

Perspectives on Social Work

The Journal of the Doctoral Students of the
University of Houston
Graduate School of Social Work

Special Issue
Proceedings of the 2005 Annual
Doctoral Social Work Student Research Symposium
“Today’s Research-Tomorrow’s Practice”



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Perspectives on Social Work

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Table of Contents

From the Editors Amy Russell & Peter A. Kindle	3
Preface to First Doctoral Research Symposium Special Issue	4
Sexual Violence among Mexican-American Gang Affiliated Females Moisés Próspero, MSW, MBA	5
The Affect of School Status on the Health Behaviors of Young Fathers Lucinda Nevarez, LMSW	6
Last Words in the Texas Death Chamber: Implications for Theory, Practice & Research Nicole Willis, MSW	6
Doctoral Research Assistants Panel: Discussion and Recommendations Elsie Lo, MSW Amy Russell, LMSW Shetal Vohra-Gupta, LCSW	7
The Effect of Family Psychoeducational Therapy and Social Skills Training Lisiane Church, MSW	9
Stress Management of Working Single Mothers: A Single-System Approach Elsie Lo, MSW	10
PeaceJam: A Model of Peace Education Brian Trachte, MSW	10
Surfers' Report: Impact of Online Journals Amy Russell, LMSW	11
From the Lectern: Reforming the Dissertation Process Howard Karger, PhD	12
Responses to Karger: Suzie Mapp, PhD Peter A. Kindle, MA, MDiv Amy Russell, LMSW	13 15 16
Guidelines for Submissions	17

From The Editors
Amy Russell, LMSW

Perspectives on Social Work is a catalyst for students to learn the process of writing, editing, and submitting our original works to propel us toward scholarly endeavors in the finest manner possible. It is a vital opportunity that is unique to the GSSW. *PSW* is run by doctoral students and is for doctoral students. With that being said, *PSW* is facing an impasse; this editorial staff, Peter and I, will be ending our service this upcoming May. We do not have anyone to take our place as editors. Without students stepping forward to continue the mission of the journal, *PSW* will be no more. To me, this is a great loss and a very sad and discouraging thought. Something that editorial staffs before us, who worked so hard to create and develop, will cease to exist. Something that is truly for doctoral students to improve our knowledge and skills will essentially fail because students ourselves would not invest the time in this endeavor. We hope that you feel the same and will respond to this call for a transition team to succeed the present editors. We need this team to consist of at least two persons to step forward by November to ensure a timely and efficient transition. We hope you will seriously consider this dilemma and agree with the present editors that *PSW* is a critical and exceptional part of the PHD program at the GSSW. If you do not, then *PSW* will cease to be.

Editorial: Reflections on Three Years
Peter Kindle, MA, MDiv

Three years ago this month I began my association with *Perspectives on Social Work* as one of the first two student authors to be published in the first issue. Within a few months I had become the managing editor, working with co-editors-in-chief Manuel Zamora and Leslie Raneri, and last spring I joined Manuel as an editor-in-chief.

Few experiences at the UH-GSSW have been as fruitful in preparing me for a career in academe as my association with *PSW*. First, the process of reviewing submissions and preparing editorial comments for authors has provided a wealth of experience that has improved my own ability to communicate in text. Editors do not always assess submissions in the same way and negotiating these differences with my editorial colleagues has enriched my appreciation of peer review.

Secondly, the editing experience I have gained has served as an entrée into a variety of related experiences. The student caucus of the American Psychological Society accepted me as a volunteer reviewer for two student research competitions, in part, because of the editing experience I gained with *PSW*. But my reviewer/editor experience did not end here. Two different offices of the Department of Health and Human Services accepted my self-nomination as a *paid* grant reviewer last summer, one choosing to use me as a panel chair, and I was also accepted as a volunteer reviewer of conference abstracts submitted to NASW-TX for the upcoming fall conference.

Are these experiences typical of pre-comp doctoral students? Frankly, I have no way of knowing the answer to this question. I just know that *PSW* is where this all began for me. As my term as co-editor-in-chief nears its end, perhaps it is time for you to consider serving your school, and yourself, by becoming the next editor. I do not believe that it is a decision that you will regret!

