Editorial

In Search of Subjugated Knowledge

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I can't say who I am unless you agree I'm real.

—Imamu Amiri Baraka

The above lines simply and eloquently express a vision of knowledge, oppression, power, and truth that have enormous implications for social work practitioners, educators, and researchers. Sharing this poet's vision, postmodern French philosopher Michael Foucault (1980) has taught us that knowledge and power are one, that "we are subjugated to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth" (p. 93).

Social workers, who are deeply concerned about oppressed people, poor people, people of color, women, and people suffering from disabling emotional problems and who are committed to the empowerment of their clients, must examine this intimate power–knowledge relationship. Social workers must reflect on the extent to which we may unwittingly and well meaningly disempower our clients through our role as "expert," through the authority of our knowledge.

Foucault (1980) studied the development and institutionalization of what he termed "global unitary knowledges" that, through a struggle over time, have come to subjugate a whole set of knowledges and disqualify them as "beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity" (p. 82). In his analysis, the privileging of the methods of science and unitary knowledges have led to the subjugation of previously established erudite knowledge and of local, popular, indigenous knowledge located at the margins of society. These subjugated knowledges have been exiled from the "legitimate domains of formal knowledge" (White & Epston, 1990, p. 26).

Foucault's concern is not only with the centralized political, economic, and institutional regimes that produce privileged knowledges but also with their exercise of power in the capillaries as they flow out and are practiced at the local level. Or, as Parker (1989) has written, "The knowledge that circulates in discourse is employed in everyday interaction in relations of submission and domination" (p. 63).

For example, that powerful global and unitary body of knowledge, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Third Edition* (American Psychiatric Association, 1980), which is centrally established and encoded in economic, medical, and educational systems, is practiced at the most local level—in the relationship between a social worker and a client. When a social worker is required by an agency's funding needs or by the rules of third-party payers to attach a diagnostic label to a client, a powerful and privileged classification system has entered this relationship and in all likelihood has affected the worker's thinking, the relationship, and the client's self-definition.

Foucault's (1980) analysis can, perhaps, best be understood through illustrations. The well-known story of how incest has been understood is a dramatic example. After initially thinking that the cause of emotional disturbance in adult women was their being sexually abused as children, Freud came to believe that such memories reported by women were not of real events but were childhood fantasies, evidence of infantile sexual wishes. This scientific knowledge was so reassuring and served such powerful interests that it was maintained for almost 100 years. It was maintained so successfully that the knowledge of incest victims was subjugated to the extent that victims themselves denied their own experience.

Another example of the hegemony of global, unitary knowledge has been the invisibility of women and of people of color in the social sciences, constructed by white males with a few generally marginalized and quieted alternate voices. Other examples include the definition of homosexuality as a disease with resulting elaborate and even destructive protocols for cure and the widely adopted notion of the schizophrenogenic mother and schizophrenic family.

The political nature of knowledge is well illustrated by the fact that each of these privileged truths has been challenged, not primarily by alternate theories from the sciences but by sociopolitical movements that lead to what Foucault (1980) called the insurrection of subjugated knowledge. The women's movement encouraged women to break silence and tell their stories and stimulated the critique of the theory that incest memories were fantasy. The civil rights movement and the rich flowering of African American literature has begun to make visible the African American experience (Collins, 1990). Modern African American women writers are not only bringing forth current subjugated knowledge but are going back to reclaim the ancient knowledges of long lost early writers such as Zora Neale Hurston and Maria Stewart. In going back these writers are able to connect the historic and current struggles. Gay and lesbian pride, which was sparked by the Stonewall resistance, potentiated the insurrection of yet another subjugated knowledge and the official depathologizing of homosexuality, if not the eradication of homophobia. The mental patients' rights movements and activism on the part of the families of mentally ill people have led to a revision of the discourse about and treatment of mentally ill people and their families.

In each of these examples, oppressed and marginalized populations whose experiences had been described,

CCC Code: 0037-8046/92 $3.00

defined, and categorized by powerful experts rose up to tell their own stories, to bear witness to their own experience, and to define themselves. Through this process, through this insurrection, they have become empowered, and as they have become empowered their own truths and their own knowledges have begun to be validated and legitimized.

What does this mean for social work practice and research? How can we avoid participating in oppression? How can we lend our efforts to the insurrection of subjugated knowledge and the empowerment of our marginalized client populations?

First, in research and practice we must abandon the role of expert, we must abandon the notion that we are objective observers and our clients are passive subjects to be described and defined. In Foucault's (1980) words, "We must entertain the claims to attention of local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledges against the claims of a unitary body of theory which would filter, hierarchize, and order them in the name of some true knowledge and some arbitrary idea of what constitutes a science and its objects" (p. 83). We must not appropriate those whom we would try to know and understand by "colonizing" their experiences, by interpreting them from the perspective of the privileged expert (Opie, 1992). We must enter into a collaborative search for meaning with our clients and listen to their voices, their narratives, and their constructions of reality. It is significant that studies grounded in the subject's experience, that speak in the voices of oppressed people, and that promote the insurrection of subjugated knowledge have become classics. They are so immediate, so alive, and they teach us so much. Meyerhoff's *Number Our Days* (1978), Liebow's *Tally's Corner* (1968), Erikson's *Everything in Its Path* (1978), and Stack's *All Our Kin* (1974) are such works.

Recently in our own social work literature, Williams (1991) published a volume on black teenage mothers that brings to us their own perspectives, their own experiences, and their own words and presents a very different kind of picture than the large-scale epidemiological studies.

It is really not so complicated; we must ask people and then listen. And as we listen, we must attend to difference, to particularity, the contradictory, the paradoxical. As we do this, we will attend to that which may be quantifiably insignificant but whose presence may question a more conventional interpretation and expand understanding (Opie, 1992). Epidemiological studies are useful and important, but direct practice must be built on local knowledge, on the particular, on attention to difference and, most vital, on multiple voices. The questions to be asked and the interpretations of the data must be developed in collaboration between the researcher or practitioner and the one to be understood who is, after all, the expert. Knowledge and power are one, and when clients and subjects are collaborators in the discovery process, if their expertise is valued and affirmed, they are empowered.

This volume of *Social Work* seems at first to contain a range of somewhat unrelated articles about women, racism, academia, research, and people of color. But if we listen to Foucault, if we agree with him that knowledge is power and power is knowledge, we recognize the deep connection between the empowerment of oppressed people and the development and distribution of knowledge.

There is a painful paradox in being a professional and being committed to empowerment. A key part of the definition of a profession is the possession of knowledge and, in fact, the ownership of a specific area of knowledge. As professionals we are supposed to be experts, but the power in our expertise can disempower our clients and thus subvert the goals of our profession.

How can we resolve this paradox? Must we discard our knowledge, our accumulated professional wisdom? This would leave us adrift without anchor or compass. We need not discard our knowledge, but we must be open to local knowledge, to the narratives and truths of our clients. We must participate with them in the insurrection of subjugated knowledge. We must listen to honor and validate our clients' expertise. We must learn to bracket our knowledge, to put it aside so it will not shape our questions and our listening and cause a barrier between us and the people we would understand. Furthermore, we must not privilege our professional knowledge and we must let ourselves hear information from our clients that would challenge our views. We must attend. We have been mistaken before and we will be mistaken again. But we are only wrong when we continue to cling to our mistaken truths.

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