

Person-In-(Dual) Environment: Reflecting on the Dual MSW/PhD Program

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Students encounter various obstacles in the process of earning a doctorate, and these obstacles are often voiced in the literature (Brown, 1999; Chan, 2003; Chauvin, Rodenhauser, Bowdish & Shenoi, 2000). Most of the literature on the doctoral student experience is focused on the process of transition- from student to professional, professional to student and even the common familial, financial (Cusworth, 2001) and social (Leatherman, 2000) stressors faced in the process. However, there is a lack of literature on the experience of doctoral students in dual degree programs (Chauvin et al., 2000; Michael & Balraj, 2003). The bulk of existing dual degree literature focuses on *interdisciplinary* programs, with emphasis on administrative challenges such as ownership (Michael & Balraj, 2003), degree recognition cross-nationally (Rauhvargers, Bergan & Davis, 2003), budgetary control and publication credit (Mangan, 2001) and less on challenges faced by the students participating in these programs. The challenges related to intra-disciplinary dual degrees, such as the MSW/PhD dual degree are unique and have not been fully explored in the literature (Michael & Balraj, 2003). Role conflict theory can demonstrate how an intra-disciplinary dual degree such as the MSW/ PhD generates unique challenges. In this article, stages created by these unique challenges and implications for social work doctoral education will be discussed.

Role Conflict Theory: Stages in Intra-Disciplinary Transition

In pursuing dual MSW/ PhD degrees in social work at the Graduate School of Social Work at the University of Houston¹, we have struggled to meet different expectations and goals associated with each program. We also work to balance two different roles during our educational experience: masters' students studying to become practitioners, and doctoral students studying to become academicians. Roles are determined through both the degree and extent of interactions with others, as the expectations that ourselves and others have of us can be found in those interactions (Juneau, 1984; Robbins, Chatterjee & Canda, 1998). According to role conflict theory, our sense of our role(s) can be threatened when there are changing expectations within these interactions. According to Juneau (1984) recognition and exploration of existing conflicts can both minimize conflict and increase learning and professional growth. This article is the means with which our role conflict as (intra-disciplinary) dual degree students can be explored and shared.

The MSW program prepares us for practice, while the PhD program prepares us to become scholars in teaching and research (Proctor, 1996). Brett and I have faced unique challenges in the dual environment; these challenges are described in terms of stages during the dual degree process, as differing academic and role expectations manifested and evolved as we progressed through the program.

The Exploration Stage: Year One

We applied to the dual program after one semester in the MSW program. This was a time for defining long-term goals and gathering information: What is it that I want to do when I get the degrees? Do I want to work exclusively in academia, or combine teaching, research and practice? It is a time for developing networks of social support with other students; fellow students are an invaluable source of emotional and academic support. It is also a time to strategize financially for the long academic road ahead. Finally, it is a time for exploring aspects of the PhD program without the added stress of PhD coursework (for example, observing proposal/dissertation defenses,

becoming familiar with faculty interests and past comprehensive exam questions, and talking with PhD students). Due to the exploratory nature of this year, we call this time period the Exploration Stage.

The Anxiety Stage: Year Two

The second year brings with it new challenges as we take our first steps into the PhD program. PhD policy and research classes are substituted for the required MSW level policy and research requirements. This combination of MSW and PhD classes marks the beginning of the role conflict as we begin functioning in two separate academic environments with each having unique demands, expectations, and goals.

The two programs have some important differences. MSW classes are larger, and focused on group work with the goal of preparing us to become social work practitioners. PhD classes are more intimate and geared towards preparing us to work in academia. Performance in class is a very different experience in the two programs. For example, in an MSW class, one can blend into the background fairly well and not participate in that day's discussion, however, in PhD classes, daily participation is expected. Finally, MSW and PhD level classes are labor and reading intensive, but PhD level work is held to a higher standard, requiring more thorough acquisition, critical integration and rigorous depth of understanding of current research. It is at this point that we start to question our competency. Former students speak of the *Imposter Syndrome*, meaning that we ask ourselves, "How did I manage to get into this program and how long will it be before they find me out?" It is easy to feel intimidated by those experienced students who have had several years of post-MSW practice experience. Combined with the constant, daily shift between MSW and PhD roles and you have what we call the Anxiety Stage.

The Conflict Stage: Summer of Internship Immersion

The summer semester following the second year of classes presents several unique challenges. We realize during MSW graduation that we won't be going forth into the community like the rest of our peers to utilize our skills and fully develop our identity as practicing social workers. The second difficult part of the summer is that we get the chance to experience a full-time field placement as social work interns. Brett and I really enjoyed our summer internships just enough to tempt ourselves with various thoughts, yearning for a full-time income, work with clients in the community and developing our identities as competent social workers. We frequently found ourselves contemplating our dual degree decision: Can we really be competent doctoral students when we feel our roles as practitioners are so underdeveloped compared to our peers? We realized that if we did not, somehow, fit in two years of post-MSW practice experience, we would not be able to teach practice courses as faculty members (Proctor, 1996). We began to brainstorm about ways in which we could get the experience without taking a break between the MSW and PhD. Because of this struggle with role and identity, this stage is labeled the Conflict Stage.

