

# Doctoral Students and the Future of Social Work Research

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# Organizing Premise I

Doctoral students and early career scholars are vital contributors to the profession's knowledge base, research contributions, and capacity for social impact:

- Theory building
- Research
- Research-practice translation
- Social work's educational pipe-line
- Disciplinary renewal and vibrancy

“...doctoral students and graduates bear a great responsibility to the profession, playing a central role in its preservation and further evolution as a field of study...”



Anastas & Kuerbis, 2009, p. 72

# SW doctoral students: A significant scholarly resource

- # of social work doctoral programs in USA and Canada: 80+
- # of students entering US social work doctoral programs each year: 320-340 (Mackie, 2013)
- #s of SW PhD graduates each year: 300+ (2009-2010: 320 graduates from 65 programs; CSWE, 2011).



# Organizing Premise II

Fully realizing the potential represented by social work's doctoral students and emerging scholars will require greater intentionality – *by students* as well as programs/faculty – than is currently evident in social work doctoral education.

# What kinds of dissertations? USA

Maynard, Vaughn & Sarteschi, 2014

Analysis of random sample (20%) of social work dissertations, 1998-2008 (N=593)

- Methods:
  - Quantitative – 57%
  - Qualitative – 22%
  - Mixed methods – 14%
- Design:
  - observational (92%): cross-sectional correlational (51%), descriptive 26%
  - experimental (7%)
- Data: primary data - 61%; secondary data - 24%
- Significant trend: more use of secondary data sources



# What kinds of dissertations? Canada

Rothwell, Lach, Blumenthal & Akesson, 2014

- Scoping review of publicly available dissertations, 2001-2011
- N=248 (91% of total number of dissertations)
- Methods:
  - Qualitative - 65%
  - Quantitative - 16.9%
- Primarily descriptive (68%); *not* focused on intervention (71%)
- Primary data - 87.5%; secondary data – 9%



“...concern exists that the pressure to complete dissertations quickly and publish prolifically are driving choices of research design and topics rather than the needs of the field and profession or the learning skills that doctoral students will need to answer relevant questions.”

“We fear that the descriptive nature of social work dissertations in Canada are not generating theory to understand complex individual and social behaviors....Further, we are concerned that the descriptive and non-intervention nature of the scholarship has limited social impact. This trend may position social work research on the “curbside” for influencing policy and practice.”

# Additional Indicators

- Kreisberg & Marsh, 2015: analysis of 100 most cited articles in the *British Journal of Social Work*, 2000-2009
- USA – more empirical work (but only 15% of all US papers focused on intervention effectiveness)
- UK/Europe – more theoretical, profession-oriented studies (3% focused on intervention effectiveness)
- Key findings, for our purposes:
  - Differences in content and type of research
  - Under-emphasis on outcome research
  - Theory as an “underutilised tool in US social work research and scholarship” (p.15)

# Additional Indicators

- Study of citations of the same 100 most-cited BJSW papers (Slater, Scourfield & Sloan, 2012)
- Strong tendencies towards within-country citations: US scholars overwhelmingly cite US research; UK scholars cite UK research - though to somewhat lesser extent.
- USA– more quantitative, outcome-focused
- UK – more critically-framed qualitative research
- Evidence of a “Great Atlantic Divide “?

# General Observations

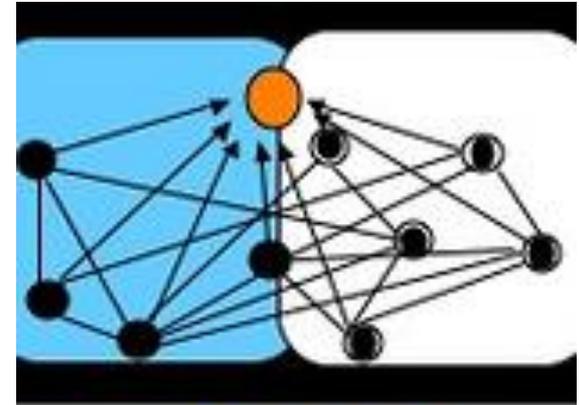
- Preponderance of dissertation research descriptive – and often not methodologically cutting edge
- Relatively few dissertations focused on intervention and outcome research
- Increasing reliance on secondary data
- Relatively under-theorized
- Predominantly focused on traditional social work issues and questions; not yet deeply interdisciplinary or cross-cutting
- Generally US-centric

