Identity and Multicultural Social Work Research:
A Reflection in Process

Michael S. Spencer

Abstract: *Personal identity and multicultural issues have relevance for social work researchers as well as practitioners. Written specifically for* Advances in Social Work, *this self-revelatory and inspirational article by Dr. Michael Spencer is based, in part, on an address he delivered at the January 2001 Annual Conference of the Society for Social Work and Research. Michael Spencer encourages social work educators, researchers, and practitioners to join with him in the conversations needed to address identity and multicultural issues as they pertain to service-related research. In particular, he challenges social workers to recognize and manage their identity-based personal biases and preferences, and use both quantitative and qualitative research perspectives in ways that acknowledge the uniqueness of diverse peoples. He recommends that the processes of collaboration and self-reflection characterize the conduct of multicultural social work research, and urges researchers to translate their findings into practitioner-friendly forms to facilitate application in service delivery.*

Keywords: Identity, multicultural, social work, research

As an academic researcher dedicated to cultural diversity and social justice issues, I have often found myself struggling with competing theories, methodologies, and ethical considerations. Striking a balance within these areas has been a struggle, but it has also led me to think critically of the role of multiculturalism in social work research.

I entered academia at a time when social work was establishing its credibility in the world of federally-funded research and was fortunate to see an evolution in the way in which the profession has advanced in research. The establishment of NIMH-funded centers in the mid-1990s to develop the infrastructure for sustained programs of research was most beneficial to the field. At about the same time, the Society for Social Work and Research and the Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research were chartered for membership, and these organizations highlighted the work of social work researchers and set a standard for scholarship. While multiculturalism has long informed social work and its values, the absence of critical theory and social justice in social work researchers' empirical work has troubled me. Certainly, cultural variables were included in studies, and there are numerous examples of research in social work that have invested in proving neg-

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ative stereotypes and biases of cultural groups as myths, but I continued to feel that something was missing.

As a social justice educator, I have been honored to read the works of individuals such as Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Ronald Takaki, Howard Zinn, Paulo Freire, Peggy McIntosh, Beverly Tatum, and others who have influenced my thinking around multiculturalism and social justice (e.g., Freire, 1970, 1973; hooks, 1981, 1984, 1994, 1995; Lorde, 1984; Takaki, 1993, 1994; Tatum, 1997; Zinn 1980, 1997). These works embody the notions of social transformation, social action, critical consciousness, self-reflection, and the inter-sectionality of multiple identities, whether they encompass race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability status, or spiritual orientation. I wondered why these works are absent from the social work literature. Were our advancements in research and methodologies incongruent with this literature base? How could research be conducted as I had been trained to do and was expected to do as part of my tenure and promotion and be true to my deep values in diversity and social justice?

I have been trained in quantitative research and have found these methods useful, particularly in my study of racism, poverty, and mental health. This research allows me to examine the association between inequality and well-being in a credible and authoritative manner. These methods use probability to establish the statistical significance of the relationship between such variables in an objective and unbiased manner. However, as I study the epistemology of knowledge development, I note the increasing skepticism of this notion of objectivity (e.g., Grinnell, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Is our research not influenced by the questions we choose to study? And, are these questions not influenced by our personal life experiences and the passion that drives us to study these relationships?

Qualitative research holds some promise in addressing these epistemological issues with its emphasis on context and meaning. However, not all qualitative research is necessarily transformative, nor does doing qualitative research ensure advances in social justice. There are paradigms in qualitative methodologies, such as post-positivism, critical theory, and constructivism that recognize the subjectivity of the researcher and ask the researcher to examine this subjectivity as part of the process (e.g., Bryman & Burgess, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). These paradigms acknowledge that what we know as "truth" is influenced by social, political, economic, cultural, ethnic, and gender factors that crystallize over time. Our research findings are not developed in a vacuum of objectivity, but rather are mediated by values. Thus, multiple realities are possible; they are realities that are socially constructed and influenced by social, cultural, and historical contexts.

