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Editorial: Is the Master's Thesis an Ethical Issue?

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The day one graduates with an MSW is accompanied by an overwhelming experience of self-actualization, a pinnacle of the graduate's life. However, within the timeframe of that degree, no greater experience can compare to completion of an oral exam and oral defense of one's MSW thesis. When an academic program fails to offer a thesis option, that program strips the individual of the opportunity to experience the unique triumph associated with the successful completion of the MSW thesis. The self-actualizing experience that is associated with the completion of the MSW degree is lacking because there is no joy and pride a student will experience after an oral thesis exam. Walking out of an oral thesis exam is a highly personal experience that cannot be compared to walking across a stage and shaking the hand of a university administrator that one had never met.

In this editorial we address the topic of the MSW thesis from three directions which include history of the MSW thesis, the ethics of failing to offer a thesis option, and the structural racism/sexism brought out by this issue.

History of the MSW Thesis

At this juncture, it is incumbent upon us to assess the historical features that eventually led to the “no thesis option.” Following is a review of literature from decades ago that formally addresses the early evolution of the thesis concept housed within the MSW degree.

The concept of social work research and its importance to social welfare grew out of the work of Todd (1920), who promoted the scientific method in social work training in the 1920's. Lindsey and Kirk (1992) provide a list of familiar names found in social work history, who followed Todd's example in stressing the use of the scientific method in practice evaluation and social work research. Tragically, although Lindsey and Kirk (1992) articulate a crisis in social work research education and make recommendations on how to avoid future problems but, the social work education establishment pursued the exact opposite pathway from their recommendations. Lindsey and Kirk's nightmare became a reality, and despite their warning, social workers may be more likely than in 1992 to be scientifically illiterate.

In earlier days of analyzing social work education, Corcoran (1984, 30-31) noted that the “master's thesis has always been an integral component of social work education. With the 1968 Educational Curriculum Policy Statement, however, the thesis was eliminated as a distinct requirement.” Immediately 57% of all MSW programs dropped the thesis requirement. How had established MSW practitioners envisioned the place of the thesis within their past curricula? Many years prior to Corcoran's (1984) study, Kirk, Osmalow and Fischer (1976) demonstrated that the overwhelming majority of MSWs, with a median of seven years of practice experience, were never involved in direct research, but nevertheless envisioned that research was a critical component for the profession. Although this is a finding from decades ago, we doubt that replication would find much difference by contemporary MSW practitioners.

In their extensive analysis of the pursuit of excellence in social work education, the Task Force on Quality in Graduate Social Work Education (1986) wrote

Development. The profession can achieve excellence only to the extent that its knowledge base is constantly tested, extended, and refined. This process supports excellence in education for practice and for knowledge application. Excellence in knowledge development through systematic inquiry and practice experimentation requires that a school have the capacity and resources to make major new contributions to social work's body of knowledge (p. 77).

The concept of contributing to the knowledge base emerges from research built on past research. The policy of eliminating the MSW thesis contributes to a paralysis of growth and development of our knowledge base. A good example of paralysis of growth is outlined in the research of Wodarski, Feit, and Green (1995) where they demonstrate that social work research is commonly flawed, and replication is absent. Contrary to the NASW Code of Ethics, there is a profound absence of successful contributions to the knowledge base.

Zimbalist and Rubin (1981) address the extreme variations of the role of social work research within MSW programs. In the 1980s, some graduate programs had a strong research content while others did not. They recommended four decades ago that a "floor" for research competence be established to "protect and strengthen the scientific basis of graduate education" (p. 61). Instead of establishing a floor for research competence, the social work education establishment has instead pursued a deplorable path away from social work research.

Ethical Issues

The ethics of failing to support a thesis option need to be considered. The ethical argument for the mandating a thesis option lies within a standard of the NASW Code of Ethics:

5. Social Workers' Ethical Responsibilities to the Social Work Profession
 - (d) Social workers should contribute to the knowledge base of social work and share with colleagues their knowledge related to practice, research, and ethics. Social workers should seek to contribute to the

profession's literature and to share their knowledge at professional meetings and conferences.

Here, social workers are obligated to develop and maintain pathways to make contributions to our knowledge base. This pathway creates an embedded requirement and satisfies one of major criteria that define a profession (Flexner, 1915). How do we understand the need “contribute to the knowledge base” other than with original and fresh research? We know that good research does not emerge from the thin air. It emerges from persistent and sustained practice. The master's thesis is just one of those steps that leads the young emerging professional to offer a contribution to the knowledge base. Yet, we deny MSW students this opportunity. Such a denial is contrary to the NASW Code of ethics and other social work codes of ethics found internationally.

For broader social and cultural context, we completed an international analysis of social work codes of ethics. In our table, social work codes are divided into two categories: those countries that articulate that the profession is ethically obligated to contributed to the knowledge base, and those for which a standard cannot be detected.

Has Ethic Standard for Contributing to Knowledge Base	No Standard Detected
Armenia	Belgium
Burundi	Denmark
Congo	Finland
Croatia	Ghana
England	Paraguay
France	
Germany	
Ireland	
Israel	
Italy	
Japan	

Luxembourg	
Norway	
Portugal	
Puerto Rico	
Russia	
Singapore	
Slovak Republic	
South Korea	
Spain	
Suriname	
Sweden	
Turkey	
Uganda	
USA	

Table 1: Countries with and without Ethic Standard for Contributing to Knowledge Base

For those countries where the standard is not detected, we do not mean that the standard doesn't exist. It simply means that the standard could not be uncovered using Google Translator.¹

Thus, virtually all codes articulate that social workers have an ethical obligation to contribute to the knowledge base.

