



# Why Not Consider a Research Career? From Direct Practice to Doctorate

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## Abstract

Social work practitioners, including both current Master of Social Work (MSW) students and MSWs experienced in clinical practice, possess significant potential as clinical researchers. Merging clinical practice and research not only bolsters the foundation for evidence-based interventions but also advances social work's scientific standing. Over time, discussions have underscored social work's promise to enrich the practice evidence-base through rigorous research. This article serves as a practical guide, offering clear direction toward research career paths. Recommendations are provided for MSW students, encouraging them to engage in research and learning opportunities that enhance their education. For MSW graduates, the focus shifts to building networks, active program participation, and considering PhD programs that build on clinical foundations. By delineating a roadmap for both MSW students and graduates, this article may open the door for more clinically-focused MSWs to consider a research career path.

**Keywords** Research · Social work career · MSW program · Direct practice · PhD program

## Introduction

A core competency of the social work profession is related to the engagement of practice-informed research and research-informed practice (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2022). CSWE further defines this competency as a means to inform social work decision-making. Essentially, social workers should know how to parse empirical studies such that their decisions in practice are well-informed. They must be competent at assessing reliability and validity of empirical findings. This core competency is also articulated as a means to share findings with social workers in practice. All told, social work research must have utility for practitioners and practitioners must be able to access it. Given the above, it stands to reason that those adding to the empirical knowledge base related to social work practice must be, themselves, fundamentally familiar with practice in the settings they seek to study. Thus, the purpose of this discussion is to make the case that those social work professionals and current MSW students who are well-situated in direct

clinical practice, and who have never considered applying their knowledge to a research career, have the potential to be the best clinical researchers in the social work discipline.

The reciprocal relationship between clinical and empirical knowledge is essential because it ensures that research findings have practical utility for clinicians, while researchers themselves require a deep understanding of the clinical settings they study. In light of social work's ongoing call to research, this discussion essentially argues for the further development of the discipline into a scientific field that embraces rigorous methodologies and expands the knowledge base relevant to social services. This evolution may be best accomplished by empowering and calling on more clinical practitioners to enter research careers. The rationale for a more rigorous discipline-wide approach is articulated herein as the potential for improved quality practice (e.g., via implementation science methods), community impact (e.g., via community-based participatory methods), and enhanced credibility of the discipline, increasing public trust.

## Social Work Practice & Research

Over a century ago, Abraham Flexner's call for an empirical foundation prompted discussions on shaping social work into a scientific discipline, addressing the field's "identity crisis"

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(Flexner, 1915). This sentiment persisted through subsequent scholars (Brady et al., 2016; Brekke, 2012; Tosone, 2016; Gelman and González, 2016). Notably, Anastas (2014) emphasized the need to further establish social work as a rigorous scientific field. Today, The Social Work Grand Challenges, advocate for “social progress powered by science” (grandchallengesforsocialwork.org, 2023), reflecting the profession's transformation agenda. However, the transition from practice to research requires a clear roadmap. This is where the role of direct practitioners gains prominence.

Social workers immersed in direct, real-world experiences possess unique potential as researchers. Cnaan and Dichter (2008) noted the significance of empirical research for evidence-based practice, yet acknowledged the complexity of studying social work's multifaceted nature. Such complexities necessitate a balanced approach that respects the artistry of clinical work while promoting evidence-based practice. In this context, the bridge between research and practice finds its strongest foundation in the experiences of direct practitioners. This perspective does not solely rely on theoretical propositions but thrives at the crossroads of actual practice and research exploration. However, challenges persist in integrating scientific research into social work's identity. Teater (2017) highlighted the struggle of scholars to link research to practice, urging investments in resources to bridge this gap. In sum, Teater noted that building a research culture and pathway within the discipline is vital.

In social work, research career trajectories and the paths they follow are unique, varied and not always objective or clear. Students interested in moving their career beyond their MSW's may choose to pursue a PhD or practice-oriented doctorate such as a Doctor of Social Work (DSW). PhD's are primarily focused on research and contributing new knowledge to the field of social work whereas DSW's emphasize advanced practice skills and the contribution to practice innovation (Bradshaw, et al., 2019). Despite growth in research-oriented doctoral programs, research doctorate conferrals have decreased (CSWE, 2021). In contrast, practice doctorate conferrals surged, indicating a growing market for advanced clinical training.

In any case, integrating research skills with clinical expertise enriches the field overall, promising a brighter future for social work research. Ultimately, the clarion call for research has echoed through social work's history and bridging research and practice is the key to fulfilling our grand challenge mandates.

### **Clinically-Oriented Social Workers & Research Engagement**

There are several reasons why clinically-oriented social workers should engage in research efforts that extend

beyond interpretation and application of others' research. Because of their practice knowledge, they may be ideally suited to identify best practices in real world settings, they can hypothesize how to adapt practices to meet the needs of understudied populations, and importantly, they can do all of the above while serving as a link between practice and research. However, it may not be a common practice for clinically-oriented social workers to pursue research careers.

