

Norman Denzin and autoethnography

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Abstract

This article reflects on the influence of Norman Denzin in qualitative social work. In 1992, I travelled from west coast Australia to mid-west USA to complete doctoral studies in social work with Denzin as a thesis advisor. *Mystory*, an autoethnography, was a class assignment in his sociology unit, *Methods of Field Research*. Struggling to understand what was meant by the task proved useful in exploring what it is we do when we do social work. This method enables a holding in tension the theoretical, value-based and practice elements involved in the grit of doing humanitarian, public-spirited social work. Such research can be traced in both sociology/social work to the time of Jane Addams and her cohort. Denzin's naturalistic inquiry for social justice both affirms and updates for our discipline the strength of this heritage. Using *mystory*, I narrate my lived experience of becoming a practitioner through detailing three pieces of qualitative research informing my development: a library-based study (1969), a community study (1976) and an autoethnography (1994). Denzin argues that we are always positioned practitioners of social work. Gender, race, class, geography, age and other factors inscribe our lived experience. Awareness of the particulars of these dynamics is always partial. Pinch points help raise consciousness. Denzin's work clarifies the medley of moral, political, intellectual, emotional and practical aspects of change. For a contemporary world similar to the market-driven chaos that Addams addressed, Denzin shows through scholarship and action how research for change usefully draws on critical thinking, the humanities and social theory.

Keywords

Autoethnography, practitioner research, culture, *mystory*, narrative, Jane Addams

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Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards - Soren Kierkegaard.

The world keeps on changing and will never be the same - Jimmy Chi

The end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time – T. S. Eliot

Introduction

In the period 1889–1930, Jane Addams, working as a member of sociology’s classic generation, created a sociology that places ethics at the center of its analysis of society and social life—as a major explanatory variable in social theory, a policy objective for applied sociology, and an important emphasis in the practice of public sociology (Lengermann and Niebrugge, 2014: 99).

Norman Denzin inherited and updated the thinking of Jane Addams and the Chicago School of Sociology. His work recognizes that social work operates across time and space in differing and changing cultural landscapes. Denzin’s writing and generous interactive presence have spread widely through his writing, classes, thesis advice and Congress of Qualitative Inquiry. Among his many achievements he responsively shows practitioners how to enact the purpose and values of social work in differing contexts. He demonstrates how curious, committed and engaged practitioners can use their agency as a research tool just as powerful as those tools determined by the scientific method. He offers a disciplined reasoning of the diverse ways knowledge for social practice can be gained. He has mindfully built a global community of inquirers with the means to bring about change for social justice ends. He shows how the interpretive turn in social theory moves social work beyond debates between scientism and interpretivism. In consequence he maps spaces where embodied practitioners in positioned action can value their own inquiring creativity in addressing ‘what is happening here?’. He reminds us that in social work our project is not just to study society but to act to change it. The aim is to work in and between personal troubles and public issues; to praxis thought and action to good effect and to choose best fitting research approaches according to value-based purpose. Denzin establishes that there is a politics of practice and research in doing this but argues that this need not be a war (2002, 2014).

Using the particularities of my lived experience I aim in this article to connect with wider generalities as to the nature of social work. After 10 years of practice as a social worker and then another 10 as a social work academic, in 1994 I gained a year’s leave to pursue doctoral studies. With few options in Western Australia (WA) I settled on enrolment in the School of Social Work at the University of Illinois in Urbana- Champaign. The deciding factor was an opportunity to study with Norman Denzin. Already known to me through his writing, when I met him in person, he generously agreed to being a thesis advisor. Our family packed up for 2 years living in the US. We decided we could live on 50% of my salary for 2 years with my husband becoming the prime child carer. Embarking on this adventure far from home with excitement and trepidation, we were accommodated

in the University's international student village. For me, having time and space to read, attend class and think was a welcome relief from work pressures.

