research enterprise is embedded. Yet, this is clearly not the case.

Within the domain of social work research, the institutions and bureaucracies that promulgate and implement social welfare policies provide much the impetus and rationale for the research and its objectives (O'Connor, 2001). With rare exceptions, these policies (e.g., the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act; the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act) and the broader institutional rules from which they emanate have always attributed the causes of the social problem under study to individual-level factors (Handler & Hasenfeld, 1991). These assumptions then shape knowledge production. For example, the dominant mode of research on homelessness looks for individual-level variables, such as criminal history, mental health status, employment history, and social support to explain and predict the risk of becoming homeless (Baum & Burnes, 1993). Similarly, poverty researchers tend to be preoccupied with why single motherhood increases the risk of becoming and remaining poor (e.g., Brady, 2009; Edin & Kefalas, 2005; McLanahan, 2009).

The research enterprise also operates within a political economy that has considerable impact on its structure and content. For example, reliance on government funding such as National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) or US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) greatly constrains the type of research issues and the expected methodologies to pursue them. Almost all the studies on welfare reform, funded by HHS and several foundations, were predicated on pursuing two key research questions: (a) What personal barriers do welfare recipients face in becoming economically self-sufficient? (b) What interventions are more effective in increasing the employability of welfare recipients? (e.g., Blank, 2002; Corcoran, Danziger, Kalil, & Seefeldt, 2000; Grogger, Karoly, & Klerman, 2002; Gueron, 1986; Jayakody, Danziger, & Pollack, 2000; Ver Ploeg & Moffitt, 2001). Such research never questions the basic normative assumption that poor single mothers are expected to participate in the labor market and that their unpaid dependent care work does not count as work (Anderson, 2004b). As O'Connor (2001, p. 215) puts it: "Despite its own claim to non-partisanship, the poverty research industry owed its success as much to the changing political climate as to its disinterested technical proficiency. One reason, no doubt, was to reduce the most volatile of social problems into quantifiable, individualized, variables—while leaving questions of politics and power unasked."

*The problem with value neutrality in social work research: The reification of social categories.* Epistemologically, social work researchers and practitioners always engage in the application of social categories into which they assign the target population such as homelessness, mental illness, substance abuse, or child maltreatment. For example, research on the mentally ill might entail the use of diagnostic categories such as *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) V. Research on homelessness (e.g., Poulin, Maguire, Metraux, & Culhane, 2010) uses the federal government's definition of "chronic homelessness" as "an individual or family with a disabling condition who has been continuously homeless for a year or more or has had at least four episodes of homelessness in the past three years" (Resources for chronic homelessness, n.d.). Studies on risks of child maltreatment involve the use of a risk factors scale which is based on a particular conception of child maltreatment (and what is not child maltreatment). Much attention is given to the validity and reliability of the measurement of such social categories. Nonetheless, the categories themselves are assumed to describe an objective reality, albeit with the possibility of some measurement errors. Yet, critical studies of such classification schemes as DSM show that they are invariably shaped by political and cultural forces. Indeed, the idea that the formulation and application of diagnostic categories, rationalized on scientific grounds, can be isolated from politics is untenable, as clearly demonstrated by the controversy over removing homosexuality from DSM-III or the inclusion of posttraumatic stress disorder (Bayer, 1981; Schacht, 1985; Scott, 1990).

More fundamentally, social categories are infused with values that emanate from dominant moral assumptions about the persons assigned to them, and these become embedded in the categories themselves. When researchers classify the subjects of their study by such sociodemographic markers as age, gender, race and ethnicity, social class, or marital status, they in fact invoke the moral valuations that underlie and generate these categories. As Tilly (1998) argues, these categories are institutionalized and practiced as mechanisms for sustaining social hierarchies of domination and subordination, privilege and deprivation, inclusion and exclusion. When social work researchers use these categories to develop and test causal models of social problems and interventions without critically appraising their sociopolitical meaning and the implicit ways in which they affect their theories, methodologies, and findings, the researchers, *de facto*, endorse and reinforce these hierarchies. For example, when researchers accept and anchor their intervention research on the social category of “welfare dependency” they, in fact, reify that single mothers on public aid suffer from moral and psychological deficiencies (Fraser & Gordon, 1994).

