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UNDERSTANDING FAILURE:
SOCIAL WORKERS REFLECT ON THEIR LICENSING EXAMINATION EXPERIENCE

by

Scott Graybow

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Social Welfare in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2015

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This manuscript has been read and accepted by the
Graduate Faculty in Social Welfare in satisfaction of the
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Abstract

UNDERSTANDING FAILURE:

SOCIAL WORKERS REFLECT ON THEIR LICENSING EXAMINATION EXPERIENCE

by

Scott Graybow

Advisor: Professor Manny J. Gonzalez

Passing the social work licensing examination is a critical part of the professional development of contemporary social workers. However, the literature has consisted largely of debates over the ethical and theoretical merits of professional licensing that fail to shed light on the lived experiences of social workers sitting for the examination. This dissertation study sought to gather and analyze data about the manner in which social workers experience licensing examination failure. A series of semi-structured, narrative interviews captured the nuance, complexity and uniqueness of this experience. The study had three major objectives that gave it direction. First, the study sought to understand how social workers come to prepare for the licensing examination. Second, it attempted to reveal how social workers experience failing the examination. Third, it tried to illustrate the ways in which social workers respond to the stressors that follow examination failure. The data used for this dissertation study were obtained from a sample (N=15) of alumni of the graduate social work school of a large, urban, public university who failed the entry-level social work examination, or the Licensed Master of Social Work examination, at least once. This dissertation was theoretically informed by the theory of locus of control, attribution theory, and the psychology of event perception. Findings from the study suggest that respondents utilized a range of preparation methods and endorsed a host of emotional reactions to examination failure. Of note was the important role that graduate social

work education played in the practical and emotional aspects of examination preparation.

Findings from this dissertation can inform future studies on the topic of licensing examination performance. Based on the findings, implications for social work practice, education, and research are discussed.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Brian Graybow. To Brian, thank you for always believing in me, supporting me and being the best spouse anyone could ever wish for.

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I would like to express my deepest and most sincere gratitude to the many individuals who made this work a reality.

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CHAPTER I: PROBLEM FORMULATION

Problem Statement

The current scholarly literature fails to shed light on the lived experience of social workers who have failed the licensing exam, their perceptions of failure, to what they attribute failure, and the specific implications of failure. However, a review of the gray literature suggests this phenomenon is of critical importance because of the frequency and variety of entries on the topic of exam performance (Burgess, 2013; Rosenthal, 2011). Comments on such websites as *The New Social Worker* and *Social Work Today*, lesser known blogs created by individual social workers, and discussion forums on non-social work websites such as *indeed.com*, *linkedin.com*, and *answers.yahoo.com* indicate that many social workers struggle with questions about how best to prepare for the exam, their strong emotional reactions when they fail the exam, and the multiple challenges they face when attempting to manage the professional, social, and personal implications of exam failure. This research study captured the nuance, complexity, and unexamined responses associated with the lived experience of social workers who have prepared for, failed, and attempted to manage the impact of failing the social work licensing exam.

Currently, 16.4% of social workers fail the graduate level social work licensing exam (Association of Social Work Boards, 2012). Today's lack of understanding about the nuance, complexity, and uniqueness of the experience of failing this exam is an issue of pressing significance to social work students, practitioners, and scholars for a number of reasons. First, preliminary studies about poor licensing exam performance are necessary before empirically based approaches can be developed and tested to attempt to decrease the frequency of exam failure. Second, such research will enrich the professional discussion about the role of standardized exams in particular and licensing in general as a means to ensure the members of

the social work profession are informed, competent, and effective. Lastly, an improved understanding of the perceptions of social workers who fail the exam can identify themes that social workers use to establish meaning when reflecting on their perceptions of failing the social work licensing exam.

Relevance of the Study for the Social Work Profession

This study illustrates the deep and complex relationship between the topic of licensing exam performance and the needs of the social work profession that underscores the centrality of the experience of exam failure, identifies its central themes, captures its complexity, and portrays it in a clear, concise way not previously seen in the professional literature. Social workers who are unable to pass the LMSW licensing exam and obtain licensure are unable to apply for an increasing number of entry-level and mid-level social work jobs. Those who are in such jobs often face a deadline by which they must obtain licensure or their employment will be terminated. Furthermore, failure to pass the LMSW exam means they are not eligible to sit for the clinical exam, formally known as the Licensed Clinical Social Work (LCSW) exam, which is required to obtain the clinical social work license. Concerning the LCSW license, lack of this license poses significant professional dilemmas. Social workers who cannot pass the LCSW exam and obtain the clinical license often find themselves unable to apply for clinical positions. Additionally, many supervisory positions require the LCSW, which means failure to obtain the LCSW could prevent career advancement and cut off access to higher paying positions.

At present, a search for scholarly articles on the effect of licensing exam failure upon social workers yields no results. The same is true of searches for scholarly articles about the impact of failing licensing exams in the legal, nursing, and psychology professions. For articles that give some idea of the impact of exam failure on professionals, it is necessary to turn to the

gray literature, that is, blogs, websites, print magazines, and newspapers. A Google search reveals numerous blogs, personal websites, and articles in popular online magazines addressing the issue of what to do upon failing a licensing exam. For example, an article in *Business Insider* entitled “What to Do if You Bomb the Bar Exam” reassures readers that half of all bar exam takers in California fail then goes on to list “immediate steps to take” including: be disappointed, commit to taking the bar exam again, and change the way you approach the test (Burgess, 2013). Besides providing advice on how to proceed following exam failure, such articles also tend to focus on providing readers with insights into why they failed in the first place. One such post by Rosenthal (2011) on *psychotherapy.net* provides a list of reasons why the reader might have failed the psychology licensing exam and urges against “marathon study sessions” and having too much self-confidence as aids to ensure that future exam attempts do not end in failure.

Context of the Problem

The need for improved insight into the phenomenon of licensing exam failure becomes apparent when considering the context in which unlicensed social workers find themselves. They are in a professional environment dominated by an increasing need for workers to obtain licensure by passing a standardized, multiple-choice exam. The notion of becoming licensed and the debate over how to award licensure is neither new nor limited to social work. As early as the 13th century, European monarchs began regulating the practice of certain lines of work such as medicine (Gross, 1978). More recently, licensing in the US has become common and is closely associated with issues such as professional legitimacy, improved treatment and service outcomes, professional competency, client safety, and client satisfaction (Marson, DeAngelis, & Mittal, 2010). Regarding social work, licensing is sometimes associated with the question of whether the discipline meets the criteria necessary to call itself a profession. Flexner raised this

issue in 1915, and today it remains attached to the fear that an over-emphasis on clinical work and individuality could undermine social work's historical commitment to achieving social justice via macro-level practice (Specht & Courtney, 1995).

In 1971, the National Association of Social Workers concluded that licensure was necessary to improve professional behavior and client well-being (Swagler & Harris, 1977). This sped up the process of states enacting legislation to regulate social work, which had begun with California in 1945. Currently, all 50 states require social workers to pass a standardized examination if they wish to become licensed (NASW, 2011). According to the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB), 25,598 social workers took these examinations in 2012. ASWB offers four different exams, each relating to a different level of practice. The levels of practice are: Associate, Bachelors, Masters (LMSW), Clinical (LCSW) and Advanced Generalist. As of 2012, 70 people took the Associate exam, and the pass rate was 77.1%; 3,237 people took the Bachelors exam, and the pass rate was 77.1%; 12,635 people took the Masters exam, and the pass rate was 83.6%; 9,506 people took the Clinical exam, and the pass rate was 76.8%; and, 150 people took that Advanced Generalist exam, and the pass rate was 63.3% (ASWB).

Research Aims

This dissertation sought to answer three questions: 1) How do social workers experience preparing for, failing, and managing the effects of failing the Licensed Masters in Social Work (LMSW) exam? 2) What do their narratives reveal about the professional, emotional, and social implications of exam failure; the causes attributed to exam failure; and how social workers perceive exam failure? 3) Can their narratives lead to mid-level theory that potentially explains this phenomenon?

The main research question encapsulates the scope of the study, which goes beyond the experience of merely taking and failing the exam. The narrative data gathered and analyzed in this research study sheds light on the manner in which respondents understand, conceptualize, and experience the decision to take the exam; the process of preparing for the exam; and the emotional and professional fallout of failing the exam. Essentially, the study provides insight into how MSW graduates who fail the licensing examination understand this failure in relation to aspects of their lives not directly touched by but still highly relevant to the events associated with failure. The central theme of the inquiry shows how the seminal event of failing the graduate level social work licensing exam, formally known as the Licensed Master Social Worker (LMSW) exam, simultaneously relates to, informs, promotes, and possibly compromises the overall experience of being a professional social worker.

A very important aspect of the dissertation study, then, is its offering of ground-breaking research that serves both immediate and long term benefits. In the short-term, the research study offers an as-of-yet unseen analysis of the highly complex and nuanced ways in which social workers make sense of an extremely important event in their professional lives. The long-term benefits are equally appealing. Whereas at this time there are not enough studies to create highly specific, quantitative research questions that test previously constructed theories regarding this topic, it is apparent that exploration of social workers' perceptions about their exam performance is a natural and important next step in expanding the professional knowledge base in a scientific and practice-relevant way.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Professional Licensing and Social Work

Gross (1978) defines professional licensing as, “the arrangement whereby practice is restricted as well as the collaboration between a state and a profession, including registration and title certifications” (p. 1009). The first instance of professional licensing occurred in the 13th century under Frederick II of the House of Hohenstaufen, who called for licensing the practice of medicine. In the 21st century, licensing has expanded to include increasing numbers of occupations. Instead of title certifications, compulsory licenses and tightened academic standards are more the norm (Gross, 1978). In the US, licensing of the helping professions follows the model of medical licensure, which calls for practitioners to pass a standardized exam to secure licensure and clearance for practice within the scope of a chosen discipline.

Among social workers, licensure serves to, “declare who is allowed to use the title social worker, establish an examination board, set continuing education policies, and outline disciplinary hearing procedures” (Dyeson, 2004, p. 408). The Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) (2006) defines licensing as, “a way to verify that a social worker has the skills and knowledge necessary to provide a safe level of practice... [it] also establishes social work practice as a separate and distinct branch of mental health, and gives governments a way to monitor the professional conduct of social workers” (ASWB, 2006, p. 2). Nevertheless, there has been considerable debate about whether social work is a true profession (Flexner, 1915; Toren, 1972). As such, the debate surrounding licensure within social work is closely associated with the question of whether social work is an independent and legitimate profession.

Abraham Flexner (1915) wrote that social work does not meet the six requirements of a profession. He identified the six elements of a legitimate profession as: 1) intellectual operations with practice autonomy; 2) skills derived from educational experience; 3) practical and well defined goals; 4) possession of an educationally communicable technique; 5) self-organization; and, 6) altruistic motivation. Using these criteria, Flexner argued that examples of pursuits that meet full criteria for a profession are medicine, law, and engineering. Social work is in touch with many professions, but was not a profession itself due to lack of specificity in aim. He concluded by stating it is important to be aware of social work's status as a non-profession because it instills a dose of humility in social workers, which leaves them better able to serve clients.

Licensure is one mechanism that defines social work as a viable, independent profession. The others are the existence of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and the functional role of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics. The CSWE is the sole accrediting agency for social work education in the United States (CSWE, 2014). The NASW (2014) "works to enhance the professional growth and development of its [social work] members, to create and maintain professional standards, and to advance sound social policies" (p. 1). According to Garcia (1990) regulation serves two purposes regarding granting social work the status of an independent profession. First, it ensures a more accurate understanding of the profession by the public by defining social work roles. Second, it protects recipients of social work services by improving quality of care.

Licensing is thus associated with the critical issues in contemporary social work. Meinert (1994) identified five issues that raise questions about social work's presumed status as a profession: 1) ambiguity of the mission of social work; 2) sustained re-interpretation of the

knowledge base; 3) lack of enduring consensus about social work values; 4) difficulty specifying a systematic body of social work theory; and 5) lack of differentiation between BSW and MSW programs. In a more general sense, these five issues suggest social work suffers from an identity crisis, and suggest licensure plays a role in effectively resolving that crisis. Baylis (2004) and colleagues posited this is due to chronic self-doubt within social work about its status as a profession. They argued continued references in the social work literature to Flexner's (1915) conclusion that social work is not a profession provide evidence of the presence of "neurotic doubt," or concerns among social workers that they are not members a viable profession independent from similar professions such as psychology (Baylis, 2004, p. 56).

Others have defined social work as a "semi-profession" (Toren, 1972, p. 1). In *Social Work: The Case of a Semi-Profession*, Toren (1972) described four types of professions. Established professions such as medicine and law are built on theory and bound by practice autonomy. New professions such as engineering, chemistry, and accounting are grounded in original theory. Semi-professions such as social work replace theoretical study with acquisition of technical skills and, finally, would-be professions require neither study nor acquisition of technique. Toren (1972) placed social work in the semi-profession category because it lacks a clearly developed theoretical knowledge base. In addition, he cited a lower level of practice autonomy among social workers than among members of other professions. Professionalization risks pulling social work away from its traditional goal of improving social welfare to more professional topics such as psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, which results in a shift towards helping clients who are middle class rather than poor.

In 1975 the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) officially concluded that licensure was necessary to address the issue of whether or not social work was a legitimate, independent profession. Garcia (1990) stated that NASW subscribed to licensing in order to establish different levels of social work practice, raise standards of service, enhance accountability, and enhance the profession. NASW identified eight ways in which licensure should be enacted through regulation. It should: 1) be directed to the licensure to practice, rather than the protection of title only; 2) recognize all levels of practice that are based on knowledge and discipline of the profession; 3) establish criteria for autonomous or independent practice and for private practice or fee for service practice; 4) require that each level of practice have valid means of objectively assessing the qualifications, knowledge, and competencies of applicants for licensure in addition to requirements for specific educational attainment; 5) cover all areas or settings in which social work is practiced, including public and voluntary, profit, and nonprofit; 6) require periodic renewal of the license and a requirement for some form of continuing education for those licensed; 7) provide that client worker communication will be considered confidential; and 8) grant authority to hold practitioners accountable for their professional and ethical conduct (Garcia, 1990).

The decision to require social workers to have a license was not without conflict, and a review of the conceptual and editorial literature produced around the time of NASW's 1975 decision provides an overview of the debate. Writing just a few years after NASW's decision to support licensing, Gandy and Raymond (1979) stated the pros of licensing. The pros included providing a legal definition of a profession, protecting clients, raising standards of practice, establishing accountability, and serving as the basis for further development of the profession. The cons of licensing were that it encouraged elitism, excluded a number of practitioners through

testing mechanisms, and excluded other appropriate methods for the assessment of practice competence. They concluded that licensing threatened to create a monopoly. In addition, it was redundant if there were already other types of standards, such as the CSWE, in place for programs in educational institutions to follow.

Concerning problems with licensing that are unique to social work identified during this period, Swagler and Harris (1977) asserted that licensure may have enhanced the standing of social workers (e.g. autonomy, third party fees), but did not offer consumers protections or benefits they did not already enjoy. They agreed with the conclusion that licensure promoted monopolies, which in turn discriminate against lower income consumers and detract from social work's historical mission to improve social welfare. The gains of licensing go primarily to the members of the profession, not the consumers. Within the profession, those who gain the most through licensure are social workers in private practice and those eligible for third party fees.

These commentators (Grandy & Raymond, 1979; Swagler & Harris, 1977; Toren, 1972) presented their ideas at a time when licensure was still a concept rather than a rule. Clearly, their concerns about licensure were more of a response to a desire among social workers to respond to Flexner's (1915) claim that social work is not a profession. As recently as 1995, debate raged in the field about whether or not social workers were losing sight of their original mission to help the poor by focusing on individual practice modalities such as psychotherapy (Specht & Courtney, 1995). Specht and Courtney (1995) maintained that an increasing number of social workers were becoming private practice psychotherapists who were treating mostly middle class individuals in private counseling. They asserted this trend failed to uphold social work's historic mission to promote social justice at the macro level. A search of the current professional literature fails to provide any empirical evidence as to whether the ethical issues these early

commentators suggested have caused a shift away from macro practice towards micro practice similar to the one about which Specht and Courtney (1995) warned.

Effects of Licensure in New York State

In 2004, New York became the 48th state to regulate the use of the term, “social worker,” and limit the provision of social work services to licensed professionals (New York State Society for Clinical Social Work [NYSSCSW], 2010). The news stories that appeared following this action present anecdotal evidence that licensing laws can have an impact on the type of work social workers decide to pursue. For example, the NYSSCSW (2010) sent out an article to its members entitled, *Policy Problems Found in State Licensing for Psychotherapists*. The article highlighted shortcomings in the manner in which licensure was enacted that could affect the career choices of entry-level social workers. It pointed out that with the new licensing law only certain settings where entry-level social workers work would be able to offer hours towards licensure as a clinical social worker.

Since 2004, questions have arisen in New York as to what sort of social work settings and social work experience should qualify social workers for the LCSW (New York State Office of the Professions, 2013). As of today, New York State has determined that people can only be employed in the role of licensed social worker and can only provide licensed social work services at places of employment authorized by the State to hire such workers and provide such services. This has raised questions as to whether or not social workers employed by and providing social work services at employment locations such as employee assistance programs (EAPs) can count these hours of clinical work towards the clinical hours necessary to sit for the LCSW exam (New York State Education Department, Office of the Professions, 2013). This lack of clarity has created a need for the state to create a process by which these employers can

petition to be allowed to hire social workers. In the case of private EAPs, the State now allows completion and submission of a Corporate Waiver form designed by the NY State Office of the Professions. As a practical matter, social workers hoping to work in a place where service will count towards LCSW hours must decide whether they want to take the risk of working in a setting that might not allow them to qualify to sit for the exam. They may decide to forgo working at an EAP in favor of working for an employer recognized by the State as eligible to hire social workers and provide social work services.

Social work is not the only helping profession to require licensing. In New York State, there are no less than 33 professions that require licensure and are regulated by licensing boards that coordinate with licensing boards in other states to facilitate nationwide licensing standards (New York State Education Department, Office of the Professions, 2013). Examples of these professions include psychology, psychoanalysis, mental health counseling, and marriage and family therapists. In the field of psychology, licensing is overseen by the Association of State and Provincial Psychology Boards (ASPPB), which was formed in 1961. It is responsible for, “enhanc[ing] services and support[ing] its member jurisdictions in fulfilling their goal of advancing public protection” by developing licensing exams, organizing programming that disseminates regulatory information to psychologists and stakeholders, and promoting consumer protection (ASPPB, ND, p. 1). In New York State, psychology is regulated under New York State Education Law Title VIII Article 153 (New York State Education Department, Office of the Professions, 2010). This is the same law that regulates social work licensure; each profession has stipulations in a particular article of the law.

Similarly, nursing is a licensed profession nationwide that is organized around a regulatory body, the National Council of State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN). The NCSBN defines itself as a, “not-for-profit organization whose purpose is to provide an organization through which boards of nursing act and counsel together on matters of common interest and concern affecting the public health, safety and welfare, including the development of licensing examinations in nursing” (2013, p. 1). To achieve this end, the NCSBN develops the national nursing licensing examinations. Similar to the Association of State and Provincial Psychology Boards, NCSBN monitors and distributes information about laws pertaining to the regulation of the nursing profession. In New York, nursing is defined and regulated under New York State Education Law Title VIII Article 139 (New York State Education Department, Office of the Professions, 2010).

Finally, an increasing number of lesser-known fields are becoming licensed professions. In New York State, these lesser-known mental health fields are regulated under New York State Education Law Title VIII Article 163 (New York State Education Department, Office of the Professions, 2013). They include mental health counseling, marriage and family therapy, creative arts therapy, and psychoanalysis. As with social work, debate has raged over whether these professions, as well as the professions of nursing and psychology, benefit or not by licensing, and whether becoming licensed professions indeed promotes the stated objective of licensure (Bernstein & Lecomte, 1981; Huber, 1982; Robiner & DeWolfe, 2010).

Bernstein and Lecomte (1981), writing about the potential shortfalls of making psychology a licensed profession, argued that simply requiring practitioners to pass an exam and file for a license is not enough to assure psychologists will protect the public and insure practitioner competence. Huber (1982) argued the same point for mental health counseling. He

wrote simply insisting on practitioners becoming licensed is inadequate. Instead, he supported an alternative licensing model, that of Bernstein and Lecomte (1981), which is a more sophisticated method that espouses using examinations that involve personal interviews with candidates, require that renewal of licenses include review of practitioner performance, and rely on empirical studies to determine which competencies and practices the licensing process should endorse and promote.

Huber (1982) qualified his critique of licensing with the observation that, while theoretical arguments and anecdotal evidence may, “imply that licensure itself is unsatisfactory, from an empirical standpoint, however, no data has been generated to prove whether it is merely the current licensing process that is at fault or whether licensure itself is inherently defective” (p. 247). Robiner and DeWolfe (2010), writing about the process of obtaining licensure in the field of psychology, provided empirical evidence indicating it is the former possibility that hinders licensing. That is, it is the manner in which licensing occurs, not its essence, that undermines its effectiveness. Their data show that delays in the processing of license applications due to bureaucracy and misunderstandings on the part of applicants about how to fill out forms hurts both the profession and its most disadvantaged stakeholders. This is especially the case for psychology clients who are racial minorities or economically oppressed, because these individuals are frequently reliant on the services of newly minted psychologists and have fewer resources to locate alternative providers.

In summary, a review of the history of the march towards licensing in social work and other helping professions reveals that the topic of licensure has a long and sometimes hotly debated unfolding. Despite possible drawbacks, licensing is now highly institutionalized within the professions (New York State Education Department, Office of the Professions, 2010). That

is, for a majority of today's social workers and the workers in other helping professions, achieving professional licensure is a necessity that must be met in order to function as a fully-fledged practitioner. At the basis of the movement towards licensing is the claim that requiring licensure improves practitioner competence and protects consumers (Gandy & Raymond, 1979; Garcia, 1990). A review of the professional literature from social work, psychology, nursing, and the allied mental health fields reveals that detractors of licensing across these professions support the argument that licensing fails to protect consumers. However, they do not provide empirical evidence to support the conclusion that licensing is inherently flawed. The empirical studies that do exist, such as that of Robiner and DeWolfe (2010), indicate that flaws have to do with the manner in which licensing is implemented, not its essence.

As it pertains to social work, detractors of licensing propose that licensing insidiously detracts from social work's original emphasis on helping the poorest and most disadvantaged in favor of providing highly individualized services to those members of society who can afford the services of a licensed professional (Grandy & Raymond, 1979; Swagler & Harris; 1977, Toren, 1972). However, these claims do not have empirical support. Although they offer strong theoretical arguments and appealing anecdotal data, empirical research to attempt to verify their claims has yet to be conducted. Meanwhile, licensing of the social work profession has progressed rapidly to the point that all 50 states now require licensing. Social workers who lack professional licensure are at a professional disadvantage in relation to their licensed peers (Association of Social Work Boards, 2013). It would appear that while the question still remains about whether licensing actually achieves its stated goals, it is increasingly an institutionalized reality for mental health workers in a growing number of professions, including social work. A

review of the primary tool used to decide who becomes a licensed social worker, the licensing exam, is therefore indicated at this time.

