

Dr. Chris Hall



What classes do you teach here at UNCW?

I teach Clinical Practice and a field class in the MSW [Master's of Social Work] program. I like teaching both classes. What I like about both of those classes is that we get to talk about real things. In Field, the students are obviously working with real clients. In Practice, I talk a lot about clients that I work with. In both of those situations, I try to make it as real and practical as possible. Anything that is free-flowing and calls for a conversation where we can integrate thoughts and ideas on how things work and practice is what I like.

Do you have any ongoing research projects?

In academia, there are two different ways in which you publish research. Research can be quantitative or qualitative. The other way you can publish research is theoretical. Here, you're talking about models of practice and how to apply those models of practice. A lot of what I do is talk about theory and how you actually practice. I've cited research and I've done research. For me, it's more about talking. I published a chapter on Narrative Therapy which explains how to use Narrative Therapy, and questions and specific skills used in Narrative Therapy. I'm helping to co-edit a book on Theoretical Perspectives and Social Practice. That with Chris Bolton and Peter Layman. I'm more in that area. I don't mind research. Research is okay. Because I've been in the field a bit, it's more fun to talk about the reality and schools of practice. I talk about postmodernism, social constructivism, ways we can practice ethically, and enhance diverse views of practice. That's the kind of thing I write about.

You're heavily involved with a few organizations in the field of social work such as the Global Partnership for Transformative Social Work, the Taos Institute, and the journal *Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping*. Can you explain what these organizations are and how they relate to your scholarly interest in social work?

The Global Partnership for Transformative Social Work is an international organization I'm on the board on. It's designed for social workers and professional psychologists. It's really for folks who wanna change the world in some way. It revolves around social constructionist ideas. It's about helping people in a way in which they can transform themselves. Sometimes

helping can look like behavioral intervention. Primarily from a transformative perspective, people learn to be able to see themselves or the world in a different way. If people can transform the way they see things, what follows is different choices and different behavior. The organization also focuses on how we can transform social work into being more encompassing. It can help us discover how to transform societies. The Taos Institute is really similar. It's run by Ken Gergen who is a well-known social constructivist. It's more broad in the sense it encompasses more professions. For the last one, *Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping*, I'm one of the practice editors. This is a wonderful journal about how professionals reflect on their own practice and experiences. It's not necessarily a research journal. It's not meant to be a research journal. It's meant to be more of an ethnography. It's meant to be a space for people to critically reflect how it is they experience the world and their work. Again, it's also a constructivist or social constructionist orientation. A great way to think about it is through these phrases: "Experience near or experience far knowledge." Far knowledge would be knowledge that comes from research that isn't necessarily connected with you. Knowledge that is experienced near is how you personally feel in that moment right now. When you look at qualitative research, it's more about this moment right now. That is particularly important when you talk about counseling. That's everything about counseling-how is this going right now? The *Narrative* journal tries to capture experience near knowledge.

As someone who's lived and traveled to a multitude of countries, where have you lived and what kind of work did you do?

The first one was when I was a student. I lived in Italy as an exchange student. I was 15 or 16 years old. I definitely wasn't doing any social work. I was going to school there in a place called Rodengo, Italy and that was a lot of fun. The second place I lived in was in the Czech Republic. I lived there in 1991 or 1992. I taught English there for the Czech Military Medical Academy. I was there for a year. I had a place to stay for free and my food was free. I made \$250 a month which was nothing. I think I worked three or four days out of the week. Plus, I had access to a car, so I could drive around and travel. I got to see the Czech Republic, Poland, Germany, and so many other cool places. The other country that I lived in was Japan. I lived in Japan for about three and a half years. There, I ran an English school. I taught English and had a small preschool in Iwaki City, Japan. That was a great time. The last country is the United States. I've been bouncing around all over the country. The funnest

place I've lived here is New York City. I lived there a year or a year and a half. I also travel a lot.

How would the practice and education of social work be different abroad and in the United States?

In different countries, social work isn't considered clinical. Here, in the United States, we have licensed clinical social workers. In other countries, it's a psychology degree and that's really it. In most of Europe, social work is not necessarily a clinical degree. That's the biggest difference. You have more generalist practice in Europe. There are some really great models of practice that come out of Scandinavia and Australia. These countries don't have a fee for service structure. It's not a situation where you see the client and get reimbursed for that client. It's more of a state structure where if you're a social worker or counselor, you get a salary. What that does is that it lets you as a social worker get really creative. You could have more than one counselor working in a room with a family. You can have a model called collaborative language system that developed out of Scandinavia. Narrative Therapy developed out of Australia and in large part because of that. Because of the structure itself, there are a lot of things that can help you be more creative than here. The United States follows a linear model of one person in a room, do some measure, and see if they change behaviorally. It's pretty limiting here.

As a social worker and educator, what would you like to do to help reform the field of social work?

The biggest thing I would like to do is get rid of the fee-for-service model. I'm not exactly sure how that could happen because that's driven by the insurance industry. Imagine if counselors and social workers could get paid through the state or agencies, and get salaries. We would be able to do macro and micro work. We would be able to talk to our clients about how the feelings they are experiencing now, I might not be emitting from some dysfunction between them. They might be very natural reactions to a rather unjust society. This happens with Stephen Madigan in Canada. They have more of an open system. If you've been affected by inequality, I can certainly help you get through that. But, what if all these other clients who are having the same issues come together and help each other? They could also become an advocacy group. We're shifting out of this idea of mental health and shifting into the idea of being an advocate in an unjust society and making change. That shift would be a really nice thing to see. It helps people join together instead of keeping them separate. The great idea is that the fee structure inhibits that right now.

Do you have any last words before we end our interview?

Diversity is a big thing right now. Social workers are at the forefront of that. I also think it's important to recognize that social workers have been on the forefront of that for a long time and have been trying to make things more just. I'm really pleased to see that focus. I'd like to see a more diverse focus on models of practice and have it trickle into the idea of mental health. A lot of what we do has been developed from some real conservative thinking. We should be veering away from models of practice that tell people what to do or impose on them what they are experiencing that may have come from 1950s Western idealism and explore other models of practice on how other people view their world. We have to ask ourselves, "How are you experiencing your world and how can I join you in that?" It's not my normal that's being imposed on you, but it's your normal and what your normal is meant to be. I would like to see a broadening of mental health. There's a great opportunity to do that now because we're all looking at the concept of what normal is and what colors are.