The MSW degree is largely understood to be the highest level of education needed to practice as a social worker. Unlike in other fields, such as clinical psychology or medicine, social work practice does not require doctoral education. Thus, those seeking a clinical career may not be organically introduced to research careers. While clinically-focused social work students may be persuaded to consider research careers, there is not a clear path for these students to garner training (in addition to their clinical foci) that would assist their entry into a doctoral program. Furthermore, MSW programs are well-positioned to help students build the foundation for careers in direct practice, which is a clear assumption because in order to be accredited by the Council on Social Work Education, MSW programs must be aligned with social work core competencies (CSWE, 2022), many of which are oriented to direct practice. Depending on the institution, MSW programs may also offer concentration in public advocacy or policy, but MSW programs are not necessarily introducing research or Ph.D. as a career option for students with clinical interests; and this is logical because most students may not be interested in moving toward a research-oriented degree. Ultimately, there remains untapped potential for MSWs with interest in research careers. This gap between clinical training and research exposure can be bridged by proactive measures on the part of motivated students. By incorporating a few key recommendations students and graduates can be equipped with the necessary tools and insights to consider and prepare for a research-oriented career.

### **Recommendations for MSW Students**

There are several activities MSW Students can take part in to increase research engagement. First and foremost, they can seek out research opportunities like those described below. They can also take focused courses and propose independent studies. With the support of faculty and school administrators, they can attend conferences such as the Society for Social Work and Research (SSWR) and the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) Annual Program Meeting (APM). Lastly, they can seek out social work scholars whose areas of research they find interesting.

## Seeking Research Opportunities & Collaborations

Opportunities to engage in research in schools of social work where there are PhD programs may be clearer because there are faculty engaged in research and it is likely these faculty already engage PhD students and MSW students with an interest in research. However, even in social work schools that do not host PhD programs, there may be opportunities to engage in research collaborations. Across all different types of social work schools, there is a need for programmatic evaluation to meet quality standards for ongoing accreditation (for example), and MSW students in these programs may have interest in learning about surveying, data collection, analysis and reporting. MSW students are encouraged to make their interest known to administrators charged with program evaluation. Another important step for students is to conduct searches for scholars engaged in research and clinical areas with which they have interest at other institutions of higher learning. It is likely that they will come across experts who would be open to brief discussion or email exchange with a passionate and interested MSW student.

## Learning Opportunities & Conducting Research

Other opportunities exist for MSW students in institutions of higher learning to take additional coursework related to research methods and the development of analytical skills even if this coursework is not available in social work-specific settings. For instance, students may look to departments like sociology, psychology, and public health. Students might also consider looking into workshops offered within their own institutions or in other institutions related to research methods and design. Lastly, even in schools that are not research-oriented, MSW students may be able to find positions for internships that could include research components (e.g., human service agencies that have a program evaluation department).

With the support of faculty mentors, MSW students may design and conduct their own research studies. Exemplars for programmatic integration exist and are available in the empirical literature. Mendoza et al. (2022) described a fully functional interdisciplinary training program, sponsored by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), that encouraged the development of student-led research. Students are encouraged to be proactive in seeking training programs that can supplement research education. Programs like the Substance Abuse Research Education and Training (SARET) and the Interdisciplinary Training Academy for Integrated Substance/Opioid Use Disorder Prevention and Healthcare (ITA) are examples of initiatives that can provide valuable research training (Hanley et al., 2018).

Furthermore, even in schools without a strong research infrastructure, MSW students may have the opportunity to

identify their own research questions based on a topic of their choosing, develop their own research design, collect and analyze data, and disseminate research findings. Students in MSW programs that may not be research-oriented may still propose or seek out thesis writing opportunities that focus on research. Students should advocate for clear policies or guidance from faculty on how to approach research through thesis efforts.

## Practicum Research Opportunities

Students may actively seek field placements that offer research components, which can complement clinical skills acquired during their MSW program. If such placements are not readily available, students may collaborate with faculty to create partnerships with organizations that can provide research experience, such as program evaluation firms or quality management departments in social service agency settings. This proactive approach may enhance student's learning experience and broaden their professional competencies. Furthermore, administrators and faculty may be willing to help students supplement direct practice placements with research components to help build a social science skill set. This collaborative effort between students and faculty can foster a more robust educational environment, one that acknowledges and integrates the importance of research skills in shaping a well-rounded social work practitioner.

## Conferences

Conferences and other professional gatherings could be important spaces for MSW student introduction to research. Major conferences like CSWE-APM and SSWR offer specific opportunities for students to become more engaged with research. CSWE brings together educators, scholars, and practitioners to share research, teaching strategies, and best practices. There are myriad opportunities for students to present, attend research related workshops sessions, and network with prominent social work researchers. SSWR is primarily a research conference and also offers numerous opportunities for students to become engaged with research where they can present collaborative findings or attend research related sessions including receptions with opportunities to interact with faculty experts and researchers. SSWR also has student specific committees that provide opportunity for students to engage in peer review processes or contribute to SSWR conversations and events.

