Constructing anti-racist social work from perspectives of other in a Canadian rural context: Sensitizing concepts and stories from diverse people - a first chapter.

Abstract

This paper explores a potential contribution of stories, and sensitizing concepts from these stories, to anti-racist social work. It proposes that social workers should respond to different lived experiences of racism in different ways, and that a meta-narrative that informs anti-racist social work should not be created. When social workers gain understanding about the storied complexity of their own lives, and the lives of people with whom they work, social workers and their clients can participate together in constructing an anti-racist social work that responds to unique situations in their unique contexts.

Introduction

This paper explores the potential of stories to inform anti-racist social work practice. It posits that stories told by people from different ethnic and racial groups have a huge potential to enhance understandings about lived experiences of racism. Some results of a qualitative study conducted in the St John River Valley of New Brunswick, Atlantic Canada, which investigated stories, and key (sensitizing) concepts from stories, illustrating experiences of racism in the lives of research participants are reported in this paper. The paper also reports participants views about how anti-racist social work practice can confront this racism.

The study rests on a number of assumptions. A fundamental assumption is that our lives are guided by stories. These stories are narratives set within a context that give meaning to events, people and relationships (Clews & Randall, 2000). Both social workers and their clients have stories. The communities in which they live also have stories. This story metaphor represents more than the culture of the community. The story orders the culture, draws it together and wraps it in meaning (Flynn, 1991, p. 24). The stories that inform the worlds of social workers and people with whom they work form models through which we understand the world. These models are biased by the experiences (and stories) of the model-creators. Therefore social workers should not seek to develop a single model of anti-racist social work but should maximize the different models that they employ in order to enrich their understanding of the experiences of other. Stories can be a medium for enriching these models. It is impossible to understand fully the lived experiences of others but our understanding can be enhanced when we reflect on their stories, and the sensitizing concepts embedded within these stories, that capture central and important truths of their narrators. As social workers gain understanding of lived experiences of racism, as reflected in the stories of diverse people, they will be better situated to construct anti-racist social work that is informed by these lived experiences of racism. Therefore, anti-racist social work practice will be enriched when it is informed by stories of people from diverse ethnic and racial groups who have experienced racism.

Stories and sensitizing concepts

Stories are an important part of our lives. They guide socialization processes and inform individuals understandings of self (Richardson, 1990). Children and adults are
socialized to conform to societal or group mores through the lessons embedded in fairy stories and fables, as well as the family, community or national stories that are presented as fact. We create and re-create ourselves through the stories that are central to our self-identity. We select some of the many experiences in our day to day lives to confirm or to change ideas about ourselves and others and create stories around these experiences.

The story metaphor has many entailments. We give meaning and coherence to our experiences through storied themes, plots, subplots and major characters (Randall, 1995). Similarly, we create and re-create our understanding of others through the stories that we develop about them. Storied images of people from unfamiliar ethnic or racial groups are constructed both in fiction and so called fact. These images may inform our perceptions of other unless we recognize and reject stereotypes and learn to understand unique people. Stories and sensitizing concepts can help us to do so.

Beneath the surface simplicity of tales in the storied worlds (Randall, 2000) of ourselves and others lies huge complexity. We have stories, and we live the stories that we create because they act as scripts for us at personal, interpersonal, community, national and international levels. It requires lifelong efforts to understand the stories that inform our own lives. Social workers also develop stories about the problems and strengths of others and more stories about the best way to help. There is a danger that these stories about other are informed by our own stories rather than those of the people we attempt to help. Is this inevitable? How can we ever understand the richness of the stories that inform the lives of others? In particular how can we understand the stories of people who differ from ourselves by dimensions of diversity such as gender, ethnicity, social class or spirituality. How can we engage in anti-oppressive social work practice without this understanding?

A starting point in comprehending an unfamiliar story may be to try to might be to try to understand an element of the story, a sensitizing concept embedded within it. A sensitizing concept is defined as a construct from the research participants perspective, uses their language or expression, and sensitizes the researcher to possible lines of enquiry (van den Hoonoord, 1997, p. 1). Sensitizing concepts, as conceived by Blumer (1969), were introduced as a method of remaining true to the empirical world of others during research processes. I suggest that these concepts have utility in the social work thinking that informs practice as well as research. If this is so, sensitizing concepts have promise to bridge the storied worlds of ourselves and others.

