

Episode 246 - Dr. Michael Kelly: How “Grand” Are the Grand Challenges?: A Critical Discussion on the Evidence Supporting Social Work’s Grand Challenges Initiative

[00:00:08] Welcome to inSocialWork, the podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at www.inSocialWork.org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of inSocialWork is to engage practitioners and researchers in lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice to research. We educate. We connect. We care. We're inSocialWork.

[00:00:37] Hello and welcome to inSocialWork. I'm Louanne Bakk, your host for this episode. I'm thrilled to announce that with this episode we're marking the 10th anniversary of the UB School of Social Work podcast series since its inception. We have produced over 240 episodes. We have over 1.6 million downloads and we have listeners from over 200 countries. We'd like to thank you, our listeners for your loyalty to inSocialWork. We truly appreciate your ongoing support over the past 10 years. In recognition of our anniversary we wanted to address a topic that is of great interest to the social work profession that is the Grand Challenges. The 12 social work Grand Challenges were established in 2012 by a group of leading social work scholars and are intended to provide an agenda to effect social change and emphasize improving individual and family well-being, strengthening the social fabric and helping create a more just society. The grand challenges represent a call to action for the profession to address some of the toughest social problems and identify ways in which social work can resolve these problems within 10 years. In this episode our longest standing host of the podcast series, Peter Sobota, engages in an interesting and thought provoking conversation with our guest Dr. Michael Kelly on the 12 social work grand challenges. Dr. Kelly begins by providing an overview of the grand challenges in the intent that led to their establishment. He explores current criticisms pertaining to the formation of the Grand Challenges in relation to research practice in client population served by the profession. Dr Kelly then describes his research, which involved the use of a content analysis to examine the rigor of evidence supporting the establishment of the Grand Challenges. Findings pertaining to whether the Grand Challenge papers provide compelling evidence to support addressing the defined problems within ten years our disgust. The episode concludes by arguing that a more rigorous approach is needed to inform the Grand Challenge initiative and to developing and discussing social work issues. Michael Kelly, Ph.D. is professor and director of the family and school partnerships program at Loyola University Chicago's School of Social Work. Prior to joining Loyola University in fall 2006 he was a school social worker family therapist and youth minister in the Chicago area for 14 years. Dr. Kelly has written extensively on school social work and evidence based practice. He was interviewed in July 2018 by Peter Sobota, clinical assistant professor here at the UB school social work.

[00:03:42] Hi Dr. Michael Kelly, thank you for joining us and taking the time to speak with us about your work.

[00:03:47] You're welcome it's great to be here on inSocialWork.

[00:03:50] Yeah. So I've been looking forward to talking with you. I am a proud social worker myself but I'm very willing to endure what I call lovers quarrels with our profession and value thinking critically about you know, what we're up to. And I get the sense that that might be a similar take that you have as well. So I've been really looking forward to this.

[00:04:18] Yeah. Thank you. And I do I share that as well and I think that the idea of the loyal opposition or a lovers quarrel whatever metaphor we settle on, I think it all comes around critical thinking honestly and we need more of that just period in the world, But definitely in social work.

[00:04:36] So to just get going here, would you be willing to tell me about your current research in school mental health and how that relates to your other interests in terms of the Grand Challenges for social work?

[00:04:51] Yes. So I've been a school social worker myself since 1992 and I stopped being in school full time around 2006, got my Ph.D., got involved and where I am now at Loyola as a professor. My interest in school mental health, and I say all that because my interest in school mental health definitely started from a very practical "how does this actually work" kind of frame. I was very intent when I went back to get the Ph.D. to turn around as soon as I could and provide the best available information both that I could generate but also that I could find and disseminate to other practitioners. And looking back and this is kind of the dark ages of twenty eight modems and AOL accounts and things like that. But that back in the 90s there really weren't the online resources we have now. And we still have unfortunately most of our period stopped buying paywalls in the States. But even the things that are available now really weren't and certainly there is nothing like Twitter or YouTube and all those things. So when I got into my school social work school mental health research I was very intent on first of all discerning what people actually are doing in their practice. I didn't want to assume that what I had done for 14 years was what everybody else was doing. And then secondly once I figured that out, because I've been doing some fairly large scale national surveys of school social workers for the last 10 years with a team of other people around the country. Once we got a good sense of what people are and aren't doing and what's in their way and what they wish they could do more of them and what they face then the next set of questions which directly relates to the Grand Challenges was, you know, essentially what are our Grand Challenges as school social workers and as researchers trying to connect things to those folks. And sure enough a lot of what was urgently needed were what I call evidence informed practice so things that have been empirically validated through the typical academic process of a peer review some sort of experimental study or in-depth qualitative study possibly even a systematic review or amend analysis where you collected a bunch of studies and did things with them, those things needed to be disseminated to the extent that we had them. And so what I did was I said it in addition to the survey research I just mentioned I set it on myself to also look at where are the ways we can get to people to get that information to them and so I've authored I believe it's four books on this topic. One school social work and evidenced-informed framework for practice, right there in the title that was in 2010 with Jim Raines who is the outgoing president of our National Association of School Social Workers and Susan Stone at Berkeley and Haiti Fry at Louisville. And we took on this very topic that arguably is something that the Grand Challenge framework could nicely be congruent with, which was what are the major issues, what do we know about them right now, what do we not know, what do we need to know to say that we can confidently state here's where we need to go. And so in most recently because I've been at it for a while and gotten some good response with training practitioners I've begun to really move to creating my own kind of online dissemination strategy. So I'm the co-editor of schoolsocialwork.net which has over 2000 likes on Facebook and over 600 Twitter followers and people are coming to it from the practice world and the research world to say how do we find good information. So that's the kind of stage so to speak for what made me think about the Grand Challenges when they came across.