Meeting Norm in person disarmed. He could pass for an outback Aussie character dressed in khaki bush shirt and shorts and on his stubby feet, thongs (later upgraded to Birkenstocks). His dress disconcerted the class when snow arrived and his legs were still bare. His resonant voice rolled out in each class with no audio-visuials. Instead his words would be published later almost unchanged. I appreciated he likened our task as qualitative researchers to being a detective rather than a scientist. To digest the meaning of this connection to detective work, I read his recommendations of fiction writers such as James Lee Burke and Raymond Carver and their capturing of specific landscapes. We read a myriad of cutting-edge feminist writers including pioneers in using the term intersectionality, Kimberle Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins. It was an invitation to a world of scholarship that connected to the everyday. In this exploration there was no hurry for me to commit to a research question. His active listening skills allowed for an open exploration of the methodological possibilities. My research direction always centered on 'what does it mean to work the social as a social worker?'

In an invited article for the first edition of *Qualitative Social Work*, Denzin captured much of what I learned from attending his lectures and seminars:

The critical qualitative social work researcher is not an objective, politically neutral observer who stands outside and above the study of . . . media processes and the circuits of culture. Rather, the social work researcher is historically and locally situated within the very processes being studied. A gendered, historical self is brought to this process. This self, as a set of shifting identities, has its own history with the situated practices that define and shape the consumption of cultural goods and commodities. These are the very processes that create the larger structural problems social workers address: poverty, violence, discrimination, and addiction (2002: 29).

In contemporary social disciplines the impossibility of a God's Eye View or view from the mountaintop that Denzin describes here is widely accepted. That all inquiry is positioned and that there is no theory free or value free knowledge. Yet the first national social work conference I attended in the US featured Joel Fischer (see 1973) as key-note speaker. He advocated that social workers focus on using scientifically proven facts in everyday practice. Reflecting on the limits to this in practice concluded in my committing to an autoethnography as thesis method and topic. I decided to revisit my practice experience from the emic position of an insider rather than the etic positioning of an objective outsider. The terms etic and emic derive from linguistics where phonetics capture the technical sounds of any language while phonemics are necessary to understand meaning in any language. Phonemics requires the researcher to be in relationship with native speakers. In practice there is a constant tracking between the two forms of knowing. Emic methods start in the relational and refer to shared meaning. Etic methods in contrast are ahistorical and nonbiographical. They do not allow discovery of 'what a particular interactional moment means to its participants' (Denzin 1989: 21).

The structure to this article loosely follows that of the mystery assignment Denzin regularly set (1989, 2014). I encountered it in 1992 in Denzin's sociology unit called

Methods of Field Research. There were about 35 postgrad students in class, both international and local from a range of humanities majors. Jayashree Nimmagadda (now a widely published and respected social work professor) from south India was the only other social work doctoral student. She linked to Denzin through her topic of alcoholism (Denzin, 1987). This had been the focus of her practice in India, working across caste and class with toddy dependent labourers and whiskey-drinking professionals. My practice had been mainly working with Aboriginal people in the remote Kimberley region of WA. Both of us engaged in conversations with Denzin ('call me Norm') about our interest in completing doctoral studies in social work. This was in contrast to Social Work staff. One of the kindest said: 'I'd really like to get to know you but I have too much to teach you.' This banking concept of education (Freire, 1970) positioned us as passive receivers. It reflected a general belief that we had travelled to the USA for an education universally applicable regardless of context and culture.

Denzin in contrast took us on a mystery tour. Instructions for completing the assignment were minimal. Critical attention to lecture and course material was expected. How this might be relevant in writing our lived experience was different for each student. Sharing a basement room in the School, Jayashree and I joined in struggling to understand what Denzin asked of us. We learned Oscar Lewis earlier wrote in our basement. Both familiar with his *Culture of Poverty* (1966) we thought of his autoethnographic work in grappling with describing our practice. He wrote of living with people who had to buy food day by day because of no storage. Their poverty made food more expensive and shaped short-term 'uneconomic' thinking. There was no inevitability to this 'culture' – world history attests to how changes in circumstances leads to changes in thinking. Rendering our efforts to Denzin for marking we were thrilled at the sprinkling of 'lovely's that served as feedback.