Stories and sensitizing concepts to inform anti-racist social work in rural Atlantic Canada

It is not easy to understand the perspectives of others and to allow these perspectives to inform our construction of social work theory because our stories are complex and our concepts are unique. Both stories and their embedded sensitizing concepts constantly change as we are influenced by events in our social world and our interpretations about our world. It is reasonable to assume that there may be some similarity between the stories and the concepts of people in particular social locations. Aboriginal people share a heritage of oppression by immigrants to Canada, and the Aboriginal residential school experience has touched all Aboriginal families and First Nations Communities. Almost all refugees have stories which include themes about leaving home and starting again in another country. The stories of particular refugees may be similar to the stories of other refugees, and individual Aboriginal people may
have similar stories to others in their communities, but these stories will not be the same. Even the same experience will be constructed into different stories by different people.

Stories and their sensitizing concepts can enrich our understanding of the worlds that others inhabit. It is also important for us to understand the storied complexity of our own lives to lessen the effect of our taken-for-granted assumptions about reality acting as a filter to interpret the stories of others. Attention to our own stories and sensitizing concepts, as well as those of others, will assist us to develop social work theories and practice methods that are compatible with many different stories.

Anti-racist social work practice differs in rural and urban communities. As Collier (1993) points out, many existing theories and practice methods were first developed in an urban society, and social work itself is a child of industrial society (p. 3). Our ethical code assumes urban-inspired professional practice boundaries and research confidentiality conventions that are both impossible and inappropriate to maintain in rural communities (CASW, 1994; Clews, 1999a). The ties that bond in rural communities can be simultaneously liberating and restricting in an intensity that is unknown in urban communities (Martinez-Brawley, 2000, p. 103). The rural social worker is often unable to call upon specialist expertise for help in the linguistic or cultural translation of the world-view of others. A creative way to enhance understanding is to focus on the meanings that dwell within the stories, or if the stories are difficult to comprehend, the sensitizing concepts embedded within stories.

Each rural community is unique. Collier points out broad differences between the life-styles of rural communities based on foraging and agriculture (1993, pp. 6-16). There are also differences within each community and even greater differences between communities and between regions. The different stories within each New Brunswick community are created in a context of the unique characteristics of this province. The importance of forestry, the power of a few wealthy families, and the ethnic composition of the New Brunswick population are three of the influences on stories at individual, interpersonal and community levels within the province. In an effort to understand stories and sensitizing concepts about their experiences of racism and the nature of anti-racist social work that they sought from their helpers, I gathered stories from diverse people living in different communities in the St. John River Valley region of rural New Brunswick.

Methodology

I decided that an interactive qualitative research design (Maxwell, 1996) and qualitative interviewing informed by the model of Rubin and Rubin (1995) was most likely to yield stories that were rich with sensitizing concepts about experiences of racism and views about anti-racist social work. To lessen the impact of my own story was on the research process I worked with four people from different ethnic and racial groups and from different regions of the St. John River Valley to devise a schedule for a semi-structured interview to explore stories and sensitizing concepts about racism and anti-racist social work.

A diverse sample of 29 adult male and female participants of varying ages was selected. The sample included Aboriginal people, Jewish people, immigrants, refugees and Canadian born people. Francophone and Anglophone participants as well as participants with different first language participated. The occupationally diverse sample
contained unemployed people and participants employed in different occupations. Social workers and their clients of social workers were included.

Audio-taped interviews lasted from a little over an hour to almost three hours. Participants provided a short life-story and then spoke about their experiences of ethnic and racial diversity. They shared narratives about experiences of racism. Where relevant they spoke about their experiences of social work that helped and social work that hindered their experiences of racism. Some participants suggested how student social workers could learn to become anti-racist social workers and explored implications of their ideas for social work curriculum content and teaching and learning methods.

My units of analysis from the thousand pages of transcribed interview data were stories and sensitizing concepts contained in these stories. There was a multi-staged data analysis process which included contact with participants to confirm that the stories and concepts had not become jumbled in the stages between interview, transcription, and analysis. By the end of the final stage of analysis, data had been pruned to a hundred pages of sensitizing concepts embedded in stories. These concepts were organized into collages around themes to provide a context for social workers who were attempting to engage in anti-racist social work. It is hoped that these stories and concepts will alert social workers to individual, interpersonal and systemic phenomena that are experienced as racist, and encourage students, practitioners and educators to look for other manifestations in their own communities.