Social Work Licensing Exams Past and Present

Obtaining social work licensure is closely associated with the act of passing a standardized examination (Association of Social Work Boards, 2006; Johnson & Huff, 1997; Marson, DeAngelis, & Mittal, 2010; Randal & Thyer, 1994; Thyer, 1994). Thyer (1994) wrote individuals in our society have been socialized to accept regulation of professions via testing as a way of life. In the field of social work, passing a test and becoming licensed helps the profession “remain on the edge of popular culture” (Thyer, 1994, p. 68). The goal of the social work licensing examinations is “to determine whether social workers have the minimum knowledge necessary to practice in a competent and safe manner with little risk to the public they serve” (Marson, DeAngelis, & Mittal, 2010, p. 87). The licensing exam is therefore at the center of the effort to obtain a national standard of quality assurance that is central to ensuring social work is an independent and legitimate profession.

The same can be said for the role of standardized exams in other regulated mental health professions. In order to become a licensed nurse or psychologist in New York State, one must possess the requisite educational and clinical experience as well as pass a standardized exam developed by the respective profession’s national association of licensing boards. Concerning nursing, the specific requirements vary depending on whether the applicant wishes to become a Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) or Registered Nurse (RN). To become an LPN, the applicant must be at least 17 years old, have a high school diploma or equivalent, have a diploma from a 9-month training program in practical nursing, and pass the LPN version of the National Council Licensure Exam (NCLEX) (New York State Education Department, Office of the Professions,

2013). To become a registered nurse (RN), the applicant must be at least 18 years old, possess a 2-year degree from a general professional nursing program, and pass the NCLEX-RN. Becoming a nurse practitioner requires that an applicant currently be an RN and complete prerequisite educational training, but does not require passing an exam (New York State Education Department, Office of the Professions, 2013).

In order to become a licensed psychologist in New York State, an applicant must possess a doctoral degree from a licensing qualifying program registered by the Education Department and complete the Child Abuse Identification Reporting requirement (New York State Education Department Office of the Professions, 2013). The applicant must possess at least two years or 3500 hours of supervised clinical experience. One of the two years of experience must be post-doctoral experience. Finally, applicants must pass the Examination for Professional Practice in Psychology (EPPP) developed by the Association of State and Provincial Psychology Boards (ASPPB) with a score of at least 75.

Concerning applicants who wish to obtain licenses to be mental health practitioners in New York State and practice in professions regulated under Article 163, Title VIII of the Education Law, obtaining a licensing requires an educational degree, passing a licensing exam, and completing a pre-determined number of supervised hours of work in the profession (New York State Education Department, Office of the Professions, 2009). The process varies from profession to profession in that each profession requires a different examination, and the examinations are developed and administered by a number of different organizations. Regarding educational requirements, each of the professions requires applicants possess a graduate degree specific to the profession (or a graduate degree deemed to be an appropriate substitute by the Education Department) except the profession of psychoanalysis, which requires a graduate

degree from a program in any field that is registered by the Department or substantially equivalent as determined by the Department. Concerning the number of hours required under the experience requirement section of each profession, Certified Art Therapy and Marriage And Family Therapy require 1500 hours of post-degree supervised clinical work. Psychoanalysis and Mental Health Counseling differ in that the former allows for work completed during psychoanalytic education to count towards the required minimum 1500 hours and the latter requires a total of 3000 post degree hours, a minimum of 1500 hours of which must be direct client services hours and the rest can be non-direct but related to mental health counseling.

To be eligible to take the LMSW examination and apply for licensure in New York State, an entry-level social worker must be at least 21 years old and possess a Master's degree in social work (New York State Education Department, Office of the Professions, 2013). Applicants who meet these criteria can sit for the LMSW examination, which is developed by the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB). The ASWB also develops the examination for the other type of social work licensure available in New York State, the clinical social work license (LCSW). The LCSW applicant must be at least 21 years old, possess an MSW degree with at least 12 semester hours of clinical coursework, have at least three years or 2000 client contact hours of post-MSW clinical social work experience, and pass the licensed clinical social work exam (New York State Education Department, Office of the Professions, 2013).

The Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) was created in 1979 and defines itself as, "the non-profit association of social work licensing boards in the United States and Canada... an organization devoted to consumer protection" (ASWB, 2006, p. 2). It is not affiliated with the National Association of Social Workers or the Council on Social Work Education. It does not set licensing requirements for individual jurisdictions, which are left up to each state's social work

licensing board. Rather, ASWB serves a twofold purpose. First, it owns and maintains the social work licensing examinations. Second, it provides services to state licensing boards and individual social workers. These services include but are not limited to the Approved Continuing Education program, the ASWB Social Work Registry, and the Public Protection Database (ASWB, 2006).

Construction of the Social Work Licensing Exams

Marson, DeAngelis and Mittal (2010) detailed how the tests are constructed. The steps of test construction begin with analysis of professional practice, development of test specifications from the practice analysis, item writing based on test specifications, item review for appropriate working, and relevance to practice. Then items are pre-tested by using them on tests on an un-scored basis to screen for unexpected performance and assembly of a final test form based on psychometrically sound test items. The steps for item development include recruitment of writers, screening of potential item writers, item writer training, item writing, editor reviews of items, exam committee review, psychometric review, and ongoing statistical assessment.

The ASWB examinations are prepared entirely by practicing social workers. Each year the ASWB Item Writer Program accepts 20 to 25 social workers to train to become question writers. The Item Writer Program is defined by ASWB as a, “network of trained writers from diverse backgrounds, each selected for their unique social work expertise... the source for the questions that help to ensure that the public is served by competent, ethical social workers” (ASWB, 2006, paragraph 1). Social workers from all levels and areas of practice – BSW, MSW, LCSW, clinical, non-clinical – are invited to participate. Participants, also known as “item writers” must meet seven qualifications. They must have a social work degree, hold a valid social work license or Canadian registration, be currently practicing social work, complete the

application process, attend a weekend training session, sign an agreement to not take any social work licensing exam within one year of participating in the program, and sign an agreement to not participate in any licensing exam preparatory classes five years immediately following participating in the program (ASWB, 2006, paragraph 2).

The first social work licensing exam was created in 1979. Until January 2011, the Masters and Clinical exams were divided into 10 and 11 content sections, respectively (ASWB, 2011). The Masters exam covered various content areas. These included service delivery (9%), human behavior in the environment (18%), diversity and social / economic justice (7%), assessment, diagnosis and intervention planning (11%), direct and indirect practice (22%), communication (7%), professional relationships (5%), professional values and ethics (11%), supervision, administration and policy (8%), and practice evaluation and utilization of research (2%). The clinical exam was formerly divided into the following content areas: human behavior in the environment (22%), issues of diversity (6%), diagnosis and assessment (16%), direct and indirect practice, psychotherapy and clinical practice (16%), communication (8%), therapeutic relationships (7%), professional values and ethics (10%), clinical supervision, consultation and staff development (4%), practice evaluation and utilization of research (1%), and service delivery (5%).

In 2010 the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) completed a practice analysis of the social work profession. Similar surveys were completed in 1979, 1988, 1996, and 2003 (ASWB, 2011). According to Thyer (1994) such analyses share a common theme of gathering information about, “how social workers spend their time, activities they engage in and knowledge bases they find useful” (p. 68). Using data from the 2010 survey, ASWB determined that content on the Masters and the Clinical examinations should be condensed from 10 content

areas into 4 content areas and from 11 content areas into 4 content areas, respectively. The purpose of this re-organization was to ensure the examinations reflected the most current understanding of what it means to be a social worker. The changes became effective in January 2011. Currently, the LMSW examination is divided into the following content areas: professional relationships, values and ethics (27%), human development, diversity and behavior in the environment (28%), direct and indirect practice (21%), and assessment and intervention planning (24%). The content of the LCSW examination is divided as follows: professional values and ethics (18%), human development, diversity and behavior in the environment (31%), assessment, diagnosis and treatment planning (26%) and psychotherapy, clinical intervention and case management (25%).

Despite changes in organization of content, key aspects of the exams remain unchanged. The goal of the examinations remains the same: to determine whether test takers have the knowledge and skills necessary to provide social work services in an ethical and effective way that is congruent with professional standards and legal mandates, and enhances the well-being of clients and society. Many of the particulars remain unchanged, too. The tests still consist of 150 graded and 20 non-graded questions, and test-takers are still given four hours to complete the exam. Each examination continues to utilize a mixture of three types of test questions: Recall, Application, and Reasoning (Independent Study, 2008).

Recall questions are questions that ask the test taker to recall a fact.¹ They do not include hypothetical scenarios and therefore do not require analysis or application of the material the test taker is being asked to recall. *Application questions* are questions that ask the test taker to apply a fact to a given scenario. To answer application questions correctly test takers must be able to

¹ For examples of recall, application, and reasoning questions see Appendix A.

recall the necessary information and correctly apply it. This is the most common form of question on the MSW-level exam. Finally, *reasoning questions*, which are the most complex form of question on test, assess the test taker's ability to recall a fact and apply it to a scenario in which an ethical dilemma exists. These questions require test takers to recall specific information and use their own judgment to decide how it should be applied to a given scenario. This type of question is common to the LCSW exam.

As of 2012, pass rates among test takers of the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) exams were as follows: Associates 77.1%; Bachelors 77.1%; Masters 83.6%; Advanced Generalist 63.3%; and Clinical 76.8%. (Association of Social Work Boards, 2013). The Association of State and Provincial Psychology Boards (ASPPB) reports that the average pass rate for first time test takers "exceeds 80% in the most recent sample years" (ASPPB, 2013, p. 4). For takers of the National Council Licensure Exam for Registered Nurses (NCHLEX-RN) the pass rate in 2012 was 74.41% (National Council of State Boards of Nursing, 2012). Takers of the NCLEX-LPN, the exam for individuals wishing to become licensed practical nurses, had an average 2012 pass rate of 74.91% (National Council of State Boards of Nursing, 2012). Upon comparison, this data suggests pass rates for the ASWB exams are comparable to those of the pass rates of licensing exams for other helping professions.

Reliability and Validity of the Examinations

It is generally agreed that the exams used to test potential social work licensees must be useful measurement tools (Albright & Thyer, 2010). As such, empirical research on the topic of the social work exams has focused on the process of creating and regulating the examination. At the nexus of the process of creating then regulating the examinations are the issues of reliability and validity. Important research findings on the reliability and validity of the exams were

presented in the work of Albright and Thyer (2010), Johnson and Huff (1987) and Randal and Thyer (1994). In their seminal study of the validity of the clinical exam, Randal and Thyer (1994) explored the claim that the test is a valid measure of social work knowledge capable of assessing test takers' competence to practice the profession. Using quantitative research methods, they conducted a survey of 42 first-year MSW students. They asked the students to complete a version of the Association of Social Work Board's (ASWB) LCSW practice test. The test had the questions blanked out and the four possible answers visible. Results found students chose the correct answer an average of 37% of the time, which is statistically significant. The authors concluded these results call into question the test's content and discriminant validity and undermine ASWB's argument that the test is not a test of test-taking skill.

Research conducted prior to and after Randal and Thyer's 1994 study also raised doubts about the exams' validity. In 1987, Johnson and Huff explored the impact of social work education and experience on the performance of social workers taking the LMSW exam. They looked at the relationship between pass rates and seven variables: demography, undergraduate GPA, credit hours, location of MSW program, possession of prior graduate degrees, prior work experience, and performance on prior social work examinations. The strongest correlation was between undergraduate GPA and examination score. These results raised questions about the inconsistency between knowledge needed for the exam and knowledge acquired via social work practice and education.

More recently, Albright and Thyer (2010) recreated Thyer's (1994) earlier study. As before, a sample of MSW graduate students was asked to take a practice ASWB clinical examination. This time the sample consisted of 59 students. As before, a statistically significant number of students were able to correctly answer questions despite the fact that the questions

were blanked out and only the four possible answers remained visible. The authors concluded this meant the examination, “is excessively transparent or guessable and cannot justifiably be claimed to be a valid assessment of competence to practice social work” (Albright & Thyer, 2010, p. 229).

These validity issues raise red flags as to the design of the exam, but a database search of the professional literature does not produce evidence that social work researchers have studied this problem or attempted to find a solution. The database search was completed on the Academic Search Complete database. I used the title keywords “social work” and “licensing exam” to search for relevant articles. No articles were located by the search. Clearly, the empirical evidence shows that possible shortcomings in the examinations should not only be the concern of test takers, but the profession as a whole. Once again, evidence of another area of interest that as-of-yet has not been fully studied and could easily be the subject of its own research has surfaced. But, this literature review shall remain focused on the current task and move onto the third and final piece of the journey towards getting a complete picture of the background and issues relevant to making our current literature review complete. To do so, I will now review the available literature on the topics of adult learners, the demographic characteristics of social workers, and the strengths and weaknesses social workers bring to the table as they prepare for the licensing exams.

Andragogy

The professional literature does not include satisfactory knowledge about how social workers prepare for the licensing examinations, but it does contain enough data to give a clearly defined picture of the educational background, needs, strengths, and shortcomings of the contemporary social workers likely take one or more of the licensing examinations. More

generally, a large and well-developed professional literature on the topic of andragogy, or how adults learn, is also readily available. An understanding of the essential elements of this part of the literature is critical to the problem addressed in this dissertation given that social workers preparing for the exams fall into the category of adult learners. According to the National Association of Social Workers, 45% of current social work students are age 45 or older and the average age of MSW social workers entering the field is 41.4 years old (NASW, 2006). A review of the literature on andragogy and the learning experiences and personal backgrounds of social workers lends insight into the issues and challenges adult learners face when preparing for licensing and could enrich future attempts to understand what techniques are most helpful (or harmful) during the process of learning in preparation for the exam.

Relevance of Adult Learning

An improved understanding of how and why adults learn is a topic of interest for many reasons. First, demographic changes related to the number of adults in the population indicate there is a need for an improved understanding of adult learning. According to the United States Census Bureau (2004), adults constitute a growing percentage of the total population. Currently, adults ages 42 to 60 constitute 78 million people, or 26% of the country's population. By 2050 this segment of the population will have aged and grown considerably. At that time, people 65 and older will make up 21% of the total population, or 86.7 million people. That is an increase of 147%. During the same period the United States population as a whole will only grow by 49%. These individuals represent an increasingly large percentage of students enrolled in education programs. As of 2004, adult learners represented 43% of total enrollment at community colleges (Women in Government, 2009). In 2002, 39% of all undergraduate students were adult learners (Plageman, 2011). By 2007, this number increased to 40%.

Second, changes in key social variables beginning in the 1980s – rising education levels, the changing role of women, early retirement, civil rights, increased leisure time, and life-style changes – indicate adult learning is becoming and will continue to become more prevalent (Cross, 1981). With these social changes have come new understandings of the role and purpose of education. Education is no longer limited to young people nor is it exclusively sought for the purposes of academic advancement. Rather, education today is sought based on a host of individual characteristics; for some education is a necessity, for others it is a pastime, and for all it is increasingly acceptable and attainable.

Lastly, technological changes explain why adult education is becoming more common and therefore must be better understood. Technological change is so fast that entire industries are created and die within the course of a single generation. This rapid pace of change means education garnered as a young person no longer lasts a lifetime. Instead, lifelong learning is now the norm (Plageman, 2011).

Issues Relevant to Adult Learners

Knowles' (1970) theory of andragogy provides a baseline from which to understand issues relevant to adult social work learners. Andragogy differs from pedagogy, or the science of child learning, in a number of specific ways. According to Chatziefstahiou and Phillips (2011), these differences are evident in the deviations between school teachers and adult trainers. Although both assume the roles of organizer, facilitator, counselor, and coordinator, the latter differs from the former in that it is a more demanding role, it cannot adopt an authoritarian dimension vis a vis students, and it is founded on a co-equal relationship. Furthermore, whereas school teachers focus on the sociocultural aspects of education, adult educators emphasize

helping learners integrate knowledge into their daily work, provide learners the opportunity to work in small groups, and develop critical thinking skills (Karatza, 2005).

Historically, andragogy was concerned with who participates in adult learning and why, what adults learn, and how adults learn. Poor people, racial minorities, the elderly, and those who failed to graduate from high school are significantly underrepresented among the ranks of today's adult learners. This disparity may be due to barriers to learning, which include situational (such as finances), institutional (such as inconvenient time/location), and dispositional (such as attitudes and perceptions about oneself as a learner) blocks that adults face and young learners do not (Cross, 1981; Lasater & Elliott, 2005). Such negative experiences and barriers influence the educational trajectories of a majority of adult learners. Exigence, or demands posed by an outside force beyond the control of the individual, is a constant theme in the narratives of many adult learners (Zacharakis, Steichen, de Sabates & Glass, 2011). Consequently, adult education focuses greatly on improving self-confidence and social capital.

Houle (1961) and Tough (1968) conducted groundbreaking research into what motivates adults to pursue learning. Using qualitative interviews, Houle found three types of adult learners. Goal-oriented learners learn in order to meet specific objectives such as learning how to speak in front of large groups. Activity-oriented learners learn because they enjoy the act of learning itself. For these individuals attending an evening class may dispel boredom and offer a constructive social outlet. Finally, learning-oriented learners pursue learning simply for the joy of increasing their knowledge. According to Houle, these learners tend to enjoy reading, choose academic jobs, watch serious programs on television, and are detail-oriented.

Tough (1968), also a pioneer in the field of adult learning research, concurred with and expanded Houle's (1961) thinking. Like Houle, Tough used qualitative interviews to understand what motivates adult learners to learn. A key finding was that adult learners are often motivated by a pragmatic wish to use or apply the knowledge they obtain. Out of his sample of 35 respondents, 29 endorsed "very strong" or "fairly strong" when asked if they believed the knowledge they garnered would be used for taking action. Also, in a finding that supports Knowles' (1970) claim that adult learners are motivated by a desire to understand that is not apparent among younger learners, Tough found that 22 out of 35 respondents answered "very strong" or "fairly strong" when asked if they believed the knowledge they acquired was for the purpose of satisfying curiosity, puzzlement, or answering a question.

How adults choose to learn is a topic addressed by Penland (1979). In his survey of educational resources used by adult learners, Penland found that consulting with an expert who is also a friend or relative was extremely important (75.2% of respondents agreed). This was followed by a number of other resources, which are listed here in order of importance: books (71.2%), close friend or relative (58.7%), travel (52.5%), individual instruction or tutoring (49.2%), paid expert (48.8%), newspaper (48.1%), television (44.2%), class or lecture series (43.1%), and self-formed groups (41.8%).

These resources are overwhelmingly used to pursue education related to vocational interests (Carp, Peterson, & Roelfs, 1974). Boaz (1978) reported that occupational training was nearly twice as common as all other educational topics pursued by adult learners. Similarly, Carp, Peterson and Roelfs (1974) found that a strong majority of respondents listed vocational training as their first choice of interest and a total of 78% of respondents listed vocational training among their choices of topics of interest.

These findings are consistent with the rise of what Cross (1981) called “mandated continuing education” (p. 40). While all adult education shares the theoretical qualities identified by Knowles (1970) and certain philosophical qualities such as humanism (the empathic identification of learner needs), critical humanism (exploration of the environment as a determining variable in adult learners’ needs), and emancipation (empowerment to enact broad social change), identified by Milheim (2011), differences exist between adult education that is mandated or for the purpose of necessary professional development and adult learning that is purely voluntary. These differences are apparent in each type’s commitment to divergent ends. Mandatory, work-related education has as its goal the improvement of workers’ lives. On the other hand, non-compulsory adult education has more general aims that vary according to each learner’s individual motivations. Rose and Jeris (2011) explained that education of workers has historically been described using three terms. From 1900 to the 1940s this phenomenon was known as worker education. From the 1930s to the late 1960s it was known as labor education. Since then, “labor studies” has become a synonym for adult education intended to reach the specific end of improving workers’ professional and economic well-being.

Relationship Between Adult Learning and Social Work

This idea of labor studies raises the issue of social workers, who are very likely to find themselves in a position where they must pass at least the entry-level licensing exam in order to achieve the minimal qualifications necessary to enter and fully participate in the profession. But who are today’s social workers? A review of the professional literature reveals a number of older and more recent studies that speak of the demographic characteristics of this population and the psychosocial issues typical social work school graduates face (Huff and Johnson, 1998;

Kameoka & Lister, 1991; Kaplan, 2006; Pardeck, 2004; Morris & Liu, 2008; Stoesz, Karger, & Carrilio, 2010).

A survey of changes in the demographic characteristics of MSW students over the past quarter century based on CSWE data was presented by Schilling, Morris and Liu (2008). They concluded that issues of racial, ethnic, and gender representation are particularly salient among social work students and graduates, and could play a role in how these individuals experience the world and make their way through it. Concerning gender, they found in the past quarter-century social work has become an increasingly female profession; as of 2000 females accounted for 85 percent of all MSW candidates (88% of BSW candidates and 73% of social work PhD candidates). Male MSW candidates, who once made up 43% of all candidates back in 1960, accounted for only 15% of all candidates in 2000. Regarding race and ethnicity, they document that 26% of all MSW candidates identify as racial/ethnic minorities.

Regarding how social work students perform on standardized tests while in school, the recent professional literature fails to provide clear answers. Studies arrive at contradictory conclusions (Kameoka, 1991; Huff & Johnson, 1998). On one hand, Kameoka (1991) presented data from the late 1980s indicating that only a minority (33%) of MSW programs regularly use objective measurement tools to assess students' academic progress, thus putting many students at an educational disadvantage when it comes to performing on standardized exams. In contrast, in a review completed not longer after, Huff and Johnson (1998) concluded that social work educators tend to over-rely on educational methods such as rote memorization; they employ a hierarchical approach to the dissemination of knowledge to the extent that some social work students are left feeling disempowered and lacking in critical thinking ability.

More recently, Kaplan (2006) produced a study focusing on the role differing undergraduate learning experiences have on how MSW students perform academically. This research centered on how the students resolved dilemmas that lack a clear and objective resolution. He concluded that the sort of undergraduate program an MSW candidate attended could influence how he or she performs in social work school. The author demonstrated that MSW students who completed bachelor degrees in the liberal arts were more likely to excel at coursework and fieldwork involving moral reasoning compared to MSW students with BSW degrees. This could be because, “liberal arts courses, by nature, are concerned with analytical discourse... that influences the ability to think in more complex ways than the training approach and narrow subject matter that may be more common in undergraduate social work programs.” Kaplan noted that, while BSW programs are technically liberal arts-based, they do not offer students the same level of flexibility when choosing classes and tend to include in their curriculum mandatory courses that sometimes favor technical skills over critical reasoning.