Two methods that parallel these paradigmatic positions include community-based research (CBR) (e.g., Israel, Schultz, Parker, & Becker, 1998) and participatory action research (PAR) (e.g., Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Stringer, 1999). These methods deserve our consideration because they recognize context and because they appear to be well-grounded in values that are congruent with social work ethics. CBR and PAR focus on community needs and resources, collaboration, and social transformation. These methods acknowledge that the researcher and participant are interactively linked and that research find-

ings are inseparable from this relationship. CBR and PAR emphasize a continual dialectic of iteration, analysis, assessment, reiteration, and reanalysis (Israel et al., 1998). CBR and PAR are also appealing because we are able to use both quantitative and qualitative methods. House (1994) notes that "choice does not have to be between a mechanistic science and an intentionalist humanism, but rather one of conceiving science as the social activity that it is, an activity that involves considerable judgment, regardless of methods employed" (p. 19, cited in Israel et al., 1998). While these methods are only beginning to gain recognition and legitimacy, I am hopeful that they will become a standard in social work research.

CBR and PAR also have advantages related to multiculturalism and social justice. For example, the principles of CBR strive for equitable participation and collaboration, building on the strengths of the community, a co-learning and empowerment process that attends to social inequalities, and critical subjectivity, which encourages a self-reflective, engaged, and self-critical role of the researcher. Despite these advantages, less has been written on how this is done and how it is integrated into the research process. For example, how do our multiple identities and social positionality fit into CBR and PAR? Do we adequately consider our personal and professional identities in our research? Can we incorporate self-reflection and critical consciousness around both our privileged and oppressed statuses? And, can we tolerate epistemological differences and incorporate this self-reflective process in both quantitative and qualitative methods?

In the midst of contemplating these issues, I received an invitation to present my current thoughts on the practice of multicultural social work research as part of a plenary panel at the 2001 Society for Social Work and Research Conference. Upon completing my draft of the presentation, I had mixed emotions. First, I felt a great deal of satisfaction. I felt the presentation could play an influential role in how social work researchers view the role of personal and professional identity in research. It also had the potential to promote CBR and PAR as potential vehicles for transformative research. By delivering this message to a large group of my colleagues, I could be a part of the legitimization of this kind of work and perhaps reduce the struggles of future social work researchers around the practice of multicultural social work research. On the other hand, I felt considerable apprehension around whether social work researchers would "get it" and whether they would dismiss my presentation in favor of mainstream methodologies that emphasize objectivity. I was pleasantly surprised with the reception I received following the presentation and was further honored by an invitation to publish my presentation in this journal. So, now I take a second risk and present my thoughts to a broader audience of social work educators, researchers, and practitioners. I suffer from the same sense of apprehension, but this time with greater hope that we do "get it," or at least that we can further the discourse in this area through dialogue. I look forward to your reactions and comments so that we can further define best practices for multicultural social work research. The following sections of this paper are derived from my Presidential Plenary Panel presentation at the Society for Social Work and Research Conference in Atlanta, Georgia, on January 22, 2001. The paper concludes with further reflection and recommendations.

INTRODUCTION

I would like to begin by presenting an introduction that I gave in 1998 for a commencement keynote, slightly modified. Let it serve as background for this paper as well as a further elaboration of who I am.

"I took my place on this faculty four years ago. As stated in my introduction, my research interests are in the area of race/ethnicity, poverty, and mental health. I do research on the mental health of children and also study the inter-sectionality between issues of race, class, and mental health among vulnerable populations.

But the question remains, who am I? To begin with, I am part Native Hawaiian, Chinese, Japanese, English, and Irish. I am a man, heterosexual, a partner, the father of three children, a coach, a son, and a brother. I am an assistant professor, a researcher, a teacher, an advisor, a mentor, a friend, an ally, an advocate, and an activist.

I am a member of an oppressed group and have experienced overt, institutional, and everyday racism, but I have also walked this earth with many privileges. As a person of color, I understand what it is like for people to assume that I got my job at Michigan because of my race, to be described by people who don't know me by my race, and to be told that I am obsessed with racism and that I should get over it.

As a person born into a lower socioeconomic background, I know what it is like to use food stamps. To bear the cold because I couldn't afford to purchase a good coat. To hear your child tell you that he'd like a new pair of shoes only if there is extra money this month, when the soles of his shoes have torn off.

As a man, I understand what it is like for people to assume you are the breadwinner, that you make the decisions, and that you are the head of household. I understand what it is like not to fear that I will be sexually assaulted or harassed in my own home, my place of employment, or on the streets. I know what it is like to be privy to conversations that are sexually degrading to women, not to have to put my career on hold to bear children, and not be labeled pushy or having my time of the month when I am assertive, when I need to make a point and be heard.

As a straight person, I know what it is like to receive benefits through the institution of marriage, to have my love and affection for my partner recognized and cherished by our families, to have peace of mind that if I were to die, my life insurance would offer some security. No one bats an eye if I take my partner's hand or give her a loving kiss on the cheek. I have the privilege of flaunting my heterosexuality.