[00:08:06] Yeah and it's really nice to hear about somebody who's considering evidence and really trying to articulate what social workers do for example in school settings because as we all know school social workers hand tissues to crying children brought to them by teachers. Isn't that what mostly happens?

[00:08:24] Well it's where it starts. My kind of mission at this point in this next stage my career is to critique and maybe dismantle what I call the see-the-kid-fix-the-kid model of our practice. So definitely where that crisis, you know you're crying. Let me reassure you. Let me get this kid off your hands kind of thing. And we always will be because that's teachers and adults in the school and

the kids themselves. They see us as that resource. But we also have another level that I think is problematic. Where we we spend an inordinate amount of time essentially see kids and what really amounts to an outpatient therapy model, which you know, would be great if there were like 15 of us in. But there isn't so that clinical model needs to be looked at to say where can we get in earlier. Where's the prevention that we can get in on. So a lot of the work that I do and actually I should have mentioned this a minute ago, I'm a person who has created at Loyola a 15 credit post-Master's program called the School Mental Health Advanced Practice program, which again is taking on I would argue school social work, school mental health Grand Challenges to say what are the things that we need to equip the next generation of school social workers and school that help people when they get out there and they realize all the things they didn't learn in grad school, and so that they're not just that kind of person that's expected to put out the fires and goes home exhausted.

[00:09:41] Exactly. Very interesting. So there's a segue to the Grand Challenges. So that's what I want to ask you about what are the Grand Challenges for social work? Why do they exist or what kind of gap are they looking to fill?

[00:09:55] Well there's a lot in there. And again I almost want to, this is maybe heretical to do on a podcast where I'm being interviewed but I would almost want to ask you first like what do you know about the Grand Challenges just as a person going about your business?

[00:10:07] Well yeah I mean I've you know we've been following them here at UB since I'm trying to think now probably 2015. And so my own reaction beyond just you know reading the 12 of them is that these were kind of like the grand ideas that would provide the focus that would kind of almost like galvanize efforts of social workers towards actually doing something about the problems. And I think you know my other understanding and I'm sure this is going to fit with what you've already talked about and will be that these ideas are and these recommendations and responses will be based on science and empiricism not just the kind of this is, now this is me being editorial I guess, our usual approach where we're kind of very aspirational in our work and not very practical. So that's my take. I don't know, what do you think?

[00:11:01] Well thank you I appreciate you going first because I do think that that's part of what we're still at honestly, as the elevator speech shifts. I think when you talk to researchers and I have, I should also full disclosure, I and one of my coauthors, Dr. Jonathan Singer who's here at Loyola and is The Social Work podcast creator and noted expert on suicide prevention. Lots of other things in his own right. He and I are both authoring this paper that I'll talk about a minute. We also are on Grand Challenge papers so we're on one of those 21 papers that we're going to talk about. So I have an inside view as well as an outside view. And I say that because as a researcher, as a person who's even been on one of these I think depending on the audience or the context I've been in people have responded and defined these differently. I think for the field as it stands that created them this is very much meant to be a way for researchers to come together for there to possibly be the efforts to seek large scale federal or foundation grants to organize research teams to generate a potential kind of pipeline that students and people that are coming through that will work on these educators have designs and curriculum around it. I believe, and this could be something that you might want to fact check so I get it right but I believe that USC has created a online doctorate that's largely organized around the Grand Challenges.

[00:12:20] Yeah I've heard of that.

[00:12:22] Okay, I was told that that's what those were and I know that they have an online doctorate that they're hyping a lot. So there's an educational response and there's been some writing by the leadership there at USC and other places about how to align curriculum with the Grand Challenges. So there's an educational view. There's a practice view and the reason I asked you and it

wasn't to be snarky and a trick question but...

[00:12:41] Yeah not at all.

[00:12:42] As somebody who, you know, looking at your background has done a lot of practice work and a lot of practice as I try to I have to tell you I've never met a social work practitioner just out there in the field that knew about the Grand Challenges. And again I want to qualify that like once they're in class with us. Maybe they do or once they come to something I'm talking about they might resonate with it but just in the random kind of day to day that I might be in an agency consulting or talking to people that has not appeared to get on the ground yet. So that's a long winded way to get back into what are the Grand Challenges which is I think they are as you said these 12 areas that social work leadership, and I'll talk more about what might be some challenges about just that but leadership has defined as the major pressing issues that the field needs to face and to organize around and that they need to where possible apply science and the empirical data available to help us make decisions about how to best intervene. Maybe this is, Peter, even a place to just read what they actually said when they appraised the papers that they eventually accepted.