**If you are interested in gaining invaluable experience by becoming a Co-editor or
Managing Editor for *PSW*, respond by November 30th to Dr. Epstein at
mwepstein@uh.edu.**

Save this Date!
March 23, 2006

Second Doctoral Social Work Student Research
Symposium
Today's Research - Tomorrow's Practice

Presented by
Perspectives on Social Work
The GSSW Doctoral Student Journal
and
**The University of Houston, Graduate School of
Social Work**

Registration details will follow soon.
www.sw.uh.edu/

**Preface to First Doctoral Research Symposium Special Issue
UH Graduate School of Social Work Doctoral Program**

Set in an urban, multicultural environment, the purpose of the GSSW doctoral program is to develop social work researchers, scholars, teachers, and leaders who can facilitate change through rigorous and contextualized analysis of social problems and social work interventions in a manner respectful of the experiences of all affected. Graduates will advance the knowledge base of the profession, promote a scientific basis for social work practice at all levels of intervention, and actively promote global social and economic justice.

In order to expand the knowledge base of social work, the doctoral program holds a journal named *Perspectives on Social Work*. The journal aspires to challenge each reader to probe into and question prevailing views of the Social Work profession by giving thought to the theoretical, practical, policy, and research implications of new or differing perspectives. By intimate examination and exploration of past, present, and future realities, it hopes to enrich and enhance understanding of Social Work and its association with other disciplines. The prevailing theme is to enable a view of Social Work, in all its static, mechanics, and dynamics, as a means to improve our quality of life. *Perspectives on Social Work* is a proud sponsor of the UH Doctoral Social Work Student Research Symposium.

The First Annual Doctoral Social Work Student Research Symposium Planning Committee envisioned a process of showcasing such academic works in a forum that would increase learning, expand social work research, and contribute to the social work knowledge base. Doctoral students were invited to submit dissertation research-in-progress, independent

study projects, concept papers, theoretical models, and other student research for inclusion in the symposium. Through perseverance, program planning and development, and thoughtful creativity, the Planning Committee created an efficacious colloquium, which met the stated scholarly objectives. Included in this special issue are expanded abstracts from the March 31, 2005 symposium, to best represent the academic inspirations and activities of the program participants and the UH-GSSW Doctoral Program.

Articles are published as submitted by the student.

First Annual Doctoral Social Work Student Research Symposium

Planning Committee Members:

Heather Kanenberg, LMSW

Peter Kindle, MA, MDiv

Elsie Lo, MSW

Mahasin Saleh, MSW

Dana Smith, LMSW

Shetal Vohra-Gupta, LCSW

Special thanks to:

Barbara Henley

Carolyn Brooks

Dr. Maxine Epstein

Dean Ira Colby

The Greater Houston Area Health Education Center

Sexual Violence among Mexican-American Gang Affiliated Females

Moisés Próspero, MSW, MBA

Mexican American female adolescents are at a disadvantaged structural societal position in several areas: socioeconomic, ethnicity, gender, and age. Therefore, some researchers have posited that some Mexican American female adolescents join gangs to resolve societal structural problems, even at the cost of increased risk for substance use, sex, crime, and violent activities (Miller, 2001). The present study explored sexual violence among high-risk Mexican American adolescent females using Johnson (1995) typology of intimate partner violence. Life history interviews were conducted on 150 Mexican American gang affiliated females, ages 14-18 years, to elicit information regarding participants' exposure to and experience with crime, drugs, violence, and sexual behavior.

Results of the qualitative analysis revealed two analytical concepts: 1) Context of sexual violence and 2) Attitudes towards sexual violence. Within the context of sexual violence theme, five sub-themes were found: emotional manipulation, sexual coercion, attempted rape, rape, and gang initiation. The attitudes towards sexual violence theme, two themes were found: acceptance of sexual violence and blaming the victim of sexual violence. The author argues that the sexual violence experienced by the study's female adolescent participants in the street gang culture is characterized by patriarchal terrorism as explained by Johnson's (1995) typology, in which the male perpetrator used violence to control the female victim. The implications of the study are for advocacy efforts to address attitudinal change of sexual violence through media and increase male participation in the responsibility of violence against women. Additional research

should be conducted with a focus on male perpetrators and prevention programs should also be developed with an aim at attitudinal change of violence against women.

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- Johnson, M.P. (1995). Patriarchal terrorism and common couple violence: Two forms of violence against women. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 57, 283-294.
- Miller, J. (2001). *One of the guys*. New York: Oxford University Press.

