Chicano Social Work: A Critical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines an experiment in Social Work education: The development and implementation of a theoretical and practice perspective grounded in the views that Chicanos have about themselves. It is argued that the development of a Chicano perspective has proceeded without reference to the social historical influences on knowledge and curriculum building. More concretely, the structuring effects of dominant scientific paradigms and the organizational requirements of dominant educational institutions. As a result, the Chicano self-view is yet to materialize. Further the scholarship so far generated has been, for the most part, unreflective.

INTRODUCTION

In a recent review of the minority perspective in social work education, Montiel and Wong (1983) noted that its proponents have failed to, "define theoretically and put into operation empirically" its most salient concepts and variables. Key notions such as racism, discrimination, and ethnicity are seen as givens; social change is narrowly conceived as demands for increased services and the adoption of an "appreciative perspective". As a result of this unsystematic scholarship, the authors conclude, the minority perspective prevalent in social work curriculum lacks a coherent theoretical base of its own

and remains tied to an assimilationist theory of race and a functionalist view of society.

This working paper will expand the critique initiated by Montiel and Wong but will focus on the minority perspective in social work education only as it relates to Chicanos. Guided by a critical theory of society and drawing from the historical experiences of the Chicano movement, it shall be argued that the Chicano social work perspective remains tied to normative theories of society because of selective consideration of the historical mandate that gave it birth; and because it has failed to consider socio-historical influences in theory building, namely the rules of scientific paradigms and educational institutions. As a result, the scholarship that this perspective has generated has been, for the most part, uncritical and unreflective.

In order to elaborate and render the above thesis comprehensible, the analyses begin with a synopsis of the most immediate politico-economic antecedents of the Chicano perspective, and of the ways it was first articulated in academic and social welfare, mental health practice circles. Next, it proceeds with a brief characterization and a critical analysis of the prevalent Chicano social work perspective. Finally, it presents for consideration, some key elements, that in our view can yield a critical, liberatory Chicano Social Work.

POLITICO-ECONOMIC ANTECEDENTS

An exacerbation in the structural contradictions of American society during the sixties and seventies radically disrupted the reproduction of the social order (Castells, 1980). Not surprisingly, Chicanos, together with other minority people of color, began to raise their voices in a more powerful manner than ever before in recent decades. They denounced the social structures that kept them exploited and oppressed and vowed to struggle toward the achievement of a more just social system (Rendon, 1971).

In the academic social sciences, humanities, and applied disciplines including social work, the Chicano protest was articulated, among others, by Romano (1968; 1973), Montiel (1973), Rocco (1970), Vaca (1970), Alvarez (1970), and Limon (1973). These academicians

96

argued, for the most part, the obvious: that the socio-political forces that exploited and oppressed Chicanos as producers and consumers of American wealth are mirrored in academia. Thus, in a societal context where Americans of Mexican origin are dispossessed and regarded by majority individuals as inferior, academia employs a limited number of Chicanos and sponsors a social science replete with stereotypical and derogatory portrayals of Chicano life. This misrepresentation was and still is accomplished through the deployment of status quo oriented theories mostly sensitive to psychological and social deviance; and through the wide utilization of uncritical, historical concepts such as resignation, fatalism, or "traditional culture."

The task for Chicanos, according to these critics, was to enter academia to redefine the Mexican-American through the articulation of culture, history, and self-view, and to work toward socio-political empowerment and liberation. This effort could best be accomplished by adopting a historical paradigm premised on the belief that Chicanos are not traditional unchanging social beings, but creator and participants of their own history.

The Chicano protest movement had a similar impact in community mental health.[1] The ground here was particularly fertile. Practitioners in this growing sector of the welfare field, were familiar with the social structural analyses of health and illness advanced by Goffman (1963; 1966), Szasz (1961), Fanon (1963) and Hollingshead and Redlich (1958). The contradictions they encountered in the practice arena made them a receptive audience to these kinds of conceptualizations. Unsurprisingly then, the Chicano critique took as a point of departure the notion that mental health and illness are socially and culturally defined. Further, it argued that prevalent conceptions arose out of dominant Anglo values. Thus, accepted service programs and treatment methods could not be considered appropriate or applicable to Chicanos. Moreover, mental health as an institution began to be seen as an instrument of social control. It was seen as assisting, among other things, in keeping the Chicano population as an "internal colony". The task for Chicanos, according to these practitioners then was to enter these domains of practice, to control its

97

infra-structure, and to define culturally relevant modalities of treatment (Sanchez 1971; Abad et al., 1974).