A collage of stories

There is a whole new world, and you can never live like them. You can never neatly fit in the sense of being a true Canadian and do what the other Canadians do. Yet you cannot live as yourself, as you have been brought up . . . you are in a void . . . you have to keep things to yourself . . . solve your problems on your own . . . you have to weigh everything, maybe some day if I have a problem who do I tell, what do I tell, when do I tell? Do I write back home and tell them? You dont want to get them concerned. Or do I tell someone here? They wont want to know about my problems because everyone has their own problems. Refugee

Many professional helping people go into the field unprepared. Many social workers have the best intentions, but may lack practical knowledge. I believe that it is very important that potential social workers are versed in multi-cultural issues. Student

Me: You graduated from here in 1990 . . . how did your education prepare you?
Social worker: believe me, it didn't! I got culture shock. I didn't have any inkling of how it was going to be to work in another culture. A conversation would come up once or twice in the classroom . . . no one ever really got into it. No one talked about how one would survive. There was nothing. Social Worker in First Nations Community

A lot of Social Workers come into our community (with) their own baggage. They need to go through their own healing. They come in with good intentions but . . . whose needs they begin to meet is their own. Because they are so needy. And, many come in carrying guilt, not knowing us at all, and rather than being able to facilitate something thats constructive, they wind up avoiding the situation around them. Aboriginal person
I don't think people understand what racism is. A family had been terrorized for several nights. Around midnight a group would come with tomatoes and start throwing them all over the house. And the little children would wake up and hear this thump, thump all over the house... they were frightened of course. And the husband started keeping all night vigil... he would even sleep out in his car. I told him, if there was any way in which I could help, just to let them know they were not alone, that someone in the community was aware... and did not approve of it. He was very, very appreciative. The police came out, and investigated. I made a bit of a fuss, I spoke in church. This did not speak well of our community.

Human Service Worker

Racism? Alive and well!

The study confirmed that racism is experienced by diverse people in New Brunswick. After providing a collage of concepts and short phrases that together provide my story about the nature of New Brunswick racism constructed from the stories of participants, I explore each concept in turn.

Everywhere
Because I wasn't a white person...
Gossip between themselves, speak of smell...
Lazy and drunk
Somebodys assistant
Black people from gangs... groups that kill people

Smart and rich
I know what a cherry tomato is, and I can read
When you have an accent they assume you can't speak the language

Credit refused
Canadian qualifications problem
Canadian experience problem
The house has been taken
Children half way across the world
Smudging sets off the hospital alarms

Hate

White backlash

The concept racism in different forms was the main topic of discussion for between a quarter and a third of most interviews. Participants emphasized that racism existed and described its pervasiveness in individual interactions and social structures. They described ways that racism was prevalent in the province, emphasizing various effects on different ethnic groups, and the impact of white backlash on attempts to confront racism. Many people prefaced accounts of experiences of racism by emphasizing that New Brunswick was not immune to it. A human service worker described New Brunswick racism as alive and well. An immigrant human service worker said:

The Maritimes are so friendly and so nice, but it is only friendly and nice to people who look like the dominant culture, it's not so friendly to minorities.

Everywhere
Participants mentioned that they encountered racism everyday in numerous ways. As one participant commented, it is everywhere. A refugee often encountered racism with things that involve sharing . . . with the lighter community . . . then you know you are going to face some resistance. Racism was encountered by many people as they tried to negotiate the social structures of a New Brunswick that reflected the values and needs of the numerical majority of white people who emigrated from Western Europe, particularly Britain, before the middle years of the century.

An immigrant human service worker stated that for people in the St. John River Valley racism is a part of regular everyday living. An Aboriginal participant agreed that you get immune to it . . . to accept that it is out there and will always be out there. Because I wasn't a white person

A human service worker gave the example of shopping in a grocery store: Now there are more products on the supermarket shelves that will fit peoples needs, that has been taken care of because it is money-making . . . but there's still no sensitivity. A minority person could be in line and the person behind them would be asked to come up front sometimes.

A temporary resident confirmed this view: There are some supermarkets I used to go to . . . sometimes they would make a mistake in one of my articles . . . the lady would look up at me . . . the impression I got was because I wasn't a white person . . . I had to show her my receipt and she had to look very carefully before she actually acknowledged that a mistake was made.

Similarly, an immigrant said: I went to the post office to pay my bills . . . they were so rude . . . I can't say what was said it was so rude.

A human service worker found that people from diverse minority groups often experienced racism in public services. People with limited English who try to explain themselves while going to the hospital, going to the library, are sometimes greeted with a hostile pardon me, pardon me. In her work she encountered clerks who gossip between themselves, and speak of smell.