Perhaps most notable is the growing amount of empirical and anecdotal evidence suggesting that one of the defining issues challenging recent social work school graduates is the ever-increasing amounts of student loan debt these individuals carry with them throughout a significant portion of their adult lives (CSWE, 2010). Speaking generally, the profound impact of excessive student loan debt is an issue faced by students of all disciplines that could soon have an impact on the overall national economy. The United States Department of Education reported that in March 2012 total outstanding student debt in the US surpassed \$1 trillion. Recent research detailing the personal impact of student debt revealed this type of indebtedness has a profound impact on spending habits and purchasing power. The Federal Reserve Bank of New York (2013) recently reported that 30-year-olds with student loans are now less likely to have debts

like home mortgages than 30-year-olds without student loans. The same pattern is true of 25-year-olds and auto loans.

Within this negative financial environment, the economic picture for many MSW graduates is even bleaker given social work's lower than average salaries, a weak economy, the privatization of the social safety net, and the economic impact of racial and gender inequality. CSWE (2010) reported that typical student loan debt loads incurred during an MSW program range from \$10,000 to \$63,140 and a total of 80% of all MSW program graduates finish their degree with some level of student debt. CSWE attributed this wide variation to whether the student obtained their MSW from a private or public university. This number does not include student debt incurred as an undergraduate. Stoesz, Karger and Carrilio (2010) detailed the economic impact of social work education. They observed that upon graduation from social work school the typical entry-level social worker earns approximately \$38,000 per year and has a combined undergraduate / graduate student loan debt of \$45,777. This hypothetical individual will need to dedicate 25% of her net monthly income in loan payments for ten years and will eventually pay over \$17,000 in loan interest during the life of the loan (Stoesz, Karger & Carrilio, 2010).

CSWE (2011) advised this last figure for loan interest could be an underestimate, because a significant number of social workers who finance their education with debt do so with credit cards in lieu of private loans. While charging interest rates that are higher than federal loans, private student loan interest rates are still much lower than the rates on many credit cards. It is unclear if this is a phenomenon specific to social workers. It is also unclear if this has anything to do with the fact that student loan debts, both private and federal, cannot be erased through

bankruptcy whereas credit card debt can be included in bankruptcy (US Bankruptcy Code, 1978).

Chapter Summary

This review has shown that, at a minimum, any exploration into the learning needs of social workers must begin with a firm understanding of adult learners as expounded in the elementary work on the topic of andragogy. Regarding issues specific to social work learners, the professional literature contains recent studies that provide details about demographic trends amongst MSW program student populations, explore the reasons behind why some social work students are better able to resolve difficult moral dilemmas, and provide evidence that social workers graduating from MSW programs today face unique financial challenges due to excessive student loan debt. From this wide range of information we get a sense of the complexity and nuance of this population and its individual members.

CHAPTER III: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theory refers to the conceptual framework that informs research. Locus of control, attribution theory, and the psychology of event perception have been applied to the learning process and to the topic of academic achievement (Carden, Bryant, & Moss, 2004). As educational phenomena, test-taking and licensing are clearly linked to the process of learning and achievement. Therefore, the study will rest upon these conceptual theoretical frameworks.

Locus of Control

Locus of control is a concept developed by Julian Rotter (1954, 1966). Locus of control studies examine the extent to which individuals believe they do or do not have control over events that impact them. Rotter's (1966) locus of control hypothesis is divided into two camps: people with internal locus of control, or "internals," and people with external locus of control, or "externals." Internals believe they have individual characteristics that allow them to behave in a way such that outcomes are related to their personal decisions and actions. Externals assume that outcomes are related to factors beyond their control, such as chance, luck, the role of God, or the impact of powerful people and organizations.

Ohlson (2003) explored who was more likely to be an internal and who is more likely to be an external. He found exploration of cultural differences helped answer this question. Some cultures espouse individualism and others espouse solidarity. Therefore, being an internal or an external is to some extent related to one's culture and that culture's attitudes towards the role of the individual. Spector, Sanchez, Siu, Salgado, and Ma (2004) found that people from non-Western cultures that rest on the idea of shared responsibility have traits typical of externals more frequently than people from highly individualistic Western nations, who are more likely to be internals. The conclusion that culture and locus of control are linked is supported by the

findings of Wood, Saylor and Cohen (2009). They found that nursing students of Filipino and other Asian heritages were more likely to report external locus of control than their non-Asian peers.

People with high internal locus of control tend to perform well independently and make effective use of available resources. However, they may struggle in situations where they are expected to submit to authority or work collectively (Spector, 1983). Conversely, people with high external locus of control often excel in situations that require cooperation, but they can be vulnerable to external manipulation (Spector, 1983). Locus of control studies have been applied to a range of different phenomena for the purpose of gaining improved understanding of individual differences and people's expectations (Twenge, Zhang, & Im, 2004). Concerning the relationship between locus of control and academic performance, studies addressing these phenomena inquire whether participants associate academic outcomes to internal characteristics over which they have control or external factors over which they do not have control.

The results of studies exploring locus of control and academic performance have arrived at a number of important empirical conclusions. For example, Carden, Bryant and Moss (2004) discovered that internal locus of control is tied to better academic performance because internals are conscious of and organize their behavior in response to an awareness that there is a relationship between putting forth effort and doing well. Also, internals have lower rates of non-illness-related college absences and procrastinate less than fellow students with external locus of control (Janssen & Carton, 1999; Trice & Hackburt, 1989). Additionally, students who are internals have higher levels of self-efficacy, which contributes to improved academic performance (Landis, Altman & Cavin, 2007; Onwuegbuzie & Daley, 1998).

The idea of locus of control relates directly to the topic of academic performance and test-taking. Applying this theory to an inquiry about social workers' perceptions about their unsatisfactory performance on the social work licensing exam raises the question of whether or not these individuals believed their failure was related to internal or external factors. The locus of control theory speaks to the importance of understanding if informants endorse external locus of control. This is because extensive research has demonstrated that external locus of control is associated with lower academic performance, poorer study skills, and lower rates of satisfactory test performance than is internal locus of control (Carden, Bryant, & Moss, 2004; Onwuegbuzie & Daley, 1998; Wood, Saylor, & Cohen, 2009).

One issue not addressed in the professional literature at this time is the limitations of the current conclusions about the relationship between culture and locus of control, because these studies assume a Western definition of success in general and academic performance in particular. Although personal responsibility and motivation have been shown to be closely linked to internal locus of control and success in the West, there is a dearth of research studies on the issue of what sort of skills are linked to academic success and other types of achievement in non-Western countries. The assumption that academic styles are universal and do not include differences at the cultural level seems limiting. Locus of control theory and culture may be an important factor given the higher than average amount of cultural diversity that is found among social workers than other professional groups.

Attribution Theory

Attribution theory builds on Rotter's (1954, 1966) locus of control concept. It incorporates the previously mentioned conclusion about locus of control, namely that high academic performers tend to exhibit internal rather than external locus of control (Schatt, 2011).

However, in attribution theory, locus of control is only one concept among many. Specifically, locus of control is one of three causal dimensions (Weiner, 2010). The other dimensions are stability and controllability. Stability refers to whether an attributional cause is constant or varies over time. Weiner (2010) stated that, “causal stability in part determines expectancy shifts and the extent of hope, hopelessness, and helplessness” (p. 34). Controllability refers to whether an attributional cause is subject to volitional influence and is linked to shame in situations of uncontrollable causality and guilt and regret in situations of controllable causality (Weiner, 2010). Indeed, an exhaustive meta-analysis provided evidence that beliefs about control influence emotional experiences and are proximal determinants of aggression (Rudolph, Roesch, Greitemeyer & Weiner, 2004).

The primary aim of attribution theory, then, is to understand the process by which people make the causal attributions they do (Hunter & Barker, 1987). Similar to studies that have a singular focus on locus of control, studies that examine attribution theory have addressed a host of topics including health psychology, academic performance, management skills, musicology, library science, and race (Freedman, 1984; Graham, 1997; Savolainen, 2013; Schatt, 2011; Wallston, 1978). In each case, these studies examined participants’ placement on the three continuums of causality. People with internal locus of control attribute outcomes to native ability and effort, whereas people with external locus of control attribute outcomes to task difficulty or luck. Expectations for the future are based on whether participants conclude the attributional cause is stable or subject to change. Finally, regarding controllability, study participants either believed effort could provide some control over outcomes, or they believed outcomes are not controllable and are subject to luck or an ability lacking in the individual.

Regarding attribution theory and academic performance, Hunter and Baker (1987) concluded that educators should encourage students to attribute academic performance outcomes to effort instead of ability. This is because the latter leads to low self-esteem and the belief that future strivings will be futile in cases of poor academic performance. Graham (1997) hypothesized that poor academic performance among African-American youth is due to high external locus of control, feelings of lack of control over academic outcomes, and beliefs that there will be little fluctuation in outcomes over time. She argued in favor of an “Attributional Change Program” to improve academic and behavioral performance in school (Graham, 1997, p. 25). This would involve incorporating techniques into school curricula that would cause African American youths to become internals, have a sense of control, and gain an understanding that academic performance is fluid and dependent on effort instead of permanent and inflexible over time.

Psychology of Event Perception

Attribution theory is highly focused on our perceptions, which leads to the topic of the psychology of event perception. Event perception focuses on our view of what caused an outcome, regardless of the accuracy of that perception. According to Hunter and Barker (1987), “Our perceptions of causality, rather than reality, are critical because they influence self-concept, expectations for future situations, feelings of potency, and subsequent motivation to put forth effort. While other factors may affect a person’s intent to put forth effort, perceptions of causality constitute an important stimulant to motivation” (p. 51). Event perception is a field of study that has been greatly influenced by the work of J.J. Gibson. According to Reed (1988), Gibson’s work is an example of revolutionary thinking as evidenced by his theoretical shift from a focus on a stationary perceiving model to a focus on a moving perceiver model as the result of

two decades of empirical research. This eventually became known as the ecological approach (Gibson, 1979).

More recently, the psychology of event perception has focused on event structure, which Zacks (2001, 2007a, 2007b) has written about extensively. Events are considered to be critical parts of the human experiences of perception, attention, and memory. Current research seeks to see if a better understanding of how we experience events allows for insight into previously unknown psychological realities. An event is defined as, “a segment of time at a given location that is conceived by an observer to have a beginning and an end” (Zacks & Tversky, 2001, p. 3). The process by which humans identify and label these beginnings and endings is known as “event structure perception,” and the process of parsing a continuing stream of reality into a meaningful event is known as “event segmentation” (Zacks & Swallow, 2007, p. 80; Zacks & Tversky, 2001, p. 3).

Event segmentation consists of three parts. First, we experience an event and assume it to be automatic. Second, upon reflection it becomes apparent that segmenting an event involves recalling memory and learning. Third, specific parts of the brain, which Zacks and Swallow (2007, p. 80) refer to as “specialized neural mechanisms,” pick up physical and social features that cue us to associate the experience to event boundaries. Their research is also important because it has demonstrated that better event segmenting skills are related to better memory skills (Zacks & Swallow, 2007).

CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Qualitative methods are most appropriate to the proposed study because of the limited empirical knowledge base regarding social work failure of the requisite licensing examination. Specifically, I was unable to locate any research questioning how social workers perceive their failure of the licensing exam and its impact on their experience of being a social worker. Regarding specific areas of perception, this study sought to learn more about those causal attributes social workers perceive as being associated to their failure of the exam. For example, it was interested in learning about test takers' perceptions of how examination failure influences their short term and long term career goals and the manner in which these perceptions influence how they plan (or do not plan) to prepare for future attempts to pass the exam. Together, these perceptions constituted a set of narratives that when analyzed shed light on the experience of exam failure and illustrated how that experience relates to, informs, promotes, or compromises the overall experience of being a social worker today.

Given the lack of study about this phenomenon, I employed an inductive approach. Although research does indicate that diversity, high student debt, and low professional salaries are three variables of great importance to social workers, researchers at this time do not possess enough knowledge to formulate testable hypotheses (Stoesz, Karger, & Carrilio, 2010). Because there are no testable theories available, the selection of a study in the grounded theory tradition strove to develop such theories inductively. In summary, although there are variables identified as relevant to the experiences of professional social workers, these variables have not been studied in relation to examination performance. Consequently, an exploratory study broadened the scope and identified more variables in a manner that is useful and appropriate. This led to the

development of mid-level theories that might be tested at a later time. The complexity and uncertainty of this study's phenomenon of interest reduces the power of quantitative inquiry, which presumes that we know enough or can easily capture the various facets of this experience through a test of a specific hypothesis. Consequently, on the basis of the complexity of my research interests and early stage of knowledge development, the use of an inductive method is indicated.

This study approached the area of inquiry from the perspective that there are multiple ways respondents understand and experience this phenomenon. Rather than attempt to obtain a previously unknown empirical result, the purpose of this inquiry was to discover as much as possible about the factors identified by social workers who have failed the LMSW exam. This information was then used to tease out from the collected narratives a sense of the salient patterns and themes associated with this experience. This served a dual purpose: enriching our knowledge of a previously undocumented phenomenon that is relevant to social work and laying the groundwork for future studies of a more quantitative nature.

The study was exploratory in nature. Exploration is a fundamental part of all types of social work practice. It is valuable to social workers involved in direct practice, working with communities and agencies, and those engaged in work with social welfare policy. Social workers interested in research use exploration to generate new knowledge (Reamer, 1998). Exploratory research projects are typically done when the phenomenon of interest has not yet been thoroughly studied, and there is a dearth of available information about it. Specifically, Rubin and Babbie (2005) explained exploratory research is most commonly used when, "a researcher is examining a new interest, when the subject of study is relatively new and unstudied, or when research seeks to test the feasibility of undertaking a more careful study or wants to develop the

methods to be used in a more careful study” (p. 123). This dissertation study was an example of a research project that examines an unstudied phenomenon, and its goal was to gather as much information about an unexplored subject as possible. Therefore, for the purposes of the dissertation study, an exploratory method was most appropriate to the research design.

Sampling Strategy

The dissertation study utilized a convenience sample of 15 participants drawn from the alumni email list obtained from the alumni office at the graduate school of social work of a large, urban, public university (hereafter referred to as the School). The population for the study was the alumni who are on the email list. An email was sent to everyone on the list. Those that replied constituted a sample of convenience that was used for this study. The sample of convenience was screened to insure the persons who replied are those who have taken and failed the LMSW exam and not those who have failed other social work licensing exams. From those that were screened and found eligible, I drew a sample of 15. There were no other criteria for participation other than being an alumna/alumnus of the School and self-reported examination failure of the LMSW exam at least once.

Researchers conducting exploratory research typically use small, manageable samples that offer enough data to be fruitful but not so much that saturation occurs or the project becomes unmanageable (Reamer, 1998). For example, a qualitative, inductive, grounded theory study by Thompson, Odessa, and Nitzarim (2012) used a sample of 16 respondents to gather narratives and produced a testable theory on the benefits of addressing the issue of social class during psychotherapy. Other examples of exploratory research studies have used small convenience samples as well (Attwood, Meadows, Stallard & Richardson, 2012; Khisa & Nyamongo, 2010;

Ratheesh et al., 2013; Wainer, Ferrari, Dautenhahn & Robins, 2010), Therefore, a sample size of 15 participants for this study is consistent with other grounded theory research studies.

Here it is important to note this study will identify themes and patterns in the perceptions of social workers regarding failure of the LMSW exam, and not any more advanced clinical examinations. At this time the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) has two licensing exams geared towards Masters-level social work graduates, the LMSW exam and the LCSW exam (Association of Social Work Boards, 2013). The LMSW exam is the entry-level exam that social workers are eligible to take immediately upon graduation from social work school after having registered for the exam and being approved by their state licensing agency. The LCSW exam is a clinical exam that is generally taken after approximately two to three years of professional, licensed social work experience post-graduate school. Whereas the failure of the LCSW exam is undoubtedly important to the professional and emotional lives of a significant number of social workers, failure of this exam poses different practical challenges than failure of the LMSW exam. Indeed, failing the LMSW exam means a social worker might be unable to get or maintain any social work positions. It is the gatekeeping mechanism for entry into the profession. On the other hand, failing the LCSW examination means a social worker is unable to access jobs in a specific area of professional social work practice.

While a combined study of the perceptions of people who have failed both the LMSW and LCSW exam is theoretically possible, such a study is pre-mature, given that at present neither the impact of failing the LMSW exam nor the impact of failing the LCSW have been studied individually. As a result we cannot say for certain at this time what themes and patterns are relevant to both experiences and what themes and patterns are unique to each examination failure. Therefore, while similar analysis of the perceptions of social workers who fail the LCSW

exam is necessary at some point, this dissertation study assumed failure of the LMSW exam poses greater practical and professional challenges. Therefore, it chose to begin studying LMSW test failure before LCSW test failure in light of the availability of finite resources and a prioritization of the needs of the profession.

Data Collection Methods

This dissertation study employed semi-structured interviews. The way data was collected from the respondents was dependent upon the fact that the dissertation study used a qualitative design. In exploratory, qualitative research, observation is conducted in a manner meant to maximize the amount and variety of data collected (Reamer, 1998). In the data collection design used herein, observation is not bound by predetermined measurement or categories in order to measure useful discoveries. Semi-structured interviews allow for more diverse experiences to be included. Their purpose is to verify, deepen, compare and contrast, enrich and clarify. Qualitative interviews have a number of stages. Initial observations are general and unscripted with the goal of becoming familiar with the setting, situation, and phenomena of interest. Then, patterns begin to emerge as key features and categories come to the surface. In the dissertation study, these features and categories surfaced in the participants' narratives, which occurred through face-to-face interviews.

Face-to-face interviewing can be structured or unstructured. Semi-structured or non-directive interviews are open-ended, having one or a few pre-set questions that serve as catalysts, and probes that serve to enrich the depth of the data collected. Probes do this by getting the respondent to thoroughly explain his or her statements using highly descriptive terms and by providing examples such that the narrative paints a detailed, colorful, highly textured, and

convincing picture of the informant's personal experiences. Open-ended questions lead to variations of discovery. Their flexibility makes them highly responsive to individual differences. Also, they are capable of taking into consideration specific nuances for example social context, which in the case of this dissertation study is the context of professional social work with its current emphasis on the need to obtain a license to practice by passing a standardized exam. On the other hand, structured interviews can limit the power of inquiry when the goal is discovery of the greatest amount of knowledge possible. The data they collect is highly specific and, while easily replicated, can fail to accurately capture overall depth and nuance of a phenomenon of interest. Therefore, they were not appropriate for this dissertation study.

The dissertation study used a specific sort of unstructured interviewing known as narrative interviewing. Bates (2004) defines narrative interviewing as “a qualitative research method used to stimulate interviewees or study participants to express their experiences and views of the topic being studied through telling stories and narratives” (p. 16). According to Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000) narrative interviewing's “underlying presupposition is that the perspective of the interviewee is best revealed in stories where the informant is using his or her own spontaneous language in the narration of events” (p. 61). Narrative interviewing goes beyond the traditional question-answer schema and relies on self-generating schema. It represents the elements that make up the essence of the qualitative method, namely, a desire to elicit a valid, authentic rendering of an informant's experiences with the least amount of interference and bias from the interviewer while collecting the widest array of data possible.

This form of interviewing differs from traditional interviewing. Traditional question-answer schemas are organized around pre-determined questions that reflect the needs and concerns of the interviewer and may prevent the discovery of information and meanings that are

unrelated to the questions chosen by the interviewer. Consequently, narrative interviewing is empowering to informants, gives them a voice, meets them where they are at, and lessens the typical power dynamic that puts interviewers above interviewees (Hartman, 1981; Strickland, 1994). For these reasons, narrative interviewing is particularly helpful in giving voice to the stories of people from disadvantaged or marginalized groups (Bates, 2004; Mattingly & Lawlor, 2000). Narrative interviewing is especially helpful when investigating specific events such as seminal life events or hot button issues, when voices from different or little known social groups are attempting to be understood, and when a project attempts to integrate life histories with social contexts (Schutze, 1977, 1992).

There is a structure and process to narrative interviewing. Narrative interviewing maintains guidelines on how to initiate the story schema and how to keep it going. It also has specific boundaries that the interviewer must maintain in order to minimize bias. Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000) stated the phases of narrative interviewing are preparation, initiation, main narration, the questioning phase, and concluding talk. During the preparation phase the interviewer becomes familiar with the field under study and draws up a list of his or her interests about the topic. In the initiation phase, the interviewer explains the investigation to the informant and obtains consent to allow the interview to be recorded. During the main narration phase, the informant has space to tell his or her story. Throughout, probes are used to get more information on areas that have not been elaborated completely and that are of interest to the study. Lastly, concluding talk occurs when recording ceases but small talk that touches on topics raised during the two previous sections continues between interviewer and the informant. The interviewer keeps written notes on the information shared during this informal period.

The main question used in this dissertation study was an open-ended request that orients the participant to the purpose and method of the interview as well as its central question. The question the researcher hoped to answer in this study provided context for respondents to speak to while remaining open enough for them to relate things surrounding the specific acts of preparing for, taking, and failing the exam. The request encapsulated the scope of the study, which desired to go beyond the experience of merely taking the exam. The study generated knowledge about the manner in which interviewees understand, conceptualize, and experience the decision to take the exam, the process of preparing for the exam, and the emotional and professional fallout of failing the exam.

In addition to the narrative interview, the research collected demographic data about the informants using a brief questionnaire. The emphasis of the dissertation study was on the narrative interviews with the structured questionnaire serving as an adjunctive data collection source that provided concrete data that shed light on and helped tease out themes discovered in the narratives gathered from the interviews. Only probes were used to flush out meanings and details about statements made by the interviewee. For example, the social work literature indicates that issues pertaining to diversity, high student debt, and low professional salaries are highly relevant to social workers today (Stoesz, Karger & Carrilio, 2010). When respondents raised these issues in their narratives, the researcher used probes that incorporated the respondent's own words. In this way, the researcher was able to foster a dynamic, reflective discourse in which generative questions posed by the interviewer were based on the responses and contributions of the participant for the purpose of generating opportunities for new questions to be asked and themes to be addressed.

Following the unstructured interview, a brief survey containing pre-set questions about such things as the participants' demographic information and previous exam experiences was administered. It was administered following the narrative interview so as not to influence the participants while speaking with the interviewer. The questions asked covered respondents' social work educational history, their experiences with standardized exams, and demographic information. Question answers were recorded via a self-administered survey.

