Inter-Asia Cultural Studies

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Frank T.Y. Wang

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ABSTRACT   *This is a personal narrative, which reflects upon my experiences of encountering cultural studies after attending the Teaching Cultural Studies Workshop. For me, the term 'cultural studies' represents something abstract, fancy, and thus difficult to understand, and which intimidates disciplines that emphasize application over theorization, such as social work. However, my fear of cultural studies was overcome in this workshop through the lived experiences of being respected for differences. This personal experience reflects the historical construction of social work within scientific hierarchy, so that the relevance of cultural studies and social work is not recognized by social workers. Despite the often difficult-to-understand style, cultural studies does provide important venues for social workers to obtain qualitative understanding of an individual's problems and crises within a social context, which is crucial to effect strategies of resistance among vulnerable populations.*

As a non-Western social work practitioner and scholar, I am constantly caught in a double-bound contradiction of practice vs. theory and non-Western vs. Western culture. To ensure my standpoint in everyday practices, I adopt ethnography, the study of cultures, as the major research method in my academic inquiries. My academic mentor, Canadian feminist scholar Dorothy Smith, explores everyday life, which is culture, as the focal point in her studies of trans-local ruling relationships (Smith 1990; 2005). However, I have never identified myself as a scholar in the field of cultural studies because I considered my work as not 'theoretical' enough. It was not until I joined the 2006 Teaching Cultural Studies Workshop, where I met a group of people who are constantly looking for 'otherwiseness'[1] (fei/fei), that I realized that I was one of them, engaging in the same battle to liberate unheard voices. In the beginning, there was a sense of uneasiness and anxiety as I listened to the unfamiliar language due to the differences between the disciplines. Yet, this feeling disappeared due to the sincere and touching experiences that were shared one after another, especially with the established figures in the Taiwanese cultural study area. Hsiao-hung Chang talked about how she tried to link students' personal experiences with political analysis. Josephine Ho shared with us how she survived in an academic setting. Kuan-Hsing Chen worked hard to connect academics across various boundaries during the workshop. These established academics were totally different from what I had previously experienced during my academic career. Established scholars in Taiwan tend to be authoritative and seek to control the young scholars in their individual groups. Chang, Ho and Chen embodied what they taught during my encounter with the cultural studies area, along with the idea of respect for individuality. The warmth and support, without coercion, that I experienced in the workshop altered my perception about academia.

After my return from the workshop, I reflected upon some issues. As a social work scholar, what did I feel that so alienated me relative to the cultural studies area before attending the workshop? If cultural studies is aimed at including the voices of marginalized peoples who are also the target clients of social work professionals, then the social work profession ought to embrace such a cultural studies approach. The social work profession has long been committed to

social justice by addressing the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable and oppressed and living in poverty. We have better access to the worlds of marginalized peoples than other disciplines. Why then are so few social work scholars involved in the development of cultural studies, an area that has major implications for our daily practices?

As an applied science, social work has been viewed as 'good at practice but slow at theory'. The separation of practice and knowledge in the consciousness of social work profession has provoked a sense of inferiority among social workers. This occurs when difficult theories and concepts are heavily used in the production of knowledge, as in some cultural study works. I did not identify myself with cultural studies because I do not think I am good as mastering theories, which is similar to how most social workers view themselves. Intimidated by big words and theories, social workers' knowledge of marginalized groups is thus silenced. To be a social worker is to be positioned at the margins. To speak the simple language that our clients can understand is a political choice that scholars who call themselves 'radical' need to make. The forms and languages used by many writers in cultural studies are too theoretical for people's lives and too aristocratic to be accessible to our clients with whom we seek to ally ourselves.[2] My experiences in the workshop provided face-to-face contacts that tore down the wall of knowledge that used to stand in my way of understanding cultural study.

As an alternative choice to the epistemological paradigm, the intellectual possibilities that cultural study has created, could bridge the gap between the daily practices of social workers and knowledge production by the academic community. Deep in my heart, I agree with Freire's proposition that a social worker is a cultural worker (Freire 2000). When social workers engage with the victims of domestic violence, psychiatric patients, homeless people, demented elderly persons, and the unemployed, social workers are entering a realm of life that is unfamiliar to mainstream society. Although cultural crossing is our daily practice, social workers rarely reflect on our intervention from the cultural study perspective. The failure to adopt a cultural perspective as a part of the social worker's view has multiple roots.