The Affect of School Status on the Health Behaviors of Young Fathers **Lucinda Nevarez, LMSW**

For many young men, adolescence can be a life stage filled with a great deal of uncertainty. The ambiguity of adolescence is further complicated when these adolescents become teen fathers. Studies suggest there is an association between teen fatherhood and risk behaviors such as; unemployment, antisocial behaviors, substance use and poor contraception use among other risk behaviors. The study presented examined the extent to which school status affects risk behaviors from among a group of 198 young fathers who participated in a school linked multi-service community program. School status was defined by three groups: those still in school, 21%, those who had dropout, 52% and those who graduated from high school or completed a GED, 27%. The groups were analyzed to determine the extent to which school status affects risk behaviors young fathers engage in from intake through follow up, and how school status affects service needs. Demographic and risk behavioral data was gathered at entry into the program, and at three months, six months and twelve months. The results indicate that young fathers who were still in school had lower rates of risk behaviors at both intake and at the 12-month follow-up compared to school dropouts and graduates. Though, throughout the course of the study consistent contraceptive use was poor among all groups, teen fathers who were still in school reported the most consistent use of contraceptives. Teen fathers who were still in school also reported lower rates of cigarette and alcohol use. Though many young fathers reported having numerous issues, few requested services other than employment assistance or vocational training. The findings suggest that being in school might add a protective factor and thus might be the optimal time for program managers to address risk behaviors. Findings also suggest that though young fathers report various issues they identify matters related to employment as their primary service need.

Last Words in the Texas Death Chamber: Implications for Theory, Practice & Research **Nicole Willis, MSW**

A qualitative study was conducted to investigate thematic components of the last words given by death row inmates in Texas between 1982 and 2004 at the time of execution. Last words were available from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice website and the book *Texas Death Row: Executions in the Modern Era* (Sunriver Cartel, 2000). Ninety-four inmates were excluded from the study, while 72% (n=242) of death row inmates' last words met inclusion

criteria. Transcripts of last words in the death chamber were recorded thematically with NVIVO software and then analyzed.

A grounded theory approach was utilized; a typology of last words and a mid-level theory emerged from the data. The typology was based on the interaction between two components: *thematic* (religion, responsibility, and meaning) and *community* (self, inmate family/friend, victim/victim family, criminal justice/ social system). Religion produced last words classified as validation/salvation, coping/comfort, guilt/forgiveness and justice. Responsibility produced sincere remorse, conduct, insincere remorse and innocence. Meaning produced last words classified as change, support, healing/closure and oppression. The mid-level theory that can explain this typology is called the *transitional-relational equilibrium theory*, which states that during the transition from life to death, inmates utilize religion, responsibility and meaning in their final communication to restore equilibrium to relationships (persons to whom the last statement is directed). The typology and mid-level theory that emerged in this study may be utilized by the TDCJ Victim Services Division in practice, when preparing victims' families for an execution so that they have more realistic expectations of these last statements. This study also makes a contribution to death and dying theory. Findings can also lead to future research such as examining the impact of inmates' last words on victims' families grieving process.

Reference

SunRiver Cartel. (2000). *Texas Death Row: Executions in the modern era*. Marietta,GA: Longstreet Press.

Doctoral Research Assistants Panel: Discussion and Recommendations

Amy Russell, LMSW

As a member of a panel of doctoral students at University of Houston's Graduate School of Social Work, I wish to present my experience as a research assistant for the Office of Drug and Social Policy Research (ODSPR), working with Dr. Alice Cepeda and Dr. Avelardo Valdez. Not only does the assistantship benefit me financially, which is essential as a full-time doctoral student, I have learned a tremendous amount of both foundational and illuminating knowledge to impact and increase my growth in academia.

I wish to share my experiences as a research assistant in two manners, first academically and second personally. Academically, I have gained knowledge in critical software programs such as NVivo and Endnotes. I have assisted in editing manuscripts, data entry and data management, researching topics and literature reviews, and writing for grant proposals. Personally, the experience has exposed me to an academic environment that reveals the pressures of publication; the position helps to socialize me to the necessity of being an assertive learner, who takes advantage of opportunities for increased responsibilities and enhancement in research interest areas.

As a part of the panel presentation, I wish to discuss ODSPR and the present ongoing research projects the office is administering. Primarily, ODSPR is conducting a NIDA research study which involves collecting both qualitative and quantitative data on non-injecting heroin users in the San Antonio area. ODSPR also has numerous publications in the areas of Hispanic drug use, violence, gang involvement, and sex workers. ODSPR is committed to research and scholarship that benefits the Hispanic community.

Dr. Cepeda and Dr. Valdez have been supportive, generous with data, and guiding in their teaching and supervision. My research assistantship at ODSPR has afforded me numerous opportunities to not only further my knowledge in doctoral studies, but also to advance my ability in qualitative research methodology.

Shetal Vohra-Gupta, LCSW

This abstract is being submitted for consideration under the research panel for the research symposium. Since the fall of 2004, I have worked as a research assistant under Dr. Monit Cheung. Last semester, the projects that I have worked on include: creating a theoretical outline for a book that Dr. Cheung would like to start working on dealing with multicultural counseling, researching several top social work schools and forming an outline of courses they offer in order to aid with curriculum changes at GSSW, as well as looking into mental health in India.

