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Abstract

Results from an interview based social science investigation into the organization of how the critical thinking and decision-making practices of thirteen experienced helping professionals are shaped are explicated. The skills and techniques these people use in their day-to-day support of people who have, like themselves, experienced oppression, inequity, and violence, is examined. The complex choices and consequences stemming from mobilizing one's narrative as a resource in the support of others, and the price people pay to disclose the truth about themselves in this context, is carefully and compassionately explored. We learn how this group of helping professionals find and employ practical solutions to ethical, philosophical, and political dilemmas organizing their work. Practitioners and applied researchers will gain valuable insights from this book.

Keywords

Disclosure, Helping Professions, Interview Research, Knowledge Production, Organization of Knowledge, Professional Decision-Making, Reflexivity, Social Justice, Social Suffering, Vignette Method, Work Practices

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Reflexive Thinking Practices of Bordered Helping Professionals: A Review of Zingaro's *Speaking Out*

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Results from an interview-based social science investigation into the organization of how the critical thinking and decision-making practices of thirteen experienced helping professionals are shaped are explicated. The skills and techniques these people use in their day-to-day support of people who have, like themselves, experienced oppression, inequity, and violence, is examined. The complex choices and consequences stemming from mobilizing one's narrative as a resource in the support of others, and the price people pay to disclose the truth about themselves in this context, is carefully and compassionately explored. We learn how this group of helping professionals finds and employ practical solutions to ethical, philosophical, and political dilemmas organizing their work. Practitioners and applied researchers will gain valuable insights from this book. Key Words: Disclosure, Helping Professions, Interview Research, Knowledge Production, Organization of Knowledge, Professional Decision-Making, Reflexivity, Social Justice, Social Suffering, Vignette Method, Work Practices.

Exploring Practice-based Knowledge

In her recent book, *Speaking Out: Storytelling for Social Change*, Linde Zingaro (2009) communicates the contours and results of her award-winning doctoral study completed through the Department of Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada. The story she tells is recounted with heart, insight, humanity, and with the heightened "knowledge as a member of the settings" she scrutinizes (Smith, 1990, p. 638). The reader who has experienced suffering, and who might have benefited from the wisdom of support workers in coping and overcoming, will, thanks to Zingaro's (2009) work, have the opportunity to learn about details of the reflexive, analytic thinking skills that workers in such positions cultivate and deploy in their challenging, day-to-day work of supporting other people experiencing oppression and pain. Practitioners and applied researchers working in advocacy, education, health, human services, and social work milieus, and persons interested in using qualitative research methods, will surely benefit from reading this book.

In her work, Zingaro (2009) critically investigates the social organization of people's thinking practices, and explores how everyday decision-making activities of workers in Vancouver working in a range of support service roles are shaped. Knowledge is seen as reflexively generated through people's interactions with the social world they inhabit, including the discourses in which they participate and bring into being through their work. A central and recurrent metaphor in Zingaro's work, one that provides a frame for this book, is the "portrait": understood as the product rendered by a visual

artist. The portrait Zingaro creates is descriptions and analyses of the myriad of work practices, skills, devices, and techniques that experienced helping professionals she interviewed report using in their work supporting and assisting people with experiences of oppression, inequity, and violence. The particular practice or strategy of interest here, one engaged in by all thirteen professionals with whom Zingaro spoke, is the deliberate act of “speaking out”: where the worker, after careful deliberation, decides to reference and activate her/his experiential expertise as a tool in the process of supporting, assisting, and communicating with others.

Zingaro (2009) undertakes this social inquiry out of a highly original and sympathetic concern for human suffering precisely at the point “*after* [a person] has found the strength to speak out to tell about some experience with harm or humiliation” (p. 12; italics in original). She calls this effect of “speaking out” about one’s experiences, whether formally and publically, in a testimonial setting, or informally and personally, in a one-on-one rapport with a client, “disclosure consequences” (p. 12). The entry point for Zingaro’s social investigation is her personal experience inhabiting numerous social locations that she describes as “bordered” (p. 19); a central concept that she coins and defines as a place occupied by a person who has “gained some kind of credential or position of authority and responsibility recognized by dominant culture, [where the person also identifies] as having lived through, or as living with, the same kinds of difficulties that [the person’s] work is intended to ameliorate for others” (p. 19). Zingaro pursues an investigation that exposes the contradictions, tensions, complexities, and disjunctures experienced by thirteen bordered professionals (including, very interestingly and compellingly, herself) who spoke in depth to her about how they reach decisions about deploying (or not) their “lived experience” with oppression and pain as a resource in their daily work practices (Smith, 2006, p. 224).