## Staying Informed

As they consider research careers, MSW students and graduates can stay informed about new research findings in their

area of interest by reading social work or allied-discipline journals, attending webinars, or other professional development opportunities related to research. Another recommendation for MSW students is to connect with The Grand Challenges of Social Work. It is likely that their interest area is represented under a broad umbrella articulated as a grand challenge. The challenges are “grand” because they are complex and require innovative solutions, often as a function of research and scholarship; as such, the initiative promotes education, opportunities for collaboration, and scholarship (e.g., <https://grandchallengesforsocialwork.org/events/>). Understanding and connecting with The Grand Challenges is also an important recommendation for MSW graduates.

In sum, students are encouraged to be proactive in seeking opportunities to engage in research that extend beyond what may be available at their institutions. Their academic and professional development can be furthered with supplemental learning, which could be offered internally via faculty or externally via training program or conference event. For MSW students, networking may be a key first step in expanding their potential for a research-oriented career, thus they would be well-advised to reach out to more senior scholars as well substantive area groups (e.g., via grand challenges) to fully enhance their potential.

## Recommendations for MSW Graduates

In addition to connecting with The Grand Challenges, MSW graduates are also encouraged to stay connected with their alumni associations and institutions from which they graduated. MSW graduates may also consider ways in which their agencies are ready to engage in research-oriented activities like program evaluation and quality assurance. Graduates may consider how they can step into these opportunities in order to get more experience related to research methods and design like surveying, data collection, analysis, reporting, and dissemination to organizational stakeholders. To that end, networking remains important and opportunities for collaboration may exist, even in clinical practice-oriented settings. As professional MSWs think about and prepare to enter PhD programs they may also consider unique challenges they could face with a new scholarly focus.

### Staying Connected

MSW graduates are encouraged to stay connected with their alumni associations and their alma mater as these may be important connections for research engagement (Skrzypek et al., 2019). Attending alumni events such as reunions or networking and social opportunities may involve reconconnections with former classmates, faculty, and other professionals in the field. Alumni associations may also have mentoring

opportunities for professional development. Staying connected with their university, MSW graduates can continue to engage in the institutions research related activities and the departmental contribution to knowledge in the field of social work.

### Programmatic Involvement

MSW graduates who currently work in social work agencies may be able to connect their research interest with activities occurring within the agency related to the agency’s mission and goals to become a learning organization through program evaluation and quality assurance. There may be clear means for students in practice to produce research findings that benefit their organizations and their career prospects (Vincent & Hamilton, 2021). Professional MSWs can collaborate with colleagues within the agency to develop research questions about agency practice and they can identify grant opportunities to help support intra-agency research or evaluation. MSW graduates with this interest can help develop data collection protocols, assist with analysis for reporting, and help disseminate and translate agency findings to community stakeholders. By involving their agency in research efforts, MSW graduates can ultimately help build out agency capacity for tracking successful outcomes.

### Networking

MSW graduates have opportunities to network in professional settings like community coalitions and practice-oriented conferences. These types of settings may include other colleagues with interest in research with whom they can collaborate. Graduates can also join organizations and associations related to social work such as the National Association for Social Workers (NASW), which is an organization invested in evidence-based practice and can also provide access to professional development through conferences, workshops, and networking opportunities.

### Starting a PhD Program with a Clinical Background

Graduates from more clinically-oriented programs may feel challenged in novel ways as they learn new research methods. Clinically-oriented students who want to thrive in research careers must be proactive in asking for what they need. For these students, it is imperative that they work closely with advisors, set their ego aside, and step bravely into the potential for an incredibly rewarding career. A decade ago, my colleagues and I wrote a paper articulating social work research career development through postdoctoral experiences (Mendoza et al., 2013). What was true then that remains true now, is the fact that research career preparation



for social workers is a mysterious process that often eludes those who may find reward in a career of scholarly inquiry.

Conclusively, continuous learning is key for MSW graduates. They have the opportunity for career advancement through professional memberships and the unique position to initiate agency-based research or evaluation projects. As clinically-focused MSWs consider a research-oriented career, embracing roles that include scholarship or inquiry, such as co-authoring journal articles with faculty, becomes increasingly important. This commitment to both practice and research embodies a critical core competency of the social work profession, which is the integration of practice and research. The dynamic interplay between the two ensures that research is not only relevant but also grounded in real-world application. Social workers with clinical experience are particularly well-suited to excel as clinical researchers, given their firsthand understanding of the contexts they investigate.

## Conclusion

In social work, the bi-directional exchange between research and practice is critical because research must be useful for practitioners. Social work professionals with direct clinical experience have the potential to be the best clinical researchers because they are familiar with the settings they study. One purpose of this discussion was to argue that social workers with clinical experience who have not considered a research career may excel as clinical researchers in the social work discipline. To that end, the main focus herein was to supply recommendations to current MSW students and MSW graduates.

Social workers with clinical backgrounds are the best candidates to conduct research informed by real, direct, and human experience. Many MSW programs attract students who want to make a direct impact on the lives of people in need, but these programs may not be well-equipped to prepare students for research-oriented PhD programs. Clinically-oriented students are strongly encouraged to be their own self-advocates in pursuing this career path with the understanding that it may not be an easy path but it is incredibly rewarding.

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