As an able-bodied person, I eat where I want to eat, work where I want to work, go where I want to go. I never have to worry if I'll be able to enter the building, or whether there will be a translator so I can understand the speaker at a plenary address. Each year we put up our Christmas tree, exchange gifts with family, and send greeting cards, and rarely stop to think about the

religious persecution and anti-Semitism to which I am blind. I can be sure that there won't be meetings or classes scheduled on my religious holidays.

As a citizen of America, I am able to enjoy the riches of the wealthiest country in the history of civilization, to watch on television the bombing of another country from afar, to hear the cries of people dying of hunger and disease, to impose embargoes of basic necessities against a country of people, while I sip my café latte and indulge in a cream cheese everything bagel on South University.

As a social worker, I work with the oppressed, the stressed, the mentally and physically challenged, the runaway youth, the battered woman, the gay adolescent, the child at school, the family in crisis, the community in need, the city in turmoil, the policies that are unjust, and the coalitions that are in conflict. I strive for critical consciousness and self-awareness. I fight for equality, for social justice, for diversity, for affirmative action, for social change, for freedom, and the hope that one day we can look each other in the eye and honestly say there is one race, the human race.

I am all of these things and more. I am all these things at once, in complex interaction with society. Sometimes, one of these identities will have greater significance, some of these things I cannot forget. Some of these things society does not let me forget. And some of these things I rarely ever think about at all. This is the dynamic of oppression and privilege. I am sure you could come up with your own list, for each of us live extraordinary lives, and I invite you to go through this process sometime in your life."

This introduction is used to illustrate several points. First, it emphasizes the need for recognition of my personal identity, not only for the ways in which I have experienced oppression, but more importantly, for how I experience unearned privilege in my everyday life. Second, recognizing my identity allows me to be critically conscious of the biases I bring to inter-group relationships, my worldview, and how I define social justice. Third, this introduction informs my views of social work research. It expands my view of multiculturalism beyond race and ethnicity, examines my multiple identities, and asks us to further investigate the complexity of our own identities as social workers, researchers, teachers, sons, and daughters.

IDENTITY AND MULTICULTURAL SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH

Identity is defined primarily by social psychologists as a process and a product. Erikson (1980) states that exploring identity allows us to answer the questions "Who am I?" and "Where do I belong?" Identity exploration is also a dynamic, lifelong process that is situational and informed by our social interactions. Additionally, our multiple social group memberships provide us with an understanding of social issues and social problems that may be defined very differently by members of another identity group, culture, or community. The ways in which we, as researchers, understand these problems influence the questions we ask and the hypotheses we posit. Further insight into our prejudices and how our unearned privilege affects our cross-cultural work gives us a clearer sense of how oppressive practices are precursors to social problems. In traditional models of research, we strive for objectivity. However, objectivity is often a luxury in multi-

cultural research efforts. Rather than striving for objectivity, greater productivity may be obtained by acknowledging the multiple realities of the human experience so that we might not let our biases get in the way of our research. I believe that this exercise in claiming our identities has the potential to produce research that is more sensitive to the values and practices of diverse communities.

An important point made by symbolic interaction theorists is that identity affects not only how we view ourselves, but also how others perceive us (Denzin, 1992; Prus, 1996). Not only do we prescribe our own identity, identity is also ascribed to us. When we enter a community to do research, they will have opinions of us, our motives and trustworthiness, and work with us accordingly. Even when we are members of that particular community, our motives may be challenged on the basis of one of our other identities, such as being a researcher. Community views of us as researchers are rooted in historical conflict and mistrust. Research represents knowledge, power, and resources. While we may believe that our research will have some benefit to their community, many communities are also well aware of the injustices that have been committed through research, and many have participated in previous research efforts only to see little change. Recognition of this potential barrier to research is the first step toward building rapport and trust with communities and increases the chance that they will participate in the research. Thus, taking a collaborative approach to understanding the needs and strengths of the community, their definition of the problem, and the questions that they would like answered has the potential to further enhance the validity and cultural relevance of the research findings.