Similarly, following Foucault (2006, 1977), when social work researchers (and practitioners) create or rely on behavioral classifications to differentiate between normal and abnormal behaviors, or between desirable and deviant behaviors they engage in moral judgments; they set and enforce boundaries between socially acceptable and unacceptable behavior and between desirable and undesirable attributes; and importantly, they exercise social control by the very data and findings they generate about their subjects who may come to internalize these distinctions. In that sense, professional knowledge and power become fused. As recounted by Hacking (1991), the evolution of the category “child abuse” and the knowledge claims about it have shifted from a disease model (i.e., “battered child syndrome”) to social-psychological explanations (e.g., failure of mother-child bonding; deficits of single-parent households) and have led into “dividing more and more types of behavior into normal and deviant” (p. 287). It established sharper demarcations between appropriate and inappropriate parenting, and over time increased the social controls over parents and children deemed to fall into such category.

A key consequence of the use of such categories is that they become self-reifying. Both the researchers and the practitioners attribute to the subjects of their research and practice the behavioral characteristics defined by the categories. As noted by the feminist philosopher Haslanger (2012), we infer the attributes of the target population such as being “poor single mothers” on the basis of actual observed regularities about them which we assume are the “true” attributes of women in such a category. Yet, these attributes are not necessarily inherent to poor single mothers. Instead, they may be a result of the women’s accommodations to real constraints that they encounter—constraints that are not fully considered by the researchers.

*Whose voices are represented in the research?* Social work values privilege the voices of the oppressed and marginalized. By contrast, social work research from an empiricist epistemology

will tend to privilege the voices of the researchers who are expected to adhere to the tenets of scientific objectivity. Such a perspective fails to acknowledge that dominant knowledge claims are always socially and culturally situated. If we examine a system of oppression from the perspective of the oppressed, we are likely to obtain an interpretation of the system that differs markedly from dominant interpretations. Desmond’s (2012) research on the high rate of eviction of minority women in poor neighborhoods provides a case in point. Contemporary theories attribute eviction to housing dissatisfaction, gentrification, and slum clearance. His research, which starts from the perspective of the women themselves, traces eviction to the broader social policies and forms of discrimination that disparately impact these women. Through analysis of court records data he finds that in high-poverty neighborhoods, the eviction rate is considerably higher in black and Hispanic than in white neighborhoods. More importantly, women are twice as likely as men to be evicted. To understand the mechanisms that produce such disparities, he interrogated them from the women’s perspective. Unlike the men, the women, particularly single mothers, could not meet frequent financial crises and loss of income by engaging in the informal economy because of their inability to access affordable childcare or fear of losing their children to protective services if they became involved in illicit work. While the men could negotiate with the landlords to do work for them in lieu of rent owed, this option was not available to the women who were already burdened by childcare, welfare requirements, and formal work obligations. (Desmond, 2012, p. 113). Moreover, the women reported that the landlords discriminated against them for having children and looked for opportunities to evict them. Once evicted, the only choices available to the women were to move to even worse living situations which only increased their risk of being evicted.

Researchers operating from the perspective of an empiricist epistemology generally assume that there is a broad consensus about the definition of social needs and the desired responses to them. Yet, underlying these definitions are value assumptions that are often quite contested and are influenced by one’s position in the social, racial, and gender hierarchy. The assumed consensus fails to recognize that different oppressed and marginalized groups such as racial minorities, women of color, people with disabilities, or those experiencing homelessness have their own distinct conceptions of their social needs and the desired responses to them, and that these vary by the context of their life circumstances. Still, these distinct conceptions are often given less credence by the researchers.

All in all, when social work intervention research does not fully acknowledge and counteract the broader social, political, economic, and cultural forces that shape it, the research is likely to reflect and reify the aims and interests that underlie those forces. In doing so, it screens out other, potentially more fruitful sources of knowledge. In particular, it is steered away from studying the structural conditions that lead to and maintain conditions of oppression, exploitation, and inequality. Instead, it medicalizes or otherwise individualizes what are in

reality social problems requiring social-structural remedies. Indeed, because stigmatized populations have no voice in shaping the objectives and desired outcomes of intervention research, it screens out the voices of those who come face to face with the conditions of their oppression.

### *Feminist Standpoint Epistemology*

Feminist standpoint epistemology addresses the three main critiques of empiricism: (1) it considers the sociopolitical and cultural contexts that influence the essence of the research enterprise, (2) it rejects the possibility of the value neutrality of the researcher (and the practitioner), and (3) it brings the world views of the subjects of the research to center stage. Most importantly, it explicitly directs researchers to start from the daily lives and conditions of the oppressed and marginalized, and to study the conditions, determinants, and consequences of their oppression. At the same time, it insists that such a study must be empirically rigorous and valid.