[00:13:46] Sure.

[00:13:46] Because I feel like I want to use the actual language that is on the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare. This is the criteria that they stipulated online as they reviewed the papers that they eventually accepted. They say these challenges met several critical criteria notably that they were important, compelling to the broader public and represented areas that were amenable to meaningful and measurable change within 10 years. Committee members that review the proposals look for challenges that boil down the science to focus on the best work with the clearest connection to intervention possibilities at social work and partners could deliver. So from the kind of source text origin story gospels of the Grand Challenges there you are.

[00:14:25] Yeah and just to back up for just a second because I was really interested in the comment you made about how this filters down to practitioners. Isn't that one of the kind of critiques of the Grand Challenges is that it was pretty much written by academics largely for academics?

[00:14:42] I think it is hard to argue. And again it's funny as I talk about this I was not at that original meeting in 2012 and I know some people who were and I'm not looking to gossip or anything like that. Maybe if you had it as a series of circles I'm several steps outside of that main original group but I am connected enough to people that are in that world to know that it's fairly accurate what you just said, that it was created by a gathering of social work researchers and not just all social work researchers, specific social researchers. When you look at the Grand Challenge papers that were eventually accepted basically you have the majority of them written by people from five social work schools as first authors and you only have 13 schools represented at all as first authors of the 21 papers. So right there that's a fairly select group you have people from leadership as far as I can tell. NASW was there, CSWE, probably some other organizations that I just don't know because they didn't list the membership that were there. What I don't have any way of knowing, and again this is speculation but I think it's telling that that we're talking about it in 2018 this way. I can't tell you what client organizations were there possibly consumers or actual practitioner organizations or even to be political for a minute, groups that are looking to really shape social work in some really specific political policy ends. I don't have any sense those groups were involved in the initial establishment of what the grand challenges were. And certainly since then, and I think this is indisputable as much as we can say that the grand challenges certainly have penetrated a lot of parts of the field at this point and are being disseminated, it's largely coming from a top-down approach. I mean it's coming from having a theme devoted to it at SWOR, our national research conference. I know that there's been a lot of work done on it at CSWE at APM,

the other main conference we have. Certainly NASW has devoted lots of time in its publications and its online stuff to talking about it. So people are getting it on the radar, but what I think is interesting, Peter, in your question is to think about at what point when you start with those actors in the room have you maybe not established the linkage to the very thing you wanted to address.

[00:16:49] Well sure. And I think probably as we get further into what you've learned you're probably going to have a little bit more to say about that. I have a feeling.

[00:16:57] Yeah well, again, I'm happy for this podcast to ruffle some feathers and make people uncomfortable and it's a little awkward because we haven't submitted the paper yet, so the paper is going to go in and hopefully it will get a fair review. But what I want to certainly do and not do in this podcast or any other place is I don't want to just be seen as throwing bombs at things that I can't in some ways support my critique and my critique is honestly kind of two-fold. My critique that you've heard already is how well did the group that formed these grand challenges actually establish what is known from the practice world. And again it's an open question. There may be things that we just don't know that I don't see. The main Grand Challenges site refers to doing an extensive process of sharing these ideas. And maybe that's the case but we don't have that data. We don't know what survey for instance, that those 12 Challenges were established through a survey or other means that we typically see when people want to establish the state of the field. So that's one critique. The second critique which we can go to when you're ready is the claims that I read back about boiling down the science that amenable to measurable change within 10 years. Those documents that are on the, or those words that are on the site of the grand challenges. We wanted to essentially test that and look at that and do a content analysis of the actual Grand Challenge papers to say how rooted in science are they and specifically how rooted in what social workers have contributed to science are they.

[00:18:19] Yeah.

[00:18:20] Which is not...

[00:18:21] Another layer.

[00:18:22] I guess it's a three-fold critique. So it's the participatory piece. It's the how empirically solid and research based are these Grand Challenges and then even if they are how much is social work driving them.

[00:18:32] Yeah. You know I noticed in one of the papers that I read with your name on it is that you talk quite a bit about evidence-based practice and you make a distinction between evidence-based practice and evidence-informed practice.

[00:18:46] Yes.

[00:18:46] Would you like to say a little bit about that right here?

[00:18:50] Yeah, I think there are important distinctions especially as we get into maybe talking about what we found. Evidence-based practice has, I think, earned a fair amount of ire from the social work practice community and partly why I'm at great pains to talk about both terms is that so evidence-based practice I think as it really emerged in our field and just across all fields in the United States in the 90s really was defined largely around interventions that were fairly static like they were things that had been designed to be researched in a fairly rigorous lab setting. And once those lab conditions were established through an RCT it was essentially assumed or believed or promoted that you would do the intervention as written and that there was a lot of emphasis on

fidelity and there was a lot of emphasis on we've done this already we've done the research now do it the way that we designed it. And you know for obvious reasons that has a lot of appeal and lots of other fields I mean certainly I want to know that the medicine that I'm taking has been tested and I'm taking the exact same medicine that was created, right? But we're two social workers talking on a podcast called inSocialWork and we know from the get go that our clients and our contacts and our environments are just more nuanced than that, Right? Even if we really want to it's hard to do that exact intervention the way it was designed.