Dr. Cheung is working on writing a book looking into multicultural counseling and how the theories of social work practice can be applied to individuals and families of different backgrounds. The theoretical outline was based on the social work practice theories, literature review, and forming a case vignette for each minority group. In the course of the semester, I had also designed a study consisting of conducting focus groups with professors of social work in India. I had gotten in touch with several professors of social work in Mumbai, India to set up a focus group while I was there over the Christmas break. The study was set up to look into the perceptions and teachings of mental health in another country. A formal proposal was constructed and all paperwork for IRB approval was completed.

Discussion and Recommendations

Duties, assistant perspectives, attributes of an effective assistant, and recommendations were presented. Research assistants answered a survey and stated their main duties were research and literature review, data management, writing and editing, software program manipulation, public relations, and clerical support. RA's also responded to the question of perspective from their participation in the RA position. Benefits were cited as mentorship opportunities, exposure to an academic lifestyle, networking, knowledge of software, expanded literature bases and grant proposals. Concerns were cited as lack of mentorship, clerical and technical tasks, unavailability of the advisor, demands of class work, and down time. Faculty who answered a similar survey reported that effective attributes of an assistant were strong conceptual abilities, strong work ethic and self-discipline, independence and initiative, timeliness and efficiency, motivation and endurance, excellent writing and editing skills, critical and creative thinking, and asking questions. Recommendations made were one-on-one mentorship, promoting RA's to publish and present at scholarly conferences, and knowing the RA's research interests and abilities.

Discussion following the panel's presentation revolved around student requests of advisors to spend time with them, provide feedback, give assignments that matched skill level, using students to assist in teaching, and allowing for pet projects. Faculty presented discussion on incentives for faculty to mentors, increased observant behavior in RA's to better meet the needs of the faculty advisors, sensitivity to the demands on faculty, better matching of disciplines to student interests, seeking out mentorship and committing time after hours to be with the faculty, and allow for spontaneity in the mentor relationship.

The Effect of Family Psychoeducational Therapy and Social Skills Training **Lisiane Church, MSW**

The purpose of this investigation was to examine the effect of Family Psychoeducational Therapy and Social Skills Training on burden, coping skills and social support of caregivers of patients diagnosed with schizophrenia and/or schizoaffective disorder at the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI) in the Greater Houston Area, Texas. Family Psychoeducational Therapy is described as an educational program for families and patients that also provides families with a variety of ways to handle difficult behaviors at home. The Social Skills Training is a comprehensive service for persons with schizophrenia that target their social skills deficits. The theoretical framework for the treatment program is based on Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) and the Index of Expressed Emotion (Leff & Vaughn, 1985) that is relevant to the study of caregivers of patients diagnosed with schizophrenia and/or schizoaffective disorder. The research design is pretest-posttest one group, cross-sectional and exploratory. The data was collected through self-administered inventories using a purposive sampling of 66 caregivers at NAMI in the Greater Houston Area, Texas. The caregivers completed the following instruments: the Measurement of Objective and Subjective Burden to assess burden, the Family Coping Questionnaire to assess caregiver's coping skills, and the Social Network Questionnaire to assess social support.

Descriptive statistics yielded the following: caregivers at NAMI are mostly Caucasians, married, females, and highly educated. Most caregivers have a parental relationship with their ill relative. The mean age of caregivers is fifty-eight. Most of the ill relatives are males and they live with their caregivers. The findings of this study indicated that the treatment program minimally decreased the level of objective and subjective burden from pretest to posttest. That is, the difference of the mean score of pretest compared to the mean score of posttest was not statistically significant. The findings of this study indicated that the treatment program did not increase the level of coping skills and social support of caregivers from pretest to posttest.

There are three significant contributions that this study accomplished. First, it provided additional information on schizophrenia and schizoaffective diagnosis to caregivers. Second, the proposed study recognized the importance of including the family in the treatment and rehabilitation of the patients diagnosed with schizophrenia and/or schizoaffective disorder. Third, this study recognized the importance of decreasing caregiver burden, increasing their coping skills and social support as a way to promote a better quality of life for patients diagnosed with schizophrenia and/or schizoaffective disorder and their families in the community. Caregivers at NAMI are exposed to systematic educational information about an array of mental health diagnoses. However, this study could have important implications with a large sample and among those who have not had previous experience with support organizations. It should be noted such important implications could be as follows: acquire/expand their knowledge about mental illness; ability to handle difficult behaviors of patients more effectively; ability to identify prodromal symptoms; and integrate an array of coping skills to manage patients at home.

