

The DSW: From Skeptic to Convert

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Abstract The author traces the history of the original DSW degree in relation to the Ph.D. which was viewed as the more respected, rigorous, and traditional degree, essentially replacing the DSW in social work doctoral programs. Following the trend of practice doctorates in the health care field, beginning with the Psy.D. in Psychology, the DSW as a practice-oriented doctoral degree reemerged in 2007 and programs have been proliferating at a rate of approximately one per year. Initially a skeptic, through exposure in various capacities, the author came to appreciate the important gap that advanced practitioners-scholars trained in DSW programs can fill in teaching practice-related coursework in BSW and MSW programs.

Keywords DSW · Social work · Doctoral education · Practitioner-scholar · Professional doctorate

When I was a MSW and Ph.D. student in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Doctor of Social Work degree (DSW) as seen as passé. Many of the few remaining social work programs offering the DSW were changing over to the more traditional and widely recognized Ph.D., with some even offering their alumni the opportunity to be retroactively issued a Ph.D. diploma to replace the previously earned DSW degree. Although the DSW was commonly construed as a practice doctorate, the reality was that the curricula, research training, and academic rigor of the then existing DSW and Ph.D. programs were essentially

comparable (Crow and Kindelsberger 1975; Patchner 1983). Graduates with DSW degrees were able to obtain academic, administrative and other positions without being disadvantaged by having earned the lesser known and perhaps lesser respected DSW, and seemingly earned promotions, tenure and obtained other professional advancements in a manner similar to their Ph.D. counterparts. Nevertheless, the lesser recognition of the DSW, the greater prestige associated with the Ph.D., and larger trends within university environments all conspired to diminish the value of the DSW to the point that by 2006 the degree was no longer being offered in the United States (Hartocollis et al. 2015). As a graduate of a widely respected social work Ph.D. program (Michigan), at the time I thought the extinction of the DSW was a natural maturation of the discipline, aligning it more squarely with the traditional values of the academy, which tended to view the Ph.D. as the more respected and rigorous form of doctoral training, especially in the increasingly important area of research training, compared to professional doctorates.

While the DSW was extinguishing in social work, the opposite trend was event in other practice professions, perhaps beginning with the first Doctor of Psychology (Psy.D.) degrees offered in the areas of clinical and counseling psychology, and leading to licensure as a professional psychologist. The Psy.D. was an alternative to the scientist/practitioner model of Ph.D. training then current within academic psychology. Research training was given less emphasis and training in practice skills augmented, in Psy.D. programs. This model met with considerable resistance from the established Ph.D. academicians, but it was endorsed by the American Psychological Association. Psy.D. programs proved to be immensely popular, to the extent that more Psy.D.s are now awarded in professional psychology than are the traditional Ph.D.s. (American Psychological Association

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2012). Numerous other professional training programs hosted by universities have either augmented their terminal masters degree with a professional doctorate, or actually eliminated the masters as a terminal practice degree altogether, requiring the practice doctorate instead. Examples of this trend include fields such as pharmacy, nursing, occupational therapy, audiology, and physical therapy.

Like a phoenix however, in 2007 the University of Pennsylvania decided to establish a new DSW degree program as a form of genuine practice doctorate intended for experienced social work practitioners, usually holding a license to practice social work, and who wished to move into careers focusing on advanced clinical practice, and on teaching in BSW and MSW programs. Apart from the need for such persons, demands within the academy encourage the production of ‘doctorates’ in any field, with such numbers being an important benchmark going into calculating a given university’s ‘ranking’. Also, DSW programs typically do not provide financial support, grants, scholarships, tuition waivers, nor expensive research assistantships to its doctoral students, who usually pay full tuition. This makes them a relatively low cost doctoral program for the host university to mount, and in the case of private universities the tuition dollars earned can be quite substantial.