Structural Components including Sexism and Racism

The thesis policy among MSW academic programs can be easily envisioned as an ordinal scale as seen by the graphic. There is a notable difference

¹ Special thanks must be given to Teresa Francesca Bertotti, Ph.D. from the University of Trento for helping to translate the Italian Social Work Code of Ethics; Stefan Borrmann, Ph.D. from University of Applied Sciences Landshut for helping to translate the German Social Work Code of Ethics and Céline Lember (Social Service Assistant - ANAS Administrator) for help to translate the French Social Work Code of Ethics.

between requiring a thesis for all students, and establishing the no thesis option, or prohibiting an MSW thesis from all students. There is also notable difference between having a thesis option and no thesis. Our reasonable vision sees the ordinal distance between “requiring thesis” and having a “thesis option” is considerably less than the ordinal distance between “thesis option” and “no thesis.” To be abundantly clear, establishing a policy of no thesis requirement is nothing more than a diplomatic strategy of stating, “No, you may not do independent research that can be used as a pathway to advance the profession.”

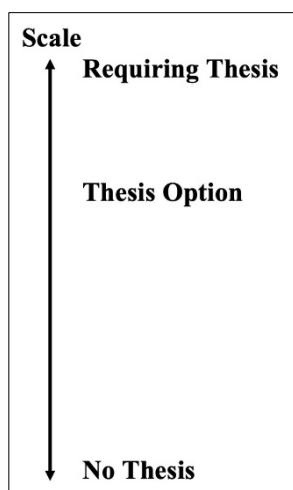


Figure 1: Thesis policy scale

In at least one respect the process of becoming a competent clinical social worker parallels the process of becoming a competent social work researcher. An MSW candidate can pursue a specialty in clinical social work, but all agree that competence is not achieved by the mere completion of a degree. Practice, practice, practice under the supervision of an experience clinician is necessary. We doubt there is a single licensed clinical social worker who would disagree. Competence for a social work researcher operates in the identical manner. Completing a master's thesis is the entry level

to becoming a competent researcher. Just as clinical social work requires experience for expertise, it takes decades of research practice to become a proficient social work researcher.

A more scholarly understanding of the profession requires us to acknowledge that in their establishment of a policy that MSW programs have no obligation to offer a thesis opportunity, CSWE is essentially excluding the systematic addition to and development of the knowledge base from being a critical component of MSW education. For every MSW program that denies a thesis option, students who have a proclivity toward research are denied a critical educational opportunity. Simply stated, denying the thesis option for the students who would likely benefit from the experience is contrary to basic social work values.

There are two important sociological components to understanding the thesis option. Both are macro structural issues.

Faculty resources: The fact is, it would not be surprising to find MSW programs that lack faculty who are competent in guiding students through the puzzle of completing a thesis. Continuing this line of reasoning, if a university cannot hire competent faculty to advise in the thesis process, that graduate program likely should not exist. Denying the thesis option hides both incompetent or undertrained graduate faculty and/or faculty who are not committed to providing for the educational needs of individual graduate students.

Institutional racism and sexism: Arguably the worst form of racism and sexism is creating a lower standard for minorities and women.

Women: I have taught statistics for 28 years and I can say with great confidence that the greatest problem in teaching women statistics is convincing them that they have the intellectual ability to do it. Once they get over that hurdle, they excel. Strangely, I found that female students do better when there are no males in the classroom. I have no evidence to support this. In the same vein, denying the opportunity to write a thesis is a product of institutional sexism. We don't want women students to face the harsh realities of failure, so we institutionalize a system by which they are denied an opportunity to stretch their intellectual muscles.

Racial Minorities: The unvarnished fact is writing a thesis is more intellectually challenging than any other alternative. More bluntly, writing a thesis is more difficult than any alternative.² MSW programs often attract individuals who were socialized in oppressive environments. These students are being denied an educational opportunity. This type of denial is absolutely the worst form of racism. One arena in which the civil rights movement emerged is the denial of educational opportunities to Black students. The “no thesis option” denies minorities an educational opportunity and it parallels the experience of the “Little Rock Nine.” It is institutional racism in social work education.

A Recapitulation

Should CSWE mandate a thesis **requirement** within all accredited MSW programs? The answer to this question is a resounding NO! The mandate requiring a thesis from all MSW students is equally detrimental to the educational process as prohibiting a thesis by instituting the “no thesis” option. We often wonder why it is common among formal institutions to envision a social reality as being black or white. The reality lies somewhere in the middle and not within the extremes. The institutional path we should be following is *maximizing choice*. Clearly, a thesis mandate and the denial to students who want to complete a thesis are equally absurd. The profession must avoid such a polarized reality. Failure to offer the options to write a thesis denies a student of a profoundly edifying educational and professional experience. A thesis option, *not a thesis requirement*, should be formally instituted in all MSW programs.

Violations to the Code of Ethics, regardless of country, fall into two categories: commission and omission. That is, we can act in an unethical manner (commission), or we can fail to act (omission) in an ethical manner.

² To acknowledge that the thesis option is a more difficult path, we review the statistics. In graduate programs that afford the thesis option, those students who elect *not* to follow the thesis path always outnumber the students who elect to write a thesis.

Which is worse? That question is absurd. We can say that in the U.S., by prohibiting a thesis option, the social work education establishment commits an act of omission. Failure to mandate the thesis *option* (not a requirement) within MSW programs is a *de facto* policy of prohibition of the MSW thesis.

Lastly, the “no thesis” option is product of institutional racism. When we prohibit minority students from writing a thesis, the social work establishment is systematically denying educational opportunities. Simply stated, denying the thesis option for any students who would likely benefit from the experience is contrary to basic social work values.

If you would like to comment on this editorial, email smarson@nc.rr.com and your commentary will be published.

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