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Critical review (Newsletter for Center for Qualitative Methodology) concerning:

Lisa Michele Warhuus: *Social Constructionism in Therapeutic Settings. Theoretical Contributions through the Realities of Practice.* <Bibliografisk reference...>

Introduction

During late autumn 1999 I served as chairman on the evaluation committee regarding Lisa Warhuus' Ph.D. dissertation carrying the above title. Co-members of the evaluation committee were Sheila McNamee, professor at University of New Hampshire and well known proponent of social constructionism in its ontologically radical version; and Allan Holmgren, director of DISPUK, an influential Danish consultancy and professional training corporation with a strong profile within the field of systemic theory and social constructionism, not only in a Danish, but also in an international context.

The evaluative statement, which came out as the written product of the committee members' deliberations, was divided in two main parts followed by a conclusion. The first part of the statement contained (a) a general description of the dissertation, followed by (b) the evaluation committee's general appraisal of the dissertation's academic merits. In the second part of the evaluative statement, each of the three committee members made his or her individual evaluative comments (sub-appraisal) regarding perceived strengths and weaknesses of the dissertation as seen by that person. The third and concluding part of the evaluative statement summed up the earlier parts through a brief general assessment saying that Lisa Warhuus' dissertation text was fully satisfactory as evaluated against international criteria for obtaining the Ph.D.-degree.

Responding to a request from the editor of this Newsletter, I have chosen to arrange my critical review text regarding Lisa Warhuus' dissertation by, first, quoting the entire section of the evaluative statement that was authored by all three evaluation committee members, i.e. Allan Holmgren, Sheila McNamee & I, myself, jointly. Following this, I present a structural outline of my personal sub-appraisal of the dissertation text.

- “General description of the dissertation

Theoretically Lisa Warhuus’ dissertation is based on social constructionism. Social constructionism is viewed as an intellectual movement, or ”set of concerns” (p.1) within the social sciences broadly speaking. The dissertation represents an effort to examine the concrete utility for psychotherapy of social constructionist assumptions. By using the expression *utility* Lisa Warhuus is signalling that she is not searching for evidence showing that social constructionism is *the* correct or even most preferable theory for understanding what psychotherapy is about or for guiding its practitioners. Such a project would indeed run counter to the intellectual spirit permeating social constructionism. Rather she is interested in exploring to which degree a discourse informed by social constructionism may be experienced by psychotherapists as a help to ‘go on in the world’ (p. 18) professionally speaking.

The first part of the dissertation is called *Theoretical Development*. Here Lisa Warhuus establishes the theoretical framework that shall enable her to classify discourse elements coming from or exchanged among psychotherapists as pointing towards a social constructionist orientation. This work is done through the following stages:

- In *chapter 1* the overall research purpose of the dissertation is presented together with definitions of key terms, critical reflections on basic research issues, and a chapter-by-chapter overview of the dissertation.
- *Chapter 2* presents social constructionism as an intellectual tradition in its special relatedness to psychology and to the social sciences.
- In *chapter 3* the focus is narrowed, in that social constructionism is now presented in its specific historical relatedness to psychotherapy.
- On the basis of material presented in chapters 1-3, Lisa Warhuus uses *chapter 4* to first present and then discuss nine ‘theoretical propositions for a constructionist-oriented therapy’. These propositions shall serve as her basic research tool in the empirical investigations that are reported upon in part II of the dissertation. The concrete applicability of the nine propositions to the professional experiences of the involved therapists shall serve as an operationalization of the utility value of social constructionism for their therapeutic orientation.

The second part of the dissertation bears the title *Empirical Study*. It has three chapters, 5 - 7.

- *Chapter 5* is a presentation and discussion of the dissertation’s research methodology: description of overall design and concrete procedures; reflections on issues concerning validity and reliability. Basically the design takes the form of a dual case study. A wide variety of qualitative data have been collected from two family treatment institutions. Both case-institutions are social constructionist-informed, meaning that their staff have

been exposed to and take an active professional interest in the application of social constructionist assumptions.

- *Chapters 6-7* present the main findings that resulted from data collection at each of the two case-institutions separately. The findings are organized proposition by proposition, illustrating the ways in which therapists from the two case-institutions directly or indirectly ascribe professional utility to the nine social constructionist propositions that were developed in chapter 4.

The third and final part of the dissertation is called *Evaluation*.

- In *chapter 8*, Lisa Warhuus makes a cross-case summary of her empirical findings, the mode of presentation being analogous to that used in chapters 6-7.
- *Chapter 9* is a summary presentation of the dissertation's main findings and their implications, for theory, for practice and for future research.

The committee's appraisal of the dissertation's academic merits: general perspective

The evaluation committee finds that Lisa Warhuus' dissertation has a number of distinct academic merits. The most important of these are listed below.