Data Analysis

Narrative interviews can be analyzed in a number of ways. Schutz (as cited in Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000) offered a five step process: 1) transcribe verbal material; 2) separate material into indexical and non-indexical material; 3) develop trajectories from indexical components; 4) knowledge analysis; and 5) clustering and comparison of individual trajectories. Another method uses a coding frame to generalize and condense data and obtain meaning from it. Such thematic analysis involves three columns. The first column contains the transcript, the second contains paraphrased summary sentences, and the third column contains keywords. Lastly, structuralist analysis focuses on simultaneous analysis of the chronological and non-chronological, or the syntagmatic dimension and the paradigmatic dimension, of the narratives. As evidenced in the work of Abell (1993) on structuralist analysis, this form of analysis is formal and mathematical but does not involve statistics.

This study used the traditional three-column, thematic analysis method. Use of this method was consistent with the scholarly aims of the dissertation study, which sought to go beyond the experience of merely taking the exam by generating knowledge about the manner in which interviewees understand, conceptualize, and experience the decision to take the exam, the process of preparing for the exam, and the emotional and professional fallout of failing the exam

through the identification of salient themes. This method enabled the study to follow the social constructivist model envisioned in Riessman's (1973) take on open-ended, qualitative interviewing. She emphasized that narrative interviews not only reveal details about past events, but shed light on the manner in which interviewees make sense of those events, how they perceive them, and how those events relate to their overall lived experience. In other words, narrative interviews offer insight into how interviewees experience the research topic in relation to aspects of their lives not directly touched by but still highly relevant to the events associated with the phenomenon of interest. This choice of data analysis, then, ensured the data lent itself to the attainment of a textured, multidimensional picture of the salient themes and meanings surrounding licensing exam failure.

Protection of Human Respondents

The dissertation study protected the rights, privileges, and confidentiality of its human respondents in a number of ways. Foremost, the study obtained the approval of the institutional review board. Furthermore, to protect the well-being of the participants the researcher had a list of mental health resources available for distribution in case participants revealed they are suffering with emotional conditions stemming from their LMSW experience that require professional care. To this end, the researcher was prepared to stop the interview at any time if it became apparent the participant was being emotionally overwhelmed and it appeared continuation of the interview would cause harm. To minimize any adverse effects, it was clearly explained prior to starting the interview that participation in the dissertation study was completely voluntary. Participants were reminded that it is up to them to decide how much or how little information they wished to reveal, and they were free to terminate the interview at any

time. Lastly, they were informed there are no direct clinical benefits from participating in the research.

All participants received a \$25 American Express gift card. No deception was used in the study. The study was not anonymous but maintained confidentiality. Confidentiality was maintained by limiting access to the audio recordings to the researcher and the professional service that transcribed them. Once received from the transcribing service, all data transcripts were kept on the personal, encrypted computer of the researcher. While the study was not anonymous because the researcher knew the participants' identities, confidentiality was maintained by creating pseudonyms to protect the identities of the participants. Participants were advised that confidentiality would be broken if the participant disclosed they are suicidal or homicidal, as the researcher is a licensed clinical social worker and as such is a mandated reporter. Nor would confidentiality be maintained if the participant revealed instances of child abuse or neglect, which would be reported to the appropriate authorities. Prior to starting the interviews, participants were asked to give verbal consent acknowledging they understand and agree to these conditions, the steps the researcher will take to ensure confidentiality, and the purpose and methods of the study. This was completed prior to the start of the interview and prior to the recording device being turned on. The audio recordings of the interviews were destroyed once they were transcribed.

CHAPTER V: FINDINGS PRIOR TO THE EXAMINATION

Introduction

This dissertation research study explored the experiences of social workers who failed the graduate level social work licensing exam, the LMSW exam. Using qualitative methods, I sought to locate data that captured the detail, nuance, and complexity of the experience of failing the LMSW exam. More specifically, the aim was to identify and describe the themes and patterns that are representative of the experience of preparing for, taking, failing, and responding to the fallout of failing the LMSW exam. The purpose of this research study was to generate knowledge to fill the current void as concerns the profession's understanding, or lack thereof, of the lived experiences of social workers who do not succeed in passing the LMSW exam.

This chapter, Chapter V, is the first of three that report on the findings of a qualitative analysis of interviews with 15 social workers, all graduates of the graduate social work school of a large, urban, public university (hereafter referred to as the School) who failed the LMSW exam at least once. Chapter VI expounds upon findings about taking and failing the exam, and Chapter VII reveals how the members of the sample responded to and attempted to overcome the experience of exam failure. This chapter begins with a discussion of the role of the semi-structured narrative interviews employed in this research. It offers a profile of each respondent and an overview of the demographics of the sample. It concludes by sharing details of the findings as they relate to the experiences, actions, and behaviors of the respondents prior to taking the exam.

Motivation to Participate in the Study

The use of semi-structured interviews allowed the respondents to partially generate their own narratives, which were often eloquently stated and invariably expressed a range of feelings and aspirations including but not limited to hope, regret, determination, desperation, empowerment, shame, and powerlessness. Some respondents commented that seeing the research study invitation in their email inbox motivated them to resume efforts to study for and pass the LMSW exam. For them, participating in the research study marked a renewal of efforts to obtain licensure, efforts that had been put off, ignored, or avoided for months or even years. One respondent, Danielle², stated that receiving the invitation to participate in the study, “made me pick up the book [the study guide]. It made me say, let me start focusing, and made me reach out to a lot of colleagues, people I went to school with, and said, what did you do? This helps.”

Other respondents commented that participating in the study represented for them an expression of their hope to contribute to something that might somehow help others who are struggling to pass the LMSW exam. For example, Esther stated that she hoped the dissertation would be published and reviewed by representatives from the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) who would consider changing the rule that the exam must be taken in English. She stated, “My voice is going to be a factor in changing the exam. I’m not going to be a passive person here. As a minority, I should raise my voice and my point here and let the mainstream hear what the minority is talking about.” Similarly, Jane stated, “I think I have been silent about the fact I didn’t pass the exam and I don’t know anyone else in my class who failed. Doing this

² All names and other personal identifying information have been changed to protect the respondents’ confidentiality.

interview is something I can do, I relate to it, and it sounds like there are other people out there that have failed their exams, too.”

Natalie stated that she decided to participate in the study after receiving the email invitation to participate and thinking, “maybe this will help someone else that’s going through the same situation that I am.” Martha stated that she wanted to participate in the research in order to share what she believed would be insights that might help future test takers pass the exam. She had two major insights she wished to share. First, she expressed that she strongly believes it is better to take the exam right after graduating than to wait. She said, “I think if you wait to take the exam after you finish your master’s degree, if you wait a year or two to take it, it gets harder.” Second, she opined that test takers should be aware that in order to pass it is imperative they think like test takers and not necessarily like social workers, who often think in complex, analytical ways that do not correspond with the logic of the test questions, “Also, when taking the test one tends to think like a social worker to answer the questions, but in reality, the questions, how they’re written, [are] very general. So you fall into that trick that, ok, yes, this is the right [social work] answer, when it reality, it’s not it [the test answer].” She summed up her advice by stating, “[the] message can be across the board for to all grad students in general. Listen, take the test early, think general basics, you will be more successful in passing the exam.”

Lastly, many respondents expressed that their decision to participate in the research project was the result of a desire to give back to the School’s community. Having reaped the benefits of an education at the School, they were eager to assist me with completing a doctoral research project so that I might join the ranks of alumni of a doctoral degree granting institution affiliated with the School. For example, Jim stated, “Look, I received honors in research, I have a great appreciation for people who do research and, like I told you, I understand how difficult it

can be to get respondents for research... I know how tedious it is... I figured why not [participate in the study.] Let's help this guy get his Ph.D." Similarly, Luanne stated, "I also just support social work and I'm kind of curious about getting a Ph.D. so I'm like let me go support this guy in his research. I just feel like it's important; somebody's actually looking into people failing the exam!"

Following the narrative method employed in this study, respondents were invited to tell their LMSW exam story. Sometimes their stories began with descriptions of how they prepared for the exam followed by tales about failing the exam and dealing with exam failure. Other respondents shared their story in the reverse of this order. All 15 respondents, though, shared stories that included a before the exam, during the exam, and after the exam. Therefore, in a manner similar to the doctoral work of Ross (2013), my first level of analysis was to code the data in an overarching framework of before, during, and after the exam. This phenomenon of the majority of respondents directly or indirectly categorizing their experience into before, during, and after moments meant I often did not have to ask pre-determined questions. Rather, topics of before, during, and after came about naturally and simply had to be probed for greater detail.

An immediate and striking observation was the integral role the School played in the formation of the respondents' identity as social workers, which was strong and multi-dimensional for all the respondents despite their difficulty with passing the LMSW exam and despite the fact that many remained unlicensed. A majority of the respondents had taken a test preparation course offered by the School's continuing education department. Thus, the School played a key role not only in the respondents' graduate social work educations, but also in their exam preparation methods and, for many, in their efforts to overcome exam failure by studying for and taking the exam a second or third time. Two themes were coded with regard to

respondents' feelings about the School: the School as a prestige school and the School as an accessible school.

The Study Participants

In this section, I present a brief profile of each respondent followed by a summary of the characteristics of the sample. A total of 28 respondents replied to the invitation to participate in the research study that was emailed out to the alumni listserv. Of those, 21 completed the telephone screening. Six respondents who completed the telephone screening were found to be ineligible to participate in the study because they did not graduate from the School. These six respondents found out about the email invitation in the following ways: one got the invitation from her therapist who is a School graduate, one from her work supervisor who is a School graduate, one from a social worker who interviewed her during a job interview, and three because, although they are not alumni of the MSW program, they are on the School alumni email list. One such respondent was on the alumni list because she completed her seminar in field instruction (SIFI) at the School, and two were on the list because they completed an LMSW preparation course at the School. The remaining respondents, numbering 15, were found to be eligible to complete the interview. That is, they met the criteria of being School alumni and failing the LMSW exam at least once. These 15 respondents completed the interview either in person (five respondents) or by phone (10 respondents).

Deirdre is a 52-year-old, African American female who resides in a low-income, urban area. She failed the LMSW exam once and has yet to retake the exam. She is currently employed as a case manager at a city-run social service agency. Although she is not at risk of losing her job because she does not have the LMSW license, she missed out on the chance to be promoted to the title of social worker by failing the exam. Deirdre completed her undergraduate studies at a

small, private university, was in the one-year residency (OYR) program at the School, and currently has \$62,000 in student loan debt from her undergraduate and graduate educations.

Kathy is a 44-year-old, African American female who has failed the LMSW exam eleven times and has yet to pass the exam. She attributes her repeated failure of the exam to what she perceives to be cultural biases imbedded within the exam. She graduated from a medium-sized, private university then completed her MSW degree at the School in the two-year program. She is currently employed as a social worker at a charter school in a position that does not require a social work license. Kathy reports that she has lost multiple social work positions due to her inability to obtain the LMSW license by passing the exam.

Larry is a 39-year-old, African American male. He failed the LMSW exam twice and has yet to pass the exam. As a result of his inability to pass the exam, he lost his job of eleven years at a city-run social service agency; he was briefly promoted to the title of social worker but, because he was unable to obtain the LMSW within six months of being promoted, he was terminated. He is currently unemployed and getting by with the help of Public Assistance (PA). Larry completed his associate's degree in media studies at a public university and his bachelor's degree in public administration at the same school. He graduated from the School in 2010.

Danielle is a 48-year-old, African American female who failed the exam once and has yet to retake the exam. She graduated from a public university with an undergraduate degree in criminology and for many years was employed as a corrections officer. She states being a corrections officer required the use of many social work skills including identifying the presenting problem and active listening. Danielle spoke at length about the emotional impact of LMSW exam failure, stating that it caused her to become physically ill. She expressed relief that her current position as a caseworker at a small not-for-profit agency does not require a license,

but also remarked how difficult it is to survive on her small caseworker salary of \$42,000 per year. She has been passed over for promotion at least once because she does not have her LMSW.

Evan is a 44-year-old, Hispanic male who has failed the LMSW exam three times and has yet to pass. He completed his undergraduate degree in human services at a small, private college. He graduated from the School in 2013. His concentration was clinical practice with individuals and families. Evan has \$50,000 in student loans from his undergraduate and graduate educations.

Jim is a 29-year-old, Caucasian male who recently graduated from the School in 2012. Prior to that he completed his bachelor of social work (BSW) degree at an out-of-state, public university. Jim's concentration at the School was community organizing. Jim failed the exam once and passed on the second try. He is currently employed as a social worker at a psychotherapy clinic and earns \$45,000 per year. He has \$55,000 in undergraduate and graduate student loans.

Esther is a 43-year-old, Asian-American female who failed the exam four times and has yet to pass. Esther associated her repeated exam failures to cultural issues. She spoke at length about her belief that it is unfair that the exam must be taken in English even if English is not the test taker's first language. She also spoke about how certain test questions are highly culturally biased; they privilege and normalize Western, American, suburban, Caucasian cultural norms and put test-takers who do not fit into these categories at a disadvantage. Esther completed her undergraduate degree in psychology at a prestigious public university in 2009 then went straight to social work school at the School. She pointed out that she was always an excellent student. Huang is currently employed in a social work position that does not require a license and earns \$45,000 per year. She does not have any student loans.

Luanne is a 37-year-old, Caucasian female who failed the exam once and passed on the second try. She completed her undergraduate degree in psychology at a major public university. She graduated from the School in 2010. Luanne's LMSW story is a stressful one; she was at risk of loosing her employment at a major private teaching hospital if she did not pass the LMSW exam on the second try. Luanne associated her trouble passing the exam to internal forces. She explained that she is a "bad test taker" and generally a poor student. Luanne graduated from the School with a combined total of \$75,000 in undergraduate and graduate student loans.

Jane is a 28-year-old, Caucasian female who has failed the exam once and has yet to retake the exam. She is a recent School graduate from the Class of 2013. Her concentration at the School was community organizing. Jane completed her bachelors of social work (BSW) at a large, public university. She attributed her exam failure to external forces. She explained that her exam performance was greatly influenced by the fact that she was a community organizing major and as such she had little classroom or fieldwork exposure to clinical matters such as how to make a diagnosis. Jane is currently employed as a community organizer earning \$37,000 per year. She has a total of \$80,000 in student loans from her undergraduate and graduate educations.

Natalie is a 60-year-old, Hispanic female who has failed the exam three times. She completed her undergraduate degree in human services at a small, private college. She graduated from the School in 2002. She was in the one-year residency (OYR) program and her concentration was clinical practice with individuals and families. Natalie has been employed at a large public hospital for nearly 35 years. Although she is not at risk of loosing her job because she is not licensed, she has been demoted to the position of social work assistant for this reason. Natalie earns \$45,000 per year and does not have any student loans.

Martha is a 42-year-old, Hispanic female who failed the exam twice and passed on the third try. She graduated from a large, private university with a degree in economics then completed her MSW at the School in 1999. She was in the one-year residency (OYR) program and her concentration was clinical practice with individuals and families. Martha does not have any student loans.

Amy is a 31-year-old, Caucasian female who has failed the exam twice and has yet to pass the exam. She attributes her exam failure to external forces. She states, "I don't feel like I was prepared enough for the exam... I think one thing that the School lacks is clinical. I think there's not a lot of clinical education there." Amy completed her undergraduate degree in sociology at a large, suburban, public university then immediately began her MSW studies at the School, where her concentration was clinical practice with individuals and families. Amy has \$10,000 in student loans.

April is a 62-year-old, African American female who graduated from the School in 2001. She was in the one-year residency program (OYR). She completed her undergraduate degree in public administration at a small, private, urban college. She is currently employed as a caseworker at a city-run social service agency and is not at risk of losing her job despite not having a social work license. April has failed the exam three times and has yet to pass. She identified "anxiety" as the primary reason for her repeated exam failure. She described how each time she failed "my heart just dropped to the bottom" and she suffered with feelings of self-doubt and low-esteem.

Mary-Beth is a 55-year-old, African American female who failed the exam once and has yet to retake the exam. She stated her desire to take and pass the LMSW exam is because the exam represents "the first step on my journey to becoming a clinical social worker." Mary-Beth

associated her desire to become a social worker with her experiences growing up in a family that was “way below poor” and suffered many negative affects of poverty. She graduated from an urban, public university in 2010 and from the School in 2014. Mary-Beth said one of the things that attracted her to the School was its identity as an institution dedicated to social justice and urban social work. She has a total of \$40,000 in undergraduate and graduate school loans.

Louisa is a 39-year-old, Hispanic female who failed the exam once then passed on her second try. She attributed her initial failure of the exam to a number of factors including “not being a good test taker” and not having enough clinical knowledge/experience because her concentration at the School was community organizing. Louisa stated she believes the knowledge and self-awareness she garnered through her participation in a study group with fellow School alumni was what enabled her to pass the LMSW exam on the second try. Louisa’s undergraduate degree is in sociology from a large, private, urban university, which she graduated from with a total of \$15,000 in student loans. She graduated from the School in 2001 without having to take out additional loans.

The oldest respondent was 60. The youngest was 28. The average age was 44. There were six African American, one Asian, four Caucasian, and four Hispanic participants. There were three male respondents and 12 female respondents. Seven respondents failed the exam once, three respondents failed the exam twice, three respondents failed the exam three times, one respondent failed the exam four times, and one respondent failed the exam 11 times. Four respondents passed the exam on the second try and subsequently obtained their LMSW license. Eleven respondents have yet to pass the exam and consequently remained unlicensed. Eight respondents reported having student loans. The largest student loan debt was \$80,000. The lowest student loan debt was \$10,000. The average student loan debt was \$48,375. Concerning

the social class backgrounds of the respondents, the majority (10) said they grew up in working class families. Four reported they grew up poor and one reported growing up in a middle class home. The majority of the respondents (14) were currently employed in the social work field. One respondent was unemployed and receiving public assistance. Five of the respondents had non-social work careers before attending social work school. These careers were: ambulance driver, correctional officer, television producer, substance abuse counselor, and librarian.

The respondents attended a range of public and private undergraduate institutions. The majority of the respondents (14) completed their undergraduate studies at a college or university in the state where this study was completed. One respondent completed his undergraduate degree out-of-state. Six respondents attended private institutions and nine respondents attend public institutions. The respondents also reported a range of undergraduate majors. The majors included: human services (four respondents), psychology (three respondents), public administration (two respondents), bachelor of social work (BSW) (two respondents), economics (one respondent), sociology (two respondents) and criminology (one respondent). One respondent also had a master's degree in human services.

Concerning the educational experiences of the respondents while they were students at the School, seven completed their MSW via the one-year residency (OYR) program and eight completed their MSW in the usual two-year program. The method of the majority of the respondents (12) was clinical practice with individuals, families and groups. Three respondents completed the community organization, planning and development method.

Prior to the Exam: Motivation

The respondents reported a range of motivational factors behind their decision to take the LMSW exam. These factors included: a desire to avoid having to pay the fee to retake the exam, a desire to take and pass the test before it is updated to include questions about the new *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (2013), a desire to obtain a higher paying job, a desire to avoid being demoted to a lower rank and pay grade, a desire to obtain a more professionally satisfying job, a desire to fit in with alumni and professional colleagues who had already passed the exam, a desire to obtain a sense of personal satisfaction and accomplishment, and a desire to meet the stipulations of paying back a scholarship.

Among all the participants, there was a general feeling that passing the exam and obtaining the LMSW license is key to progressing professionally as a social worker. Luanne summed up this feeling stating that besides needing to pass in order to maintain her job, she wanted to take and pass the exam because she thought becoming licensed would open professional doors for her. She explained, "I feel like it [the LMSW] broadens your horizon. I got my license because I knew that should I decide to leave the hospital or try to further my career in management or whatever, you're really going to need a license... You just kind of need it, it opens doors and it allows you an opportunity to work." Similarly, Larry stated, "... like I'm looking for jobs now... Everyone wants you to have a license. There's so many things I could do just based on my experience, but because I don't have the L to my MSW I get knocked out of consideration."

This was particularly true among respondents who were seeking clinical positions. Jim explained that his decision to take the LMSW exam was couched in the reality that all the jobs he was considering required at least an LMSW license. The jobs he was interested in were clinical

in nature; they entailed doing psychotherapy, making diagnoses, and providing case management. Jim stated, “What motivated me to take the [LMSW] exam was... most of the jobs I was looking at either had MSW, LMSW preferred, or LMSW required, LCSW preferred. I was looking for clinical positions and in order to get clinical work the LMSW is a prerequisite almost to have that. There’s that component.” For Jim, obtaining a clinical position would also mean a salary increase, such that he would finally be paid a salary that in his eyes was commensurate with his worth as a graduate level social worker, “I loved my old job, but the pay, as you know, is pretty dismal, it’s \$28K per year. That was another of my motivations to leave. To get out. If the pay were more I probably would have stayed. I would probably be doing that now if it [the pay] was commensurate with what I’m worth.”

Besides the need to pass the exam to obtain his desired type of employment, Jim wanted to obtain the LMSW for other reasons. He pointed out that many of his friends who graduated with him from the School had already earned their licenses. He wanted to be a part of that group. Describing this drive to get licensed so as to fit in as a sort of “self-applied pressure,” Jim stated, “There’s also this self-applied pressure [to pass the exam], because I had noticed that almost all my friends in my cohort at the School had taken the LMSW and passed their first time. I thought, ‘Oh well, if they can do it, so can I!’”

Louisa reported that her desire to take and pass the LMSW exam consisted of two parts, “Well, there’s two things. One is the DOE [Department of Education] now requires you to have your license... And the other part was, you know, I wanted to challenge myself and get that license and have that, you know, piece of paper.” Natalie said she needed to pass the test in order to avoid being demoted to a lower title and pay grade, “If you don’t pass, they do a demotion, not only with money but also with the [job] title... you are demoted from social worker to case

worker.” Mary Beth identified the need to pass the LMSW exam as one step on her “journey” towards becoming a licensed clinical social worker (LCSW). In explaining this journey, she described professional goals that, like Jim’s, were highly clinical in nature,

My journey I’m trying to go on will lead into clinical [work] and in order to get that you have to have your [LMSW] license. I like to work with adolescents and their family members in drug treatment because I feel the adolescents of today if you could reach them while they’re still young and impressionable, you can work with them to improve their lives along with their family. I believe that including their families is imperative because they have to go back home, and what the issue may be, maybe within the home, so everyone in the home needs to begin a journey of change in order to help the young individuals and I want to be a part of that.

Mary Beth spoke at length about how her previous jobs in the US military and as a member of the local police department contributed to her desire to get licensed and become a clinical member of the social work profession. She viewed her previous jobs as preparation of sorts for her current, formal foray into the field of social work. Describing social work and her former professions as “helping professions,” she explained that all three professions focused on creating and maintaining helping relationships with people in need. Interestingly, she also explained that the basis of the test is not memorization or recalling facts, but demonstrating that one understands how best to deal with difficult human interactions. She explained,

I’ve always been in a helping field. The military is a helping field. A lot of people don’t realize that, but we’re helping a country or an area get stabilized. In the Police Department I was on the helping side in EMS. I was in a helping field always. The injury [I incurred working for the Police Department] led me to social work, a helping field in a different genre, more interaction... A lot of that [interaction] is on the test with understanding why individuals do certain thing[s], how they react certain ways, the family environment.