The mystery approach to depicting everyday life builds on a number of consequential assumptions. It assumes that we are born into and live in interaction with other people in contrast to any belief that we make our way as individuals. People shape who we become as we shape them. In this moulding, factors such as geography, history, class, race and gender inevitably influence outcomes. Particular interacting power plays of such embodied factors connect to belief systems with singular but structured effects on each individual. In seeking to understand this as a mystery each of us needs to start with reflection on family beginnings before identifying turning points in our life. This self-writing involves interpretation of lived experience while also accepting there are objective markers of a life. That each of us is an actual person with a real life marked by turning points or epiphanies. As Denzin states: 'Everyday life represents a site where power, ideology, gender and social class circulate and shape one another. Social work practitioners mediate and intervene in this life world' (2002: 27). Being self-aware in this is an important tool.

Building on all these assumptions any mystery will be an interpretation of what is real. But lived experience rendered in this subjective way can be as truth-like as facts established on the human condition through the objectivity of scientific method. In social work both objective and subjective truths are the territory of practice such as when we need to represent a client's lived experience in a court system of legal objectivity. There is

a social patterning to be discerned in the lived experience of any one individual's life. The telling of mystory is driven by moments of awareness as to the subjective and objective facts of what is happening in my life and how I understand it.

This approach has resonance with social work traditions of listening and making meaning of the private troubles brought to practitioners. Many are resolved between the person and the practitioner. But throughout history many of these troubles have connected with other's concerns to lead to a public reckoning. Such reckonings can make for change (Mills, 1959).

Background - Mystory

I was born in the post-war Perth, WA of 1948. Perth's population was 233,000 accounting for 45% of the state total. The rest spread across an area four times as large as Texas. The poorest state in the nation, WA was known as the Cinderella state. Times change. Now the Perth population is 2.8 million, this being 75% of the state's population and WA is the richest state. Mining is responsible for much of this change with many miners based in Perth while flying in and out to work. Economics and culture make for a city-centric lifestyle as much of the state is desert.

Both my parents were born in Perth of rural Presbyterian Scottish and Irish ancestors. Both left school before 14 with my father setting up as a milkman with the help of his father, the local policeman. My mother became a skilled seamstress and milliner. Horse and cart were used to deliver the milk enabling Dad's hobby of racing horses. A horse whisperer his horses were kept on our land near the dairy processing plant. We were fairly self-sufficient with hens and turkeys, a huge mulberry tree and Chinese market gardener neighbors. Largely a swamp, our land was within walking distance of the city. All five children worked from an early age. Dad traded horse manure for vegetables from newly arriving post-war European migrants setting up market gardens on the city outskirts. Mum made all our clothes. She worked for the Red Cross during the war as a driver/mechanic and, uncommonly then, drove her own car. While her supportive parents lived across the swamp, Dad's parents and sisters lived next door. They didn't talk to Mum but Dad went every day for morning tea. When I was 10, we children disappointed Mum. Television arrived and every day we rushed next door for the Mickey Mouse Club. She saw to it that soon we had our own TV.

Reflecting now I see for the first time these unspoken divisions as class driven. Proud of being a public servant family, Dad's side felt Mum should look up to them. Her father was a manual labourer and her mother next to illiterate yet she didn't know her place. She was a thoroughly modern woman, driving about, socialising, dressing smartly and going so far as to design and have built a new house for us all. Dad kept on side with everyone. His main teaching was that everyone was of equal worth and deserving of respect.

School extended these horizons. Free government schools were the only consideration and family expected children leave as soon as legally possible. Australia was then known as a worker's paradise with education generally not seen as useful. Belatedly the federal government realized that small numbers graduating university meant few to staff the expanding public service needed for post-war nation building. Scholarships became

available to keep students at school. Along with many others I received scholarships to finish school and go to university. Dad was dubious. I was a girl and would waste an education. With no cost involved, my modern Mum convinced him otherwise.