Eight years ago I was skeptical of the resurgence of the DSW. With over 30 years of experience teaching in traditional Ph.D. programs, directing one, and publishing a number of articles on social work doctoral education and of the importance of high quality research training, I was concerned that the DSW degree had the potential to further marginalize the already low esteem with which social work is seen within the academy, and that a ‘practice doctorate’ had the potential to erode the value of the MSW as the profession’s terminal practice degree. More cynically, I thought that the DSW was a ploy by social work programs to extract tuition revenue from uninformed LCSWs. Certainly the lack of research training would make these ‘practice’ degrees a debased form of doctoral education. When asked, I actively discouraged MSW students from applying to DSW programs, explaining, somewhat tongue in cheek, that they would spend the rest of their career explaining to people what the DSW initials meant, or that their degree would be confused with the shoe store by the same name.

Over the past few years however, I have had some experiences which have forced me to rethink my position, so the point that I have moved from being an active skeptic in relation to the value and role of the DSW, to being an active advocate for this new practice doctorate. Let me explain my thinking and experiences that have lead me to this new perspective.

The Council on Social Work Education accreditation standards formerly required that faculty who taught required practice classes had earned the MSW and had at

least 2 years of post-MSW practice experience. This was a weak standard. ‘Practice experience’ was not defined. It need not have been clinical practice, and it need not have been full time. Current accreditation language is even more ambiguous, reading “...faculty who teach social work practice courses have a masters degree in social work from a CSWE-accredited program and at least 2 years of practice experience” (CSWE 2012, Standards 3.3.1). Practice experience remains undefined, it is not stipulated that the experience be clinical, nor paid, nor full time, thus a BSW graduate could work 2 years, earn an MSW and then be hired to teach MSW practice classes having had no post-MSW work experience whatsoever.

Nor does the CSWE require that social workers who teach practice themselves hold a license to practice social work, something that related university-based professions such as law, nursing and psychology require as an accreditation standard for their tenure-earning faculty who teach practice skills. After I published an essay urging that the CSWE require a current license to practice social work of faculty who teach clinical courses (Thyer 2000), the CSWE promptly came out with a position paper arguing *against* any requirement that faculty who teach practice be licensed to practice social work! Increasingly, social work Ph.D. programs are admitting non-MSWs into doctoral study, and also admitting new MSW graduates immediately into the Ph.D. This has resulted in a shortage of doctoral graduates in social work capable of competently teaching practice classes. They may possess remarkable skills in statistical or qualitative data analysis, absent the MSW or any significant post-MSW employment. Partially as a result of this, the proportion of social work faculty holding temporary, part-time, adjunct, or non-tenure-earning positions now exceeds the percent of social work faculty in tenure-earning lines. DSW graduates have the potential to be admirably positioned to fill this gap, so long as only experienced, preferably licensed, MSWs are accepted for enrollment in these new practice doctorates. So I have come to see the DSW as a partial solution to a serious lacunae in faculty with practice expertise available for classroom instruction.

A few years ago I was asked to visit the University of Tennessee at Knoxville to conduct an external appraisal and site review of their proposed new DSW program. I was given all relevant paperwork about the new planned degree program, one focused on recruiting LCSWs. The Tennessee DSW was to be offered as an alternative to their continuing traditional social work Ph.D. program. Frankly, I was impressed. The needs assessment documenting the demand for the DSW seemed sound, the curriculum had an admirable focus on innovative clinical training involving online teaching and supervision technology, it emphasized evidence-based practice, the faculty were well-qualified,

and the program had support from higher university administration, in addition to the enthusiastic endorsement of their excellent Dean. I came away from my site visit with a very favorable impression, and submitted a correspondingly positive report.

My third transformative experience occurred in the Spring of 2015, when I was hired by Tulane University's new DSW program to teach a course on clinical research methods. It was a hybrid class, meeting face to face over 2 weekends during the term, with weekly assignments completed online using the Blackboard program in between our two meetings. I enjoyed pulling together the syllabus for the inaugural offering of this class, and was delighted during my first weekend to find a large cohort of 14 licensed social workers sitting in our seminar room. Almost all held full time positions as clinical social workers involving challenging clients such as prisoners on death row at the state penitentiary, working with persons with HIV/AIDS, and counseling convicted sex offenders. One woman with an MSW and a JD degree worked in the mayor's office. There were no freshly minted MSWs in the class, and each student brought years of rich practice experience to our class discussions and written assignments. I was impressed that half the cohort was African American. It was all remarkably refreshing! Almost everyone devoted a great deal of time and attention to the weekly assignments, and all were obviously exceptionally bright. In lieu of the traditional dissertation, the program requires the submission of two papers for publication, one of which was to be a practice-research project involving community-based agencies, using actual data from real live clients, in addition to considerable coursework.