Two participants emphasized that New Brunswick racism is not just a white persons disease but found in all parts of the community. A social worker in a First Nations Community regretted the oppression of his own people by band politicians. Another participant said that although many overt acts of racism are by white Aryan nations . . . the Ku Klux Klan, people from all ethnic groups exhibit intolerance.

A participant who had taught in a refugee camp before coming to Canada, attempted some anti-racist education in New Brunswick. Invariably, educational officials
assumed that he was an assistant to somebody else and at first he was usually accompanied wherever he went, particularly if he attempted to use electronic teaching aids. He thought that people believed that he knew nothing about electronic equipment and might break something.

Black people from gangs . . . groups that kill people

Another refugee who had encountered a number of stereotypes thought that social workers should be aware of these New Brunswick stereotypes about people from minority groups. Such knowledge would confront their own stereotypical thinking and help them recognize this thinking in others. Some of the views that he encountered were based upon historical prejudices on some groups of people . . . that they are not achievers . . . not as intelligent. Other stereotypes reflected images of deviance:

Black people form gangs, and when they form gangs they get into groups that kill people, and rob peoples property, break into peoples cars, they have this kind of life that they always live in gangs . . . gangs that tend to be of a criminal nature.

Smart and rich?

A contrasting stereotype was mentioned by a Jewish person. This older participant who had lived in New Brunswick before the holocaust spoke about an enduring stereotype of Jewish people. Were the smartest, were the richest, stereotypical picture that is so untrue.

I know what a cherry tomato is and I can read!

An Aboriginal person told stories that illustrated assumptions that they had limited cognitive abilities. The Aboriginal participant had attempted to buy cherry tomatoes. The sales clerk told her that she was looking at cherry tomatoes, repeating this loudly when she did not respond. The participant, who was angry because there was a clear sign labelling the cherry tomatoes, said, I know what a cherry tomato is and I can read.

When you have an accent they assume you cant speak the language.

Two participants stated that an accent suggesting a first language other than English gives rise to stereotypical thinking and comments from others. A Caucasian immigrant living in Canada for many years who retains a slight accent said when you have an accent they assume you cant speak the language. A refugee said that a black skin colour combined with a non-Canadian accent resulted in many assumptions in New Brunswick. This participant is fluent in several languages. People comment on his excellent English and assume that he learned it in Canada. Another refugee pointed out: you lived before you came here . . . its not as if you are just children arriving.

Credit refused

Immigrants and refugees spoke about different ways that Canadian structures and policies assumed previous Canadian residence. Finance was difficult. An immigrant intending to reside briefly in Canada attempted to rent a television. An absence of a credit rating made this impossible. She was allowed to take a television home when she deposited the full price of a new one. On another occasion a refugee attempting to buy a computer on credit was turned down and referred to his bank. He had sufficient funds in his account so suggested to the bank that they put a stop on some of his funds until his
debt was paid off. They refused to do so and told him that the only way he would be able to secure a credit rating was to obtain and use a bank credit card.

Canadian qualifications problem

Several newcomers spoke about an unwillingness to have foreign qualifications accepted in Canada. A refugee mentioned reactions when he applied for work or higher education. First he encountered the Canadian qualifications problem, finding it difficult to get his qualifications recognized. When applying for a place on an MBA to obtain again his management qualifications he could not demonstrate his undergraduate qualifications:

They insisted I do some business course before I qualified, before they take me in. I even asked the Dean: Have some faith in me and what I can do. I have my qualifications, I can do it. The approach was unsuccessful and he took qualifying courses. I did it much better than they expected . . . it cost $5000 and a lot of time at home. He said that the Canadian qualifications problem was experienced by many newcomers. They come with Masters Degrees, with PhDs, with all this but . . . they have to start at zero.

Canadian experience problem

Participants reported continuing difficulties continue when they attempted to find work.

There is that feeling of shock . . . Im submitting a resume about a job that has been advertised . . . it is not expected that I would . . . when I go for an interview . . . the interviewers . . . seem to wonder how theyre going to deal with me . . . I see confusion in their eyes.

Then the Canadian qualifications problem becomes the Canadian experience problem. Another refugee stated: They always ask me for Canadian experience. How will you get Canadian experience if nobody hires you? A refugee discovered that when she did find work people are always trying to test you, they give you some small project. They check up on you . . . it gnaws.

Conversely, one refugee said that newcomers expect too much and should be willing to take minimum-wage work as she had done, and then move up. If newcomers work hard they will succeed, she argued. Sure they are going to hire someone who speaks the language, she pointed out.