# Key Questions

- Where is US social work (and doctoral social work) scholarship breaking new ground?
- How well is it keeping up with larger research trends?
- Is it having as much impact as it could?
- **Are we making the best possible use of the intellectual capital and potential of our doctoral early career scholars?**

# Emergent Research Emphases

- *Problem-centered*: addressing difficult scientific and social questions (“wicked” problems) – e.g. social and health disparities
- Knowledge for use: *practical*; relevant
- A focus on *impact*: sustainable, real-world, end-user benefits
- Socially *accountable*
- *Innovative*: new methods, models, and interventions
- Broadly *collaborative*



# NIH Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research: Strategic Priorities

- Next generation measurement and data – aimed at capturing “complex, real-world phenomena.” Novel methods, measures, technologies, “big data”, system science
- Population health
- Team science and multidisciplinary engagement – broadly interdisciplinary. collaborative

# Grand Challenges for Social Work Initiative (AASWSW\*)

Seeks to engage the public in identifying ambitious yet achievable goals for society that:

- mobilize the profession
- capture the public's imagination, and
- **require innovation and breakthroughs in science and practice to achieve.**

# Why a Grand Challenges Initiative?

- Describes the power and potential of SW to innovate and lead--what we can do for society.
- Sets out ambitious, but time-limited and achievable goals for the field.
- **Provides a way to integrate research into concrete social progress, impact**
- **Can guide, influence the pipeline of current and future workforce in academics and practice.**

# Grand Challenges<sup>^</sup>

1. Maximize every person's productive potential
2. Prevent behavioral problems in youth
3. Reduce isolation and loneliness
4. Foster safe families
5. End homelessness
6. Improve health for all

*<sup>^</sup>Communications experts are engaged to effectively frame these ideas--titles of GC's and papers may change.*

# Grand Challenges<sup>^</sup>

7. Reduce incarceration
8. Strengthen financial security
9. End racial injustice
10. **Protect the human environment**
11. Promote social and economic participation for all
12. Harness technology for social good

<sup>^</sup> Communications experts are engaged to effectively frame these ideas--titles of GC's and papers may change.

# #10: Strengthen Social Response to Environmental Challenges\*

- Extant social work roles and interventions available for scaling up and adapting into strategies for addressing the human impacts of environmental change range from evidence-based psychosocial interventions for disaster-related mental and behavioral health problems to well-developed strategies for community mobilization and policy advocacy.
- **However sophisticated new interdisciplinary research around environmental challenge and change is also needed to develop and hone innovative strategies and to translate these into sustainable social solutions, in concert with the intentional development of impact-oriented partnerships across community, disciplinary, sectoral, and national borders.**