*The impact of social hierarchies on the production of knowledge.* Feminist standpoint epistemology starts with the recognition that social hierarchies deeply influence scholarly inquiry of social problems. As articulated by Harding (1992, p. 442),

Knowledge claims are always socially situated, and the failure by dominant groups critically and systematically to interrogate their advantaged social situation and the effects of such advantages on their beliefs leaves their social situation a scientifically and epistemologically disadvantaged one for generating knowledge.

She goes on to state that “these accounts end up legitimating exploitative ‘practical politics’ even when those who produce them have good intentions” (p. 442).

A key characteristic of such knowledge is the objectification of subordinates. Haslanger (2012, p. 65) proposes that when a person becomes objectified, it occurs in a relationship of domination in which she is treated as an object in order to satisfy the interests of the dominant person who has the power to enforce his or her views over her. Importantly, the attributes assigned to the person being objectified are viewed by the objectifier as *true of her nature* rather being enforced on her as a product of oppression or exploitation (p. 68). That is

The illusion in successful objectification is not in the reports of its consequences—the women who have been forced to submit do submit; the illusion is in, so to speak, the modality of such a claim—women submit by nature. (p. 69)

Haslanger (2012) terms such beliefs about the nature of women “projective beliefs” which are false.

Researchers from dominant groups who do not interrogate the situated nature of knowledge are apt to start their inquiry from the perspective of such projective beliefs. These beliefs become the starting point of knowledge claims that focus on the attributes of those who experience oppression rather than on the

root causes. Such knowledge production tends to mistake the consequences of oppression as root causes. It informs practical decision making (e.g., policy making that individualizes structural problems) which misleads us into pursuing the wrong policy and practice solutions and makes the patterns of domination invisible.

*Resisting value neutrality.* Feminist standpoint epistemology sees claims of neutrality as complicit in the reification and reproduction of social hierarchies. According to Haslanger (2012), researchers who objectify the subjects of research appeal to norms of objectivity and value neutrality to rationalize their objectification. She terms the endorsement of such norms “assumed objectivity” because it enables the objectifier to claim that the observations and findings about the state of nature of the oppressed are “genuine.” As she puts it,

If we look neutrally on the reality of gender so produced, the harm done will not be perceptible as harm. What appears to be neutral or objective is one which will under conditions of gender hierarchy, reinforce the social arrangements on which such hierarchy depends. (Haslanger, 2012, p. 69)

She concludes that “a general endorsement of the ideal of assumed objectivity reinforces the objectifier’s position of power and contributes to his ongoing success.” (p. 73). These processes of objectification can apply to all patterns of domination. Haslanger also proposes that one can be a collaborator of objectification simply by accepting the “state of nature” produced by the objectifier. This has certainly been the case in the studies of “welfare dependency” that objectify single mothers on aid as lacking in work ethic (Handler & Hasenfeld, 2007). In other words, a researcher may become a collaborator if she accepts that the objectified attributes of the subordinates she is studying meet the norms of the assumed rationality.

*Starting from the perspective of the marginalized.* Recognizing that social hierarchies and patterns of domination generate objectified knowledge about devalued people which is inherently false, a standpoint perspective uses the life experiences of the oppressed to critique dominant knowledge claims. It is a form of ideological critique where the ideologies, assumptions, and knowledge claims of the dominant stakeholders who set the parameters of the research *on* rather than *with* marginalized people are interrogated. The research questions start with and are framed by the lived experiences of the oppressed and marginalized. Collins (2000), for example, argues that African American women, particularly poor women, have common and distinct experiences of white domination which are critical to capture and document in order to inform research from their life experiences. However, these life experiences are only the starting point of the inquiry. A standpoint perspective calls on the researcher to identify, document, and uncover the mechanisms that create and maintain the conditions of oppression that shape the experiences of marginalized groups. Often it requires the researcher to collect and analyze large quantitative

and longitudinal data sets such as on the effects of living in poor segregated neighborhoods (e.g., Sharkey, 2013) or on racial disparities in access to health care (Smedley, Stith, Nelson, & Institute of Medicine, 2003).