These critiques, made possible the emergence of pressure lobbies that pushed for, and monitored, affirmative action programs which in turn insured ethnic presence in the classroom, clinics, service agencies and in administrative ranks. These efforts were eventually financed by official funds targeted for dealing with the crises of legitimacy in the society. Ethnic programs in academia and social service consequently flourished during this period.

In sum, the first articulations and manifestation in academic and social welfare arenas of a Chicano perspective provoked by politico-economic considerations and subsidized by official governmental funds to legitimize the system had mostly to do with means and ends. The educated and the not-so-educated Chicano was to enter the ranks of the "definer"; expose the socio-historical forces and institutions that oppressed and exploited the Chicano as a group; document their indigenous culture and history; and develop alternative modalities of teaching and mental health practice.

THE CHICANO SOCIAL WORK PERSPECTIVE

Traditional social work education and practice quickly followed in the footsteps of academia and community mental health. Presentations of normative social work knowledge, skills, and values were interrogated with reference to its relevancy or application to Chicano life. The perspective which emerged at this time is contained in a series of seminal articles and monographs.[2] According to these, social work practice with Chicanos is deemed relevant and appropriate when sensitive to the unique historical experiences of the group: such as the conquest by the U.S. or annexation of Mexican territory; aware of the importance of language in the construction of a person's world view; cognizant of variant interpersonal, sex-role, and kinship structures such as respeto, amigo system, machismo, compadrazgo or la familia; and finally, open to alternative or parallel forms of services, as in the case of curanderismo or bilingual-bicultural centers. Relevant practice, in

98

sum, is centered on a concept of culture that articulates diversity in the context of a pluralistic ideology.

Evaluating their own creation, proponents of the perspective have recently termed it a success (Dieppa, 1983) for it has firmly enthroned the concept of culture, and of the culture broker. This self-assessment, however, might be premature or optimistic. For while it is true that Chicanos in social work have developed an impressive inventory of Chicano cultural items (from respeto to machismo), one is equally impressed, by a treatment of the concept of culture as an external category, as a de facto situation, an "out there", the features of which need only to be itemized. Absent, is a dynamic dimension of culture, as an everchanging universe of possiblities. Moreover, culture as external, thing-like facticity is a reification[3] and as such it does not permit the movement of consciousness which the articulation of a group's world-view necessitates.

Also worth noting is the relative absence of historical analyses involving contemporary processes and events, namely of a political economic nature. What does exist, dwells on matters such as the conquest, U.S. annexation of Mexican territory or other past events. This is all most useful if the sole concern is with questions of origins. It is also important to focus, however, on where one is now, and where one might also go (i.e. social change). To meet that end, it is structural analyses of ongoing processes and events and utopic reflections that are needed. These, have the power to inform praxis and provide a vision of a better, more humane world.

Additionally, the prevalent Chicano perspective is yet to fully commit itself to a documentation of the Chicano self-view from an internal, people perspective. Academicians and practitioners have become the "definers", assumed to be spokespersons for a "homogeneous" community and consequently spoken on its behalf. The actors/actresses themselves, the oppressed and exploited however, are yet to be heard.

A word about "ends". The preferred themes in the Chicano perspective focus on ethnic identity, cultural pluralism and a quest for alternative services. Missing are the original concerns of progressive practitioners having to do with the conceptualization

of mental health as an instrument of control, internal colonies, etc. It is no small wonder then, that recently, proponents of the perspective saw the need to be reminded that the ultimate goal of Chicanos social work with Chicanos by Chicanos is social change, to achieve community empowerment (Dieppa, 1982).

Hence, vis a vis its own antecedents, the Chicano perspective does not live up to its original mandates. On the question of means, it is satisfied with a reified, one-dimensional view of culture and history. It ignores the self-view. As a consequence, it has failed to provide a substantive theoretical and empirical base to adequately inform praxis. As for ends, it trades empowerment and liberation from oppression for entry into the domain of the definer, psychological identity, and bilingual-bicultural service agencies. This is a case of unreflective scholarship.