They . . . want to get paid for their qualifications . . . but its hard for Canadians . . . Ive worked for minimum wage . . . now Ive come to the point that . . . Im happy, its still not what I should be making, eventually Im going to get there.

Others disagreed. One social worker was unable to provide the proof of qualifications required by the CASW (Canadian Association of Social Workers) to accredit her qualifications in Canada and thought that social work decision makers lacked understanding of what it was like to escape with only your clothes on your back. She hoped that the political turmoil in her country of origin would settle sufficiently to enable her to secure the proof required. Meanwhile she was doing volunteer human service work to secure the much-needed Canadian experience.
The house has been taken

Particular difficulties were experienced when people tried to rent property. Looking for housing made for some interesting situations, said one refugee. He would make a telephone appointment to view a property but when he arrived the owner would show surprise at his skin colour. Later when I called to say I would like to take the house . . . the owner would say, No, the house has been taken. [The participant thought that] neighbours tell the landlord we dont want those kind of people around here.

Children half way across the world

Refugees and temporary residents were often very saddened by the racism experienced by their children. One temporary resident was pleased that her son was well accepted in the first elementary school he attended but everything changed in his next school. He was taunted by other children because of his black skin. His mother felt guilty that she had brought him half way across the world to experience this, so that she could pursue graduate studies. When she told her son that she planned to raise these racist taunts with the School Principal, her son begged her not to. He preferred to be nice to the children who were taunting him so that they would realize that brown people can be good people. This remark made her feel really bad. Another refugee said that: kids are very careful in the presence of the teachers . . . in the playground these racial slurs come in . . . calling them stupid . . . go back where you came from . . . this is not your country . . . black monkey.

An immigrant thought that her son would be identified because of his skin colour and selected as a trouble-making ring-leader in any misbehaviour. I have one boy . . . he is so active and he has been with a group of other active kids . . . if anything goes wrong . . . (he will be picked out) because he is different . . . assumptions are made about who is the ring-leader.

A refugee bought a coat for her son from the Salvation Army. Another child claimed the coat as his. The other child's father visited the participant and asked her to return the coat. The participant showed the father the receipt but he still demanded the coat. The father was a police officer and the participant felt totally powerless. Therefore, she returned the coat which her son had not stolen.

An immigrant spoke about the difficulties experienced by her family as they attempted to settle in Canada:
When I came here, I had four kids, and my kids went through hell . . . if they weren't strong kids, I think they'd be in the streets . . . if the family wasn't strong . . . I had the stresses of outside and then I'd have to go home and deal with all of the stresses the kids faced, and help them. I then started educating in public places, going into the schools, and educating the public about it, because it was becoming too much.

Smudging sets off the hospital alarms

A hospital social worker identified systemic racism in hospital policies. At difficult times Aboriginal people want to carry out ceremonials such as smudging. This practice sets off fire alarms and people rush to evacuate the building. Customs, particularly those surrounding birth and death, vary across cultures and often hospital policies cannot accommodate them. Culturally sensitive organizational policies are particularly important at traumatic times of life. Dialogue is needed between Aboriginal
spiritual leaders and hospital administrators to devise a system that maintains safety for all patients but enables Aboriginal people to engage in the rituals that promote adjustment to life transitions or healing.

Hate literature

Examples were also provided of occasions when hate was expressed in a community. Many Jewish and Aboriginal participants had strong senses of the history of oppression of their people. They expressed alarm about the proliferation of hate literature on the internet originating in New Brunswick, and acknowledged fear about the future. One participant referred to New Brunswick hate literature as conclusive proof of racism in New Brunswick today. Allusions were made to a New Brunswick schoolteacher who, many argued, denied the holocaust. A story was told about a refugee family who were terrorized until a human service worker intervened. The worker cautioned that social workers who want to confront racism will become known and will be called upon on occasions such as this. These social workers may become targets for aggression from the perpetrators of attacks. Nevertheless, he urged social workers to intervene because of the suffering caused to ethnically and racially diverse people because of these attacks. The effects are devastating, your whole being is practically ripped and torn to shreds, you are made to feel worthless, alienated. There has to be work with the victims. Help them and support them.

White backlash

Two social workers noted that a recent policy had resulted in the hiring of more bilingual social workers. Although advantageous for the clients, who are able to communicate in their first language, some unilingual social workers resent the change and working life has become more difficult for Francophones. When promoting change, anti-racist social work must be sensitive to the potential backlash.