Mum also persuaded me not to do medicine because it was well known that women doctors drank and smoked. I had been in the science class in high school with 40 boys and 4 girls. Most boys went on to become engineers but for girls the path was less clear. Two chose work while another girl and I enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts. I chose a major in Anthropology with little consciousness of a working life following graduation. I enjoyed the rich worlds of ideas opened to me. The Department of Anthropology was subtitled Comparative Sociology. While the Professor, Ronald Berndt, and his wife Catherine were experts on traditional Aboriginal culture, other staff were interested in urban ethnography, especially the Chicago School and symbolic interactionism.

Thesis one 1969–Understanding West Indian migration to Britain

Honours meant another year of exploration. The Anthropology Department limited honours students to library research. Field research was not allowed. I chose the topic of West Indian migration to Britain, then widely covered in news media. The Sidney Poitier film *To Sir with Love* released in 1967 moved me emotionally as to the unfairness of being judged by race. In the same year a national Australian referendum resulted in Aboriginal people being counted as citizens. I hardly registered this local move. In 1968, anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner talked in a national broadcast (published as *After the Dreaming*, 1969) about the “cult of forgetfulness” practiced on a national scale. He termed it the Great Australian Silence. Australians generally, supported by the media, curriculum, and governments at all levels, chose not to think about the atrocities of the past. Even the Berndts, experts on Aboriginal culture, stayed focused on ‘traditional culture’, largely bypassing the historical and contemporary issues.

In this context, I chose to look at the dynamics of race in what was still called ‘the old country’. Distant from all players in pre-internet days, I depended on media reaching Perth. An objective piece of qualitative research, reliant on statistical facts, government reports, academic analysis and research, I leavened it with available novels and films incorporating West Indian viewpoints. I learned from this the power of social Darwinism in British culture. There was a widespread imagining of a fixed hierarchy of race that meant West Indians were seen as not belonging and not wanted in the UK. While there were humanitarian counter-narratives to this, most powerful against this rejection was economic demand. Post-war migration kept public services such as buses running. On the supply side migrants had expected to be welcomed ‘home’ because of the colonial structuring of their education. Instead colonisers were ethnocentrically shocked to discover the colonized coming into their territory. For me it was a social history of a place far away but connected.

After graduation what next? It was the end of 1969 and looking for work, I approached the state Native Welfare Department, responsible for administering laws affecting the Aboriginal population. The senior public servant told me a woman anthropologist

couldn't be employed because Aboriginal elders wouldn't like it. I had no answer though I knew enough of Aboriginal culture to know women elders would not lightly chose to talk to men of women's business. The white man speaking to me wore his misogynist and racist authority lightly. Still largely unconscious of my own compromised positioning as an anthropology graduate I searched further afield for relevant work.

Gaining a position with the federal Department of External Territories I hoped to be posted to Papua-New Guinea (PNG). Shifting to Canberra I found women anthropologists couldn't go to PNG because of policy and it was policy not to disclose what the policy was. With a first-class honors degree I shared an office with a man with third-class honors and a father who was a senior figure in Canberra. This young man was recruited to an enrichment program while I colored in off-shore oil lease maps of PNG.

Tardily learning my department was to be dissolved with PNG's coming independence, I sought a position with the Colonial Sugar Refinery in Sydney as a market researcher. The mining boom in Western Australia had taken off and this building materials company sought to be the supplier of choice to the mining towns being constructed. What a difference with responsibility, respect and resources! Travelling the country on generous expenses, interviewing mining bosses, a rewarding corporate life beckoned. But a business career held little interest as I was working to save money for a trip 'home'. Visiting the ancestral home country was a call widely experienced by young Australians. *'The Adventures of Barry McKenzie'* a film released in 1972, captures aspects of this phenomenon. The film features a naïve, beer guzzling country boy who hits Earls Court in London. Like the West Indians, this Aussie boy has heard so much about the home country he wants to experience it first-hand. For 2 years I followed a similar cultural script. I worked as a temporary typist in London to fund exploring Britain and Europe. My experience of acceptance differed to that of the West Indians I studied. By the 70s in contrast, Caribbean culture starred in Swinging London.