April also sought to pass the exam so she could begin the journey towards becoming an independent mental health clinician. She associated this social work role, the role of independent psychotherapist, with one of status and increased prestige. The desire for this prestige, and the increased earning potential that accompanied it, were her main sources of motivation, "I took the examination because I wanted to be licensed to raise my status at my job, and I wanted to be licensed so I could work outside my job part time as a psychotherapist... At that time I was doing part-time psychotherapy, but I would have been paid more if I had a license."

Luanne and Danielle needed to pass the exam in order to keep their jobs. Luanne had to obtain her LMSW within six months of becoming employed at a large hospital. Danielle stated, "Right before the test, because my job was closing, and in order to stay in another part of the agency, you need your license." She was keenly aware, then, of the relationship between passing the exam and her ability to remain employed and support herself and her family, "I said, 'You got to pass this test, because if you don't, you're not going to have a job. You're not going to be able to take care of your family. You're not going to be able to do certain things if you don't pass this test.'" She also hoped to pass because she found it difficult to afford to pay the \$270 fee required to sit for the exam, "Because it's like, you got to pass. I can't afford another \$270. I got to wait to put money aside. It's very hard."

Amy was motivated to become licensed because it was an expectation of the agreement she had signed when she accepted a scholarship offered to her during social work school. The scholarship required that recipients provide a year of service as a licensed professional in the area in which they studied for every year they received the award during graduate school. For Amy, this means that she is expected to put in two years of service as a licensed social worker,

“For me, I got my degree in social work and so I have to become a licensed social worker and work... for two years to give back to the scholarship foundation I had taken money from.”

Lastly, respondents such as Jane sought to pass the exam as a back up of sorts. Jane was a Community Organizing major at the School. Although she does not plan to pursue a career as a clinical social worker, she decided that passing the exam and obtaining the LMSW license would be good resources to have should she ever need to fall back on them. She explained, “My track was community organizing. I knew it was not completely necessary for me to get my license but I figured that I might as well get it, just in case in the future I wanted some kind of case management job where it would be helpful for me to have a license.” In the back of her mind was the knowledge that should she make the switch from a community organizing job to a case management or clinical position, there might be a slight pay raise. This pay raise would be very helpful for her given her current student loan situation, “Getting a pay raise definitely crossed my mind because of the student loans I have to pay back and my living situation right now. I’m living with family. I could move out but I would be living paycheck to paycheck; paying rent, paying loans and food. I definitely think that’s not, that’s not what I want... My living situation is fine... but ideally I don’t want it to stay how it is for too long.”

Prior to the Exam: Preparation

Respondents reported utilizing a number of test preparation methods. First and foremost among them was the LMSW exam preparation course taught by a licensing specialist (LS) through the School’s continuing education department. Respondents spoke highly of this course, both as a preparation tool and as a source of motivation, encouragement, and improved self-esteem. The course was described as being flexible, accessible, and practical. Besides covering test content, the course instructor oriented the students to the details of what to expect on the day

of the exam. For Deirdre, this very helpful and comforting, “She explained everything of how the test would be as far as what building it would be in and [she explained] when you go, you get finger printed, and [what to do] if you had to go to the bathroom, so she [LS] was very thorough.” For Deirdre, the preparation course also represented a link between her place of employment and the School, and indicated to her that both her former school and her current employer had a desire to see her pass the exam and obtain the LMSW license. This became apparent to her when LS appeared at her agency one day and gave the School’s prep course to agency employees, “Lo and behold, the first day... lo and behold it was her [LS] teaching the class and I said, you know what, I said to myself, this is a double for me... this extra practice means a lot to me... even my job is pushing [me].” To Deirdre, this “pushing” by her employer was not about “making you nervous about the test but trying to uplift you.” Lastly, LS’s willingness to allow Deirdre to be on a payment plan for the course tuition was helpful in both a practical way and highly meaningful to her.

Danielle reported similar feelings of support and empathy due to her experience in the School’s LMSW exam preparation course. She explained, “It’s like a family. You meet in the library, you meet and you study downstairs, you know, just come together, and we all want the same thing.” She contrasted this feeling of solidarity with the isolation she experienced taking the actual exam, “It’s like you are own your own when you go take the exam. It’s not like you’re taking it with [School] students. It makes you nervous. You’re scared to even go to the bathroom. Got to raise your hand, stop the test. It’s just anxiety.”

For at least one participant, LS’s class helped to compensate for what were perceived to be shortcomings in the MSW curriculum vis a vis test preparation. Jane, a graduate of the Community Organizing track, stated LS’s class was helpful because it exposed her to clinical

material that was not covered in her courses at the School. She stated, “I think it [the preparation course] was helpful in that there was a lot of things I learned I had never heard of before... diagnoses, names for different methods, things like that... In the class it would come up and I was like, ‘I’ve never heard that before.’”

Evan pointed out what he saw as the pros and cons of the School’s licensing preparation course. He said the pros were that it helped prepare him for the practical parts of taking the exam; what to expect upon entering the test site, how and when to take regular breaks, and exercises to combat test anxiety. What he felt was not helpful were the practice questions, which in his opinion were very different in style from the questions on the actual exam. Evan stated,

She [LS] prepared me for sitting, going in and being ready to sit for four hours and stare at this computer. Stay focused. How to break down the questions. How to be aware and alert to certain words and how they word the question. That was very instrumental... The anti-anxiety that she taught. How to prepare yourself emotionally, physically... The material itself was totally different from the exam, though. A lot of stuff she taught was similar but not that similar. The questions on the exam were a lot different.

Other respondents, including Louisa, Jane, and Martha, found informal study groups to be helpful. Louisa reported that prior to taking the exam the first time she studied alone. She explained that she studied, “independently, myself, just kind of read books... just kind of read stuff online, just tried a couple of books here and pamphlets.” She stated as a result of this method “I didn’t do well.” On the other hand, prior to taking the exam the second time she joined an informal study group consisting of School alumni. She described the group as a very positive, “communal” experience that was directly linked to the fact that she passed the exam on the second try. She stated, “I would go to their house and, you know, we had, you know, the Sunday mornings and we put in about two, three hour blocks and it was really communal because people

bring soda or what, you know, water, coffee it was in the morning, something to bite, so it's really welcoming and we sat around and really challenged some of these questions." For Louisa, the sense of camaraderie that developed amongst her and the other group members during the six months they studied together was the key to making the experience a success, "... you know, that's why I loved the study group, [it] was more long term, it was like six months we were doing that... So the study group again is that emotional connection because I'm doing it with friends and it was, you know, communal." For Jane, the informal study group she participated in with her friends helped alleviate anxiety as much or more so than it served as an actual learning experience, "Then I was meeting with two of my friends and we were doing... it's not like we were testing each other but more like spending time together... It helped me think to myself, 'I'll be fine.'" These references to connection, emotionality, and camaraderie bring to mind the connection Deirdre felt to the School's LMSW preparation course because of the extra steps LS took to make her feel comfortable, accepted, and wanted.

Others reported their preferred method of exam preparation was taking the practice tests for sale at the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) website. Mary Beth explained this was her preferred method of preparation because she felt the most important part of preparing for the exam is not memorization, but getting a sense of what the questions on the exam are like, and to think accordingly. She expressed an understanding that the LMSW exam seeks to get test takers to demonstrate they understand being a licensed social worker means being able to think critically and to resolve difficult ethical dilemmas, not simply recall theoretical facts. For this reason, Mary Beth eschewed preparation methods geared towards memorizing theory and sought out practice tests that had questions most similar to the questions on the actual test. When asked how she knew to do this, she explained her understanding of social work was that it is a helping

profession based first and foremost on mastering difficult human interactions. In regard to her preference for the ASWB practice tests, she explained,

The type of questions I was seeing on different websites with maybe 10 practice questions were not like the real test. They were all about medication, about diagnosis. It seemed the real test would be more about interacting with the clients and I figured, “Well, let me take this [ASWB] practice exam and see if it will help me, see if it helps at least get my mindset to the type of questions they’re going to ask.” It worked. I didn’t pass, but those were the exact type of questions they ask on the test.

Respondents Esther and Jim both used a for-profit test preparation service called Social Work Test Prep. They spoke highly of this service. Huang liked the service because of the personal operator who would answer your phone calls if you had questions about any of the products. Jim liked the service because of the way it broke down the test answers and explained the reasoning behind each one. Each of them found the service through a Google search on the Internet.

Respondents who had taken and failed the exam multiple times reported what seemed to be a chain of preparation interventions, which often began with studying independently and, as the number of failures mounted, gradually grew to include more communal and frequently more expensive educational interventions. For example, April, who failed the exam three times and has yet to pass, studied on her own before taking the exam the first time. She employed this technique after failing and before taking the exam a second time. After failing a second time she spent the money to take an exam preparation course at the School. Although this more expensive, more communal educational intervention also did not precede passing the exam, it did result in improved feelings of confidence and preparation. April stated, “The first time I just studied. I studied on my own. I had a study guide. I ordered the study guide from the board. And

then I failed. The third time I went to the School to... paid a small fee to get the prep for the exam and everything. I took my notes and so forth and all, and felt somewhat better.”

Prior to the Exam: Education

I discovered that respondents’ educational experiences at the School played a major role in their professional identities as social workers and in the manner in which they experienced preparing for, taking, and failing the LMSW exam. Based on their narratives, I divided respondents’ statements about the School into two categories: the School as a prestige school and the School as an accessible school.

Concerning the perception of the School as a prestige school, respondents stated the School’s competitive entrance policy had great meaning to them. In their eyes, it meant that admission to the School was restricted to the most deserving, most qualified students. As such, obtaining admission to the School was a source of pride and confidence for a majority of the respondents. Deirdre, who described the School as “one of the best social work schools” explained,

All my life I always wanted to go to the School but everybody said ‘no’ the School is hard, it’s hard to get into the School, so I thought, well, I’m never going to apply for the School, but then I applied and I got in, and then the thing is people is like how many times have you applied? I said, once, and then I’m hearing people say, well, when I applied I didn’t get in... so right there I was like, wow, not only did I get in social work school but I got into the school that I never thought I would get into so I was happy about that.

Also, respondents spoke highly of the perceived quality of a social work education at the School. They commented that a social work education at the School is on the same level as an education at the social work schools of nationally-recognized, top-tier universities. April stated, “I heard... that the School was really the tops... I heard that the School was the number one

school in the state for social work. The School beat out all these big Ivy Leagues and everything.” Danielle reported, “I always heard the School was a good school, the best I suppose. I wanted to go to the School or [University X] or [University Y], those were the three schools that I heard were good, so I just said, ‘I’m going to go to the School.’”

Amy was on the fence about whether to attend social work school at famous, private social work school or the School. Accepted at both schools, she was unsure which one had the better reputation in the social services field. She spoke with one of the School’s deans about her concerns, and he made an interesting suggestion to her, “... he said I should call three non-profit organizations in three different states and ask them which school I should go to and see what they say.” Amy called three agencies. Two were on the fence, saying that the School and the other option were both very prestigious. The third said that hands down the School is the better school. Amy said,

I called somewhere in Atlanta and they were on the fence, right? Because [University X] was a big name, but they also felt like the School’s program would carry itself well and they didn’t know. Then I called somewhere random; I think it was somewhere like in the Midwest and I asked the lady and she was like, “Well, you know when I hear [University X] it kind of bends an ear, but at the same time I have always heard about the education at the School especially in the social work program. Then I also asked someone in another organization in here in the city and they automatically said the School.

Lastly, the School’s prestige was based in part upon the perception among respondents it values diversity, prepares students for urban social work, and is committed to social justice. Mary Beth, who was accepted to a number of prestigious social work schools chose the School because she believed its location in a low-income, diverse, urban setting was reflective of its commitment to social justice,

What attracted me the most is where they're located. The School is in the heart of it and that's what attracted me. I was like they're putting their students, their staff in a situation where they always have to watch their back and they have to worry and they have to be concerned based on the areas that they're going to attend classes. By doing that that puts the mindset of the student and their staff at you. If this is the field you want to be in, you always have to be conscious of your surroundings and who you're around and how to deal and live and survive in these areas to be able to help these people. That's how I saw it because I am African American and I grew up in the city, so I've lived it, I've seen it. I know how to survive it. In that school [the School] all the students who may never have lived or worked or were involved with people who live in those types of areas are exposed to them. It opens their mindset to see reality that, "Oh, we're not teaching you something that's not there." Here, see it, live it. Do you know what I mean? That's what I thought was part of this linking with putting the school there.

Luanne seconded this opinion, stating that the diversity she experienced at the School was much greater than anything she could have hoped to experience at another social work school, and greatly enriched her education. She stated,

The diversity of the education was the best part. Very cool between the teachers and the students it was like such a mixed bag of people. All different kinds of races and backgrounds. It wasn't like going to a really high-end, all white school. That just never appealed to me. Yeah, [attending the School] broadened my horizon tenfold more than if I ever went to [University X] or [University Y].

Similarly, Larry stated, "A lot of the stuff when I got into the School I knew already because of what I did for a living but it was still very educational because it got to teach me a few different things. It taught me, number one, how to see other people from a different cultural perspective." He went on to explain that for him this meant he came to understand that, "if you had a Jewish person, African American... a Caucasian person and an Asian person sitting in the same place trying to do social work, all are going to come out with a different result because of their

heritage... that's why I say it [my School education] taught me how to look at other people from a cultural perspective." Larry attributed specific aspects of the School educational experience to this insight, specifically the sense of solidarity that existed amongst the students, which was not a factor at the prestigious undergraduate institution he attended, "[University X] is run like it's a prestigious, private school and everyone is lost at the source... Everybody was so into their own thing. Nobody hardly talked or spoke with you. When I got to the School it was working for me because they don't do that. The School put you in groups, you have to discuss things, have conversations. It's more communal."

Respondents spoke at length about the affordability of a social work education at the School. In their opinions, this made the School different from other prestige social work schools; other schools are prohibitively expensive but the School offers both quality and affordability. There was a sharp contrast, then, between the perception of the School as being difficult to get into because of its stringent academic requirements, and the belief that, once accepted, the School is relatively affordable and therefore accessible to the students it educates. As Louisa stated, "I knew that at the same time I couldn't, probably couldn't, afford [University X] or an [University Y]... But the School still had, you know, it was up there as one of the top schools for social work and I said, 'Ah, I can get that and still be able to manage.'" April seemed to agree, stating, "... I said, 'I want to go to a... strong social work school,' and on top of that the School was not as expensive as other schools, so not only did it have a top-rated social work program, it was affordable, too." So did Amy. She stated, "Overall, looking at the price and just asking around and looking at what the school can offer me I thought the School was ultimately the best choice. To this day, I'm really happy with the choice that I made." Jim said, "It [the School] is

the most affordable, and its respectable. It is, it's a very respectable school. It has an awesome faculty. The School, I wouldn't trade it for anything in the world. Absolutely!"

Amy observed that the School was more accommodating to the students who wished to finance their education with financial tools other than student loans. She was accepted at a prestigious, private social work school and the School. She received a substantial financial aid package from the School that included many scholarships. Her financial aid package from the private social work school consisted primarily of student loans. Concerned about her ability to pay back the loans on a social work salary, Amy called the private institution and inquired if they could offer her any additional scholarships. Their response was direct and non-empathic, "... I remember calling [University X] and asking them to increase the scholarship that I had received. I gave a couple of reasons why. I felt like maybe they could increase it but the worker told me, 'No, loans is what we do here. That's what we take out. That's what we do here, we take out loans.'"

Chapter Summary

This chapter is the first of three that report on the findings of a qualitative analysis of interviews with 15 social workers, all graduates of the School, who failed the LMSW exam at least once. It began with a discussion of the role of the semi-structured narrative interviews employed in this research. It offered a profile of each respondent and an overview of the demographics of the sample. It concluded by sharing the details of the findings as they relate to the experiences, actions, and behaviors of the respondents prior to taking the exam. These findings were coded into the following categories: motivation, preparation, and education. The education category was further coded into categories on the topics of the School as a prestige school and the School as an accessible school.

Regarding motivation, the principle theme behind individual motivations to take the exam was the deeply held belief that passing the exam and obtaining the LMSW license are keys to progressing professionally as a social worker. Regarding preparation, respondents were found to have utilized a range of preparation methods including individual study, informal group study, and formal group study. Of note, the LMSW preparation course offered by the School had a profound influence upon a majority of the respondents. The course and its facilitator played a key role in not only academically preparing respondents for the exam, but also in providing such types of support as helping to improve self-confidence and providing a feeling of community.

Finally, regarding education, respondents' educational experiences at the School were deeply linked with their perceptions of exam performance. In general, respondents spoke highly of their experiences at the School and as such a subcategory on the School as a prestige school was added. In this category it was discussed how the majority of respondents felt the School to be a better educational option than other, seemingly more prestigious schools. Affiliated with this were feelings of pride and success at the notion of having been accepted to and graduated from such a prestigious school. Also of note, respondents spoke at length of the School as being an accessible school in the sense that it offered a lower tuition rate and provided a greater range of financial aid tools aside from student loans to assist students with financing their social work educations. In summary, this chapter discussed the details of the study cohort and shared in detail the individual respondents' experiences preparing for the exam in regards to the matters of motivation, preparation, and past educational experiences during their MSW studies at the School.

CHAPTER VI: FINDINGS DURING THE EXAMINATION

Respondents' narratives about experiences during the exam were coded into the following categories: the emotional experience of taking the exam, perceptions of exam performance, and emotional reactions to exam performance.

The Emotional Experience of Taking the Exam

For many, taking the exam was a grueling emotional experience that produced a range of difficult and unwanted emotions including fear, anxiety, helplessness, nervousness, surprise, anger, sadness, and even physical illness. Deirdre's description of her experience sitting for the exam gives a sense of the pressure, anxiety, and intensity she experienced, and the way in which these forces quickly got the best of her,

One thing [the Licensing Specialist (LS)] did say was at 25 questions, stop and regroup and go wash your face, get up, but I didn't get up because I said, "The clock is running!" And... [LS] said don't flag more than 17 questions, which is 10% of the test, but after the first couple of questions I was thinking too hard... instead of going to the next question I stayed on the first couple questions too long, then I started just flagging questions, then the next thing you know there was a half hour left on the test, maybe I have 30 questions to go and plus the flagged questions to go back to... I just remember reading them over fast and hoping that my answer was right.

Mary Beth also spoke of the disorienting nature of the test site and its relationship to her emotional experience while taking the test. She described feeling angry and being in disbelief about what she perceived to be the arcane and unfair protocols of gaining entry into the test facility, and the behavioral expectations once in the testing room,

... there were different dynamics going on that put me in a bad mindset... When I came in to take the test, I have my two pieces of ID. I gave the girl my passport and I gave her my student ID, which was acceptable when I first applied to take the test... The girl started giving me issues that my ID wasn't acceptable because

it didn't have a signature. That already put me in a bad mindset but she accepted my debit card, which was ridiculous. Then when I got in the room, I was reading the questions, not out loud. I was kind of mumbling. The woman came and tapped me on my shoulder and she said, "You cannot read the questions out loud." She put me in a bad state and I was ready to get up and walk out. I was almost in tears because I'm trying to take this test and she's stressing me out right now... after that I just rushed through the questions to get it [the test] over with to get out of there because I was upset.

Others spoke about the experience of taking the exam with sadness for different reasons.

Louisa was disappointed to realize that the exam expected her to think more like a test taker and less like a social worker, at least in her opinion. She explained that she realized she needed to "retrain" herself not to think "so much like a social worker." In other words, in Louisa's opinion social work thinking is not the sort of thinking that leads to optimal test performance, "So I had to retrain myself to not... Here at social work school you're equipped to just dig a little deeper and then just peel away at the onion and see what else surfaces... I had to let that go [sighs]." Summing up this statement, I observed that the respondent felt she was being expected to be less of a social worker and more of a test taker, to which she responded, "Absolutely!"

Danielle reported that she was surprised she succumbed to anxiety during the exam. She stated that LS had warned her and other students in the exam prep class that the testing experience would be highly anxiety producing, but she never thought anxiety would be a problem for her until it set in during the course of actually taking the exam, "She [LS] discussed anxiety a lot, that some people suffer with it. I didn't realize that it would happen to me. I was like, anxiety! I didn't worry about that, until it happened on the exam." The anxiety came to be a defining emotional part of the experience of taking the exam. She described it in a way that suggests she felt the anxiety reached the point of controlling her, stating, "The anxiety completely took me over... I just couldn't believe what I was feeling at that moment." She also

reported the experience of becoming physically ill while taking the exam. Danielle, who is diabetic, explained, “So while I took the test, I became ill. I’m also a diabetic. I didn’t eat that morning, everything just went wrong.”

Another respondent, Amy, also reported struggling with anxiety, “I was nervous the whole time. I had to calm myself down and try to really focus there and I think that’s what’s hard about it [the exam].” Natalie also reported considerable anxiety, so much so that she became physically ill, “By the time you are half way finished with the test you are so exhausted, mentally and physically... It gets tiring, tiring. You get exhausted... It provokes a lot of anxiety. It made me sick. It gives a lot of different physical problems.”

Luanne reported that during the exam she experienced anger as well as anxiety. She said she felt “very anxious” and was “a mess” while she sat for the exam. She also recalls feeling angry while taking the exam. She said the anger was about, “...me being asked these questions that had nothing to do with what I did on my job. Period. It did not reflect anything I do. It didn’t reflect me as a worker.”

Some respondents reported being able to maintain behavioral control while taking the exam despite the emotional pressure produced by sitting for the exam. Jane, who described sitting for the exam as an experience that induced feelings of fear and nervousness, explained that despite these negative emotions she was able to remain focused. For her, remaining focused meant staying in touch with and carrying out the tips recommended by LS during the prep course. Jane stated,

I did take breaks after every 25 minutes, where I’d stand up. I think it was an LS thing, where she was like, ‘You should take a break every 25.’ I did that one. I flagged ones that I just didn’t know right away and then went back to them. I felt like I was being calm, in that I was reading all the questions really fully. Trying to stay

focused... I think [that] was something LS always talked about. You have to be mentally prepared to take the test.

Finally, one respondent answered that his primary emotional reaction to the experience of taking the exam was surprise. Jim, who had graduated from the Community Organizing track at the School, stated he was surprised the test was so clinical. That is, he felt he was unprepared for the fact that the test had so many questions on clinical topics such as diagnoses, medications, and psychotherapy. Jim stated, "It [the exam] seemed far more clinical than I anticipated, but that might have something to do with the fact that I studied community organizing. However, it [the exam] was very clinical."