How can this taming of action-oriented scholarship, of its means and ends be explained? How is it possible to settle for a quasi-sacramental view of culture, engage in the reification of Chicano ways, and accept the possibility of mental health as oppression, simply because the services are to be delivered in Spanish. The answer lies partly in the tremendous capacity of the capitalist system to absorb and redirect protest. Additionally, as it was shown, the Chicano perspective has failed to made reference to the imperatives that were to guide it. Other explanations are also possible.

The Chicano perspective for one, has ignored the limiting effects of institutional contexts. It has also failed to develop strategies for short term integration into the system and long term disintegration of the system (Meszaros, 1970). More concretely, it has not grasped the character and functions of two key institutional contexts in which it has and will continue to develop: the dominant scientific paradigm and the school. Further, it has not enabled the development of effective resistance and change strategies. Let us take a cursory look at what has been missed.

THE PARADIGMATIC CONTEXT

The dominant paradigm in the social sciences, is that of the classical natural sciences and positivist philosophy. Samson (1978) notes that this view assumes a world of facts as an external, natural reality. It demands that the pursuit of knowledge be objective, eliminating the perspective of the knower so that pure facts can be obtained; it seeks principles and laws of functioning that are abstract, general, and universal. Hence, person, time, and place are regarded as sources of error, "noise", to be controlled, largely, through experimental and survey methodologies.

This means that this natural science conception denies the historicity of the social world, it also disregards the historically situated nature of science making itself. Namely, a political economic context which involved the development of industrial society, the spirit and practice of capitalism, and the emergence of the middle class (Samson, 1978). As such, it can arrive at reified description of phenomena and it can also produce theory lacking generative potency, that is to say the capacity to challenge dominant assumptions about the social order and to offer fresh alternatives to dominant patterns of conduct (Gergen, 1978).

Epistemology and socio-political processes then, do interact (Kuhn, 1962; Mittroff, 1974; Riegel, 1972; Samelson, 1974). Indeed, as Gouldner (1971) and critical theorists from the Frankfurt School (Jay 1973) noted, positivistic scientific knowledge about social reality contains ideological, political, and evaluative convictions which serve to justify and maintain dominant, status quo conceptions of the social order.

An alternative conception of proper science is the historical one (Samson, 1978). Social theories are conceived, not as fundamental in the classical physical science sense, but as reflections of contemporary history (Gergen, 1973). Theories, facts and truths emerge within, and refer back to specific epochs, places, and paradigms (Samson, 1977; 1978); they are grounded, socially constructed (Berger & Luckman; 1967), indexical (Garfinkel, 1975), dialectical (Riegel, 1976) and dynamic (Gergen, 1973). Thus, the formulation of transcending laws of human interactions, a central concern for the natural science perspective, is considered an illusory pursuit.

These two scientific paradigms, Samson (1978) notes, are often encountered as antagonistic modes of pursuing knowledge: nomothetic vs. idiographic; prediction/control vs. understanding. This need not be the case. In fact, present social science ought to focus on paradigm complementarity in an attitude of partnership and equality. For neither paradigm can, by itself, yield a wholistic, reflective representation of social phenomena. (Samson, 1978; Marcuse, 1964).

A few questions are now in order. What is the paradigmatic context of the Chicano perspective? Is the chosen paradigm conducive to the articulation of Chicano historical and cultural uniqueness? Does the paradigm have the power to generate liberating theories to inform praxis? An examination on the major themes developed within the perspective reveals it, from the most part, indifferent to the influence of ongoing social-historical contexts on theory construction. The structuring effects of paradigms, ideologies, processes such as reification, and ultimately political economy are simply not elaborated upon.

This indifference reflects an uncritical stand. Moreover, it is an indication that the prevalent Chicano perspective is tied to a conception of natural science and to an antiquated conception for that matter (Capra 1982). This is an uneasy alliance. For, as Sampson (1978) observed, it is a sine qua non posture of the positivistic mode to proceed as if socio-historical processes, (an overt concern to Chicano Social Work education), are of no import in the pursuit of knowledge. The unreflective scholarship critique assume yet greater cogency when one considers Montiel and Wong's (1983) observation that the perspective continues to be allied to status quo, normative social theories, and when, as argued earlier, one witnesses a disregard for themes on oppression an exploitation; the treatment of the concept of culture as an external category; and the absence of studies from the perspective of the knower.