OPERATIONALIZING CULTURE AND IDENTITY

Researchers can also increase the validity of results by better operationalizing the constructs used to measure socio-cultural differences. For example, why do we include measures of race in our studies? Typically, we include race as a basic demographic control variable that we want to explain away. At other times, we are trying to control for the complexities of cultural experiences, differential exposure to risk and protective factors attributed to race, or injustices in our societal structure. However, often we do not explicitly measure these things, and, therefore, are left to speculate about the source of racial differences. Multi-cultural studies that incorporate measures of identity (how closely individuals affiliate and draw strength from a specific racial or ethnic group) or measures of racism and discrimination excite me most. Recent research by individuals such as David Williams, Nancy Krieger, and some of my social work colleagues have shown that racism and discrimination have a significant effect on health and mental health status (e.g., Krieger, 1990; Krieger, Rowley, Herman, Avery, & Phillips, 1993; Williams, 1999, 2000; Williams, Yu, Jackson, & Anderson, 1997), that identity can have a moderating effect on this relationship (e.g., Spencer, Icard, Harachi, Catalano, & Oxford, 2000; Walters, 1999; Walters & Simoni, 1993; Williams, Spencer & Jackson, 1999), and that the meaning attributed to whether individuals seek help for health and mental health problems is informed by cultural values and attitudes towards the mainstream culture (e.g., Snowden, 1999a, 1999b).

We may also better understand the socio-cultural meaning that communities attribute to constructs by explicitly probing for such responses through the use of

methodological techniques such as cognitive interviewing. I participated in a study where we probed for the socio-cultural meaning of mental health outcomes in the administration of the Composite International Diagnostic Interview, a commonly used measure of psychiatric disorders in survey research. After each question, we followed up with a probe to illicit further understanding of socio-cultural meaning. For example, after asking whether individuals have experienced an unreasonably strong fear of an object or situation to assess anxiety, we asked respondents what makes an object or situation fearful and to define "unreasonably strong." Through these probes, we were better able to determine whether socio-cultural perceptions may affect differential rates of diagnoses for anxiety. By understanding how identity affects these perceptions and how our own identities affect how we interpret these perceptions, we could test whether the operationalization of these constructs according to DSM-IV criteria are similar to the perceptions of members of communities of interest. We also increased the probability of explaining why differences occur when they do.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Thus, our personal identity has implications for our professional identity as researchers. When we layer our professional identity onto our other social identities, including our racial, ethnic, gender, or class identities, we increase the complexity of how we will understand and how we will be understood. We might avoid some of the pitfalls associated with cross-cultural research through careful consideration of our identities, as well as a review of the tenets of multi-cultural social work research as reported in Uehara and the Multicultural Research Group at the University of Washington (1996) and through the recommendations of community-based researchers in other disciplines.

Collaboration is critical. Collaboration assists in trust building, rapport, and needs assessment. One of the best ways to incorporate community needs is to include the community in the entire research process (Barton, 1998). In one of my collaborative research projects, we conducted universal mental health screenings with preschoolers in the Detroit Head Start program. Upon introducing the project to Head Start staff, we were confronted with concerns about whether the Head Start staff would see the benefits of the research to the program. The staff explained the frustration they experienced with previous research conducted by university researchers with Detroit Head Start. Results were never shared with the program, whether by a simple presentation or report. In order for us to begin the project, we met regularly with parents, teachers, mental health coordinators, and administrators at the site, agency, and city level. We made use of MSW community organization students who were recruited to meet individually with each of these groups and record the process. MSW students also supervised undergraduate students who, in addition to participating in data collection and data entry, also attended a weekly seminar on self-awareness around issues of race/ethnicity, poverty, mental health, and child development, as well as research methods. The students also volunteered weekly in the Head Start classroom as part of an academic service learning initiative. The collaborative experience produced both a valuable learning experience for the students as well as a research project that is valued by the community and provides a tangible service.

Self-reflection. I have talked about this at length and want to quote a mental health coordinator at a recent meeting who stated, "I wanted to tell you that I am so glad you all are here. To tell you honestly, I am so afraid that people will discriminate against the children when they do research. I really know you all aren't that way, that you wouldn't discriminate, and that is why I am so excited about this project."

Although the coordinator's comments might not have a strong impact upon others, they profoundly affected me. I found them to be among the most meaningful words I have heard in my relatively short research career.