- The dissertation's research design is ambitious. For a one-person project at Ph.D.-level it could even be seen as over-ambitious. All through the dissertation, however, Lisa Warhuus manages to keep up a writing style distinguished by clarity as far as structure is concerned, and density as far as contents is concerned. Lisa Warhuus' personal presence is continually felt in the text, and in a manner that adds quality to her description of and reflection on research findings.
- As one side-effect of the ambitious design very large quantities of empirical data have been collected as part of the research process. The reader is only informed about the data processing work in broad outline. In spite of this, the dissertation's narrative is immediately experienced as confidence-inspiring. The reader can thus concentrate on content-related issues ("What is being said - what are the implications? - do they make sense to me - can I learn something?") rather than formal issues ('fault-finding' related to the way arguments are put together, data are used etc.).
- Lisa Warhuus has not only taken up an observer's position vis à vis the dissertation's two case-institutions, but has included research procedures of a participatory kind, and with a developmental intent. By doing so, she has not only (as it appears) made her research project a valuable experience for the involved case-institutions and their staff. She has also managed to make her research design a field of application for social constructionist values at a concrete level.

- Within the context of social constructionism Lisa Warhuus' dissertation must be seen as a pioneering work both in its scope and volume. It is worth noting that the dissertation's research design is not one that has been given to her by a senior researcher. In its concrete details it is entirely of her own making.
- Lisa Warhuus not only has a very good grasp - in breadth as well as in depth - of the literature that is of relevance to her dissertation. She also has obvious talents for writing about even complex theoretical issues in an engaging and straightforward manner."

Present reviewer's personal assessment of relative strengths and weaknesses of Lisa Warhuus' dissertation

The above long quote reflects the evaluation committee's unanimous appraisal of what we saw as the academic *merits* peculiar to Lisa Warhuus' dissertation. In ensuing sub-appraisals each committee member presented (as stated above) his or her balanced personal viewpoint regarding strengths *as well as weaknesses* of the dissertation text. My own sub-appraisal was inevitably coloured by the fact that, as a researcher and psychological practitioner in my own right, I seriously questioned the soundness of the very meta-theoretical framework which Lisa Warhuus had chosen as her generalised research-strategic set of guidelines; cf. the following quote.

- "In her dissertation, Lisa Warhuus presents and discusses four different accounts of social constructionism, varying in their degree of anti-modernist radicalism. From these she chooses the most radical account <i.e. the one proposed by Kenneth Gergen/SW> as the one that shall provide her with the conceptual framework for the dissertation's empirical investigations. Her reasons for this choice are mainly research-strategic: "If the results of this study support the applicability of a radical social constructionist therapeutic stance, it can be readily assumed that a conservative-constructionist approach is also applicable. The reverse assumption would not be the case" (p. 45f).

My reading of the dissertation was inevitably coloured by the fact that my own epistemological preferences would have persuaded me to make other, less radical choices among the social constructionist accounts available. In her general discussions leading up to the choice she finally makes, Lisa Warhuus (on p. 40) refers to one less radical representative of social constructionism <i.e. Rom Harré/SW>, who describes the account of her own choice as being on philosophical grounds self-refuting. I tend to agree with this viewpoint."

On this background, my personal appraisal of the dissertation took on a dual character.

- "On the one hand, I think Lisa Warhuus has done a very good job in working out, with much methodological rigour and analytic sophistication, some important implications of radical social constructionism in its possible linkage to psychotherapy. On the other hand,

my personal-professional apprehensions concerning the conceptual foundation of her investigations make me naturally critical or questioning towards many parts or aspects of the dissertation text.”

In the following sections of my sub-appraisal, I exemplified my major ”critical reader’s comments” to Lisa Warhuus’ dissertation. In these I argued most importantly (1) that, in places, she clearly over-emphasised whatever demarcation lines could be drawn between ’modernist’ and ’post-modern’ ways of thinking about and being a professional practitioner within the field of psychology; thus, as a function of her actual writing practice, and definitely against her own stated intentions, her text, to my mind, fueled a dichotomized, historically misleading mythology of ‘us, the post-modern saints’ versus ‘they, the modernist sinners’; (2) that I had read her dissertation as one extremely clearcut, and therefore also, to my mind, both illuminating and exasperating illustration of the epistemic losses that are incurred once you deliberately start discounting the unavoidable tension existing between, on the one hand, a discursive world as construed by humans through their communication practice, on the other hand a material world, being there and being what it is independently of human discursivity.

Having developed these personal-critical themes in some detail, my personal sub-appraisal ended with the following paragraph.

- ”In line with my introductory remarks, the above critical comments shall not be read as pointing to so many errors, that have been committed by Lisa Warhuus in her dissertation text or during the research process leading up to it. The comments are reflections that have grown out of a reading process based on an intellectual and value-based perspective related to, but not identical with the one employed by Lisa Warhuus. Lisa Warhuus deserves merit for having written a dissertation text which, due to its clarity of structure, conceptually and design-wise, invites its readers into a discussion on important theoretical, meta-theoretical and professional issues.”

With these comments, I invite others to acquaint themselves with Lisa Warhuus’ dissertation text in its published version.