First, the hegemony of the positivist paradigm in the field of social work has stopped social workers viewing the knowledge that social workers apply in their everyday practices as situated and socially constructed. Emphasizing the superiority of the universal and standard rules of problem-solving techniques, social workers cultivate a single dominant way of understanding social problems. Without critical appraisal of the social formation of social work knowledge, social workers tend to adopt an individual-oriented and residual approach to their intervention in human misery. Thus, they fail to understand the collective effect, where such an approach is in fact reinforcing the existing power relationship.

Secondly, professionalism is based on positivism and this creates a doubly-disadvantaged position for the front-line social worker as well as their clients. There is an artificial dichotomy that separates the social worker and client in the professional relationship as the helper and the helpless and this discredits the clients' capacity to solve the problems they are facing themselves. The dichotomy of the academic and practitioner in the professional hierarchy, as the knowledge producer and the knowledge consumer, stifles the local and tacit knowledge that social work practitioners have generated during their work. Positioned as the objective scientist, subjective experiences and personal narratives of social workers are coded into an objectified form of knowledge that reproduces the perspective of the powerful and it is in this way that it is rendered visible (Smith 1990). The challenge of cultural study toward the dominant form of knowledge and cultural study's pursuit of diverse local knowledge allows social workers to give voices to their lived experiences and most of all, to their clients.

In this workshop, stories of social workers and clients kept coming into my mind. Gradually, it becomes clear to me

that the reason why these stories attracted me is that the underlying theories behind their actions were so different from the existing social work theories. Therefore, the methods I have learnt from socializing into the social work profession were deconstructed. I learnt to understand that theory generation is an everyday activity that is not the privilege of academics. For example, a family member of a psychiatric patient drew on his reading of a Chinese Kung-Fu novel, in which the leading protagonist pushes the poison out of his body by inhaling and exhaling breathing exercises, to be encouraged to develop a tennis-club based rehabilitation program for psychiatric patients as a way of reducing the side effects of psychiatric drugs. The regular matches that occur between the tennis clubs around Taiwan provide a channel for psychiatric patients to have social contact with the general public. By playing tennis, not only are the psychiatric patients' physical and mental functions improved, but also society's stereotype of mental illness is potentially interrupted or even replaced by face-to-face contact. In contrast to most hospital-based rehabilitation programs, which take place in settings constructed by professionals, the family member efficiently, if not effectively, transplants the rehabilitation component into an existing social network. Another example occurred in a remote indigenous village where the victims of domestic violence faced the dilemma of a shortage of shelters. An indigenous woman without formal social work training was hired as a social work assistant. Rather than complaining, she was inspired by her memory of traditional tribal life in which helpful neighbors were willing to provide shelter to a victim because a man would not transgress into another man's house. Based on this prototype, the social work assistant developed a volunteer team organized through a group of women who provided a network of support, including temporary shelter for victims of domestic violence. Rather than viewing shelters as a physical house, she conceptualized a shelter as a network of individuals willing to help. Her way of conceptualization was thus able to challenge and subvert official discourse on women's shelters and, most of all, made the shelter readily available to the victims. Knowledge that has developed out of the daily struggles with the gaps between lived experiences and ruling perspectives has taught me to re-learn what social work is and should be.

My academic life has been enriched by encountering these local experiences and cultural studies has provided an identity that names who we are and provides a space to nurture each other. For me, cultural studies makes daily living visible, which allows critical analysis and opens up a brand new way of understanding the world in which we are living. Denzin has tried to demonstrate the relevance between social work and cultural studies (Denzin 2007). To discover silenced voices, social work needs to empower its own voice. Cultural studies provides a useful vehicle for that purpose.

Notes

1. Hsiao-hung Chang uses the two words to signal a dual meaning of otherwiseness. The Chinese words for self-denial and flight in Chinese have the same pronunciation.
2. I am inspired by bell hooks' discussion of her choice of speaking the oppressor's language and writing academic works in simple English (hooks 1994).

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Special terms

fei / fei 非/飛

Author's biography

Frank T.Y. WANG is Assistant Professor of the Institute of Health & Welfare Policy, National Yang Ming University.

Contact address: Institute of Health & Welfare Policy, National Yang Ming University, No. 155, Sec. 2, Linong St., Beitou District, Taipei City 112, Taiwan.