[00:20:06] Yeah there's very little need for a human being to show up if you get really rigid about that approach, right?

[00:20:11] Honestly the way I was taught it originally I think I've been heard. I know I don't want to create an Eileen Gambrell directly on saying this and Leonard Gibbs but certainly they are two of our main leaders and thinkers on this topic and I heard it it's something they were at, but that what I've just described is evidence-based practice as a noun. It's a set thing, it's something you can buy in a manual. It's something that you could replicate pretty much as you said pretty robotically. Even if we had our conditions very set and nice primmed lab conditions, I think as social workers we're not built that way. We want to innovate, we want to be creative as well. So where I go then is evidence-informed practice, which honestly is my experience traveling the world right now and talking about this in my little world of school mental health. This is how most of the world really thinks of EBP. They recognize that context will matter, that yes we need to do that rigorous empirical study through our cities and quasi-experimental designs and if we get enough of them we need to do a systematic review and really feel like we know what we're talking about. But ultimately this is going to come down to how you apply it in a specific population or context or client. And so the evidence-informed piece is what I again heard described when I was first getting trained in this as the verb. It's a doing, it's something you do with your client and with your team or with your, in my case your school, where you find the best available evidence and then you find a way to translate that and apply it to actual people that you're going to help. And to me the intuitive appeal that I think to anybody listening is probably pretty obvious I mean I think all of us want to think that we're involved with our clients in that way that the relationship, the connection the cultural humility we need to show with clients because the other thing that's kind of funky about the evidence-based practice as noun is most of those interventions at least initially had not been tested in my world of school social work on a diverse population of students. It was essentially the upper middle class white schools that the professor who was often of that same background could get access to. And so they did the studies there. And those kids need help too so it's nothing on those kids. But does that generalize to kids in Appalachia? Does it generalize to kids living in inner city L.A? We don't know. We were kind of being told to assume that it did. So evidence-informed practice says we're not just going to throw out the RCTs, the systematic reviews, the quasi-experimental designs. We're going to actually look within them to say what can we take from this to actually apply to our cases. And that's honestly why I talk about schoolsocialwork.net and our certificate program and all the things I'm doing right now at Loyola. That's a lot of what I'm really focused on.

[00:22:36] Yeah absolutely. So your question currently is you're really examining the rigor of the evidence for the Grand Challenges. So what were you hoping to discover?

[00:22:46] Well again I think the project started with the premise that the people that are on these papers, and again we're not going to get into personalities or names, but many of them are very well-known people in the field of social work research and have been at it for a long time. And so certainly they qualify as experts. So we started with that premise that there was there was a real dream team of people gathered to do this work. What we wanted to do was say Okay these are, again leaving aside what I said earlier, Peter, do these topics actually, are these the 12 we should

have done? I mean do we know that. Like let's just assume for now that this is what we've got. We're going to go with these these 12 that kind of begat 21 papers related to them, right, So it's not 12 papers it's 21 papers. So let's just start with what was there. Let's start with the premise that the people that put these together were operating in part because what I read to you a little while ago that the criteria that they met was that they had identified topics in areas that could be amenable to medical changes and within 10 years. Now what does that mean, What does that imply about a field of research, and then secondly how did they make the case that they boiled down the science. Which, you know, it speaks to me that when you say something like that you're not saying there's no more research to be done and people like us never say that we always say more research is required, but when you say "boil down the science" you're presuming there's enough to boil down. You're presuming you found the best work that's out there so that you can say based on this, this is where we need to go. And so we wanted to take these papers at face value and to ask a question of them which is where the content analysis allows you to do and and we did a directed content analysis of the methodology we use to say based on kind of what we think the answers to those questions would be, like what would make something amenable to medical change within 10 years. What would mean that we'd boil down the science. Let's see what these papers have to tell us.

[00:24:32] Yeah. And when you did all that what did you find?

[00:24:36] Yeah. So before I leave that I just want to give a shout out to my Doc students that helped us so Ilana and Melissa and Diane all were part of this project in the work I'm about to tell you about. And I've already mentioned Dr. Singer. So what we did was we looked at the papers. We did a rigorous coding scheme. So we created a codebook, we created a way to look at the papers in a systematic way so that we had two of us myself and those three Doc students we paired off and looked at these papers. This was very much as I said a directed content analysis so we started, our codebook was informed by what actually we were looking for. So we didn't just randomly coat things we coded specifically around some areas that I'll tell you about a minute. And then we did the work you do when you do any kind of qualitative project where you get to what's called iterator's reliability. Right, so we did the codes independently. Other things I won't get into in establishing the codebook, we did some iterations of that. But once we had our code pretty well set we went off and did our thing. We came back in pairs and then got to an acceptable level of integrated reliability which in our case was .9, So we had pretty strong integrated reliability. People are seeing the same things. So that was our process to talk kind of about what we actually were looking for in the codebook now. I want to make sure I'm going in order but not overwhelming you.