Then it was time to return to Perth. Early in 1972 I saw an ad in the daily paper for graduates to join the new Community Welfare Department. The former Child and Native Welfare Departments had amalgamated and the diversity of West Australians were to be included equitably in terms of access to welfare support. At recruitment, the interviewer asked me to explain the difference between integration and assimilation. These being concepts covered in my thesis I performed well and was offered a position. When told it would be a country position I fled in tears. To work in the country, in this city-centric culture, meant humiliation. I couldn't accept.

Days later the recruiting officer rang. A mistake had been made and I was to work in Perth. My face saved, I now accepted. Half my time was spent escorting Aboriginal people from all over the State to medical appointments. My anthropology degree was regarded as relevant. In this way I came to meet Aboriginal people from diverse cultural groups. I began to become aware of the differing effects of colonization on individuals and their ways of life. The rest of my work was spent as a case worker in the inner suburbs across a gamut of welfare issues. I heard on more than one occasion from colleagues when I offered an opinion: 'But you're not a social worker, are you?' Social work had only begun to be offered at university in WA and retained a powerful aura of new professional

knowledge. If that is what it took to be effective, I decided to take the time to become qualified.

Thesis two 1976–Understanding a remote Kimberley Aboriginal community

Doing the Masters of Social Work passed quickly at a time when worldwide student agitation over social reform had filtered through to Perth. We engaged with a range of learning resources from both Britain and the United States. Few resources were as yet home-grown but in politics a Labor Government at federal and state government were legislating a raft of reforms. We studied processes of policy development with improving living conditions for Aboriginal people a priority at both state and federal levels.

In this context I chose a thesis topic. In January 1973 I holidayed with anthropologist friends in Derby in the Kimberley region of the tropical north. In an area three times the size of England, 15,000 people lived with half being Aboriginal. Significant change accompanied two legal decisions. The first was the national referendum in 1967 referred to previously. The request that Aboriginal people be counted in the national census as part of the population gained approval from over 90% of voters (in a system where voting is compulsory) ([AIATSIS](#)). This potentially gave Aboriginal people the right to vote and full citizenship. In the second decision that same year the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Commission removed a racially discriminatory clause from the Federal Pastoral Industry Award. In consequence equal wages for Aboriginal pastoral workers were phased in from December 1968 in the Kimberley ([Skyring, 2009](#)).

At the time many Aboriginal people lived on cattle stations (large ranches) in language groups on their traditional lands in return for providing workers. Paid little or nothing, poorly housed and often illiterate, Aboriginal stockmen (and women) greatly improved the profitability of these stations. These leasehold properties ranged from dirt-poor operations to those run by major power-brokers in the state government. A refusal and/or inability to support the resident family groups as well as pay workers' new entitlement meant pastoralists evicted many hundreds of Aboriginal people. Forced to leave their traditional country, people camped in appalling conditions in the few small towns across the region. This at the time they supposedly, as newly minted citizens, became entitled to access government support services.

As the annual wet season set in I travelled out from Derby with a doctor and my anthropologist friend to Fitzroy Crossing – so named because it was one of few sites where a road crossed the mighty Fitzroy River. Working for the Health Department, the men aimed to check how hookworm, common with inadequate sanitation, was spreading at what was called Middle Camp. Here over 300 people shared one tap and no toilets. Coming from different language groups people found it hard to organize themselves given the lack of basic support. Rain poured as we arrived in our 4WD with air-conditioning. Through the windscreen wiper I could see families huddled under scraps of corrugated iron and cardboard. Shocked, I viscerally thought 'How could this be happening in Australia?' Later we drove to the only hotel in town where one of the few 'equal rights' was being delivered to Aboriginal people. Alcohol rights came to the Kimberley for

Aboriginal people in 1972. The hotel owners responded by opening what they called the 'Animals Bar' segregated from the 'White Bar'. The economic logic in offering this service didn't apply to meeting basic needs such as shelter.