Perceptions of Exam Performance

Perceptions of exam performance varied according to whether the respondent associated his or her performance to internal forces, external factors, or a mixture of the two. Examples of internal factors that respondents perceived as having an effect on their exam performance were: not studying the correct material, thinking too concretely, and not thinking critically enough. Examples of external factors respondents attributed their exam performance to were: distractions in the testing room, shortcomings of their educational track at social work school, and a higher power watching over them.

Deirdre attributed her exam failure to a mixture of internal shortcomings and external distractions. She stated her decision not to study the ethics section of the study guide provided during LS's preparation course because "I thought I knew it" was a principle reason she failed. She also stated that distractions in the testing room contributed to a situation in which she "couldn't really focus." She explained, "... one particular person... was taking the test... she was typing her test... so I put the headphones on, I began to feel my heartbeat and it's like between

hearing my heart go boom, boom, boom, boom and... trying to read and I'm like I just said to myself just keep calm and try to read through the questions, but I just said to myself that I will have to do it [the LMSW exam] again.”

Jim, who believed failure was within his control, believed so because he only failed by three questions. He explained that, to him, failing by three questions was evidence that he had it within him to get enough questions correct to pass, and had simply failed to do so. He explained, “It [passing the exam] was totally within my control because I only... may I say this as a competition, I only failed by three questions. That was within my control. When you're so close with three questions... Had I failed by 20 questions I would've thought well maybe I shouldn't be in this profession. But it was within my grasp. I think if I had applied myself and prepared myself just a little bit more I could have had it.”

Other respondents felt their choice of educational track at the School played a role in influencing their exam performance. Specifically, there were reports from those who participated in the community-organizing track that the track had a dearth of clinical material that made certain parts of the exam such as questions about the DSM-IV particularly difficult. Louisa explained, “If you are CO [community organizing] you don't have the other skills sets as students who were clinical, your skill sets are not as strong in CO as, you know, in clinical.” Similarly, Jane stated, “We [students in Community Organizing] all felt like we lacked a little bit.” She explained that, looking back, she attributed her inability to pass the test to her failure to take enough clinical classes, and the lack of attention paid to the DSM-IV in the classes she did take, “I wish I had taken at least one clinical class. Specifically clinical, while I was at the School. I think that was really a lot of it. I could have done more reading around like the DSM.” Larry stated he failed because of factors beyond his control. Specifically, his failure was the

result of “not knowing what I thought I knew” because the OLM curriculum did not expose him to the clinical material necessary to have the requisite knowledge to pass the exam.

More generally, Amy stated that her School education lacked the clinical material necessary to adequately prepare her for the LMSW exam. Regarding the exam, she stated, “I don’t feel like I was prepared enough.” She attributed this lack of preparation to the School, “I think one thing that the School lacks is clinical. I think there’s not a lot of clinical education there as opposed to school life at [University X].”

Mary Beth initially attributed her exam failure to internal forces, saying “it was all me,” then went on to explain she believed a “higher power” had caused her to fail. She said a higher power watching out for her had in fact protected her by making her fail; had she passed she would have taken a part-time social work position and in so doing forfeited her right to the disability pension she is currently receiving from the Police Department, “I get disability from the police department because I had the injury... If I take a part time position, I lose all that. My higher power was telling me, that’s a bad decision.” She stated that evidence of the role of her higher power could be found in the fact that she failed by only one point, which she believed was intended as a message, “because to fail by only one point, that was my higher power trying to tell me something.”

Other students attributed their exam performance to not being good at certain types of questions or certain content areas. For example, April partly attributed her exam failure to being unable to correctly answer questions that required her to recall theories of psychological development and the thinkers associated with them, “It seems like... well, it then seemed like my biggest problem was the theorists... the different schools. All the other areas I passed, but that was the hardest... I didn’t have any problem with the social work relationship, boundaries, Code

of Ethics, administration. I didn't have problems with those areas. But when it came to the theorists, then, that's where I messed up."

Some respondents such as April attributed their trouble with certain content areas to personal failures such as succumbing to anxiety. April stated, "I learned them [the theories]... I think it's just I didn't remember them. In some type of way I get all twisted up." Similarly, Danielle associated her exam failure to her not studying enough non-clinical material. She explained that she did not heed LS's advice to remember to study non-clinical content. She explained,

I didn't put too much effort into policies and stuff... I didn't read that at all, and my test had all that stuff on there. That was like, shame on me, because she [LS]... did mention, oh, also review it, but I thought the clinical material was the most important thing to know, what I went to social work school for, to study all those, you know, different theories and things like that. They had a lot of stuff [on the test] to do with businesses and policies, and I didn't know it. I just didn't know it.

Similarly, Danielle, who believed her exam failure "was within my control," stated that she did not prepare enough, succumbed to her own anxiety, and failed to heed LS's advice and tips, "I think it [exam failure] was within my control. I feel that I was not prepared enough. I was too anxious. I was not relaxed. I broke every rule that LS talked about. I didn't know how to work the computer to stop it, and go back to the questions I wanted to flag. I didn't really understand the process."

Others reported their exam failure had to do with taking the exam at the wrong time, specifically, before they were ready to take the exam. Danielle explained that she took the test well before she thought she should. She did so because her agency was going through changes and the only way she could stay at the job was to become licensed and move to another part of

the agency. She therefore decided to take the exam even though she did not feel she was necessarily ready or able to pass it at the time, “I wasn’t ready to take the exam. I rushed because I had a deadline. I knew my job was closing. So I was trying to rush to take the test.”

Martha believed her exam failures to be the result of “not thinking correctly.” She explained that in her opinion the test requires “a general answer, not a specific answer.” To get the correct “general answer” as she called it, the test taker must assume a “mode of thinking” that is different from that of a social worker working in the field. According to Martha, a social worker working in the field thinks analytically, attempts to understand situations from multiple theoretical perspectives, and generally tries to get below the surface of the issue at hand. For the purpose of the test, though, this sort of thinking needs to be replaced with a more concrete, or as Martha called it, “general,” type of thinking that only considers the details provided by the question stem, “They expect a general answer, not a specific answer, and that’s where I was falling into... so I guess that was my downfall.”

Larry saw it the opposite way. He compared his manner of thinking to “baking a cake” and opined that the reason he keeps failing the exam is “basically the wording.” Larry explained that he believes he understands basic social work theory and practice, but that is not necessarily enough to guarantee the correct answer will be chosen, “It’s like baking a cake. It’s like you know all the ingredients. You need the eggs, the flour. You know all the ingredients but for some reason the cake just doesn’t rise or come out right. It was like that for me on the exam. I was like why am I failing this because it’s like I’m answering these questions and I’m like I know this stuff. I’ve been doing it for so many years...” For Larry, what seemed to be missing was the ability to think analytically, to reason, and to apply theories and principles to ethical scenarios that lacked a single correct resolution.

Natalie, who perceived her exam failure as being beyond her control, stated the biggest factor behind her failure of the exam was the fact that the test can only be taken in English. English is not Natalie's first language. She does not feel she can perform as well on a test that is in English as she can on a test in Spanish, which is her native language. Esther agreed, stating that she felt it is unfair and contrary to the social work value of cultural competency that the exam must be taken in English even if the test taker's native language is not English. She went further, stating that she believes the norms of the majority white culture are embedded in the exam's questions such that minority test takers are left at a disadvantage, "Yeah, I'm not sure it [the exam] really applies to all, everyone. I think the mainstream [culture] is more heavily in the test, questions and stuff. I'm not sure they [ASWB] are really covering everyone in there. I'm talking about mainly the way of thinking. I don't think they included every culture."

Emotional Reactions to Exam Performance

Most of the respondents reported mild to moderate feelings of sadness upon learning they had failed the exam. April's comments sum up this experience in a manner reflective of the experience of herself and many of the respondents. She described the moment of exam failure as an emotional low point associated with feelings of inferiority and sadness. She stated, "... and when I hit that final button which gave me the result... that really sent me for an emotional downer. I was really upset over that. It's like my heart dropped to the bottom... to the point that I felt really like, 'Wow, you can't pass anything.'" April, who failed the exam three times and has yet to pass, went on to give this powerful metaphor, "... each time I saw 'fail' it's like I swallowed my own heart. I felt so beat up, so down. Really, I felt like a big loser." Jim, who failed the exam once, stated, "[Upon failing] my heart sunk. My heart sunk and disappointment. I

was thinking it would be a feel good day. I'd feel good about passing. Instead, my heart sunk. I was totally disappointed in myself."

For Luanne the primary feeling she experienced upon receiving her exam score was shame. She said she felt ashamed because she did not live up to the societal expectation that to be a "good social worker" means being able to pass the LMSW exam. She reported, "Passing is more of a societal expectation. It's like, oh, you'll pass the exam. You're smart, you'll do it. If you don't live up to that expectation you're not good." Likewise, Jane also reported feelings of embarrassment and shame upon receiving a failing score. She stated she was upset with herself for having told her supervisor, a School alumna, that she was taking the exam that day. This meant she would have to admit to her supervisor that she had failed the exam, "I was also anxious, too, because I made the mistake of telling my [supervisor I was taking the exam]. I was embarrassed. It was not very long after I'd started working there. It was five months after. I was embarrassed. I was a little embarrassed, not a little, I was embarrassed!" Evan also felt shame. As a result of the shame, he explained, he never tells anyone except his wife when he is about to take the exam in order to avoid the possibility of telling others he failed yet again, "The only person that knows [I'm going to take the exam] is my wife because I'm embarrassed beforehand. I don't want to say I went and took it and then fail because I'm going to be asked if I passed the test. The embarrassment to say... I become shameful."

Mary Beth reported feelings of sadness that lasted for about a day following her failure of the LMSW exam, "... it did affect me emotionally that first day... I was depressed. I was crying... from the place back home. While I was driving I was crying and I was angry. By the time... I came home and I laid here in the dark. I didn't eat but only for a day. The next day as I thought about it and to help me put it in into perspective that it just wasn't meant to be."

Similarly, Danielle reported feelings of sadness and depression that lasted for about a day. Upon learning she had failed the exam, she reports, “I was hurt, I cried. I went to a quiet place, I left out of there... when I left out of there I cried so much. I cried. I was so sad that I messed up.”

One respondent reported ongoing anxiety problems as a result of her repeated exam failures. Natalie, who failed the exam three times and has yet to pass, stated that getting the news she had failed was like having “cold water thrown on your face.” She explained that thinking about the topic of the exam today produces considerable anxiety. She feels the anxiety is persistent and has played a role in undermining her ability to pass. She associated the anxiety to a troubling incident; a few years ago she registered to take the exam, paid the fee, and scheduled a date. When the day of the test arrived, she failed to present to the testing site because she forgot she had scheduled the test. Natalie associates this failure to remember the important appointment with an unconscious wish to keep herself at a safe distance from the anxiety taking the exam produces within her.

Confusion was also one of the emotional reactions to failure. Amy, who has failed the exam twice and has since given up trying to pass, reported that she was surprised and confused to learn she had failed. She was confused because in her professional life she has gotten nothing but positive feedback about her mastery of social work knowledge, skills, and abilities. This feedback has come in the form of verbal praise and, more importantly, in the form of no less than two promotions. It left her with the belief that she had the ability to pass the exam. Failing the exam conflicted with this understanding of her abilities and caused confusion and self doubt. She reported, “It [failing the exam] was really disheartening because I felt like my practice is where it needs to be, right. I have been promoted many times... I get so much confirmation on the fact

that I do have the necessary skills, however, I wasn't able to achieve the elevation from this exam and that bothered me a lot."

Another respondent who reported feelings of confusion and disbelief upon learning she had failed the exam was Martha. She stated, "I remember sitting [for the exam] the first time around, and when I got my score, oh my God. I was just... I was like, 'What?' I couldn't comprehend what it was I did incorrectly. I'm like, 'What? What!' I just couldn't understand it at that time."

Whereas all the respondents reported strong emotional reactions upon getting the news that they had failed, fewer reported long-term emotional effects. One respondent who did, Danielle, reported that an ongoing emotional reaction to exam failure was feelings of guilt, "What I'm feeling now is guilty. Guilty because I'm like, it's been a year, and I carried a book everywhere I go, but never got the chance of downtime to really look at it. So that part is what's making me feel guilty, because I know I can do it, it's just I didn't push myself hard enough."

Only one respondent, Louisa, reported feeling good upon having received a failing score. In fact, she was "surprised" that she had scored only six points below passing. For her, failing the exam was part of a process that began with taking the exam the first time in order to get a sense of what the exam was all about, the mechanics of sitting for the exam, and what it would take to ultimately pass. For her, her initial failing score was not a final comment on her ability to be a licensed social worker, but a "baseline" that gave her a sense of where her testing skills were at present and where she needed to improve, "I didn't really beat myself up. I was kind of surprised that it was only six points [away from passing]. I was kind of happy about that, that OK, this is where, this is my mark. This is where I got to start from."

For respondents who failed the exam multiple times, the emotional response to exam failure seemed to become more stressing with each instance of failure. Martha, who failed the exam twice and passed on the third try, described feeling “devastated” and “disappointed” after failing the exam the first time, but her second time failing was when she broke down in tears and truly began to question herself. She stated,

When I finally hit that submit button, so I could have it [the test] graded, and it came back that I missed it by one point, I just burst into tears. I’m like, what’s going on with me now? What could I have done? I was sure I had passed it that time around. I’m like, okay, this is not happening to me. My husband was waiting for me and, he’s like, what happened? I’m like, I missed it again by one point. By one lousy point. It was just hard as I was trying to understand why I couldn’t pass.

Similarly, Evan, who failed the exam three times and has yet to pass, reported a progression in terms of the emotional reactions he experiences after each exam failure. He said after the first failure he was mildly upset, after the second failure he was “a little bit more upset,” and after the third failure he felt “devastated” and “hopeless.”

It was noted that two respondents reported their primary emotional reaction to exam failure was anger. Esther stated that for her receiving the news she had failed the exam “makes me frustrated, it makes me angry.” Esther firmly believed her repeated exam failures were due to something external to her and beyond her control. Specifically, she maintained that cultural biases embedded within the exam made it harder for someone of her cultural background to obtain a passing score. This belief understandably left her feeling angry and resentful towards the exam and the exam writers. She felt strongly that the exam writers were trying to “trick you more than they are really testing your knowledge.” She alleged the reason they were doing this was to take advantage of already marginalized test takers so they would have to pay to take the exam

time after time, “I feel they’re really trying to trick you, trying to make you not pass it so they can make money.” She said this left her feeling very “disrespected” and, as mentioned before, very angry. She seemed most angry at the fact that minority social workers might be succumbing to unfair treatment, “I don’t respect that... they’re not respecting the minority social workers period. You are not empowering us as a minority social worker and second language speaker.”

Kathy seemed to agree with Esther that the exam contains cultural biases that result in preference being give to majority test takers, and this made her angry. She relayed the following story,

There were times that I felt like whether or not, I was even, like, understanding the questions. Because I will never forget the time where, and this could be something skewed, but I know the first time I took the exam I remember there being a question about a child who had soiled on themselves. I'm biracial and I was like soiled? What does that even mean? For me, I was like, I never heard of this before. And then with the questions, I mean a few of the responses were enuresis, encopresis and some other things. I was like, okay, if I see these four answers, then obviously somebody went to the bathroom on themselves. But I don't know, that's like you know what I mean like urinating? Or that was another, I didn't really know other than that. I remember just thinking at the time, something about it, I'm not even sure if that's a word that I myself would ever use, is that the term? When you think of culture and things like that, I don't even know if I would use that word. You know what I mean?

Luanne explained that for her the thing that made her angry was the disconnect between what the test was assessing and the reality of being a social worker. Much like Larry, who had commented that “it [the exam] doesn’t reflect real life,” Luanne felt the exam was an exercise in futility, an example of an examination that did not assess one’s ability to be a safe and ethical social worker but rather measured one’s ability to pass a standardized exam. She explained,

I was constantly questioning the questions and answers that they had for the questions. I was just like this is absurd. Why would you do this? I would never do this... The question would ask 'What would you do first if someone was suicidal?' The answer would be something so extreme and you would never do that first. I'd be fired. I'd be spoken to by my supervisor if I did that. I'm just sitting there, like, what are they talking about? It's just not realty! It makes me angry.

Finally, respondents such as Larry remarked that upon receiving a failing score they became angry at the fact they knew this meant they would have to register and pay for the exam yet again. Larry stated, "I just didn't understand why I was failing. I was upset and then I was also upset because I don't have money. I don't have money like that to keep paying \$280 something whatever it is. I think it's \$280. I don't have that money to keep paying and knock off."

Chapter Summary

In this chapter respondents' narratives about experiences during the exam were documented. The findings were coded into the following categories: the emotional experience of taking the exam, perceptions of exam performance, and emotional reactions to exam performance. The experience of taking the exam was generally described as a grueling one associated with a range of difficult emotions including fear, anxiety, helplessness, nervousness, surprise, anger, sadness, shame and even physical illness. Also discovered and discussed in this chapter's findings was how certain respondents felt overwhelmed and disoriented by the testing centers' rule and regulations. Regarding perceptions of exam performance, it was found that respondents varied as to whether they attributed their performance to internal or external factors, that is, whether they assumed their exam failure was the result of something within them that is within their control or outside them and beyond their control. Examples of internal factors that

respondents perceived as having an effect on their exam performance were: not studying the correct material, thinking too concretely, and not thinking critically enough. Examples of external factors respondents attributed their exam performance to were: distractions in the testing room, shortcomings of their chosen educational track in social work school, and a higher power watching over them.

Finally, regarding emotional reactions to exam performance, it was found that a majority of respondents experienced sadness and other symptoms of mild depression for one to two days following failing the exam. Of note, only one of the respondents reported persistent or ongoing emotional complaints (severe anxiety) related to exam failure. For the most part, the findings discussed in this chapter revealed the following pattern. Immediately after receiving the test results the respondents were often tearful and experienced such feelings as self-doubt, anger, confusion, surprise, and shock. For one to two days after the exam these feelings were replaced by mild to moderate feelings of shame and sadness. Typically, these feelings resolved on their own within a few days and were followed by a recommitment to study for and retake the LMSW exam.

CHAPTER VII: FINDINGS FOLLOWING THE EXAMINATION

As they discussed their experiences following exam failure, respondents revealed stories about being unable to proceed along their desired professional trajectory due to exam failure. These stories inevitably included examples of resilience and attempts to overcome the roadblocks that are increasingly the norm for social workers who cannot pass the exam and thus remain unlicensed. As such, in this section the narratives were coded into the following categories: feeling stuck and getting unstuck.

Feeling Stuck

Failing the LMSW exam left respondents feeling stuck in many ways. For example, respondents reported that as a result of exam failure they felt stuck between school and the professional world. They also reported finding themselves stuck in lower paying positions or at lower ranks (case worker instead of social worker, line worker instead of supervisor) of employment. Deirdre explained that exam failure is “like an obstacle” that has to be “overcome for me to move forward.” Her narrative listed two ways in which exam failure made her stuck. First, it left her feeling like she is in a mental limbo between school and the professional world. Although she is an MSW graduate, she does not feel fully apart from school, nor totally integrated into the professional world, because the “study portion of my head” needs to remain turned on until she successfully passes the exam. She stated, “I feel as though I’m not finished with school until I actually get my license because I feel as though I still have to keep that study portion of my head on and work at the same time and still try to deal with life because it’s like some things you can’t let go of as far as the concepts of social work until you actually take [and pass] that test!” She went on to explain, “I feel incomplete because I don’t have the license, so to

me even though... I graduated and I got a high degree... still feel like I'm in school until I actually pass this test.”

Second, Deirdre felt stuck because failing the exam meant it was too risky for her to accept a promotion to the title of social worker. She explained that although she could get the promotion without having her license, once promoted she would have six months to obtain licensure. If she did not get licensed by the end of those six months, she would be terminated.

Evan's comments also summed up well the state of feeling stuck that prevailed among the respondents due to exam failure. He stated, “I know that if I could just get into the social work department, I would be able to explore my possibilities and not stay focused on just addiction counseling. I would be able to work inpatient with severely mentally ill clients or outpatient with patients who are more functional. I wanted to explore. I'm not able to without my license. The only way that I can get hired into the social work department is with a license.” Similarly, Evan stated, “I know that if I get my license I could work another job doing therapy or being a consultant or even actually being a supervisor. I know that without the license there's a hundred more guys out there with a license that will be considered first before me.”

Natalie noted that for her feeling stuck had to do primarily with not being able to advance to positions that offer more responsibility and greater pay due to not having a license. She explained that as a result of failing to pass the LMSW exam and become licensed, “you stop getting any type of promotions... you stop growing in your career. You cannot be a supervisor, you cannot do anything.” She described this situation as “frustrating” because it means she is unable to achieve the goal that originally motivated her to attend social work school, namely to achieve a leadership position in which she “assist[s] other people in my community.” As a result of failing and being demoted, her paycheck was decreased by \$10,000. She went on to say, “... it

[exam failure] affected me a lot of ways... I can't grow within the profession. You cannot be a supervisor. You cannot, you're stuck in the same place until you pass. You see yourself going backwards. Also, you see your own department, people who are above you, you feel like they don't have the same respect for you they have for persons who have the license."

The inability to progress professionally was closely followed by financial implications, especially among younger respondents such as Jim and Jane. They had each recently graduated, had significant amounts of student debt, and did not have a previous career's worth of resources or savings to fall back and rely on. Jim stated, "It [failing the exam] did prevent me from applying for the jobs that I wanted. It affected me socio-economically, too, in the sense that I could not obtain a job that paid me what I wanted."

The inability to advance to higher paying positions due to exam failure and subsequent lack of the LMSW license was particularly hard felt by respondents with significant student loan debt. For these respondents, their student loan debt loads contributed to their feeling stuck, not just professionally, but also personally. For example, Jane had to choose between "living paycheck to paycheck" on her own or living with her parents due to her \$80K debt load. This debt load made paying for small things such as food difficult. It also interfered with her ability to pay for the chance to take the exam over again, "I think the biggest part for me is putting the money down again... I think it's \$100 on top of that to physically hand in your paper application. I don't know. I feel like it was more than that." Summing this up, I interpreted these statements, observing that it seemed money was the biggest thing holding her back from taking the exam again. To this interpretation, she responded emphatically, "Yes!"

Esther stated that she felt her repeated exam failures left her feeling stuck. She said she had progressed so much since arriving in this country as a refugee, but since being unable to succeed at passing the exam this progress has come to an end. She is now considering leaving social work altogether and finding another career.

Getting Unstuck

Although Esther's solution to the feeling of being stuck due to exam failure is to leave the social work profession, the majority of respondents reported overwhelmingly that the key to getting unstuck is to pass the LMSW exam. For most, achieving this goal meant studying differently the next time around. Things respondents did differently in their study habits the next time around included: purchasing the practice exam sold by ASWB, studying different test content, taking the exam at a different test site, attempting to improve time management skills, taking clinical classes at the School, and thinking differently (less concretely, more critically).