[00:25:51] No I'm with you so far.

[00:25:53] All right. So we did that over the course of the last semester. One of the things we were very interested in, and I'll just kind of read you the questions we asked and we were definitely interested in all kinds of analysis does this and just doing some counting. So we wanted to count what was the nature of the evidence there. There's many ways to do research, there's many types of research. What was actually in these papers based on the reference sections based on what was cited. We then went a little deeper, and this is where eventually the reviewers will hit us on and certainly people that are not okay with my conclusions today will hate us on is that we essentially argued or specific research designs that again we felt helped answer those questions about amenable to measurable change and boiling down science. And so for us the five that we settled on were what's called a systematic review, which is a study of studies including unpublished work which allows you to get a very wide range of view of what is known about a topic, a meta analysis which can be done in a systematic review but tends to restrict itself to publish studies and tends to be done in a more concentrated way than a systematic review that goes a little more broadly, a quasi-experimental design which is again a comparison group and some sort of application to conditions, and then a randomized trial which is a more rigorous version of that and is often used to

be the gold standard in intervention research. And then the fifth research design we were looking for was a rigorous qualitative design which could be a lot of different designs but essentially walked us through what we typically expect to see in a very rigorous textually driven qualitative study. So we were looking for those five designs and for the purposes today the purposes of this first paper because we got a second paper going to do once we get this one done, we didn't do any quality assessment of those five things I just read to you, we just wanted to see if they were there. Does that make sense?

[00:27:36] Yeah. Got it.

[00:27:37] And then the next piece that I think is really central and then I can maybe talk about the findings is we wanted to ask some critical questions of what this meant for social work. Right? So we wanted to know what is the degree to which even if those things that I just mentioned are there even if we feel like we've got some really strong evidence for this Grand Challenge. What is the degree to which social work is driving it? And we again chose to define that based on our directed content analysis as looking at how many of the references are by first author social work researchers and we went back into their bios and things like that to make sure we have that and then additionally we used a commonly used kind of resource that the University of Houston helpfully develops every year, every couple of years maybe, of journals that are identified as social work journals and we wanted to know how many of the works were published in social work. And I can almost kind of use this data point to start before we get into the other findings. We also were just kind of curious given what we know is happening in the world of what we know social work is doing increasingly to globalize itself. We wanted to know to what extent these Grand Challenges dealt with international work. Spoiler alert, they didn't.

[00:28:37] I have a list of the grand challenges right in front of me and there are a couple other that strike me but that was one of them, especially in the world we're living in.

[00:28:45] And honestly and again not to get into personalities today but myself I'm on these, I have a lot of international work I do, so does Dr. Singer, a lot of the people on these papers I know are doing things related to them in other countries and doing them in partnership with other researchers in other countries. And so it was interesting as we looked at it to see very few references and very few pieces that analyzed the international context which was kind of fascinating. So should I maybe talk a little bit about those things I just talked about what we found?

[00:29:12] Oh yes absolutely.

[00:29:14] The first thing is that we very much came into this with the idea that these were our codes we wanted to look at them we wanted to see what we could find out about the papers just based on them and then we imagined, and this is where we still are, we would do more analysis and possibly applications from them. But on a strict kind of counting level we found some things that I have to characterize as concerning. So the first is that none of the Grand Challenges as near as we could see in our coding used a systematic review as they're most commonly cited resource, which is not altogether surprising because they're hard to do and they don't get updated more than every five years. I also want to say we're still working on this that very few of them appear to use a systematic review as kind of the main argument for why this field is where it is and what we know. What was often used much more often were types of research, so 16 out of the 21 Grand Challenges had their most common study designs as secondary data analyses, surveys, narrative reviews and expert consensus statements. Like Trisha Greenhall at Oxford is called the GOBSAT, Good Old Boys Sitting Around a Table. This idea that the experts get together and decide what's important. So those research and/or narrative statements were the dominant ones in 16 out of the 21 papers. I mean I'm a survey researcher so I'm not putting those down as bad research in any way but what they do seem

to indicate is a paucity of information about what interventions might work to address the specific problem. So this idea that we boil down science to create interventions that are fairly ready to go seems fairly unclear from what we found. The lack of systematic reviews, quasi-experimental designs, meta-analyses and RCT's, and qualitative research honestly seem to indicate concern about the boiling down of the science either because the science was still in emerging stages, which is fair and many fields are, or simply that the authors hadn't located those seminal studies and referenced them and that's an interesting, that last point is interesting because in some ways these documents are things that are on the website. They are the things that could be in the hands of legislators, policymakers. They're not the only things I know the Grand Challenges folks are using. There have been things done since then, but typically you want your source documents your major initial documents to be really strong in my view. Because you want to be able to say this is kind of your, in some ways you maybe talk about this in a larger social context. This is kind of social work kind of asserting itself to say we get these cables, we know things we have research methods we're using we have ways of understanding this, we are not just kind of "me too" and public health or psychology or other fields. We're here because we have something to contribute.

[00:31:47] Yeah a distinct voice that uniquely social work, right?