Research on marginalized groups that is not informed by their own voices and life experiences is likely to be biased. For example, ethnographic research on poor single mothers, when framed from the perspective of the researchers' privileged values, leads them to study why poor single mothers fail to adhere to middle-class values about marriage and child rearing (e.g., Edin & Kefalas, 2005). In contrast, Morgen, Acker, and Weigt (2010) adopt a feminist standpoint epistemology to study how poor single mothers experienced welfare reform in Oregon. By taking the perspective of the women and giving them a central voice in the study (using both quantitative and qualitative methods), they debunk much of what is passed as the "success" of welfare reform. They show how the diminished safety net and low wage work keep the women in poverty and force them into daily struggles in meeting basic needs. By following the women after they exit welfare, they vividly demonstrate how their lives have been anything but harsh. They also pay close attention to the interactions between the social workers and the recipients in three welfare offices and how these interactions are shaped by race, gender, and class. Listening to the social workers, who are burdened with large caseloads and few resources, they document how many of them question the very logic of welfare reform which forces the women with low job skills into the labor market. By demonstrating the failure of welfare reform to improve the lives of the poor women and their families, the researchers are able to argue for a very different set of welfare policies that center on strengthening the social rights of poor families.

Admittedly, the beliefs of the marginalized and oppressed may themselves be biased and incorporate dominant ideologies. It is what critical theory terms "false consciousness." Oppressed groups may find it difficult to express their distinct consciousness precisely because the dominant groups suppress them (Collins, 2000). Nonetheless, close attention to their actual daily experiences and struggles can mitigate against such biases. Also, being attuned to the stories and narratives of the marginalized often reveals that at least some are quite aware of and are able to articulate their conditions of oppression. For example, Alexander (2011, p. 19) in her study of the mass incarceration of African American as a new form of Jim Crow points out that "those who were incarcerated had little difficulty in recognizing the parallels between mass incarceration and Jim Crow. Many former prisoners have told me, 'It's slavery on the inside; Jim Crow when you get out.'"

In particular, as Collins (2000) proposes, when the marginalized can participate in dialogic groups free of coercion, a collective group consciousness becomes possible and false consciousness can be shed, especially when the groups are presented with research findings on how policies and practices may not represent who they are and what they need. Kerr (2003), in doing his doctoral dissertation on homelessness, recognized that "Defining the homeless as a primary audience

would be a significant act in and of itself, and an acknowledgement of the inability of the present political process to deal with the phenomenon of homelessness" (p. 30). He initiated the Cleveland Homeless Oral History Project in which homeless persons participated in weekly workshops to discuss and record their life experiences that were then broadcast on public radio. It became clear to him that they were quite articulate about the failures of the homeless services industry, and their collective voices led to protests resulting in a major reorganization of Cleveland's emergency shelters. As he puts (Kerr, 2003, p. 32) it, persons experiencing homelessness became an "ideal peer review group due to their cynicism, disillusionment, and unwillingness to be sold false hope."

### *Concluding Thoughts*

We argue that the mission of the social work profession is to identify and address conditions of oppression, exploitation, and inequality which are the main causes of human suffering and to advance the social rights of the marginalized. Social work research can meet this mission by engaging in studies that expose the social mechanisms that generate conditions of oppression and can, in turn, promulgate the policies and practices that will reduce or alleviate them. Yet, the dominance of an empiricist epistemology in social work research steers much of the research away from studying and explaining the structural forces that cause the conditions of oppression, exploitation, and social exclusion that are at the roots of the social problems addressed by the profession. It does so because it assumes that the research enterprise can be insulated from the broader cultural, socioeconomic, and political forces that inherently slant the research to echo dominant ideologies that celebrate individualism. In particular, it fails to incorporate a critical perspective about the impact of social hierarchies in its search for explanatory models and to give full voice to the oppressed and marginalized.

As we have shown, such an epistemology as "normal science" tends to objectify the attributes of the oppressed and marginalized as their "true" nature, which are in fact false. It promulgates social policies and practices that reinforce these false attributes. We argue that to engage in research that is aligned with the mission of the social work profession, social work research needs to embrace a standpoint epistemology which adopts a critical lens that enables the researcher to uncover and interrogate the structural causes of social problems.