The key question Zingaro (2009) sets out to explicate in this book is: “What price do people pay to tell the truth about themselves?” (p. 18). The answers to this question prove complex, as evidenced in the data that the author and her informants offer the reader. To explore this question, Zingaro engages in two phases of sequential interview-based fieldwork involving thirteen informants. First round conversations begin from the starting point of a discussion framed by seven vignettes, where informants, in open-ended dialogue spanning sixty to ninety minutes, talk to Zingaro about how they would deal with issues manifest in hypothetical scenarios (see pp. 71-78; Finch, 1987; Hughes, 1998; Stolte, 1994). We learn that this deliberate methodological choice successfully yielded the type of talk Zingaro set out to illicit: data centered on her informant’s decisions and thinking about disclosing (or not) difficult, lived experience. Importantly, Zingaro tells us, this technique explicitly steered interview talk away from informants’ past traumas. These were not under examination since experiences with trauma were not per se the objects of scrutiny. This presents the reader with a highly valuable methodological option and alternative: to build on and out from people’s work, including the thinking resources they draw on and the social organization of these, rather than centering on people per se as subjects of research. This is an especially valid, valuable, and salient theoretical commitment and methodological technique where research implicates people that have been significantly (arguably over) probed by social science, humanities, and clinical researchers (see Epstein, 1996; Treichler, 1999). The technique has been used expressly

to offset excessive attention to such constituencies of people such as people living with HIV (see Bisaillon, 2012).

Considering the Social Relations of Speaking Out

Zingaro (2009) describes the costs, risks, pains, and joys associated with what happens at the intersection where an informant's knowledge claim (i.e., about lived experience) enters into the social world. What happens when a person "speaks into the spaces of social relations" (see pp. 15-16). The main argument Zingaro makes is that "speaking out" and into the social world about personal experiences with pain, grief, and violence is a part of "ritual political actions that demonstrate the lived epistemology, the moral philosophy, of a group of people who, in their responsibility to Others, are working out solutions to ethical and philosophical problems in concrete terms" (p. 176). Zingaro critically, carefully, and empathetically considers the constraints imposed by people's social location, and she examines how people's thinking work is shaped by dominant discourses circulating in the milieus in which her informants carry out their daily work. In Chapter three, Zingaro identifies and discusses numerous discourses that significantly shape the professional milieus in which her informants perform their professional duties. Early on in her book, Zingaro situates herself as a social welfare practitioner and activist with approximately thirty years of varied professional experience. In this way, she is intimately familiar with the milieus and discourses she critically assesses.

Zingaro's work is likely one of the first examinations of its kind looking at the critical processes and "mechanics" (p. 21) involved in the knowledge production and decision-making practices of bordered professionals. These are largely understudied as the focus of social science literature. A notable exception is Gerald de Montigny's (1995) reflexive examination of the relations organizing social work practice and his role within this. It is by bringing to light for critical examination these taken-for-granted or overlooked features of professional practice that Zingaro makes a significant contribution to practice and knowledge. In the closing chapter of her book, Zingaro suggests that in addition to her informants, helping professionals, public policy makers (including funders), and academics would be interested audiences for this book (see pp. 177-178). However desirable and laudable it is to want policy makers to engage with the findings presented in this book, in the absence of a rather straightforward section listing specific recommendations for practice, it is unfortunately unlikely that this cohort of people will know how to take up the findings and make good sense and use of the important insights Zingaro offers for our consideration. It might be that readers engaged in the helping professions will want to distill the main points communicated in Zingaro's work; using them to springboard discussions among themselves and in their overtures and interactions with, and proposals to, policy makers, including funders.

Transforming a Text

There are challenges associated with transforming a doctoral dissertation into a book. On the whole, Zingaro (2009) succeeds in producing a readable and appealing text. This book would have benefited from a close structural edit aimed at providing the reader stronger orienting guideposts to be in a position to better understand, from the outset,

what to expect. For example, in Chapter one, it would have been useful if Zingaro had clearly outlined the main features and findings in each of the book's subsequent eight chapters. In a similar vein, the introductory sections of each chapter needed to strongly and clearly state the chapter's arguments to fully herald the brilliant material Zingaro presents and the analyses she develops.

Practitioners in front line service in the helping professions will be most interested in paying close attention to Chapters four, six and seven. These results' chapters are the most successful because they are concise, the material is compelling—Zingaro (2009) has collected some excellent data—and the analytic writing is engaging. It is in these chapters that Zingaro is her most successful in communicating the passion, respect, and fortitude with which bordered professionals do their work of supporting themselves and others relative to disclosures of complex lived experiences with oppression and pain. It is here that Zingaro expertly delivers on her promise of explicating embedded features of the thinking work engaged in by professionals with whom she spoke. She does this by providing generous amounts of (compelling) direct quotations in informants' own words.

Perhaps linked to her aim of theorizing these people's practice-based knowledge, however, Zingaro's analytic writing falters in Chapter seven and eight (and elsewhere) in her overuse of (lengthy) quotations by persons other than those who participated in *this* study. This choice unnecessarily lengthens the book, detracts from statements made by Zingaro's informants, and distracts the reader from the analytic threads from within informant thinking work that Zingaro works hard to develop for the benefit of her reader. The appreciable contribution of this rigorously conducted study is its success in opening and critically considering previously unexamined sites of activity. Where her informants are allowed to speak for themselves, and where her own analyses are unfettered by cumbersome quotations, Zingaro is at her best in interacting with her reader. I am utterly unconvinced of the need to theorize here, and I am further unconvinced that the author actually *does* theorize in a significant way. It is her careful and deliberate explications of the complexities of how people's work is shaped that makes Zingaro's book the intelligent, convincing, useful to practice, and thus valuable work that it is.

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(http://www.oa.uottawa.ca/journals/aporia/articles/2011_11/Bisaillon.pdf).

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