[00:31:49] And that's where it kind of to go to the last kind of set of data points, that's where it really breaks down that we created a three tier system. And I'll just kind of read those categories because I think they'll help you understand the critical issues we found. We decided to create three tiers for the papers and the first tier was we were looking at any paper that had over 50 percent of its references as social work first authors of the journals in the paper were social or journalists according to that University of Houston list and at least five or more research designs that I delineated a minute ago. So the rigorous empirical research designs tend to lead themselves to conclusions about interventions. Tier two was 25 to 50 percent of both social work first doctor and 25 to 50 percent of social work journals, and then still were looking for at least five or more of those research designs. And then tier three could have one of those but basically may have fewer than 25 percent of the first author and social work journal. And then fewer than five other research designs. So we found...

[00:32:49] Yeah here comes.

[00:32:50] Only one paper had a Tier one rating and we had four that had a tier two rating and that means 16 were in the tier three category.

[00:32:59] Not even sure what to say. I kind of had a feeling that's where you were going. But it still hurts to hear it.

[00:33:07] Yeah, and again, Maybe let's just unpack that for a minute. Right. So the concern we have in looking at that is not that these are inherently flawed in the sense that they don't make arguments that are credible or that the empirical work that's in them is not ok in some research-based way that we critique it. We honestly haven't done that piece yet. Like I don't know maybe some of those studies they cite are not very well done. But we haven't done that work ourselves yet in terms of the appraisal which is a big part of evidence inform practice. But what we can say I think very clearly is that at this point the field of social work research as it stands does not appear to have put forward a preponderance of high quality evidence to argue for essentially the very criteria they put on their website.

[00:33:51] Which is the boiling down...

[00:33:53] Yeah and things within 10 years that are amenable to change and again there's been no

follow up both from the Grand Challenge website or anything I've been able to discern since and in interest of further full disclosure I have not personally reached out to anybody at the Grand Challenges to ask them what do they mean by 10 years, what do they mean by boiling down the science. But I want to say that just like I did this coding with my colleagues my Doc students. I think when you say those phrases to people there's some fairly clear ideas that might emerge. And I think what they speak to to me is a field that makes those claims needs to then have the ability to show empirically that we're basically on the brink of moving there. If we have X Y Z which is might be funding, political will, if we organize as schools of social work. And that's kind of where I want to park as we write this paper as did we actually demonstrate that?

[00:34:42] And just if I could kind of chime in with you here. I mean you're not exactly or we're not exactly inventing the wheel here because there have been other grand challenges in other fields that have set ambitious goals within ten year periods that really haven't delivered.

[00:34:59] Yes there is. Actually the Grand Challenges's history is fascinating and up on the American Academy site that details some of that and math and engineering and other fields. There have been hit and misses for sure. one of the things that I wanted also make sure I talk about, and I'm glad you brought me there, is when other fields have tried to do what we're talking about today, first of all they haven't always accomplished them. But even when they set a pretty good framework to go about the business of doing it they've often deployed some methodologies that we did not do for these. And so I talked a lot about some specific things like systematic reviews and things like that but there's other methodology that other fields have done that I find particularly compelling as I was working on a draft of this paper in a couple of them just quickly to talk about what is called the scoping review and another is called and evidence gap map. And both of these are things that other Grand Challenges and I'm talking things of public health, there was one in engineering and comp science that I saw. They basically did these types of analysis before they made the claims and the calls to action that we see in our Grand Challenges. The scoping review is essentially a hybrid of what we typically think of as systematic review where you do an extensive search you have a protocol you go in advanced to look at things and then you go find those things and then you very often compute in effect size based on the interventions you find. While the scoping review doesn't necessarily do effect size calculation what it does do is it kind of combines the systematic view methodology with what we might call a kind of guided content analysis where you search a wide variety of literatures. So you look at a bunch of databases and you look at a lot of places and you do it in some fairly concrete set up ways in advance and then you find what you find and you look for themes. So it's essentially a way to do with a thematic analysis. The evidence gap map actually takes as its premise that we have evidence, which certainly all of these Grand Challenges papers provided at least some evidence for their claims. What we also need to do is put that evidence essentially up on the board and map it to say what don't we know, what is missing. So even if we have a good systematic review, for instance in one of the papers for the Grand Challenges there was a lot of good evidence around how we can eradicate homelessness. You could do that, you could put that information up there and then you could also say "what is still not clear? What do we not know?" Now, I'm saying all this because as you brought up these other Grand Challenges in these other fields which obviously we are in some ways looking to base our work on as social work. What's really interesting to me as we think about the implications of this first paper is there doesn't seem to have been any effort within any of these papers to do that work. Essentially what we had were people who were prominent researchers in the field who would know a ton about the area who gathered other people that work with them directly and/or people that are just in social work that they wanted to connect with and they essentially did narrative lit reviews of what they know. And again, many of the things in there as we get to the analysis of the actual studies may prove to be like that's the gold standard study you found the one, that's the main one. But what is very interesting to me as somebody who thinks a lot about in-school social work and school mental health what can we say fairly definitively as much as you can research the way you get there is you have a synthesis of

research. You have a synthesis of evidence and the way you get there is you don't just have one study, you have a study of studies which could be systematic reviews or evidence gap maps. You have a scoping review that says this is a really important topic but we don't really know anything about it. And it doesn't appear that that happens or any of the 21 papers.