For Deirdre, the urge to take the exam again as soon as possible was motivated by two desires. First, she wanted to take the exam again before it was updated to include questions about the new *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (2013). Second, she wanted to avoid having to pay further testing fees to take the exam a third, fourth, or fifth time. Deirdre's plan was to do two things differently when it came to her studying. First, she would study ethics, a section she failed to study prior to taking the exam the first time. By studying ethics, she hoped to switch her focus from memorizing facts to becoming a better test taker by thinking critically. Second, she would purchase the ASWB practice test, which was strongly recommended by LS. For Deirdre, paying for the test a second time and committing to the purchase of the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) practice test were major financial decisions. She was deep in student debt and struggling to pay her bills. Paying for these things meant paying for something

else with her credit card, “I’m trying to get my bills down and whatnot so I will not have the physical cash to do it [pay for the exam or the practice exam] so I’m just going to use my credit card... So I’m just putting the bill on top of a bill to try to get ahead.”

Mary Beth reported that she is going to take the test again as soon as possible, “Yes, I’m going to take the test again. I’m not discouraged.” One thing she would do the same as she did the first time she prepared for the test would be to purchase the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) practice tests. She explained she would do this once again because, “really other than experience out there in the work field... you’re not going to be much better than [the ASWB practice test]. You can’t pick up a book and read how to interact with someone or how to come to the best decisions for someone based on interacting with them.” One thing she plans to do differently is she will take the exam at a different testing site in the hopes of avoiding stressful interpersonal situations with the facility staff, “I’m not going to take it [the exam] at the same location because I already have that experience with people in there and I don’t want them to pop up again.”

Danielle reported that she intends to make small changes in her routine the day of the exam to improve her chances of passing the next time she takes the test. These changes include eating a healthy meal the morning of the exam and getting more rest. In the exam room, she intends to pay closer attention to the instructions on how to use the computer, and to ask the testing facility staff questions if she does not understand something. Finally, she intends to try to get a better hold over her stress and anxiety. To do this she plans teach herself to introject LS’s voice, “I just need to learn how to relax, and read through the questions. I need to hear LS’s voice, because when I’m in class with her, I do well. I raise my hand and answer the questions, and go around the room, everything’s ok.”

Amy plans to improve her chances of passing the exam by taking a group exam preparation course. She stated, “I heard so many great things about it [the School’s MSW prep class]. I know someone who failed it [the LMSW exam]; people who failed it many times and then took that class and used the materials that they offer and have passed it... I’m going to see how that works for me.” Larry, who referred to his inability to find an adequate job due to failing the exam and not becoming licensed as “a temporary hold,” plans to take some clinical courses at the School so he will be exposed to the clinical material he feels was not incorporated into his learning experience as an OLM School student, “I want to go back to the School and take some of the clinical classes just to get that. I thought that would have helped me if I did that.”

Finally, as a means to get unstuck many participants used the discussion with me to voice their ideas about ways social work education might be improved vis a vis the matter of how MSW programs prepare students for the LMSW exam. Some respondents felt MSW programs should offer classes specifically geared towards preparing students for the exam. Others believed MSW programs should incorporate exam preparation (for example, doing practice questions) into existing classes. Finally, others argued that placing less emphasis on memorizing theory and more emphasis on role-plays featuring test-like scenarios would be helpful. From this last category was Mary Beth. She stated,

The classes should be about how to interact with people... How to think fully around what is the best decision to make based on the presenting problem. For example, you have a coworker who you find out has a relationship with their client outside the agency. How do you approach that? Do you go to your supervisor? Do you speak? Those questions are on the test! If you don’t experience that in the field or in class, you will never know those types of things. I think that should be added into the curriculum. How do you sit down and deal with the client and get to the right answers based on this presenting problem... I didn’t learn any of that.

Natalie stated that she felt her education at the School had not adequately prepared her for the exam. She said this was due largely to what she perceived as a lack of emphasis on preparing students for the exam. Whereas her social work education had exposed her to the facts and theories on the exam, it did not present tools geared towards actually improving her skills as a test taker. In fact, she observed, whereas the license is gained by passing a standardized exam, the MSW degree itself is obtained by completing an educational program that largely requires papers and, in her case, never required passing an actual exam. She stated, “The classes you take are technical classes, but it’s not, maybe the strategy to take the test... Before you graduate I feel they should grant that [free participation in Licensing Specialist’s (LS) LMSW preparation course] to the students.”

Luanne seemed to second this statement, saying that her hope is that in the future School professors will begin to include test preparation in their class lectures. She said,

I mean I wish that they [the professors] were able to finagle in exam questions starting from the beginning. I actually think that would be really cool if all the professors who taught would maybe do something weird. Have the questions broken up into whatever courses they’re teaching. If someone’s teaching policy or someone’s teaching behavior, they’d be like, ‘Okay the last ten minutes of each class or the last five minutes of each class is going to be five or ten test questions that we’re going to go over that are actual test questions.’ That is somehow related to the course you are taking. Just so that you start to become familiar with the questions and it’s not foreign to you.

Chapter Summary

In summary, this chapter revealed findings about two areas of phenomena related to the fallout of exam failure. First, it noted details about the ways in which respondents reported being unable to proceed along their desired professional trajectories due to exam failure. These stories inevitably included examples of resilience and attempts to overcome the roadblocks that are

increasingly the norm for social workers who cannot pass the exam. As such, the second area this chapter covered was findings as to how respondents attempt to overcome the effects of exam failure. To this end, this chapter's narratives were coded into the following categories: feeling stuck and getting unstuck.

Regarding feeling stuck, respondents overwhelmingly reported the effect of exam failure was a resultant inability to move forward in their social work careers. The way this perceived inability to move forward played out varied from respondent to respondent. Ways in which this played out included not being able to obtain employment as a social worker, not being able to obtain employment in a particular type of social work position, and not earning a desired amount of income. This latter finding had particularly profound meaning and practical implications for newer social workers who are just starting out and are carrying significant student debt loads. Also, it was found that some social workers who fail the exam feel stuck in more symbolic ways; they do not feel fully part of the professional world nor do they feel fully graduated from the academic world from which they came.

Concerning getting unstuck, the principle finding related in this chapter was that the majority of the respondents intend to attempt to move forward with their lives by studying for and retaking the social work licensing exam. Various details and nuances that surfaced as to how respondents would achieve this end included studying differently than before, eating healthier or generally living a healthier lifestyle, and compensating for perceived internal deficits (not knowing enough clinical material; therefore, necessitating enrollment in a clinical class or course).

In summary, this chapter detailed findings about what effects social workers experienced after failing the licensing exam and how they attempted to overcome them. The principle self-report from all the respondents was that exam failure results in an inability to move forward, to grow professionally. While the manner in which this lack of professional development took shape varied, a majority of the respondents expressed a desire to become unstuck by studying for and taking the exam again. Ways in which respondents intend to achieve this goal were revealed.

CHAPTER VIII: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

In the previous three chapters, I attempted to provide a thorough introduction into the experience of LMSW exam failure. I sought to capture the details and nuances, patterns and themes that were identified by the respondents as relevant to their LMSW exam experience. Using the respondents' own words, these chapters revealed the pervasive impact of exam failure. In this concluding chapter, I will interpret what this data is telling us. To do so, the aforementioned findings will be discussed through the lenses of the following theoretical frames: locus of control, attribution theory, and the psychology of event perception. In doing so, I will come to a general conclusion about how social workers understand, experience, react to, and attempt to overcome the phenomenon of licensing exam failure. From this will be drawn previously unattained theoretical propositions about failure in the licensing examination experience of social work practitioners. Additionally, implications for social work education will be examined. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the study's limitations and possible future directions for research.

Discussion of Findings

This dissertation study is the first of its kind to explore the lived experience of social workers who have failed the LMSW exam. However, the data garnered through this dissertation study can be discussed in the context of previous studies on the phenomenon of failure in general. I used theory to explicate the findings related to the phenomenon of interest: LMSW exam failure.

Locus of Control

The idea of locus of control relates directly to the topic of academic performance and test taking. Applying this theory to an inquiry about social workers' perceptions of their unsatisfactory performance on the social work licensing exam raises the question of whether or not these individuals believed their failure was related to internal or external factors. The findings from this dissertation study revealed that some of the respondents attributed their exam failure to events and characteristics external to themselves. Others attributed their exam failure to internal factors over which they felt they had control. Respondents who were internally focused reported the following internal factors as having an impact on their exam performance: not studying the correct material, thinking too concretely, and not thinking critically enough. Externally focused respondents identified the following factors as external reasons for exam failure: distractions in the testing room, shortcomings of their educational experience at social work school, and a higher power watching over them.

Notably, certain respondents described themselves in a way that suggested they simultaneously attributed their exam performance to a mixture of internal and external factors. Two examples of this were the cases of Deidre and Mary Beth. Deirdre attributed her exam failure to a mixture of internal shortcomings and external distractions. She stated her decision not to study the ethics section of the study guide provided during the licensing specialist's (LS) prep course because "I thought I knew it" was a principle reason she failed. She also stated that distractions in the testing room contributed to a situation in which she "couldn't really focus" and lead to failure. Mary Beth initially attributed her exam failure to internal forces, saying "it was all me," then went on to explain she believed a "higher power" had caused her to fail. She said a higher power watching out for her had in fact protected her by making her fail; had she

passed she would have taken a part-time social work position and in so doing forfeited her right to the disability pension she is currently receiving from her employer.

In addition, this study did not produce results that corresponded with what the research has to say about locus of control and culture. Whereas the research suggests individuals from cultures that espouse group cohesion over individualism are more likely to attribute outcomes to external factors, this was not found to be the case in this study (Ohlson, 2003; Spector, Sanchez, Siu, Salgado, & Ma, 2004; Wood, Saylor & Cohen, 2009). Nor was it discovered that respondents from highly individual cultures exhibited internal locus of control. The sample, which consisted of Caucasians, African Americans, Hispanics and one Asian-American, did not seem to vary in terms of locus of control identity and cultural lines. Many of the African-American respondents, who research would suggest come from a culture that espouses group cohesion over individualism, had internal locus of control (Sue & Sue, 2003). Also, some of the Caucasians interviewed, people who one could conclude come from a cultural/racial background more likely to espouse individualism, attributed their exam failure to factors beyond their control (Sue & Sue, 2003).

Finally, I observed both the respondents who had internal locus of control and the respondents who had external locus of control could be described as motivated and making good use of available resources. Indeed, some of the respondents who identified their exam failure as related to external factors beyond their control made excellent use of the School's LMSW preparation course. They not only found the course to be a source of academic knowledge, but also a place of support, empathy, and community. This contrasts with findings from the research, which suggest only people with internal locus of control have the quality of effectively using

available resources and only people with external locus of control prefer to work and learn in group situations (Olhson, 2003; Rotter, 1954, 1966; Spector, 1983).

In summary, while this study did not test the theory of locus of control, it did assume locus of control to be a guiding theory capable of helping us to better understand how social workers make sense of licensing exam failure. To this end, the findings of this study appear to suggest that social workers make sense of their failure of the licensing exam by believing in the power of various forces, some internal and others external, but all of which have the end result of somehow leading to, causing, or putting someone at increased risk of exam failure. Perhaps most importantly, for some of the respondents locus of control was complex and multidimensional. That is, some respondents were not entirely internal or entirely external. Rather, their narratives suggested that they vacillated between seeing themselves as responsible for exam failure and attributing exam failure to forces beyond themselves.

Attribution Theory

Analyzing the results of this dissertation study through the lens of attribution theory also enriches what the narratives suggested. In attribution theory, locus of control is only one concept among many. Specifically, locus of control is one of three causal dimensions (Weiner, 2010). The other dimensions are stability and controllability. Stability refers to whether an attributional cause is constant or varies over time. Controllability refers to whether an attributional cause is subject to volitional influence. It is linked to shame in situations of uncontrollable causality and guilt and regret in situations of controllable causality (Weiner, 2010).

Regarding attribution theory and academic performance, Hunter and Baker (1987) conclude that educators should encourage students to attribute academic performance outcomes to effort instead of ability. This is because the latter leads to low self-esteem and the belief that

future strivings will be futile in cases of poor academic performance. Research by Graham (1997) proposed that poor academic performance was due to high external locus of control, feelings of lack of control over academic outcomes, and beliefs that there will be little fluctuation in outcomes over time. Based on these findings, it would be assumed that the majority of the respondents interviewed in the study would present with an external locus of control. Additionally, attribution theory would suggest that the respondents might see repeated exam failure as a stable part of their future test performance. For example, subjects might assume positive test performance relates to having a perquisite set of abilities that they inherently lack and have no chance of obtaining.

The findings from this dissertation study are quite different. The respondents' stories revealed themselves to be anything but overwhelmingly individuals with a primarily external locus of control. To the contrary, many of the respondents reported to have internal locus of control. Additionally, a significant number of the respondents endorsed evidence of a mixture of both internal and external tendencies. Findings also differed as to stability. An overwhelming majority of the respondents expressed an understanding that academic performance is fluid instead of permanent and inflexible over time. This was evidenced in the fact that the majority of the respondents endorsed a belief that they would ultimately pass the exam. I describe this as a sense of hopefulness. All but one of the respondents reported being highly motivated to retake the exam. All but one of the respondents were in some stage of preparing to study for or actively studying for another attempt at passing the exam.

With regard to controllability, the fact that many of the respondents reported feeling shame and only one of the respondents reported feeling guilt or regret would suggest many of the respondents felt they had little control over the outcome of their testing experience (Weiner,

2010). If this is the case, it might mean more of the respondents were externally oriented than they admitted to be. Reasons for why respondents would not accurately disclose whether they are internally or externally oriented are unknown at this time, but it seems possible that fear of judgment by the researcher or a desire to satisfy the researcher are plausible explanations. For example, the notion of social desirability bias posits that survey respondents answer questions in a way they believe will be viewed positively by others (Chung & Monroe, 2003; Fisher, 1993; Krumpal, 2013). It is especially relevant to self-reports in which respondents are liable to either over-report behavior they perceive as desirable and under-report behavior they perceive as undesirable. In this way social desirability bias can distort the accuracy of data gathered via respondent self-reporting (Gonzalez-Ocantos, 2012; Lowndes, 2012; Vernon, 2011). As concerns the current study, it is possible that social desirability bias resulted in an underreporting of the frequency of external locus of control and an over-reporting of the frequency of internal locus of control.

The findings reveal an interesting contrast. On the one hand, many of the respondents did not endorse a belief that exam failure was a permanent part of their lives. On the other hand, the evidence of many cases of feelings of shame suggests a significant number of respondents felt little control over the testing experience. This contrast reinforces the finding that many of the respondents endorse a mixture of internal and external tendencies, and begins to give rise to a possible conclusion that exam failure is not just about being internal or external, but is in fact highly multidimensional and transactional.

Psychology of Event Perception

Applying the theoretical tenets of the psychology of event perception to the study's findings reinforces the growing notion that licensing exam failure is not a linear phenomenon (Zacks 2001, 2007a, 2007b). Perceptions of causality as related to an event are important because they "constitute an important stimulant to motivation" (Hunter & Barker, 1987, p. 51). By focusing on the respondents' view of what caused an outcome, regardless of the accuracy of that perception, we meet the respondents where they are at and obtain a fuller understanding of their point of view. Furthermore, event perception provides a window into how respondents define an event, which can lead to an improved awareness of key factors elicited by the semi-structured interviews.

Findings revealed respondents perceived the LMSW exam experience to consist of three key events. First, there was the act of preparing for the exam. Second, there was the act of taking and failing the exam. Third, there was the act of recovering from exam failure. It was discovered that these events can be of short or long duration. Some people prepared for months, others for a few days. Some respondents waited years to retake the exam, others took it immediately after the three-month waiting period was over. Although the events were divided in the same manner by all the respondents, they varied as to their content. No one event was exactly the same as another. Multiple and diverse factors played important roles to varying degrees. These findings support the conclusion that failure has to be understood in transactional context.

Theoretical Propositions

Grounded theory speaks to the possibility of building theories from data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Rather than attempting to prove the accuracy of a theory by testing a hypothesis, grounded theory works the opposite way. As previous research has shown, it is possible to use

qualitative data to develop a mid-level theory that describes a previously unstudied phenomenon of interest (Thompson, Cole & Nitzarim, 2012). Mid-level theory integrates theory and empirical research by starting with a phenomenon of interest and abstracting from it to create general statements (Merton, 1968). This paradigm epitomizes the current research study, which explored a heretofore unstudied phenomenon of interest that lacked previously identified theories or testable hypotheses. The study yielded data that can be organized in a way that better explicates the phenomenon of interest and in so doing offers a mid-level theory.

I would like to propose the following theoretical propositions as a means to explain both the data and what is actually happening between the elements this data points us in the direction of. First, I propose that licensing exam failure is a multidimensional phenomenon. Second, licensing exam failure is a transactional phenomenon. Combined, these propositions point to the conclusion that licensing exam failure is best understood using a multidimensional, transactional lens that can incorporate a range of factors to capture the complexity of licensing exam failure and better inform efforts to relieve it. These theoretical propositions grow out of observations made from the study's data and take a step toward the attainment of a testable hypothesis that could lead to quantifiable conclusions about the little-known matter of licensing exam failure.

The data collected here demonstrates that licensing exam failure is not merely a matter of whether an individual has a primarily internal or external locus of control. It is a phenomenon with multiple dimensions, which vary from subject to subject and are shaped by their transactions vis a vis such factors as race, social class, gender, and educational background. Perhaps one of this study's most significant findings is that a number of the respondents had neither an exclusively external locus of control nor an exclusively internal locus of control. They were much more complex. They encompassed evidence of both internal and external locus of

control qualities, and often seemed to vacillate between a preference for one over the other. In this regard, licensing exam failure was a deeply human experience, one that does not fit into a pre-defined box but rather has the complexity and contradictions that define the human condition. The respondents had depth and the phenomenon of interest - as a purely human experience - also had great depth. Failure for one subject resulted in different emotions, different responses and different behaviors than for another subject.

From the findings of this study, then, it becomes apparent that a one-dimensional approach to licensing exam failure is incomplete. As Germain and Gitterman (1996) observed, life is about a constant transaction between the human organism and the social environment. Licensing exam failure cannot be adequately understood if it is looked at from the perspective of one-dimensional measures, such as test score. The results of this study lead to the conclusion that one indicator alone cannot capture all the aspects that constitute the experience of licensing exam failure. For example, focusing on one indicator such as test score can miss much. A social worker may fail the exam with a score of approximately 50%, but the fact remains that worker's Grade Point Average (GPA) in social work school was a 4.0. Multidimensional measures, then, can complement a singular focus on something basic such as test scores. By focusing on the transactions between each of these measures, we gain a more robust understanding of the phenomenon of interest in its entirety.

Furthermore, as the data yielded from this research study shows, the respondents themselves describe licensing exam failure as a multidimensional, transactional process. No respondent provided an LMSW examination story that consisted solely of details about their examination score. Rather, all the respondents gave stories that incorporated a host of seemingly divergent factors as they attempted to weave together a narrative about LMSW examination

failure. These narratives included stories of financial hardship, professional aspirations, emotional downturns, job losses, and even physical illness. In other words, licensing examination failure is a multidimensional phenomenon that encompasses educational, social, economic and even physical aspects. Each test taker experiences the transaction between and among these factors and the act of taking the exam differently.

The tenets of adult learning theory enhance these theoretical propositions. Andragogy maintains that adult learners learn best from educators who help them integrate knowledge into their daily work, provide learners the opportunity to work in small groups, and help learners develop critical thinking skills (Karatza, 2005; Knowles, 1980, 1989). Adult learners are propelled by a pragmatic wish to use or apply the knowledge they obtain (Tough, 1968). Adult learners choose to learn for many different reasons. Their learning efforts can be activity-oriented, goal-oriented, or learning-oriented (Houle, 1961). The manner in which they choose to learn also varies widely (Penland, 1979). This leads to the conclusion that different respondents will require different assistance to successfully pass the exam. For example, a subject whose failure is closely associated with poorly managed diabetes requires a different intervention than a subject who did not attend an LMSW preparation course and as such did not receive the educational and affirming benefits of the course. In summary, the experience of licensing exam failure is a function of the outcome of the transactions between multidimensional forces. The manner in which one prepares, class status, educational experience and, finally, the act of failing the test itself, all interact to form a licensing exam experience that is unique to each individual. As such, it is a multidimensional, transactional phenomenon.

Limitations of the Study

This dissertation study's primary limitations are those typically associated with the use of an exploratory, inductive, and qualitative research approach (Reamer, 1998; Rubin & Babbie, 2005). The use of such an approach did not allow for a previously unknown empirical result to be obtained and expressed in a quantified manner. Furthermore, the findings discussed herein are not generalizable to social workers beyond the dissertation study's sample, which, although sufficient in size for this type of research, was smaller than the sample size that would have been used in a quantitative study.

The use of semi-structured, narrative interviews rather than structured interviews also resulted in limitations. A semi-structured interview, "is an interaction between an interviewer and a respondent in which the interviewer has a general plan of inquiry but not a specific set of questions that must be asked in particular words and in a particular order" (Rubin & Babie, 2005, p. 447). It differs from structured interviews, which consist of questions that are "written out in advance exactly the way they are to be asked" (Patton, 1990, p. 285). Although I did not note evidence of interviewer bias or respondent bias, the possibility of the existence of such biases influencing the manner in which the data was collected and interpreted was inevitably present. Indeed, it is possible that some respondents were not honest about their locus of control status, perhaps because they wanted to please me or feared judgment by me. If so, this would be consistent with previous research that has demonstrated how social desirability can distort the accuracy of data gathered via respondent self-reporting (Chung & Monroe, 2003; Fisher, 1993; Gonzalez-Ocantos, 2012; Krumpal, 201; Lowndes, 2012; Vernon, 2011). On the other hand, had structured interviews been used, they would have not have had the same risk for bias. Also, they

would have offered higher amounts of reliability and could have produced generalizable results if sampling has been gathered through probability sampling.

To attempt to compensate for these limitations, I followed the framework established by Riessman (1993). That is, I made sure to describe how the interpretations were produced and made visible what was done. Furthermore, I attempted to capitalize on the strengths of qualitative research, namely the ability of the chosen research approach to offer greater flexibility. This was very valuable because in this research study the phenomenon of interest varied in detail and substance to at least some extent for each subject. Being able to adapt to the differences in the narratives as they unfolded, as opposed to having to rigidly stick to a formal script, ensured the study captured the nuance and complexity of its phenomenon of interest without having to reject or consider certain narratives less valuable because they failed to touch upon pre-determined topics.

Implications and Recommendations for Social Work Education

The indelible role the School's LMSW preparation course played in the respondents' licensing exam failure experience speaks to the important implications this study has for social work education. The same can be said for the fact that respondents spoke at such great length about their educational experiences at the School in general. As such, this researcher would like to point out the following implications and make the following recommendations for social work education based upon this dissertation study's findings.