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Stress Management of Working Single Mothers: A Single-System Approach **Elsie Lo, MSW**

Women involved in family and work roles are becoming a norm in United States. However, having juggled a variety of roles among working mothers, particularly single mothers, in workplace and family has lead to different impact on micro, mezzo and macro levels. Past research studies made evident that single working mothers encounter adverse health effects in terms of physical and mental health, family disruption, economics and social consequences. As such, effective stress management strategies specifically for working single mothers should be identified to help them maintain a balance in performing their multi-roles.

The study is a single-system (A-B) design that measured the effectiveness of humor guided imagery techniques in reducing self-reported stress levels. It is targeted at working mothers, who are currently encountering life stressors. A 41-year-old Hispanic woman participated twice in each of 3-week baseline and intervention measurements, respectively. Results were collected by visual and statistical analyses for each instrument. They indicated a trend toward improvement in the desired direction, and this intervention was found to be statistically, clinically, and theoretically significant. Implications for social work and further study include adoption of this intervention in stress management practices. A benefit would be utilizing a larger sample size study with control groups.

PeaceJam: A Model of Peace Education **Brian Trachte, MSW**

This research project examines the PeaceJam model and reviews the literature surrounding peace and nonviolence. The PeaceJam model is comprised of three parts: education, inspiration, and action. Students educate themselves about violence, racism, nonviolence, and the peacemaking process. They use the real-life inspiration of the most highly honored peacemakers of our times, the Nobel Peace Laureates. From their knowledge and inspiration, they create peace projects in their schools, local community, and/or global peace efforts.

After reviewing current peace education literature from various perspectives, several important elements of peace education programs have emerged: 1) Programs should be integrated across a variety of social levels; 2) Programs should focus on positive peace, including peace building and peacemaking, not just peacekeeping; 3) Education in the Programs should include: a) the nature of violence, b) human rights, c) diversity, d) cooperation, e) and respect; 4) Education programs should contain action; 5) programs should empower; 6) Programs should be strengths-based; 7) Programs should advocate nonviolent social change; 8) Programs should contain alternatives to violence; 9) Programs should educate youth of all ages; 10) Programs should be based on multidisciplinary and multicultural understandings of adolescent development. I found that PeaceJam is an excellent example of a peace education program and that it contains all of these elements; recommendations for future growth of the PeaceJam program are offered.

Surfers' Report: Impact of Online Journals Amy Russell, LMSW

There is a debate on the impact of open access journals, which are rising at high frequencies. For *Perspectives on Social Work*, our objective is clear: to better prepare and teach GSSW doctoral students the process of creating, composing, preparing, editing, submitting, and resubmitting manuscripts. *PSW* provides an opportunity to prime students for our scholarly life course. In others areas, however, open access online journals present a dilemma of traditional versus contemporary, hardcopy versus technology. The debate is if long-term and editorial quality will prevail under traditional business models, or whether online open access journals will increase the influence of journals as well as increase readership. This issue, being studied by Thomson ISI, involves an ongoing analysis of the overall performance of open access journals. Thomson is monitoring 200 open access journals, which include those peer reviewed and journals which do not charge for access. Thomson has thus far found that open access journals are rising rapidly via new and reformatted journals, as well as publication of improved lists of such journals. This is an issue that affects us as doctoral students, since we do use both styles of journals. It will be important to watch what happens to determine if there is a change in quality and/or improvement in availability of research. Regardless, we are accountable for content and integrity in our own submissions, whether hardcopy or electronic.

Selected On-Line Journals

Baywood: <http://www.baywood.com/journals/PreviewJournals.asp?Id=0091-4150>

Blackwell Synergy: <http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/>

BMJ Journals: <http://sti.bmjournals.com/>

Cambridge: <http://www.journals.cambridge.org/bin/bladerunner?30REQEVENT=&REQAUTH=0&500002REQSUB=&REQSTR1=DevelopmentandPsychopathology>

Elsevier: http://www.elsevier.com/wps/find/journaldescription.cws_home/505746/description#description

Guilford: http://www.guilford.com/cgi-bin/cartscript.cgi?page=periodicals/jnai.htm&cart_id=

Haworth Press, Inc.: <http://www.haworthpressinc.com>

Hein Online: <http://www.heinonline.org>

Heldref: <http://www.heldref.org/jach.php>

Lyceum: <http://lyceumbooks.com/MentalHJournal.htm>

MedBioWorld: <http://www.medbioworld.com>

Research Press: www.researchpress.com

Sage Publications: <http://www.sagepub.com>

Springer: <http://www.springeronline.com>

Taylor & Francis Group: <http://www.taylorandfrancisgroup.com/>

Thomson Scientific: <http://sunweb.isinet.com>

Transaction Publishers: <http://www.transactionpub.com/cgi-bin/transactionpublishers.storefront>

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From the Lectern: Reforming the Dissertation Process Howard Karger, PhD

After being in the “business” for 26 years, I still ask the same question: “What’s the purpose of a dissertation?” The official party line is that a dissertation must be “original research that advances knowledge.” However, if that were the real criteria, then virtually no dissertation would pass muster. In fact, most wouldn’t even make it to the starting gate.