On the drive back, we called into another Aboriginal community. This was a very different story. Here a group of some 300 had resisted being evicted, had fought for and won from state government the first successful Aboriginal land grant. Covering some 15,000 acres (6000 ha) it was much smaller than surrounding cattle stations but had access to the Fitzroy River, a source of food and cultural activities. The three language groups working together under strong leadership won support from both federal and state governments. They were now in the process of planning a village to be built by the state housing authority, including a store and health service.

The difference between this community and Fitzroy Crossing is testament to the happenstance of history and the potential for influencing the direction of change with research that looks at what is happening here. In 1972 a number of factors intersected. This community was led by a charismatic leader of a language group only recently come in from the desert with no long-term experience of the dominant culture. He held together three differing, intermarrying language groups. He had a reputation as a strong and good man with both local Aboriginals and the station owners. Then a new entrepreneur from the US arrived. Deciding on efficiency he directed community members to relocate to Derby. Their answer was 'No we wouldn't go'. Thinking strategically the leader contacted a mediator in Derby belonging to one of the language groups. This man had long worked for 'welfare'. With the new Community Welfare now operating, this mediator drew in a new social worker to help enable the community to stay put. Writing in-depth reports of what was happening on the ground, the social worker advocated at the highest levels for an excision of land to accommodate the community. With a Labor government committed to the moral cause of improving Aboriginal lives, this happened (Crawford, 1997).

Visiting the year after this excision I thought to conduct a community study for my thesis. The community was supportive of the idea as they wanted to get the word out about their achievements and challenges. Support also came from my local social work supervisor but there were reservations back at University as to whether a community study could count as research. It would be acceptable to hypothesise as to whether what was called the Aboriginal problem could be best addressed through housing, education or perhaps health. Fortunately, one lecturer, appreciating the historical value of qualitative research in social work, volunteered to supervise. Berger and Luckmann's (1966) treatise on the social construction of reality was my methodological guide.

I presumptively named my consequent effort 'The story of (this community)' when on reflection it could only be 'A story' delimited and shaped by my positioning. Regardless, after that experience of engagement with Aboriginal people I committed to return to Community Welfare. Moving on from my city-centric prejudice I requested a country posting, preferably in the Kimberley. I was posted to Broome on the west coast of the Kimberley. Today Broome is a tourist town with a population of 15,000 (plus 30,000 in peak times) with 65% being non-Indigenous. In 1976 the population was about 3000 with a cosmopolitan population due to Broome's exemption from the white Australia policy. Laws introduced at Federation in 1901 aimed to help keep Australia 'British' and white.

The last vestiges of this policy were overturned in 1973. The exemption for Broome allowed the use of Asian labour in the pearl industry. After forced Aboriginal free diving fished out the shallows, deep-sea diving became necessary. Initially attempting to abide by the white Australia policy, pearl fleet owners tried white British divers. A book '*The white divers of Broome*' (Bailey, 2002) traces how this experiment had fatal consequences. After that Japanese, Malay, Filipino and other Asians remained the work force while legally only white men could own the pearling boats. Many Asian men formed liaisons with local Aboriginal women meeting the responsibilities of fatherhood even though marriage was legally not possible for much of the twentieth century.

