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EDITORIAL: Stories Still Untold

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Stories Still Untold

There are so many stories still untold, some because we refuse to hear what others have to say. There are many reasons why people refuse to hear but most is related to believing the people we are refusing to hear are unworthy of our attention. This may be because of racism, or sexism, or ageism, homophobia or transphobia. Human history is a narrative of the powerful pushing the less powerful down and trying to keep them there. It is a story of fitting others into perfect little boxes created by and for the dominant (boxes which, incidentally, we resist when others apply them to us) and punishing people who do not fit into this norm. Fortunately, this way of being has been challenged by activism. Despite ongoing serious pushback by those with a serious interest in maintaining the status quo or indeed returning to even more oppressive days, there has been a great deal of progress made in moving forwards a more inclusive agenda. There is still a great deal of work to do here but it is being done.

People also silence one another when we stop listening once we think we have figured out what is happening. This is true on the ideological left as much as it is on the right. In fact, as scholars and editors, we suggest that the progressive left faces a specific set of challenges in this regard, challenges which limit the transformative potential of critical and post-structural orientations to theory, research, and practice. Too often on the left, we look at an oppressive situation, see the oppression, bring it into the light and stop trying to figure out the complexity of what is really happening. Our assessment that inequitable power relationships are at play, that oppression is a factor in the situation, may well be correct. The problem arises when we stop looking deeper into the issue, as what we have found on the surface makes perfect sense to us. We think we have shone the light on what is happening and named the condition of oppression. Too often, though, we have only opened a crack in the box, allowing in just enough light that it may look as if the box is open. Confident in our assessment, we fail to see that there is still darkness in the corners of the box. This darkness contains stories not yet told.

An example would be in the early days in the 1970's of bringing sexual abuse into the light. Even as liberal societies (largely though not exclusively in the global North and West) started to admit that it happened, we still tried to fit people into neat boxes: victim and perpetrator. This started to change in part because of a few people in the helping fields who refused to believe that the world is as simple as we like to believe it to be. Consider the following story: There was a therapist running a program for women who had been sexually abused as children. It was a ground-breaking program at the time. Sometime after the program was established, this therapist decided to do an exit interview with people who had completed the program. As part of it she asked a simple question. "Is there anything I didn't ask you that I should have asked you?" As one would expect, most people said no. That is until one day one of the women who had gone

through treatment answered that she had not been asked in the assessment or treatment phases if she had ever abused anyone. When asked as a result of her statement, she admitted that she had sexually abused a child. This changed everything. The inadequacy of the victim/perpetrator dichotomy was revealed. No longer was this an either/or situation. The therapist started asking the question to all clients and while most answered in the negative, a few admitted that they had or were abusing other people. The box was open and this changed how we saw people. People could be both victims and perpetrators. Effective interventions started to treat the whole person and not just the part of the person that fit neatly into our boxes.

This simplifying of situations is not done with malicious intent. It is our way of trying to make the complex simple so we can understand it and take actions. We want to improve the material conditions that affect people's lives, so we latch onto explanations that make sense and seem actionable. Our explanations are often not wrong. They are often correct, but correct only in explaining part of what is happening. They explain part – but only part – of the story, and in this lays the problem. We move to action with good intentions based upon an incomplete story.

Intentionally or not, by hearing only part of the story we silence those who have more to say; we believe we have heard them and stop asking questions, stop listening for new answers. The part of the story that has been spoken fits our world view so we accept it at face value without asking is there anything we haven't asked that may give us a fuller, richer picture. We are particularly vulnerable to doing this if the broader story might challenge our worldview. It is easier to think that there are victims and perpetrators than to admit that some among us are both. It is easier to see the world in terms of good and evil, black and white. It is much harder to get our heads around the concept of gray. There is much more gray than we like to admit. This tendency to shy away from the gray leads to silencing.

There is another, related reason why we move away from the gray. We fail to ask the questions that open more space for additional stories, possibly because we believe we already understand the context. Too often, we actively seek simplicity and shy away from complexity. In contemporary political debate, candidates who offer nuanced and complex positions are accused of elitism, of unnecessary complication. Their opponents, who have single-issue answers and policy positions that speak to gut reactions but offer little detail are too often heralded as clear thinkers, decisive leaders. But context matters. Without sufficient attention to history, to current circumstance, to all the points of intersection that we ourselves do not yet see, any single course of action reflects a limited and incomplete narrative. We need to pay attention to the context in order to truly hear stories and the stories yet to be told.

We know that stories often have to be told many times and each time they are told they are usually told deeper and richer and more nuanced than the previous times. If we are truly committed to change we have to change the way we listen to people. We have to ask ourselves whether we are listening for the purpose of confirming our world view or with more open minds, knowing that what we think we know may be incomplete. The latter requires taking the risk of being deeply challenged about who we are, what we know, and how the two lead and have led us to act. As we enter into a new editorial chapter of this journal – with deep appreciation for the work of Dr. Kiaras Gharabaghi since 2010 and a warm welcome to Dr. Grant Charles with this issue – we invite scholars and researchers to engage in these questions. As the journal enters its

next stage of editorial leadership, we ask for submissions that challenge what we think we know rather than confirming the stories that are already evident in our literature and practice. We seek manuscripts that push forward not only our knowledge but our thinking, in fundamental ways. We look for scholarship that disrupts the status quo of our field and by doing so, opens new possibilities for children, youth, families, and their communities.