The majority of dissertations rely on a time-tested formula. Find a small research question, launch a study, and analyze the results. The ostensible purpose of a dissertation is to construct a stage where students can demonstrate how well they do the research dance.

Consequently, a good dissertation must be “scholarly.” In other words, dry, boring and virtually unreadable – and irrelevant – for anyone not on the dissertation committee. (I’m being charitable since many committee members also find it hard to stay awake when reading these tomes.) There should be no flamboyance, no extreme positions, and little or no controversy, except when tightly contained as part of an “academic debate.” Passion is forbidden since it reeks of subjectivity. In short, a good dissertation is tedious and students tread on dangerous ground when they fail to adhere to the “formula.”

Given the absence of passion, it’s not surprising that most dissertations die an ignoble death on a library shelf, eaten by indiscriminate insects with no literary taste. For many students, bound dissertations are an ego boost. “See, I did it.” For others, it’s “My work is important. I’m proud of it and I want it published.” This may explain why so few dissertations are reborn as books or articles. It may also explain why most dissertations fail to inform practice or public policy. Almost no one takes them seriously, least of all those intimately aware of the process. In the social sciences, dissertations have become a rite of passage rather than an avenue for important scholarship with ambitions to change policy and practice.

If we deconstruct “original research that advances knowledge,” we must examine two terms: *original research* and *advancing knowledge*. But what do they mean? If a dissertation committee held students to the “original research” part, then virtually no dissertation would be acceptable. Most professors, including myself, have rarely seen a dissertation that is truly *original* research, no less having done that kind of work ourselves. Since most good research emanates from existing studies or synthesizes them, the term *original* has limited utility anyway.

Personally, I can live with a dissertation that isn't "original," although I prefer one that is creative. In other words, a dissertation that's out of the box. But undertaking a creative dissertation is out of step with the "formula" and therefore dangerous for all but the most intrepid students. Doctoral students get a clear message early on. Stay safe! Remember, no committee ever refused to sign off on a dissertation because it was boring.

The second part of the statement, "advancing knowledge," is much more troubling. What constitutes "advancing knowledge?" Do particularistic dissertations that examine a tiny or insignificant facet of a topic necessarily advance knowledge? Do researching micro parts of a question eventually lead to a better understanding of a larger question? Maybe it does in the hands of a deft theoretician, but generally not. More often than not, tiny parts stay as tiny parts and do little to advance knowledge.

A major part of any dissertation is the requirement that a student identify the significance of the problem being studied, something that's too often downplayed. Significance becomes a perfunctory part of most theses, one that is subordinated to the research design and the hypothesis. Doctoral students quickly learn that what matters is the sizzle not the steak. In other words, the razzle-dazzle of the methodology is more important than the significance of the problem. It's therefore not surprising that many dissertations are descriptive, lack analytical content, and are superficial. Hence, they become a "show me" exercise rather than a bold foray into the terrain of new knowledge.

Another way to look at the "significance of the problem" is to ask a simple question: "So what?" Why should I or anyone else bother to read this study? Why is what you're saying important? Does your study lead to a new understanding of the problem? Does it shed light on anything worth knowing? To whom is this study important and why? Does anyone want to know or care about what you've come up with? In other words, what is the "so what" of the study?

Requiring a "so what" component for dissertations would raise the bar. Dissertations might then evolve from a "see I can do it" exercise into one where a researcher asks an important question that people want answered. It can move from answering relatively unimportant questions to tackling larger and more important ones. Adding the "so what" component can move a dissertation from a bound stack of papers occupying a library shelf to a document that larger numbers of people actually want to read. It would also make the work of dissertations more exciting for the student and the dissertation committee.

Counterpoint
Response to Karger
Susi Mapp, PhD

I have been asked by the editor to respond to Howard Karger's piece about doctoral dissertation. I suppose, as a recent Ph.D. graduate of the University of Houston, this is somewhat self-serving for me. I have to believe that the hours of labor, the missed family activities and fights with Microsoft Word over formatting were not useless. But I also do believe that the doctoral dissertation has a place in our education and that it is a valuable place.