In this frontier town of simmering racial tensions alongside harmoniously blended cultures of food, fishing and music, I began my career as a professional social worker. A narrow ribbon of unsealed road was the only connection south to the rest of the state. A turning point in my learning came with increasing awareness of the political nature of the work I was employed to deliver. There had been a change of government. Many people in town were happy with the pre-1972 status quo and often raised their concerns with state Ministers within the now ruling conservative party traditionally dominated by pastoral interests. Then there were the missions who were not happy being pushed to relinquish authority over their Aboriginal residents. In the Broome region approximately 1000 people lived in three major Catholic missions, including Beagle Bay. Until recently children of mixed race had been legally removed from mothers and sent here. It was believed by policy-makers that a mixed genetic makeup better fitted such children for future employment and marriage and entitled such offspring to a better quality of life and education. One of my first tasks was to finish closing the Beagle Bay dormitories where these children had been housed and to arrange alternative accommodation. Broome man Jimmy Chi, of Aboriginal/Chinese/Japanese/Scottish descent, captures some of the dynamics of this multicultural region in a musical '*Bran Nue Dae*' (Chi, 1991), later made into a film of the same name.

A lot of my work involved negotiating territory mapped by the competing logics of five rights that were coming into being. The five rights were voting rights, land rights, mining rights, drinking rights and government benefit rights. With legal and policy changes came spreading Aboriginal action for self-determination. Against this came rising economic interest in the mineral development of a relatively untouched Kimberley. While the Director of Community Welfare was staunch in support of his Kimberley team, our presence in delivering government services came under constant attack. Eventually several of us, including myself and husband, were compulsorily transferred out of the Kimberley at Ministerial directive. Hawke and Gallagher (1989) in photo and text capture some of the fraught dynamics of this time as Aboriginal people tried to stop the drilling for oil on a sacred site while the state government used the full force of law to make drilling happen. It turned out the well was dry. A book '*Red over black: Behind the Aboriginal land rights*' circulated tales of Marxist manipulation of Aboriginal people through multiculturalism and such ideas (McDonald, 1982). We as 'welfares' so described, ridiculed the idea of being controlled from Moscow, but many thought this disinformation true. It became highly political to practice community development. Head Office in Perth

dissuaded Kimberley staff from such work and instead deliver lower-profile casework with individuals.

Back in Perth I was tasked with writing a handbook for staff on working in Aboriginal communities. I started by explaining Aboriginal people working in community stores did not have difficulty in operating cash registers because of a lack of technical knowledge. Rather they found it difficult to resist the pressure for 'book-ups' from family members owed a cultural obligation. After addressing culture I covered the history of past policies since first settlement in 1829. The commissioning officer rejected my Handbook as unsuitable in that I had included documentation of history and highlighted past issues of power shaping contemporary behavior. I experienced this as a demoralizing and overwhelming rejection and retreated home to children. Overcoming this distress was helped by the rising voice of Aboriginal people themselves and readiness of an increasing number of Australians to listen.

In 1984 I took up a position as a social work academic charged with introducing concepts of culture and 'working with Aboriginal people' across the curriculum. My rejected manuscript was jointly published by the Social Work School and the Centre for Aboriginal Studies (Crawford, 1989). It went on to be re-printed three times. Then the zeitgeist shifted again. The Labor party that had amalgamated Native Welfare and Child Welfare back in 1972 on the grounds of citizen equity returned to power. There was no return to moral ideas of government delivered equity. An age of marketisation, managerialism and neo-liberalism had reached WA. The Premier Brian Burke proudly took a bulldozer to the public service on the grounds the market would deliver wellbeing. This Premier later served jail time for malfeasance but in his autobiography he doesn't resile from his actions. There was 'some negative publicity about "politicising the public service" and "jobs for the boys"'. . . . I contented myself with knowing the system we'd adopted had been introduced by governments in Australia and around the world. It worked' (Burke, 2017: 194).

So, during a deprofessionalisation and defunding of the public service I worked for 10 years educating social workers for a changing field of practice. The course remained strong on social theory, practice skills and traditional research with qualitative research skills added after advocacy for the narrative/interpretive turn by feminist staff and allies. Male staff tended to have a PhD obtained prior to shifting to WA and little practice experience. Female staff in contrast had significant practice experience and no PhD. It seemed important to have the authority of a PhD in arguing the value of professional practice skills. So it was I found myself with husband and children in Illinois.