[00:38:19] Yeah it's really interesting. If I could insert myself here for just a second it's really interesting to listen to talk and I'll just tell you that in preparation to talk with you today I just pulled out the Grand Challenges which I didn't have right laying on my desk before we decided to talk. I read through them and my first reaction was things like "So where's poverty? Where's racism or where's kind of especially now women's rights and status in society?" And part of what you're talking about really helps me begin to understand maybe why those things are there and you mentioned international before as well. So it's just my reaction to some of the things you're saying and I thought I just kind of pop that in if you wanted to comment on that.

[00:39:07] Yeah I do think we are guilty in social work and I'm not just saying this about the authors of these papers. I'm in many contacts where people essentially assume default as social workers that of course we do social justice. Of course we're an anti-racist profession or pick all the -isms that we're currently fighting in our society. That of course social work is at the forefront of those efforts. And I don't know honestly, Peter, that the Grand Challenges were the place to reckon with that. But I do want to say, and again just talk about work that I was involved in which honestly has got whiskers on it, it came out in 2010 and we're going to probably do a reboot of it at some point this school social work evidence-informed practice book we did for Oxford in 2010. One of the things we were very keen to do, because we essentially wrote, we didn't call them Grand Challenges, but we wrote chapters that were focused on the survey data we gathered from this national sample about the main problems school social workers say they faced. So the things that deal with the most. And we took those and then we did a critical review, I wouldn't say we did a systematic review, but we did a critical review using specific search terms and databases and we put all that work in the back of the book. We wanted to shore short works so people could check us on it, and what we came out with essentially recommendations about based on what we know about this topic. Here's the interventions that we can say are highly recommended, the ones we would recommend caution, and here is ones that are emerging, and here are the ones that we don't have any evidence for at all and may actually be harmful. And again we wrote this book and it's dated at this point, I mean some of it still really holds but the framework I think is very useful because what we had in those chapters in addition all that stuff I just went through is we have for every one of those chapters a section on developmental adaptations. So how the interventions would have aligned with the different ages and stages of kids, and also a sometimes honestly fairly scathing discussion of the racial cultural impacts of the intervention.

[00:40:57] Yeah, cultural, I was wondering about that, yeah go on.

[00:41:00] You know when we didn't for instance say have and I'm just throwing this out there, let's say we didn't have in 2010 bullying prevention intervention research that had been essentially tested across the diverse American context which we really didn't. And we said that. Now again, I think the critical thinking piece and the piece I want to bring to this talk in and around all the rest of the teaching I do is that doesn't mean we kind of throw out evidence altogether. Doesn't mean that we don't know anything about addressing bullying or we don't know anything about these Grand Challenges. What I think your kind of initial reaction to that is really spot on is even though the topics themselves obviously have lots of things to do with race and class and gender and all the other issues that we know are there that we have to be dealing with the social workers, it was often not made explicit. In addition it wasn't linked as I've been saying to what I would consider to be the case that we have the evidence to deal with those issues right now.

[00:41:54] So if I could, we're trying to keep this relatively listenable. And so I'm feeling a little pressure of time here but I'm really eager to hear what you think the implications of your work is and the research that you've been doing you know across the spectrum. How is this going to filter down to practice and education and research?

[00:42:13] I think there is a number of things and just quickly say a few. I mean the first one is I think that this paper even in its kind of mid-state form is making a very compelling argument in our view that all of these Grand Challenges would benefit from backing up and doing a critical review of what we know. That whether the people that wrote them want to do that, whether there are people that work with them that could do that, it would be in our interest if we really want to see this work extend and land in the policy corridors we want to be in and get on the radar of people. It's going to be necessary once they click on that to go to and say here's a really well done empirical study of what works in this area.

[00:42:52] That's always been the knock on us as a profession right?

[00:42:55] That's the part that I do feel a little bit like I'm breaking bad on us because I feel like that's the conversation we've been having for forever. That we don't show that what we do works or what we do is we often slot into that aspirational quality you talked about at the top that we that we essentially create this idea that we mean well, we care, we're part of this. We do all the work and certainly we do a lot of the work that's referenced in these Grand Challenges. We want to be recognized for all of that which we should be recognized. But it's a real leap to then translate that into and we are the scientists and we are the intervention researchers who are going to make it happen. Again, we're six years away from when this originally started it actually the first meeting is coming up in a couple weeks. I know this pack is going around later. August is when it took place in 2012. And I think one implication is what I just said. Let's let's back up and let's actually look at what we know and make the case with that. And then secondly I think the next step is to say if we haven't got as much traction as we want to with these how does the first implication relate to that? There are people I know because again I'm in the kind of maybe the third step removed from this world we're talking about today, who have argued that especially in this kind of crazy political time we're in that evidence isn't going to win the day. You have to win the day with other things, that you have to have good marketing. You have to be able to get people's attention. I've always been a person who operates in a both and way like I don't think it's either/or. And I think the best tell of all that is that we just had last month we had a conference that met in Dublin, the Global Social Work conference and one of the most circulated pieces from that conference was something that came out in The Guardian newspaper in England at that time that purported and I haven't done the due diligence to actually look at the evidence for it but it was an article essentially arguing that because Costa Rica adopted a community based social work derived intervention they've had all these great outcomes. And on my Twitter feed and on Facebook I probably saw like 50 times. When I look at these Grand Challenges, Google Scholar is just one metric but we've seen since these papers came out whenever, 2015 and on, they've been cited a bit like 188 times total. But what are the things that are going to get elated like that article that came out? To me, some of it is the things that you have to do when you get things that are an initiative you have to market yet to spokespeople to do the social media piece right. But I think you also have to have a bedrock of empirical support for what you're claiming. Because eventually somebody, maybe not the congressman, maybe his or her staff member will, somebody is going to say like what's the evidence for this.

