

SOCIAL WORK MEETS THE SILVER SCREEN

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ABSTRACT

The author describes a study involving filmmaking and the film industry. Although departing from typical social work subject matter, the project draws on social work values and uses related social science methods and theoretical concepts. Film is a force that influences the basic attitudes and behaviour of millions of people around the world. The medium has the potential to disseminate social work values and aims widely, if appropriately addressed.

My latest book, *Hollywood in Wide Angle: How Directors View Filmmaking*, is an academic departure for me and has taken my work in a distinctly new direction (Rothman, 2004). It is an analysis of filmmaking and the film industry and is based on in-depth interviews with a range of movie directors. The shift, though, is not as drastic as one might first think. In my previous work I studied key institutions in the communities in which I lived or worked—ethnic neighbourhoods in Pittsburgh, innovation in the automobile industry in Michigan, local social service authorities in London. Residing in Los Angeles, I did work on the mental health system and recently decided to examine filmmaking, the major socioeconomic institution in that locale.

Substantively speaking, film is a powerful art and communication form that shapes fundamental ideas and attitudes of multitudes globally, both positively and negatively. I believe this institution merits the serious examination of researchers and social analysts. I was able to act on that conviction because I had acquired emeritus status and was free to set my own scholarly agenda, relieved of the obligation of looking over my shoulder to consider whether the dean was in full accord with what I chose to work on. Besides, I've been a film lover all my life—indeed, was named by my mother after actor Jackie Coogan—Charlie Chaplin's fetching waif in *The Kid*. All in all, this was a natural swerve in my life course and career trajectory.

Also, the shift was not as drastic as it might seem because I relied heavily on social work/social science thinking and social research techniques that I had used recurrently in my work over the years. I'd like to illustrate this briefly with respect to three factors: values, methodology and theoretical concepts.

VALUES

Starting with the first of these, values guided the areas I decided to delve into. I'll give several examples (for an overview of social work values, see International Federation of Social Workers, *The Ethics of Social Work, Principles and Standards*, 1994). In the study I looked closely into the question of discrimination against women and racial and ethnic minorities in opportunities available for directors. My book statistically documented disproportionately low hiring rates for women and minorities and spelled out the kinds of obstacles they face.

Another value area concerned the professional autonomy of directors vis-à-vis constraints placed on their artistic prerogatives by the bureaucratic pressures of vast studio conglomerates. The tensions social workers experience with respect to restrictive agency policies come to mind as an apt analogy. In the film area, the studios inhibit the discretion of directors to bring to the screen their creative vision of the story they wish to tell. The study sought out the means that directors could use to make their cut of the film become, to the greatest degree possible, the final cut

distributed by the studios. This is in step with social work's predisposition to favour the little guy over the big guy, although some directors obviously don't fall objectively into the 'little guy' category, certainly not to the extent that minorities and women do.

A third social work precept concerns starting from an assessment of needs, as defined by the people who are the focus of your efforts. In my interviews the first question I asked directors to address was the major problems they face in trying to carry out their work. This initial needs assessment provided a solid platform to build on for the other lines of inquiry.

METHODOLOGY

Shifting to methodology, the study involved probing interviews with 32 informants who represented a cross-section of views and experiences. I developed a purposive sample that included directors who were younger and older, newcomers and veterans, respected achievers and those struggling to establish themselves. There was a reasonable balance between men and women, as well as a range of ethnic and racial minorities. This effort to approximate a representative sample ran counter to typical books on filmmaking, where interviews are with the 'old boys club' of white, male, celebrity filmmakers.

The study was consistent with the mode of much of my previous work, which utilised an interview pool of between 25 and 50 respondents, a number falling in place between a few cases, on one end, and an extensive database, on the other.

The interviews were based on an open-ended questionnaire of 10 items and typically took between an hour and two to conduct. They were carried out flexibly and informally and the respondents were assured of confidentiality in that they would be quoted rarely and only with permission. This fostered candid responses and helped to counter the air of exaggeration, fantasy and deception that is a hallmark of the Hollywood movie scene.

I was driven from the outset of the project by the desire to help bring a level of empirical reality to a significant social phenomenon that is awash in hyperbole. From a methodological standpoint, the overarching approach reflected a qualitative research modality with an ethnographic slant (Denzin and Lincoln 2000; Grills 1998).

THEORETICAL CONCEPTS

In retrospect, I was surprised and pleased by the degree to which I found myself drawing on theoretical perspectives from social science/social work throughout – many of them classic writings – to analyze and interpret my findings. I can only be suggestive about this here. Let me give an example that involves attempts by directors to sway studios to distribute the directors' version of the film rather than the studios' final cut. Directors spelled out a set of techniques they employed to exert influence on studios, which I found I could describe effectively through the *Bases of Power* construct (French & Raven, 1959; Pfeffer, 1992). By exploiting their relationships with high-profile stars, directors employ 'connection power' to get their way with studio executives. Producing bountiful box office returns is a way of using 'reward power'. The counterpart, 'coercive power' is exercised by threatening to walk off the set and holding up production, which can be financially damaging to the studios. 'Expert power' is displayed by demonstrating that the director alone has a grasp of how all of the pieces of the film fit together and form a whole. 'Referent power' involves engendering compliance through getting people to like and admire you personally. The full set of power bases was presented and illustrated.

I'll briefly indicate several other concepts I found useful. By introducing the *Task and Socioemotional Leadership* formulation, I could categorize and clarify the enormously diverse

range of skills directors indicated that they need to carry out their work (Bales 1950). Many directors feel alienated from their work because of intensified commercialization brought about by rising tendency of the industry to form conglomerates. *Identity Crises* was a useful construct to describe their troubled state of mind and their perplexity over whether they were truly able to function as artists or had become production managers for film output (Erikson, 1968).

Developments in digital filmmaking, a revolutionary technical change in the craft of filmmaking, could be comprehended and described by drawing on concepts from the *Diffusion of Innovations* and *Theories of Technological Change* (Rogers, 2002; Williams, 2002). *Creativity Theory* provided a tool for showing how directors can enhance the struggle of actors to bring to life the characters they seek to portray. In part, directors are helping professionals for actors, and this theoretical viewpoint provides a way of visualizing help-giving around creative objectives (Guilford, 1967).

The ever-present intense conflicts between directors and screenwriters on creative issues were illuminated through writings in the literature of *Interprofessional Competition* (Abbott, 1988). The Writers Guild of America and the Directors Guild of America are the two organisational vehicles through which this contest is played out. When directors made recommendations for raising the quality of films, I addressed means of enacting these proposals by turning to my own formulation of *Three Models of Community Intervention* (Rothman, 2001).

These concepts were invaluable for grasping the dimensions and dynamics of an extremely complex institutional network. Their application is unique in the literature of filmmaking. Together, they provide a lens that helps to widen and deepen our understanding of an institution that affects the mental outlook and behaviour of millions of people around the world. Feedback I have received, starting with the directors I interviewed, suggests that the book has shed light on this always elusive and often mendacious social system, whose impact is all but astonishing. One of those directors said that this is the most truthful book on the industry that he has read, providing some affirmation regarding this key intention of the project.

Many of the issues and views that social workers care about and want to disseminate resonate on film – in ways that are sometimes compatible with the outlook of the field, and often not. This is a medium that, all would agree, constitutes a tool without comparison for public enlightenment, a resource that has been exploited minimally, if at all, by the profession. New knowledge, such as generated in this project, is beneficial in its own right. But it also opens up new potentials for those, including social workers, who take it upon themselves to harness that potential.

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