Indeed, it appears reasonable to state that the Chicano perspective has proceeded as if the building of liberating theory is a value-free enterprise, an unproblematic matter to be left to accepted research methodologies of the positivistic variety. It is also possible to state, as corollary, that this uncritical, paradigmatic alliance, this one-dimensional posture

102

toward theory construction cannot lead to the desired articulation of Chicano life, as a dynamic, ongoing cultural-historical, and most important, liberatory perspective. Obviously alternative, complementary paradigms need to be considered.

THE SCHOOL CONTEXT

A central assumption in liberal thought today, including in Social Work education, is that schooling creates and sustains social change. So firm is this belief that critical issues relevant to the school in our society are only occasionally considered. For most academicians, education is equated to schooling and in turn this process is equated with a technical and curricular enterprise within which politically neutral pieces such as knowledge, skills, and values are arranged and developed, usually by committee, according to "rational planning" mode. The end products, a series of logically coherent courses, configurate into a program for the achievement of competencies. Social work educators, (see CSWE most recent (1983) policy on curriculum) and in the case of our discussion Chicano academicians have for the most part accepted this view of pedagogy. This acceptance is uncritical. Moreover, it can not facilitate the development of a liberatory Chicano Social Work.

Schooling in our society creates and sustains social change only if one reduces and equates change with technological advances and/or negate its ideology. However, if one considers ideological matters and if one takes social change to mean liberation from psychological, political, economic, forms of oppression, the liberal tennet must be considered a fallacy. Indeed, all to the contrary, the key function of schooling in America is to reflect and reproduce the existing order. As such, its role is not exclusively the provision of technical expertise, but also the provision of particular types of people - the sort of personality attuned to working and consuming in relative harmony, and in satisfaction with the social system. The function of schooling then is not to liberate but to maintain and perpetuate existing social relations of production and consumption through a monopoly on the forms of consciousness (e.g. rationality) which are allowed to be created and

103

recreated across generations (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Bourdieu, 1967; Gintis, 1972).

Further, this production and reproduction of the social system in the minds of individuals is accomplished primarily through a reduction of the socio-historical dynamics of schooling to the mechanics of curriculum development. Knowledge is treated as a thing, logically related but discretely distinct from matters of skills and values. This "curriculum-as-fact" view (Young, 1975) is a reified view of education. It ignores that knowledge is socially constructed, socially lived phenomena, essentially inseparable from action and value questions. Additionally, it treats curriculum categories without reference to its common sense, everyday life origins (Apple, 1975) and without mention of what contemporary educational critics (Vallance, 1974) have termed the "hidden curriculum". This element in the schooling process deserves consideration for it is crucial in the inculcation of dominant values, political socialization, training in obedience, training in acceptance of dominant forms of rationality, and just as important, training in a language, e.g., theories, concepts, modes of acting in the world, whose grammatical structure justifies the existing social order. Again, Chicano social workers in academia or in community settings have not focused on any of these schooling questions and issues.

TOWARD A CRITICAL CHICANO SOCIAL WORK PERSPECTIVE

The preceeding analysis focused on two areas where the Chicano social work perspective proves uncritical. A notable exception to that posture is Atencio's analysis of social work ideology and his parallel attempt to construct a model for Chicano social work education (1982a; 1982b).

Unlike many Chicanos in academia, Atencio has reflected on the connection between ideology and knowledge. He finds that the profession reflects the dominant values of the social system and that these do not accomodate Chicano life. Chicanos in social work, therefore, must articulate their own ideology, Chicanismo, and subsequently allow this body of values and beliefs to guide and justify their academic practice.

For Atencio, the structural myth of Chicano
ideology is Aztlan. This ancient, mytho-religious
corpus of meaning must be specified through an
integrated epistemology (empiricism and phenomenology;
Jung & Marx) which can grasp everyday life (folklore,
art, myths). And, through praxis, discourse, and
dialogue, the myth should lead Chicanos to the
attainment of fulfillment and authenticity.

