

Counterpoint
Response to Karger
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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.