The Challenge Stage: Year Three

Year three is when we are finally able to hang our MSW diploma on the wall, while taking our first full year of PhD classes. We must successfully detach from the practitioner role adopted over the summer. Class work is now designed to challenge our core beliefs about social work and what our roles as academicians will mean in terms of the evolution of the profession: How will we start making a contribution to our careers *and* social work research? Simultaneously, we become familiar with and align ourselves with faculty members with similar research interests. Mentorship is beneficial (Workman & Bodner, 1996); having a faculty member to provide encouragement, professional opportunities and guidance through the politics of publishing and academia is invaluable. Resolving the *Imposter Syndrome* feelings, lack of competency becomes less of a concern as we rise to the challenges put before us by professors. We begin to see our post-MSW experienced peers not as *intimidating*, but rather, as nurturing colleagues. We begin to understand that everything we don't know about social work is neither a weakness nor reflection of *incompetence*, but rather an opportunity to develop and explore a research question; an opportunity to contribute to the profession of social work. For these reasons, the third year is what we call the Challenge Stage.

The Refining Stage: Year Four

The summer after this third year and the following fall semester provide us the opportunity to explore and refine our interests through elective coursework and independent studies. By now, we discover where our passion lies in terms of research areas of interest. All work at this point is aimed at becoming intimately familiar with the

past and current research associated with our topic of interest. Independent studies are designed with the guidance from faculty members who can help us develop our interests. It is this quest to narrow down and define our interests which characterizes the Refining Stage.

Finally, these stages reflect our experiences, as we have worked to cope with the unique challenges brought forth by conflicts with identity and expectations. Looking back, we realize that we have coped with these challenges by problem-solving and changing our perceptions. We have changed our perceptions of other doctoral students, our lack of experience and knowledge as strengths from which we can only grow. We have also found ways in which to satisfy our desires and needs for our roles as practitioners through work outside of our academic lives. Most importantly, we seek social support and advisement from peers and professors as we continue to experience challenges in the dual process. We anticipate that additional stages will be faced during comprehensive exams and dissertations.

Social Work Doctoral Education: Recommendations

Both students and administrators can benefit from more knowledge about the dual degree experience, and this knowledge can be best disseminated through information sessions and research. This knowledge can both increase applicants' ability to make a better decision about whether or not they can cope with challenges/conflicts in the dual marathon, and also give admissions committees a better understanding of which dual degree applicants might be more likely to cross the finish line!

In a study by Workman and Bodner (1996), over 50% of students who dropped out of a PhD program reported that they had no idea about what to expect in their program before applying. Similarly, in a study of dual MPH/ MD students at Tulane University, less than 50% reported that they fully understood the effort and time commitment that it takes to complete their dual program (Chauvin et al., 2000). It is recommended that dual degree information sessions be lead by both currently enrolled dual degree students and an admissions chairperson so interested applicants not only hear the administrative component, but also the perspectives from current students.

In addition, more research should be done examining the dual experience in both interdisciplinary and intra-disciplinary dual degree programs. In what ways are student experiences in both of these programs unique or similar? In the literature, it is not difficult to find articles written by students describing their experiences in the doctoral program transition (Chan, 2003), however, during the literature review for this article, no such articles were found written by dual degree students about our experiences. Doctoral student attrition rates are a concern in many programs; it is reported that on average less than 60% of students actually finish (Leatherman, 2000). There is a lack of information about the dual degree completion rate. Since the Dual MSW/PhD program began in fall of 2004 at the Graduate School of Social Work², ten students have enrolled (C. Brooks, personal communication, July 29, 2004). Since spring of 2004, none have yet completed the program and there are seven of us remaining. Those who dropped-out did so because of a desire for full-time social work (C. Brooks, personal communication, July 29, 2004). It is important to conduct research on dual degree programs so that information could better assist admissions committees with knowing which students will be more likely to succeed in a dual program. Which factors discriminate between those dual students who finish and those who drop out? Does the dual degree curriculum progression of a different school have a different impact on dual degree students' experience? Also, what is the impact of dual degree information sessions on student applicants? Obtaining this information can help admissions and curriculum committees improve dual student completion rates and dual degree curriculum, respectively.

Footnotes

¹ For example, MBA/ MSW, J.D./ MBA and MSW/ J.D. dual degrees are *inter- disciplinary* degrees; MSW/PhD, M.S./ PhD dual degrees are *intra- disciplinary*. The MBA is the program most often paired in dual degrees (Michael & Balraj, 2003).

² See <http://www.sw.uh.edu/prospectiveStudents/phd/phdBrochure.htm#dual> for information on the MSW/ PhD dual degree program at the University of Houston

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