In sum, Atencio focuses on the epistemological
issues that impinge on the development of a Chicano
perspective. He recognizes the value of alternative
paradigms; argues for a sociology of knowledge informed
about the effects of ideology; gives credence to the
everyday life as a source of data; recognizes idealism
as well as historical and cultural materialism;
advocates praxis, dialogue, and conscientization.
Atencio, in other words, lays out some foundations for
the development of a critical Chicano Social Work
perspective. There are some points however, that are
in need of further critical reflection.

Consider, for example, the question of ideology.
Central to this phenomenon is the presence of a
structural myth which compells adherents to follow a
chosen path (see Feuer, 1975). For Atencio, this myth
is Aztlan. As to the prescriptions, however, they are
not so clear. They appear to be the attainment of
fulfillment and authenticity, which in turn appears to
be equated with social change. The logical and
historical connections between myth and prescriptions
between Aztlan and fulfillment, are simply not traced.

A reading of works on ideology also informs us
that, the commands contained in structural myths are
materialized in the consciousness and action of
individuals through processes such as reification,
alienation, and inversion. Alienation saps creative
energy and impedes cooperative action; reification
supports perception of the status quo as the natural
order and thus, prevents critical self-awareness; and
conversion permits the assimilation of critique, and
critics, into the established order (Rappoport, 1982).
These processes in other words, bear directly on the
possibility of achieving effects like praxis, dialogue,
conscientization, and ultimately change. Atencio,
however, while an advocate of the effects, shows no
concern for the process that limit them. All to the
contrary, he proceeds as if adherence to Chicanismo is

all that is needed. False forms of consciousness, or empty forms of acting in the world non-withstanding. This is an uncritical stand.

Another area of contention is Atencio's enthusiastic embracing of the phenomenological method. Indeed, this approach does appear to be a congenial way of elucidating Chicano everyday life for it focuses on the psychological structures, or sets of social rules guiding the behavior of individuals. This however, is not enough. On this point, one needs to stand informed by Gouldner's (1971) comments on phenomenologist Garfinkel that while concerned with how a definition of reality becomes established, he is only tangentially interested in why that definition is dominant at a particular time and place. Horton's comments (in Huer, 1977) are also noteworthy: phenomenology while it renders a theoretical understanding of, say reification, it does not yield a critical historical account of the phenomenon or a method for dereification. It does not result in practical action against the reified world. It follows then, that a Chicano embracing of phenomenology, must occur with reference to macro considerations, political, economic institutional, and epistemologic. In all fairness Atencio does note macro processes such as cultural and historical materialism. This is doen so tangentially, however, as to appear an anlytical afterthought.

The question then, still remains open: How can one generate a critical liberatory Chicano Social Work perspective? What requisites must such enterprise meet? This paper resists formulating yet another educational model. It presents for consideration, however, a beginning answer. This is derived from the analysis presented above.

At the most general level, the development of a critical, liberatory perspective needs to be tied to a critical, liberatory paradigm which at the outset regards its mode of investigating and the phenomena under investigation as objects situated in a cultural, political, economic and ideological milieu. Within this context the investigative goal should be to generate a corpus of meanings that challenges dominant views and patterns of conduct. All this for the purpose of furthering peoples' understanding and actions (Praxis) in the world.

106

More concretely, and as a way of summary, the argument here is for a Chicano perspective informed about political economy, paradigmatic and schooling contexts; astute about ideology and processes such as reification, alienation, cooptation; trusting of everyday life and the "internal" view of its actors/ actresses; rooted in integrated research methodologies; rejectful of one-dimensional inventory-like views of culture; open to transformative pedagogies; willing to challenge the social order and its representative institutions be these the profession and its accrediting bodies, or that ascending Chicano pro- fessional-managerial group, the culture brokers and gatekeepers of the still colonized Chicano communities.

Notes

1. For a thorough discussion on this topic refer to Wong's recent book on Minority Community Mental Health Training.

2. See, among others, work by Abad et al., 1974; Aguilar, 1972; Casas, 1976; Cervantes, 1972; De Hoyos and De Hoyos, 1966; Gomez, et al., 1973; Marigold, 1972; Morales, 1971; Padilla, et al., 1975; Sotomayor, 1976; 1977.

3. On the notion of reification and culture, see Angulo, et al., 1983; Luckacs, 1971; Berger & Pullberg, 1965; Israel, 1977.

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