Thesis three 1994-Understanding my lived experience as researcher/practitioner and practitioner/researcher

I expected to complete the necessary preparatory units of study before writing a research proposal and return home to field research. Having already arranged for Norm Denzin to be a thesis advisor, I hadn't given much thought to my enrolment being in the School of Social Work. This School I found very different to my Australian School. Back home our talk was of narrative and feminist approaches that highlighted relationship, reflexivity and

resonance. In Illinois those ideas were disclaimed as old-fashioned soft stuff that was going nowhere in not being hard scientific research. It more fittingly belonged in Community Colleges. One student shared that it was the same at other 'top' universities. When she applied at one, she was told that luckily she had been a practitioner for only a short time. Any longer and she would have been useless for social work research.

It felt like a hierarchical system with students as consumers of knowledge encouraged to develop a knowledge product that could be marketed. There were more men than women academics and lots of energy went into bidding for scarce funds by using a language that took for granted reality was out there to be measured. If it couldn't be counted, it didn't exist. Students were advised to study the market for social work academics in choosing a thesis topic. Being my thesis advisor, Denzin's status as a world-renowned social theorist gave me leverage to independently choose a topic.

Learning from Denzin's classes of the concept of autoethnography, was an epiphany. I could research by reflecting on my social work practice.

The autoethnographer functions as a universal singular, a single instance of more universal social experiences. . . . The autoethnographer inscribes the experiences of a historical moment, universalizing these experiences in their singular effects on a particular life (Denzin, 2003: 258).

Drawing on Sartre's notion of humans as singularly universal among living forms and universally singular, Denzin argues, the autoethnographer rejects any denial of respect, humanity, self-determination, citizenship, and human rights to indigenous peoples and others including women. Those cast to the lower ranks of the hierarchical ladder of human development imagined by social Darwinism can imagine and be imagined differently. These are the people social workers are likely to know first-hand.

Staller (2014) arguing for the value of practitioners writing of practice, notes that a practitioner in this high-pressure work has little space for such writing. It was a gift then to have the space to reflect on lived experience with mentoring from Denzin. He shared such mentoring with many students from around the globe following principles of community development that go back to the social work of Jane Addams. Despite her influence and achievements Addams because of her gender could not become an academic. She was involved in the origins of the Chicago School (Deegan, 1989, 2013). Her effective actions in improving lives became a reason for her ideas to be devalued by an almost exclusively male academia. She was judged as wanting in not objectively researching. Rather her research was contaminated in being subjectively involved with the studied. Denzin argues that for the knower to be in relationship with the known, like Addams, can help rather than hinder research for action (2002, 2014).

Rediscovering the work of Jane Addams, I visited the Hull House Museum in Chicago. Addams autoethnographically describes her historical moment. Looking back at her texts it is possible to see how universalizing these experiences are with regard to social work (see Addams, 1990/1910). She enacted the values of respect, equity and self-determination through an emphasis on starting where people were at. She worked with people subject to marginalization. Starting in Chicago her influence extended globally. My learning with Denzin affirmed the value of such practitioner research. Such

methodologies have a history in social work of over 100 years even while an era of positivism in western culture worked to devalue them. Denzin has both told and shown social workers that it is possible to both research and act for change on social justice issues. He has highlighted how scholarly aspects of the discipline inform action.

Both Jayashree and I went on from our time with Denzin as social work educators. Well beyond the two of us, there is a geometric progression as to his influence considering all those who passed through his classes, read his texts and attended conferences he supported such as the Congress of Qualitative Inquiry. His sociology/cultural studies informing action for social justice underscores the value of social work.

My abiding memory of his large presence is of a lecture critiquing an early form of grounded research. When he arrived at the crux of his critique he boomed about a gap in logic; ‘And when you realise that, you could drive a truck through it!’ His metaphor captures the Mid-west farm boy with ideas of global reach.

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