Translating research into practice. How do we disseminate research to the field? If community members are involved in the process, translating research into practice happens as part of the process. As part of our pilot interviews with Head Start parents, we conducted focus groups to discuss our preliminary findings. We wanted to confirm and validate whether our results accurately represented their perspectives on children's mental health problems. Based on our findings from these focus groups, we clarified and revised our interpretation of the data. Our findings were also fed back through meetings with mental health coordinators and administrators to assist in the agency's mental health service coordination. For example, we used the prevalence data we obtain for mental health problems to assist Head Start develop preventive interventions for children and parents in the program. By incorporating feedback as part of the process, we demonstrated that we are not in the business of conducting "hit and run" research, as others have done in the past. In essence, we attempted to undo past injustices through culturally-sensitive research practices. To this end, our research has been transformative and acts as an agent for social change and social justice.

Finally, there are certainly challenges to multi-cultural social work research—it takes time, it takes intensive resources, and it might mean that we must suspend our immediate questions in order to collect more pilot data. Most of all, it takes a willingness and motivation to constantly self-reflect on our identities and how they impact the community. It is my hope that we can embrace the challenges associated with multi-cultural social work research, value it, and promote this kind of understanding around the importance of identity among our colleagues. My experience has definitely shown that limitations can be overcome, not only by the benefits of such research, but also by the personal and professional satisfaction that communities will continue to allow me to study with them the social problems that ill our nation.

A REFLECTION IN PROCESS

Just as critical consciousness is an ongoing, life-long process, so is this work. We must be willing to revise our approaches to reflect the needs and resources of those we serve. Like our identities, communities are dynamic, and careful monitoring and reflection are necessary. Our methodologies should be responsive to changes in the environmental context, including policy and demographic changes, as well as intervention modalities.

This paper speaks less to the content of interventions and focuses more on the role of the researcher and suggests a value base for conducting community-based

research. Continued work by social work researchers is necessary to develop models of practice and intervention that are responsive to communities. Similarly, I do not directly address research that does not require contact with the community, such as secondary analyses of existing data sets. I argue that self-reflection and critical consciousness each have a role in this type of research. That role is reflected in the questions we ask, the slant we take, and the outcome we hope to achieve. While we may counter the risk of biasing our results, I contend that as social workers, we have an agenda, a code of ethics, a slant. It is inherent in what we choose to study, which in turn, is often based on our personal experiences or some social issue about which we are passionate. Social workers often enter the field because of a desire to advocate for certain issues or policies. We are biased. We need to reflect on why we hold such biases and whether they are congruent with or in the best interests of the community. We should not assume that our definitions of social change and social justice are the same as those with whom we work. In an exercise that I conducted in one of my classes, I asked the students to form several groups based on identity group membership, then come up with a definition for social justice. Both within and between these self-selected groups, there was little agreement on a common definition. In fact, I was so struck by the wide range of definitions for social justice that I questioned my own definition of social justice and any hope that there might be a common definition. I feel confident in saying that the variations in a definition of social justice would be far greater between social work researchers and diverse communities.

Finally, I have not adequately addressed the questions of epistemology and whether we can combine the elements of subjectivity with quantitative work. As suggested, I feel it is necessary. Purists of traditional research methodologies would argue differently, as might purists of qualitative methods. Others may argue that methods should be driven by the questions we ask. I argue that this only accounts for methodological issues, not epistemology. I welcome these dialogues in the hope that such an effort will advance the discourse to a higher level. I encourage social work researchers to critically think about these issues and develop methods of research that promote advocacy and social transformation.

By focusing on community needs and resources, we are able to make stronger statements about the implications of our research. I have become increasingly disheartened by the rhetoric found in the policy and practice implications of our research. The implications are narrow and suggest policy and program changes that are not comprehensive, and in many cases, are unattainable by the community. For example, I have read countless articles that recommend national health care policies or other national level changes in our social structure. Yes, these policies are needed, but such recommendations do little to empower the community or promote tangible benefits from our research. Do we really need another study that burdens our communities with such a statement? In some cases, yes. We must also continue to advocate for macro-level changes, with those in power to make such changes, but we must also describe how communities might advocate for these policies within their local context.

Another example of an overused recommendation is the need for cultural sensitivity training. Not long ago, such a recommendation would have been important

and innovative. In a number of contexts, this is still an innovative recommenda-
tion. However, we need to go beyond such recommendations in favor of those that
promote concrete and specific action. My intent, here, is not to cast stones; I, too,
am guilty of obvious and overused recommendations. Rather, I envision reading
research articles that translate findings into clear, meaningful guidelines for
action. This paper is a testimony to the effort I hope to undertake in my research
efforts. It is an exercise in self-reflection for what I see as my vision of multicultur-
al social work research. I invite you, the reader, to go through this process for your-
self sometime in your career.

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