As Dr. Karger states, the purpose of a dissertation is, "to construct a stage where students can demonstrate how well they do the research dance." In fact, this is a valuable process. Just as when we were MSWs and had an internship where we were able to stretch our "practice legs,"

having a “stage” on which we can practice conducting research while still having the resources of our professors to guide us can be very useful.

As for disparaging that research should be “scholarly” I can’t imagine that I am alone in having to fight for the image of social work as a scholarly profession. Since the days of Flexner, we have had to defend our image against charges that we are a “weak” profession. Teaching as I do on the bachelor’s level, we have to defend ourselves against charges from other departments, that we take the students who can’t “hack it” in other departments and get them graduated since our classes are so easy. As any student of mine will tell you, my classes are no piece of cake, but I do utilize the strengths perspective and an empowerment approach to try to bring out the potential in every student, just as we do with our clients. But in order to stand strong, I need to be able to go toe-to-toe with any other discipline in research credentials.

Dr. Karger brings out two aspects of dissertations: that they should be “original research” and that they should “advance knowledge.” In one sense he is correct that much research isn’t original. Dictionary.com defines original as, “Not derived from something else; fresh and unusual.” However, is not what we learned from research class is that *all* research builds on other research? When we move from exploratory to descriptive to explanatory, we are building on the knowledge of those who have come before. That is the purpose of a literature review, to find what others have done in this area. All too often it is only in dissertation, that we are able to find unique knowledge. For example, I currently have a student who is trying to write a paper about working with sexual abuse survivors. You think, “That’s easy, there’s a lot on this topic.” Yes, there is a lot – about Anglo children. She is interested in how it may differ for Hispanic children. The only thing that focused on exactly what she wanted was – a dissertation.

This leads to the other part of the dissertation – that it should advance knowledge in the field. I don’t know about anyone else, but when I wrote my dissertation, my chair had me include a whole section on implications: implications for practice, implications for policy, implications for research and implications for social work education. It was clear to all how my findings (as meager as they turned out) could advance social work practice.

While I myself am publishing two articles from the work for my dissertation, Dr. Karger is correct that many people do not publish their dissertation. This can be due to several factors. Many Ph.D.s in social work do not go into teaching, thus have no impetus to publish. Additionally, many graduates are so sick of their dissertation by the time they graduate; they do not want to spend more time with it to make it publishable. All too often the dissertation process can turn into an ego parade for those on the committee at the expense of the student. One of the professors in my department tells the story of how he spent an entire summer working on a whole new chapter for his dissertation at the direction of one of his committee members. When he returned four months later with the chapter, the committee member had no memory of telling him to do that and told him not to worry about it. Four months of solid work down the drain. We have all heard of dissertation defenses where the doctoral student is verbally abused by the committee in order that the committee may show off its knowledge.

Dr. Karger states that he hopes the dissertation would be a “bold foray into new knowledge.” I would not describe my dissertation in that fashion, but neither would I describe my coursework in that fashion. While we certainly had some high caliber faculty, we also had some that viewed the classroom as a soapbox where they could come in and pontificate on whatever topic was on their mind for three hours to a captive audience. Our job was to listen – not to explore, not to debate and most of all, not to challenge. I remember specific situations in which we would be charged up about our readings and want to discuss it, only to be told to be

quiet. If you want bold and exciting dissertations, you must have a bold and exciting curriculum. If you want students to challenge current paradigms in their dissertations, you must allow and encourage them to do so in the classroom.

So to all those who follow me in the program, despair not that this is a useless exercise. It has its purpose and - this too shall pass.

Counterpoint **Peter A. Kindle, MA, MDiv**

Even spurious quotations can be well-known, and this one, reputedly of Socrates through Plato is among the best:

The children now love luxury; they have bad manners, contempt for authority; they allow disrespect for elders and love chatter in place of exercise. Children now are tyrants, not the servants of their households. They no longer rise when elders enter the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, gobble up dainties at the table, cross their legs, and tyrannize their teachers (Lien, 2000).

With more authority, Christopher Lucas (1994) reports that university professors complained of student disinterest in studies, and that students complained of the cost of books, as early as 800 years ago. It is not hard to imagine that the thirteenth century equivalent of a doctoral dissertation was often critiqued by established faculty as passionately irrelevant, significant only in obscurity, and descriptively superficial.

According to the Council on Social Work Education (2004), approximately 250 students complete a dissertation in social work every year. Volume alone suggests that most will not become classics; few do in any discipline. Mapp is correct in the reminder that knowledge advances incrementally. Karger may lament the fact that dissertations deal with minutia, but it is only in this fashion that any progress is made.