I came away from this Tulane DSW experience as an adjunct transformed traditionalist. I now think that the DSW is a remarkably pragmatic and valuable form of doctoral training. I can see graduates of these programs continuing on in the world of practice, of course, and assuming managerial or administrative positions wherein a doctoral degree is an advantage. But more exciting for me is how I can envision these DSWs applying for and thriving in tenure-earning positions within BSW and MSW programs, teaching practice courses, and generating sufficient scholarly contributions to be promoted and to earn tenure in a timely manner. The profession *needs* experienced practitioners in the classroom, and full-time tenure track faculty have a greater investment in a program's viability than part-time or adjunct instructors. Over time, I can see DSW graduates assuming tenure earning positions in CSWE-accredited programs, just as Psy.D.s are now commonly found on the faculties of clinical and counseling psychology programs. If a DSW publishes sufficient scholarship, there is absolutely no reason why s/he should not be a competitive candidate for promotion and tenure, relative to the faculty member with the Ph.D.

Will the DSW be as productive as the Ph.D., in terms of published scholarship? I think that will likely be more a function of the individual's learning history, programmatic resources, and local mentoring by senior faculty, than be determined by the nature of one's doctorate. Unfortunately our profession has many Ph.D.s who produce little or no scholarly publications over time, so it is obvious that simply completing a Ph.D. program in no guarantee of having a productive research career. There are many forms of scholarship that can take advantage of a DSW's strengths – narrative case histories, agency needs assessments, client satisfaction studies, program evaluations, and so forth, and there is nothing to preclude a DSW from undertaking other forms of research more commonly associated with Ph.D. study.

Following the lead of the University of Pennsylvania's re-envisioned DSW degree in 2007, we now have DSWs offered at New York University, Tulane University, the University of Southern California, Rutgers University, the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, Aurora University, a joint program offered by St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas, Capella University and Walden University. I know of one university in Florida that is planning on a new DSW program and others are in development nationwide. Roughly emerging at the rate of one a year since 2007, the DSW has obviously struck a responsive chord within the profession. Initially a skeptic, after some careful thought, reviewing one new program's self-study, and some experience in teaching in a DSW program, I am now a convert to this model, not as a replacement for traditional Ph.D. programs, but as a very viable alternative to them. Just as one size does not fit everyone when it comes to shoe sizes, the DSW may provide a better fit for experienced social workers with interests more aligned with teaching clinical practice and conducting small-scale community and agency-based research. The academy needs individuals with these skills, and just as faculty with terminal practice doctorates in other fields can successfully compete for tenure and promotion, the DSW's ability to succeed in full time teaching positions is much more dependent on their post-doctoral accomplishments in teaching, service and scholarship, than the nature of their doctorate.

Summary

Graduates of these new DSW degrees have the potential to augment the teaching of practice classes in BSW and MSW programs. This is necessary as the larger trend is the production of Ph.D.s in social work who possess quality research skills, but who lack significant post-MSW work experience or licensure to practice social work. In addition to accepting positions in clinical practice, administration

and management, DSWs will be well positioned to apply for tenure-earning full time faculty positions which will play to their strengths as scholar/practitioners. Traditional scholarly research expectations for the award of tenure and promotion can be met by the DSWs productive publication of scholarship in the areas of clinical and community-based practice, standards that can be achieved in all except a few high research-intensive universities with formal or informal expectations that mandate obtaining a high level of externally funded research grants. There are many such faculty positions available for the DSW seeking a rewarding academic career. The profession needs such scholars and they should be welcomed into the academy with open arms. It will be critical to recruit only experienced MSWs into DSW degree programs in order to retain the legitimacy of this degree as one genuinely focused on advanced practice (Shore and Thyer 1997).

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