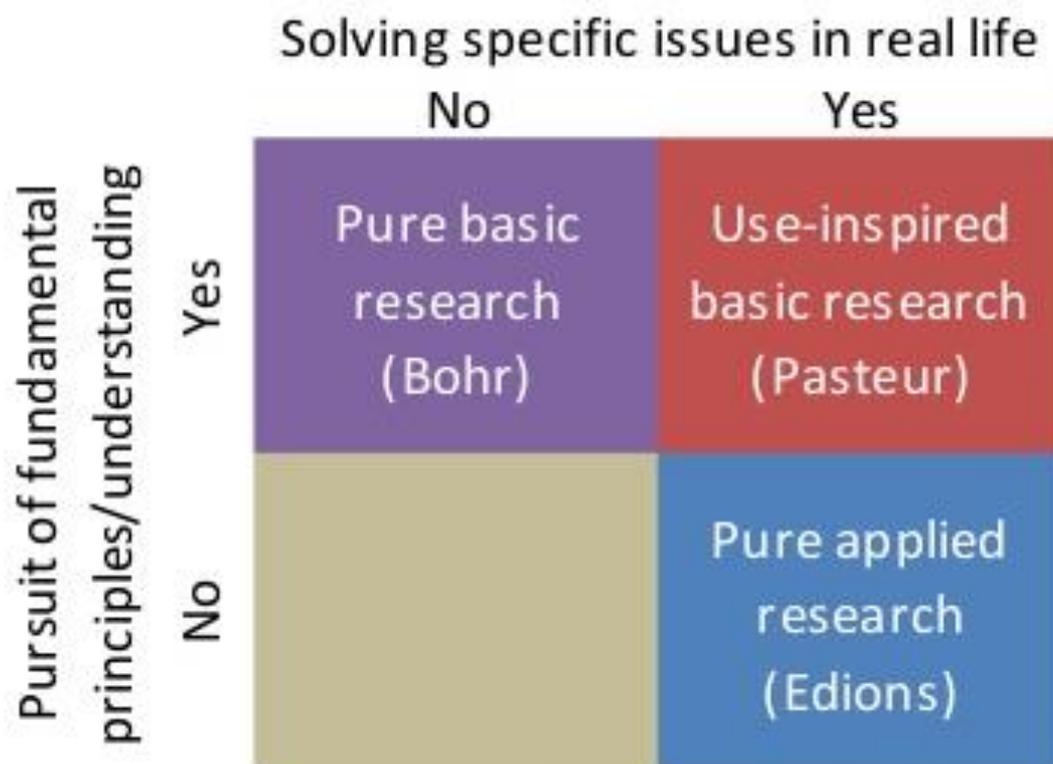
\*Kemp, S. P., Palinkas, L. A., Wong, M., Floersch, J., Wagner, K., ...& Nurius, P. (2014). Strengthen social response to environmental challenges. Baltimore, MD: American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare.

# Implications

- A return to the profession's historical interest in "*big questions and big ideas*" (Reisch, 2002)
- A focus on *impact*
- "Use-inspired" research (*Pasteur's Quadrant*, Stokes, 1997):
  - A bi-directional, both/and relationship between discovery and application
  - End goals of research: real-world change

# Classification of research motivation by Stokes's Quadrant Model

- Pursuit of fundamental principles/understandings
- Solving specific issues in real life



Sources : Donald E. Stokes, *Pasteur's Quadrant - Basic Science and Technological Innovation*, Brookings Institution Press, 1997.

# Strategic Goal

SW doctoral graduates prepared to thrive in changing research and practice environments:

- Conceptual and methodological sophistication
- Confident participation in transdisciplinary and translational research teams
- Leadership in crafting responses to complex, social, health, and economic, and environmental issues that are impact-oriented, effective, innovative, relevant, broadly collaborative, culturally responsive, and consistently focused on equity and social justice

# Additional ambitions for social work's doctoral and early career scholars

- Investment in asking generative, “meaty,” impactful – but also tractable – questions
- Creativity and vision
- Awareness that, individually and collectively, you are critical to social work's capacity for collective impact – now, near term, longer term

**Pragmatically, over the next decade, you are the ones who will lead the curve:**

- **Asking fresh questions**
- **Bringing new theories and methods to the field**
- **Envisioning and testing new interventions**
- **Engaging new partners**
- **Thinking (and acting) globally**

**How can social work's doctoral scholars, individually and collectively, more proactively elevate your collective capacity and readiness?**

# Creating Spaces for Connection, Collaboration, and Inspiration

- **Within PhD programs:**
  - Cross-cohort student groups/organizations (note: Sunday a.m.'s presentation by students from SSA)
  - disciplinary and interdisciplinary *intellectual communities* (faculty and students) (Mor-Barak & Brekke, 2014)\*
- **Across SW PhD programs:** a sense of collective contribution/accountability – **SSWR and SSWR doctoral student network as key facilitators**
- **Dual aim:** enhancing quality of students' doctoral experiences *and* elevated emphasis on strengthening students' collective contributions

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