Constructing anti-racist social work from sensitizing concepts and stories

The vignettes, fragments of stories, and sensitizing concepts outlined above show that racism is a powerful theme in individual, interpersonal and community stories in the St. John River Valley in New Brunswick. They also show that racism is experienced in many different ways. Therefore a metanarrative about anti-racist practice should not be created. Instead practitioners should try to understand the unique qualities, richness and complexity of each story and the sensitizing concepts embedded within it. An awareness of the sensitizing concepts and stories uncovered through this research can act as possibilities to alert social workers to ways that racism may be experienced. These stories can help social workers to understand the lived experiences of diverse people. The New Brunswick stories about racism, however, were stories told in a particular place at a particular time. Social workers need to listen for the different stories that will be told in different contexts. Then they need to analyze, interpret and construct (Collier, 1993, p. xxii) an anti-racist response based on what they see and understand.

A pre-requisite for this creative practice is a commitment to understand ones own stories so that they can be bracketted off on some occasions, and at other times used to help the storytelling of others. An awareness of our own story can help us to develop the empathy with others that encourages story telling. Social workers need to learn when to tell their own stories. Talking about these stories (sometimes called self-disclosure) may help, but it may hinder the social work process.
Participants suggested a number of problems with current social work and recommended that many social workers needed to go back and do their own work before trying to help others. Some social workers came in with good intentions but approach clients with a lot of baggage and wind up avoiding the situation around them and focussing on their own needs. In rural communities the life-styles of social workers are often visible to clients.

I have seen . . . non-Native social workers coming in who are married, get their job, divorce their husbands, and the next thing you know they are running around with an Indian man in the community. They need to heal before they help us.

Another example was provided about a social worker who lived in most insanitary conditions but presumed to tell Aboriginal people how to live their lives.

I said to her . . . it seems to me that social work should begin at home. How can you come into my home or into my community and tell me how to live my life? You live like a pig here.

Another participant thought that some social workers had not come to terms with their mixed heritage. Social workers sometimes disclose that they have distant Aboriginal kin thereby indicating underlying identity problems. Some participants said that Caucasian social workers often appear guilty about the past and present oppression of Aboriginal people. They come in, Im sorry, Im sorry Im taking an Indian job, Im sorry . . . I said to one guy, youre the sorriest man Ive ever met. Do your job, youre a social worker, do your job. Dont go around feeling guilty about it. Your guilt doesnt help me.

the first thing they do . . . [is to talk about] . . . these poor people . . . its not right . . . pity is the last thing they need.

Other participants suggested that some social workers lacked basic skills. One became a bit frustrated when I asked her to tell me about what she wanted from social workers. She said that talking and the action orientation characterized many social workers she had met. Social work is working with people. Right? People who are suffering . . . they have to be suffering in order for a social worker to be called. Something drastic has occurred and social workers are needed. Now if you get a social worker in there who does nothing but talk, talk, talk, talk, talk, talk, direct and whatever, and doesnt want to sit down and listen, is action oriented and takes off like a wild fire, youre going to find more times than not, the poor people sitting there bewildered, asking themselves, whats happened here? Im not being helped.

Many suggested that anti-racist social work should be based on a clear understanding of the . people (Clews, 1999b, p. 254). An understanding of the people
involves understanding their stories. This includes the legacy of the past that still dwells within us, the impact of Indian Acts on First Nations Communities, and the impact of witnessing torture, rape and maiming of family members in the war-torn countries from which refugees escape. Our past, present and our future aspirations will all influence the stories that we create about our lives.

Conclusion

This paper has proposed that we make sense of our world through stories that we construct to explain experiences at individual, interpersonal and community levels. Anti-racist social work practice requires us to understand the unique stories of diverse people that are developed in their unique communities. Sometimes we may understand an entire narrative but often we may be touched by a story fragment or a sensitizing concept. All can help us to understand the lived realities of others and then to construct unique responses to the unique situations that we encounter in our social work practice. Our response may involve challenging oppressive structures and systems, it may be helping people to re-story their lives, or it may be just validating experiences of others by listening to their stories. Our quest to understand stories requires us to listen. Sometimes we are unable to hear because our own stories are louder than the narratives of our clients. We need to attend to unfinished chapters in our own stories before we are can co-author with others to re-story in ways that will reduce pain and enhance quality of life for ethnically and racially diverse people who have experienced racism.

Rosemary A. Clews, July 2000

References


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