Regarding implications, all the respondents spoke highly of the School. In particular, they revealed they believe the School to be a prestigious yet accessible school. This seemed to contribute to a feeling of pride and satisfaction that carried over into and greatly influenced the respondents' view of themselves as social workers. Although the majority of them had yet to

pass the exam and become licensed, they all firmly identified as social workers. This appeared to be linked to the fact that they perceived themselves as having accomplished a great achievement by graduating from the School. Satisfaction and pride with one's social work alma mater may be protective factors against burnout and other negative feelings stemming from exam failure.

At the same time, a few respondents stated they believed their choice of educational track at the School, specifically the Community Organizing track, put them at a disadvantage when it came to the examination. These individuals felt they were not adequately prepared for the examination, especially when it came to questions about clinical topics. Interestingly, whereas many of these respondents reported such things as never having been exposed to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), the fact remains they all took and passed Human Behavior and the Environment (HBSE) III, a required advanced course that covers psychopathology content and the use of the DSM in clinical care and the delivery of social work services. This implies students are not aware they are being exposed to the requisite testing material, and suggests the HBSE III class might be lacking in terms of how it is taught or structured.

Perhaps the most important implication of the study findings is that attention must be paid to the timing of when social workers are given the option of taking an LMSW examination preparation course. All the respondents took the School's LMSW exam prep course and spoke highly of that experience. But one wonders, what would that experience have been like if it occurred during the course of the respondents' MSW studies instead of following graduation from social work school? This researcher proposes that licensing exam preparation be added to the MSW curriculum rather than being relegated to the area of continuing education. This could be accomplished by creating a mini course lasting five to eight weeks and taught by a licensing

specialist (LS). This would be beneficial because it would ensure all students could reap the benefits of participation in the preparation course. It would also be included in the cost of tuition so course participation would not represent an additional expense to cash-strapped alumni.

Recommendations for Future Research

This dissertation was an initial foray into the heretofore unexplored world of social workers' perceptions of LMSW examination failure. It represents the start of a new body of literature on the matter of how social workers come to understand exam failure, post-MSW learning, continuing education, and adult life long learning. It is couched in the context of a professional social work environment wherein obtaining licensure is a critical component of one's career. Findings from this dissertation study suggest licensing examination failure is a multidimensional and transactional phenomenon. Directions for future research are many.

Future research might include the replication of the study with social workers who failed the clinical, or LCSW, social work examination. In New York State, to be eligible to sit for the LCSW examination a social worker must have an MSW with at least 12 semester hours of coursework deemed to be clinical coursework by the Department of Education (Office of the Professions, 2013). To meet the experience requirement, a social worker must, "have completed 2000 client contact hours over a continuous period of at least 36 months (three years) and not to exceed six calendar years of supervised experience in diagnosis, psychotherapy and assessment-based treatment planning with at least three years of post-degree experience" (Office of the Profession, 2013, p. 1). Once licensed as an LCSW, an individual's scope of practice encompasses that of an LMSW and, in addition, includes the ability to independently make diagnoses and provide psychotherapy services. An LCSW has the right to legally describe him or

herself as a psychotherapist, whereas a holder of the LMSW does not (Office of the Professions, 2013).

The LMSW can thus be conceptualized as a prerequisite for the LCSW. Furthermore, the LMSW is for many social workers a final destination. That is, because of their career goals and interests, many social workers do not have a need to obtain the LCSW, which allows for the independent practice of psychotherapy. Viewed through this lens, the LMSW is considered more of a universal requirement for social work growth whereas the LCSW is seen as a goal for those whose interests are strictly clinical. The present dissertation study did not include social workers who failed the LCSW examination because it was concluded based on a review of the available research that failure of the LMSW examination presents a more immediate and challenging obstacle than failure of the LCSW examination. Additionally, the time and material resources available for the completion of this dissertation study did not allow for a larger study that might have included social workers who failed the LCSW examination.

Replicating the present dissertation study with LCSW test-takers who failed that examination would be valuable for the same reasons this study was valuable. Namely, it would provide data on a heretofore unexamined phenomenon of interest that is highly relevant to the areas of social work professional development and education. Additionally, replication of the present study with LCSW examination takers would be beneficial because the present study is geared toward the research of a subject that is little understood and lacks testable theories. This is certainly true of LCSW test-takers. At this time we do not have any research findings that shed light on such things as how these individuals understand, experience, or make sense of exam failure. Therefore, rather than attempt a quantitative study that tests a specific hypothesis, a qualitative research methodology such as the one of this dissertation study is most appropriate to

immediate, future research on the topic of LCSW examination failure. Therefore, replication of the present study with LCSW test-takers who failed that examination is one avenue of future research.

A second avenue of future research is a comparative study that examines the similarities and differences between the experience of LMSW and LCSW examination failure. As was previously mentioned, at this time we know little save for the findings of this dissertation study about LMSW exam failure, and we know nearly nothing about the same issue as it pertains to LCSW exam failure. An interesting possibility, once sufficient data is gathered about LCSW examination failure, would be to see if there are similarities between the ways in which LMSW examination takers and LCSW exam takers understand, experience, make sense of, and ultimately respond to exam failure and its effects.

Lastly, future research might be geared towards testing the theoretical propositions that this dissertation study put forth. Here the option arises to begin to do some quantitative research on the topic of licensing examination failure. The value of this type of research is that it could lead to generalizable results. Based on the findings from this dissertation study, we know that external factors associated with exam failure include distractions in the testing room, perceived shortcomings in one's social work education experience, and the perceived role of a higher power. Having been pointed in the direction of these factors by this research study, future studies might examine the role of these factors in greater detail and attempt to determine whether the reported role of these factors is factual or mere perception. Or, a study might be done that explores the impact of specific transactional factors and their role in licensing examination failure. For example, based on the findings from this study we know that test takers have identified financial factors as influencing such things as when they retake the test. We also know

test takers have pointed to cultural factors as influencing how they understand test questions. Studies might be conducted comparing the manner in which financially well-off test takers experience failure verses how low income test takers or test takers with high student debt loads experience test failure. Additionally, on the topic of culture, a future study might explore how culture plays out in the testing experience.

Conclusion

This dissertation study produced findings that detail how the experience of failing the social work licensing examination has a pervasive impact on the professional lives of social workers as well as important but less lasting effects on other aspects of their psychosocial well-being. As I went through the process of completing the interviews, it became apparent that there was a pressing desire on the part of the participants to share their stories and to get a message across. For some this message was intended to be of help to others. Other respondents wished to warn, prepare, or otherwise assist those who will be taking the examination in the future. For others, the experience of sitting for the interview was cathartic. It was an opportunity for respondents to relive, reflect upon, and gain insight into an important event in their lives.

All the respondents were highly verbal and forthcoming. They all were deeply committed to their identities as social workers, too. Despite the fact that the majority of respondents had yet to pass the examination and obtain licensure, all the respondents strongly identified with being social workers and thought themselves to be highly skilled, competent, and empathic members of the social work profession. Even the one respondent who was thinking of finding a new career maintained that she loved social work and was only considering leaving the profession because she felt the examination was unfairly biased against minorities. As such, it is possible to describe the respondents as strong willed and anything but weak or damaged. Despite their examination

failure and having to endure the repercussions of failure, for the most part these individuals maintained a strong identification with the social work profession, its mission, and values.

The experience of engaging with the respondents was powerful and rewarding. Listening to individuals who had never shared their LMSW examination story with anyone, seeing them light up when they described their pride at having graduated from the School and their commitment to overcoming the effects of examination failure, was inspiring. At times, I found myself using clinical skills as I listened to stories filled with pain and other difficult emotions. Although this dissertation study did not yield nor attempt to yield clinical benefits, this clinical view of the respondents seemed to be what gave the experience of conducting the interviews, writing up the findings, and drawing the conclusions a more robust and human flavor. These participants were not one-dimensional beings merely recounting a memory from their past. They were human beings with hopes and fears, dreams and aspirations who demonstrated the courage necessary to spend up to two hours reflecting upon an intense emotional experience with a complete stranger. They brought with them a diverse range of life experiences, economic backgrounds, professional interests, racial/ethnic identities, ages, and genders.

The unique details and nuances of the intimate lives of each subject were discovered to be deeply woven into the fabric of their LMSW examination stories. This understanding of the respondents, clinical yet dynamic, engendered and indeed goes hand in hand with the study's principal theoretical propositions. Namely, that licensing examination failure is a multidimensional and transactional phenomenon. Stated plainly, at the heart of the phenomenon of licensing examination failure are the complex, unique men and women who experience it. To

understand this phenomenon is to attempt to get to know them and all the intimate aspects of their lives.

Appendix A

Examples of Question Types

Recall Question: According to Freud's 5-stage model of psychosexual development, the fifth stage is:

- a. Genital Stage
- b. Phallic Stage
- c. Anal Stage
- d. Oral Stage

Answer

Freud's 5-stage model of psychosexual development is as follows: Oral Stage, Anal Stage, Phallic Stage, Latency Stage and Genital Stage. The correct answer is A, Genital Stage.

Application Question: A mother complains to her social worker that her 6 month old son only appears happy when he is putting something in his mouth. According to Freud's 5-stage model of psychosexual development, the child is most likely in:

- a. the Latency Stage
- b. the Genital Stage
- c. the Oral Stage
- d. the Anal Stage

Answer

In this question you must recall that, in general, different behaviors and ages are associated with each stage of Freud's 5-stages of psychosexual development. Next, you have to apply that information to the facts provided in the question stem: the child is 6 months old and derives pleasure orally. Accordingly, the correct answer C, the Oral Stage.

Reasoning Question: The daughter of one of the residents at a senior citizen living center approaches a social worker on staff. She tells the social worker her 2 year-old son is chronically anxious and suffers with constipation. The mother says a doctor examined the child and did not discover any medical explanation for these symptoms and encouraged her to seek counseling for the child because he “is probably in the Anal Stage.” The BEST thing for the social worker to do is:

- a. Arrange a time when the social worker and the child can meet so a full psychosocial assessment can be completed
- b. Refresh his memory on issues related to childhood development and then offer to begin short-term counseling
- c. Refer the mother to a social worker with experience working with children and knowledge of various theories of human development and behavior
- d. Take the child to the living center’s on-site physician for another medical evaluation, confirm initial doctor’s claim there is no organic explanation for the symptoms, then offer to begin therapy

Answer

In this question, you are asked to recall information about issues of childhood development and ethical social work practice. You needed to know that when all medical explanations have been ruled out, counseling from a social worker for a child presenting with these symptoms is an acceptable social work intervention. However, the question stem gives evidence that the social worker does not have much knowledge in areas related to childhood development. The Code of Ethics states that social workers should refer clients elsewhere if they do not have the skills necessary to provide the client with the best sort of care. Therefore, C is the correct answer.

Appendix B

CUNY Graduate Center Institutional Review Board Approval #1



Human Research Protections Program
Hunter College (CUNY) HRPP Office

DATE: September 12, 2014

TO: Scott Graybow
FROM: Hunter College (CUNY) HRPP Office

PROJECT TITLE: [587874-1] Understanding failure: Social workers reflect on perceptions of their social work licensing exam experience

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS

DECISION DATE: September 12, 2014

EXPIRATION DATE: September 11, 2015

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category # 2

Thank you for your submission for this project. It has been determined that this project, as submitted, is EXEMPT according to federal regulations, under 45 CFR 46.101(b).

We will retain a copy of this correspondence within our records. If the scope of this project changes, you must submit a modification request form for a determination to be made whether the project remains exempt.

If you have any questions, please contact the HRPP Office at (212) 650-3053 or hrpp@hunter.cuny.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within the City University of New York's records.

Appendix C

CUNY Graduate Center Institutional Review Board Approval #2

	Human Research Protections Program Hunter College (CUNY) HRPP Office
DATE:	October 30, 2014
TO:	Scott Graybow
FROM:	Hunter College (CUNY) HRPP Office
PROJECT TITLE:	[587874-2] Understanding failure: Social workers reflect on perceptions of their social work licensing exam experience
SUBMISSION TYPE:	Amendment/Modification
ACTION:	DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS
DECISION DATE:	October 30, 2014
EXPIRATION DATE:	September 11, 2015
REVIEW CATEGORY:	Exemption category # 2

Thank you for your Modification Request submission for this project. It has been determined that this project remains EXEMPT FROM IRB REVIEW.

Changes approved: Interview will be conducted in person or via telephone, revised consent form, and revised App. Part II.

We will retain a copy of this correspondence within our records. If the scope of this project changes, you must submit a modification request form for a determination to be made whether the project remains exempt.

If you have any questions, please contact Sarah Leon at (212) 650-3053 or bleon@hunter.cuny.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

Appendix D

Informed Consent

CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Graduate Center

CONSENT TO PARTICPATE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT

Project Title: Understanding failure: Social workers reflect on perceptions of their social work licensing exam experience

Principal Investigator: *Scott Graybow*

Graduate Student
CUNY Graduate Center

365 5th Ave, New York, NY 10016
(212) 817-7000

Faculty Advisor: *Dr. Manny J. Gonzalez*

Associate Professor

Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College

2180 Third Avenue at 119th Street
New York, NY 10035

212.396.7554

Site where study is to be conducted: *18 East 16th Street Suite 503 New York, NY 10003 OR by telephone*

Introduction/Purpose: You are invited to participate in a research study. The study is conducted under the direction of Scott Graybow of the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. The purpose of this research study is to explore the ways in which the experience of failing the LMSW licensing exam impacts the thoughts and feelings, growth and behavior of social workers. You are being asked to participate because you are a social work graduate of the Silberman School of Social Work who failed the LMSW exam at least one time. By interviewing social workers who failed the LMSW exam, I hope to gain knowledge that will lay the groundwork for an improved understanding of the phenomenon of social work licensing exam failure.

Procedures: Twenty individuals are expected to participate in this study. Each subject will participate in either a face-to-face interview or a telephone interview. The time commitment of each participant is expected to be two hours (for both in-person and telephone interviewees). Each session will take place at 18 East 16th Street Suite 503 New York, NY 10003 or by telephone. The information I gather from you will be used to write a dissertation, which will be submitted to the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. The findings from this research could also be published in academic journals, magazines or as a book. In any of these scenarios, your name and other identifying information will not be included for publication and your confidentiality will be protected by use of a pseudonym. Upon receiving your permission, I will create an audio file of our interview for the purpose of being able to record the details of your story with the up-most accuracy. If you say something and you do not want it included in your interview, let me know and I will erase that part of the interview after our meeting. After we meet, your interview will be transcribed by a professional transcribing service. The service will not know your name or other identifying information because those details will not be included in the audio file. All materials related to the study will be kept on my personal computer, which is password protected. Additionally, you will be asked to complete a short questionnaire intended to gather data about your educational and economic background.

Possible Discomforts and Risks: Your participation in this study might lead you to get upset from talking about some of your experiences regarding the LMSW exam. If that happens and you do not wish to continue talking about a specific line of thought, please let me know. In that case we can take a break, move on to another topic from your story, or even terminate the interview, if necessary. If you so desire or I believe it would benefit you, I can provide you with

a list of psychological treatment centers in the community that treat patients on a sliding fee scale.

Benefits: There are no direct benefits. However, participating in the study will allow you the opportunity to reflect on your LMSW exam experience.

Alternatives: There are no applicable alternatives to participating in the study.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you may decide not to participate without prejudice, penalty, or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to leave the study, please contact the principal investigator Scott Graybow to inform him of your decision.

Financial Considerations: Participation in this study will involve no cost to the subject. For your participation in this study you will receive a \$25 American express gift card. If you complete the interview in-person, you will receive the card at the time of your interview. Respondents who complete the interview by telephone will receive the gift card by having it mailed to them. This will require the collection of the respondents' mailing addresses. To protect privacy, the address will not be stored. Rather, the address will be written down directly onto the envelope in which the gift card will be mailed. Further, the audio recorder will be turned off at the time the subject relays their address so as to avoid having this information be recorded. You should know that you will receive the gift card regardless of whether you decline to answer my questions, if you terminate the interview prematurely or if you decide to opt out of the study. You will be given the gift card at the conclusion of the interview. If you opt out of the study before the interview is complete, you will receive the gift card at the time you opt out of the study.

Confidentiality: The data obtained from you will be collected via audio. The collected data will be accessible to Scott Graybow, the principal investigator. The researcher will protect your confidentiality by ensuring your name and other identifying information will not be included for publication. Your confidentiality will be protected by use of a pseudonym. All collected data will be stored in the office of the Faculty Advisor of the Principal Investigator. The purpose of recording the interview is to enable the principal investigator to record the details of your story with the up-most accuracy. To protect respondents from breach of confidentiality, names and other personal identifying information will not be asked during the interview and will not be recorded on the audio file.

Contact Questions/Persons: If you have any questions about the research now or in the future, you should contact the Principal Investigator, Scott Graybow, (212) 396-7886, smi0016@hunter.cuny.edu. If you have any questions concerning your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the CUNY Research Compliance Administrator at 646-664-8918.

Statement of Consent:

“I have read the above description of this research and I understand it. I have been informed of the risks and benefits involved, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. Furthermore, I have been assured that any future questions that I may have will also be answered by the principal investigator of the research study. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

I will be given a copy of this statement.

By verbally consenting, I understand that I agree to participate in the study.

Check one:

Verbal consent obtained: _____

Verbal consent not obtained: _____

Appendix E

Demographic Questionnaire

Age: _____

Location of birth: _____

Where did you attend college? _____

Where did you attend social work school? _____

What would you say was your socio-economic class growing up? (choose one that best fits)

1. Poor
2. Working class
3. Middle Class
4. Wealthy

How many times did you fail the LMSW exam? _____

What is your self-identified:

Race: _____

Ethnicity: _____

Gender: _____

Are you currently employed as a social worker? _____

If so, where do you work? _____

Did you have a different career prior to completing your MSW degree? _____

If so, what was your previous career/profession? _____

What is your familial income? (If you are single list your income. If you are married or in a civil partnership list your income combined with your partner's income) _____

What zip code do you currently live in? _____

Appendix F

Email to Social Work Alumni Seeking Study Participants

Greetings alumni,

My name is Scott Graybow. I am the Principal Investigator for a research study about social workers who failed the LMSW exam. I am completing this project to meet the requirements for my degree, the PhD in Social Welfare.

I am writing to you because I am seeking study participants. Individuals who volunteer will receive a \$25 American Express gift card. To be eligible to participate you must have failed the LMSW licensing exam at least once. Participating will mean completing a two- hour interview during which I will ask you to tell me about your experience with the LMSW exam.

Participation is voluntary. If you wish to participate, please respond to this email by sending a message to smi0016@hunter.cuny.edu.

Regards,

Scott Graybow

Appendix G

Telephone Screening

Hello.

Thank you for expressing interest in participating in my research study, "Understanding failure: Social workers reflect on perceptions of their social work licensing exam experience." The purpose of this call is to confirm you meet the necessary criteria for participation in the research study. If you do meet the criterion, we can go ahead and schedule your interview. If you don't I will be happy to explain why.

The sole criterion for participation in the research study is you must have failed the LMSW exam at least once.

Do I have your verbal consent to complete the telephone screen to determine if you meet the criteria to participate in this research study?

No – stop, do not complete screen

Yes- continue, complete screen below

Could you please tell me, have you failed the LMSW exam at least once?

Yes- go to Option A

No- go to Option B

Option A: Thank you. Based on your response, you do meet the criterion to participate in the research study. Please feel free to ask me any questions. Remember, participation is voluntary. Would you like to go ahead and schedule your interview now?

Option B: Thank you. Based on your response you do not meet the criterion to participate in the study. This is because you indicated you have not failed the LMSW exam at least once. Do you have any questions about this? Thank you for your time and for expressing interest in my research study.

Appendix H

Interview Guide

Research Question

How do social workers experience preparing for, failing and managing the effects of failing the LMSW exam? What do their narratives reveal about the professional, emotional and social implications of exam failure; the causes attributed to exam failure; and how social workers perceive exam failure? Can their narratives lead to mid-level theory that potentially explains this phenomenon?

Interview Guide

The interview guide is divided into three parts regarding your thoughts, feelings, perceptions and experiences about: 1) preparing for the exam; 2) failing the exam; and, 3) managing the effects of failing the exam. Throughout the interview I may ask you short questions that seek to get you to talk about something you mentioned that seemed especially important. Remember, there is no such thing as a wrong answer, and above all I am interested in hearing your story, your take on any and every aspect of the experience surrounding the LMSW exam.

Part I: Pre-Exam

Tell me about your decision to take the exam

-What motivated you to take the exam?

-What is the relationship between your decision to take the exam and being a social worker / achieving your professional goals?

-What are your feelings about social work licensure? About the use of a standardized exam to decide who becomes licensed?

-What (if any) were your previous experiences with standardized exams like?

-How did you perform academically in social work school? In college? In high school?

Did you prepare for the examination? How? Tell me – How did you decide upon your choice of exam preparation method? What was your chosen method?

-What was the preparation experience like for you?

-How did your previous testing experiences influence/inform your chosen preparation method?

-Did financial considerations play a role in how you decided to prepare for the exam?

Part II: Exam

What was it like to take the exam?

-How did you feel beforehand?

-Could you describe the thoughts and feelings you were having as you took the exam?

-What surprised you about the testing experience? Was it as you expected it to be?

-What sorts of questions were most challenging? Which were the least challenging?

-What topic area was most challenging? Which was the least challenging?

What was your reaction when you received the results and learned that you had failed?

-Can you describe the thoughts and feelings you had when you learned you had failed the exam?

-To what do you attribute your failing the exam?

Do you think failing the exam was the result of something within your control or beyond your control?

-If within your control, what could you have done differently to avoid this outcome?

-If outside your control, what outside factors do you identify as being factors behind your failure of the exam?

Part III: Post-Exam

Tell me how you reacted after you failed the exam

-Emotionally – You mentioned you felt _____ (eg sad, angry, anxious, depressed) upon learning you failed. Are those feelings still present? How long did they last? What made them stay? What made them go away? How did you address them? What impact did they have or are they having on you?

-Professionally – How did failing the exam impact you as a professional social worker?

-Socio-economically – For you, what were the real world (eg financial, reaction of peers) implications of failing the exam?

-Future exam performance – How do you plan to move forward with regard to the matter of the exam?

Appendix I

Psychological Resources for Respondents

Psychological Resources for Participants

1. Lifenet

Lifenet is 24 hour, seven-days-a-week hotline service that offers information and referrals about mental health, substance abuse and sexual abuse.

1-800-LIFENET (1-800-543-3638)

www.800lifenet.org

2. Low fee clinics

- A. National Institute for the Psychotherapies 250 W. 57th St., Suite 501, New York, NY 10107 | 212-582-1566
- B. William Alanson White Institute 20 West 74th Street, New York, NY 10023. (212) 873-7070

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