To be sure, there are a number of alternative epistemologies such as social constructionism, hermeneutics, and deconstruction that also share with the standpoint perspective the insight that the social construction of categories is a manifestation of power relations and social hierarchies. Social constructionism, for example, challenges the view that knowledge is based on objective, unbiased observations of the world, and it rejects the assumption that there is an objective reality separate from our representation of that reality. It further recognizes that knowledge and social action go together (Burr, 2003). That

is, different constructions lead to different kind of social action, resulting, for example, in the social inclusion and exclusion of people assigned specific categories such as race, gender, and age. Moreover, it assumes that the language we use in social interactions constructs our world and thus shapes our knowledge of the world. Therefore, language is a form of social action. (Burr, 2003).

However, unlike the standpoint feminist epistemology, constructionism and other antiempiricist epistemologies lack a theoretical lens or a critical perspective that interrogates the mechanisms that create and sustain such conditions of exploitation that stratify individuals and groups into hierarchies of privilege and deprivation, domination and subordination, and deprive certain groups of their social rights. Some antiempiricist epistemologies, such as constructionism and deconstruction, also border on relativism in the sense that they reject the idea of objectivity and the possibility that there exist social forces that create real conditions of suffering no matter how they might be constructed. In contrast, a standpoint epistemology recognizes that conditions of oppression are real. As MacKinnon (1989, p. 123) reminds us

Epistemologically speaking, women know the male world is out there because it hits them in the face. No matter how they think about it, try to think it out of existence or into a different shape, it remains independently real, keeps forcing them into certain molds.

A standpoint epistemology ensures that the researchers begin with and articulate their research questions from the position of the oppressed and marginalized. It starts by bringing their life experiences and conditions to the forefront of the research enterprise. It problematizes the assumed attributes of the subjects of the research recognizing that they have been objectified by those in dominant positions. The research questions themselves arise from and are informed by life experiences and conditions of the subjects. It requires the researchers to obtain and analyze data from multiple sources that document these conditions of oppression and their consequences. It also means giving the subjects an active voice in the research enterprise through various strategies such as detailed accounts of their experiences from their perspective to organizing them as a collective that can dialog about their life circumstances without coercion. A standpoint epistemology pushes for “strong objectivity” (Harding, 1992) because it forces the researchers to challenge the normal science of doing research and questions both the validity of the measures and the findings that it generates.

We need to acknowledge that a standpoint epistemology sets certain constraints on the researchers. To fully engage in it requires that the researchers themselves participate in political action in the cause of the oppressed group under study in order to truly appreciate their conditions of oppression. It also requires that the researchers, who are not situated in the social location of their subjects, interrogate and reflect on how their own social location influences their research (Grasswick,

2013). Strong objectivity can be achieved through such reflexive analysis and interrogation of knowledge from the perspective of the oppressed (Harding, 1992).

Finally, it is important to point out that standpoint epistemology is criticized on several grounds. For one, the standpoint epistemology raises the question whether a researcher who is not a member of the oppressed group can still assume a standpoint perspective. From the standpoint epistemology, a researcher who is not a member can still participate in the research enterprise but cannot assume a dominant role (Anderson, 2012). Related, because patterns of oppression often reflect the intersection of several conditions of subordination—not just gender, race, or class, for example—it is difficult to determine which standpoint perspective should be privileged. As the postmodern feminists argue, there cannot be a unified feminist standpoint perspective (Lugones & Spelman, 1983, cited by Anderson, 2012). In response, standpoint feminists recognize that while intersectionality results in complex experiences of oppression, nonetheless, social categories such as gender or race are fundamental mechanisms that oppress all those who fall into those categories.

In a broader sense, the very idea that a standpoint epistemology is dedicated to identify and explain conditions of oppression, and articulate strategies to eliminate them draws a sharp criticism that it is unable to pursue the truth because it is saddled with value assumptions and political motives. In response, adherents to a standpoint epistemology point out that it is quite laudable and legitimate to have normative values, such as, for example, the desire to create a more just criminal justice system and to allow them to inform the research questions and guide the research agenda (Alexander, 2011). It is also appropriate to evaluate research findings by the degree to which they support or refute certain normative values, for example, whether a basic annual income guarantee reduces the incentive to work or increases marital dissolution and the moral implications of such findings (Robins, 1980). As noted by Anderson (2004a, p. 11), rather than reject the use of values as a guiding principle, what is required is “to ensure that value judgments do not operate to drive inquiry into a predetermined conclusion. This is our foundational criterion for distinguishing legitimate and illegitimate uses of values in science.”

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