If the academic marketplace were to elevate the standard for dissertation research as advocated by Karger, then his argument would be stronger. The market does not so dictate, and other evidence seems to suggest that it would be unwise to do so. On a national basis, only half of doctoral students graduate (Smallwood, 2004). This alone indicates that the transition from classroom to independent research is sufficiently challenging and supports Mapp's contention that methodological rigor is the doctoral equivalent of a practice internship.

Nonetheless, I believe that there is a kernel of truth in Karger's charges. Dissertations should be focused on small pockets of progress, but this does not mean that progress should be sacrificed on the altar of completion expediency. Data mining and intricate statistical acrobatics alone should not suffice to make a dissertation. Furthermore, irrelevance is amplified by half-baked theoretical frameworks that inadequately contextualize studies. Neither students nor committees should accept weak theoretical justification. Just because data is accessible does not mean that a dissertation is hidden within it.

Karger demands outside-the-box creativity, a demand that I find ambiguous and unreasonable, but I am unwilling to endorse Mapp's pragmatism that borders on fatalism. I want to make a difference. If I did not, I would not be pursuing a doctorate. I call on my future chair and my future committee to help me do so.

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Counterpoint Amy Russell, LMSW

When I began reading Dr. Karger's commentary "Reforming the Dissertation Process", I felt a bit sensitive. I was thinking to myself that my dissertation will be my *métier*, an original and important piece of work from which I will publish a scandalous number of articles. But yes, I am naïve, and as I read further, realized the point (the point that I took): that there is a political process to the dissertation endeavor and that the question of "so what?" is sometimes lost. I know that I have to do the dissertation "dance" to make my way to the PhD jackpot, but I also know I do not have to agree with it. An argument is effective when you know the language. However, on my way, will I forget my vision and passion? I think this is what Dr. Karger is saying. If we forget why we set out on this course and become automatons of linear research ideology, then is the significance lost along with the "so what?"

It is not hidden that Social Work is trying to make a name for itself in the empirical world. We want to show everyone how research-oriented, scientific, and objective we really are. Since Flexner's scathing critique of our non-discipline discipline, we have been theorizing, researching, writing, establishing models, codifying, and making every reductionistic attempt to become a scholarly institution that operates under the same academic rigor as psychology, sociology, and even psychiatry. PhD students get this in large doses in Philosophy of Science courses, as we learn about how reasoning should adhere to the pure/natural scientific way of doing things, and we walk away knowing that pure/natural science is the paradigm we live under as Social Workers. Social Work is not a pure/natural science and never will be. It is social science, about human behavior and all the complexities that lie within us. It is vague, confounded by many variables, and is not exact in any sense. Social Work separates itself from other human sciences by uniquely emphasizing skills, client self-determination, and political action. Are our efforts at making ourselves appear as a scientific as psychology hurting our credibility and distracting us from our purpose of client-driven and socially just practice? How can I relate to a person when I am obsessing over whether they fit in a logistic regression equation?

Yes, quantitative methods are our friend because they are a scientific route to present our social science research. But the same rules do not apply to different things, Natural science paradigms, which are similar to social science paradigms, are not a good fit with client-driven practice or social advocacy. Is our attempt at proving our empirical value and contribution distracting us from other forms of research, such as qualitative methods, which are a good fit with Social Work since they do not reduce a person to a number but convey context richness through narrative and ethnography? Why are these social work ideas absent from the

dissertation process? What is primary, empirical research that furthers the profession or Social Work ethical values that further the profession?

Social Work started out political, passionate, and striving for social justice. We may have gone wrong on some things like trying to make minorities assimilate, but we can admit this. Now we are obsessed with quantitative numbers and significant alphas, making outcomes so immediate and impressive that no dissertation committee could deny. Where is the social justice in that? If we continue this thinking as we do now in our PhD programs, we will miss the human aspect of our dissertation process, the significance to and importance of the populations we are researching. I am already so disappointed that the persons I will be doing my dissertation research on will not be able to read it.

Occasionally I meet with a friend/professor/peer/mentor and we discuss how school is going, politics, Feminism, whatever. I was excited to share my recent decision of my dissertation topic with her, knowing she would support me and give needed feedback. It is what I think a creative, important, and significant topic should be, as well as adding to knowledge, different, and original. She supported me and also warned me about appearing too narrow, controversial, that I must consider the politics of my topic as well as the resistance that may occur from my committee if I appear too passionate. She knows how it works and she was informing a young mind of what is to come. So the dilemma: Do I go for it knowing it could have been easier or, do I go with what adheres to the “formula”, data that I already have and meets with present trendy research? You tell me.

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In order to be considered for publication in Perspectives on Social Work, all submissions must meet the following criteria:

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