[00:45:23] Yeah because I think a lot of times you know this my own opinion that we sit in a room full of social workers and we get it. We speak the same language. We have that kind of common ground. Sometimes I just think we stop there. For example that's what I always thought the challenge of a school social worker is because you're an ancillary service in an educational setting. So you just can't walk in and be wise. You've got to almost walk in and build the bridges about how

you arrive there and what you're basing this on and then deliver kind of the wisdom. And I see that's exactly what you're suggesting. That's a nice mix.

[00:45:59] That's a nice kind of analysis of kind of probably how I got to talking to you today because I spent the first 14 years of my work and I did some private practice family therapy and some youth group work. But by and large I was not in social work friendly environments. And I teach my students now and I teach certificate students as well that you will probably never stop having to explain what you do. And there are many other social work domains where that eventually stops being the case. Like you get enough of a social work agency or a social work context and you basically have a group of people who get it. But I think maybe a good thing to end on for implications is can we expand that group of people that we're trying to essentially test these grand challenges out with. Again I don't want to say this isn't happening because there appear to be some indications that there are networks forming and people are having regional meetings and conferences. But I go back to that anecdote that again is just an anecdote to walk the walk and be empirically driven myself where I have never had a social worker just reference the Grand Challenges on their own. They're referencing other things like for instance Bernay Brown who seems to be in my Facebook feed like every other day, she's a social worker and she's reached a mass audience. There are some of the researchers on this Grand Challenge and their work has been referenced, but the Grand Challenges themselves are not referenced, so maybe that's a bit of an empirical issue. That's also probably a bit of a PR issue at this point. Like how can that be remedied. And to that end I guess the last thing I would add to that Peter is that this schoolsocialwork.net site that I have and this program that I've got one of the things we've done is we've created what we're calling research briefs. We're asking practitioners to find an article, find a resource, find something that is meaningful to them, do an analysis of it that can fit on a page and we need essentially a text-based and/or infographic that can then be on our site that we can popularize to some extent.

[00:47:49] Yeah nice and practical.

[00:47:51] That's kind of you know that's my version of trying to walk the walk with what I'm calling out these papers to do things that I want to model to practitioners. This is how you find and appraise evidence so that hopefully this evidence is relevant to you.

[00:48:04] Yeah I'm curious what your in terms of you getting to wrap up a little bit here what's your next move here what's your next step?

[00:48:10] First thing we just got to get the paper done and out and ready ourselves for the reviews and then if it ever gets published the tomatoes that might come our way. So that's the first thing. I think the second thing is that I want to very much continue to build the school social work version of understanding the Grand Challenges we face. And I didn't mention this earlier but along with Ron Astor USC I'm the co-chair of the school social work research special interest group at SWOR and we have gathered last March a group of 50 school social researchers from around the country and my hope is to continue to meet with those folks as well to build out kind of our version of what we think we know and what we can do about it because the work is necessary. I guess the last thing I would say is just none of the Grand Challenges as I read them as much as I think the papers have lots of problems with them. None of them struck me as things that aren't important. And I would argue many of them are downright urgent. So I was very much for that work to continue and obviously a lot of them also have school connections so that would be where I guess I set up shop.

[00:49:08] Sure. Well it's really been a pleasure to speak with you. You strike me as a very respectful critic but what comes across very clearly is that you're also a passionate and proud social worker and I really think it's a terrific balance quite admirable. If there's anything else you'd like to

say this is your last shot I guess. But otherwise I really want to thank you for taking the time to talk about your work and to even lay some of it out before you've been able to polish it exactly.

[00:49:38] Thank you, Peter. One thing I would just say you can follow me at SchoolSocialWork.net on Twitter and the certificate program and information and all that is available there as well. Schoolsocialwork.net is the Website and we're very interested in meeting and in engaging researchers and practitioners in making research relevant. So again thank you for having me.

[00:49:57] No thank you.

[00:49:57] You've been listening to Dr. Michael Kelly's discussion on the 12 Social Work Grand Challenges. We appreciate your continued support over the past 10 years. Please join us again at inSocialWork.

[00:50:18] Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and Dean of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school, our history, our online and on ground degree and continuing education programs, we invite you to visit our website at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. And while you're there check out our technology and social work resource center. You'll find it under the Community Resources menu.