Thank you to doctoral student task force... for this incredible and somewhat daunting platform. I hope I won’t disappoint (or demoralize) you!

Yesterday I attended the session on preparing PhD students for collaborations across disciplines. One of the things that I find most invigorating about current conversations about social work research is that social workers are not just politely ceding territory to “real” or “hard” science. I like the idea of social workers not waiting around to be invited to the table but just pulling up a chair. And putting it at the head of the table.

Or starting our own tables.

The session yesterday also had concrete information about how to forge connections across disciplines. How to communicate. How to piece all of our strengths together. And it is exciting. And there are amazing advances in knowledge, technology, and technologies that can give rise to new knowledge.

But I think there is another conversation to be had, too. A less rosy one, about the conditions of doctoral education and academia at large and whether those – for most of us at most of our institutions, not just the top tier R1s – can support the kinds of social work scholarship we want to take place.

Candidly, I don’t think they can. It looks to me like the ivory tower is in serious need of renovation. (Which is very different from those who want to tear it down completely.)

But I also don’t see being critical as exclusive of idealism. In fact, critique in service to idealism is one of our superhero powers as academics.
C. Wright Mills argued that “intellectuals should conduct continuing, uncompromising criticism of the established culture” and that “unless we do this we have no chance to offer alternative definitions of reality. And that, of course, is our major business. If we, as intellectuals, do not define and re-define reality, who will?”

What I want to offer is an “uncompromising criticism of the established culture” of academia, with the hope that we might be able to redefine reality, one that positions us to seize the opportunities in front of us to meet grand challenges and to advance social justice.

But first, to establish some common ground:
I am defining research as a rightfully big tent. To my mind, the requisite component is systematic, informed inquiry. But beyond that – big data, poring over archives, observations from the field, experiments in the lab, ethnography, meta analysis, secondary analysis, discourse analysis, visual content analysis – why in the world would we want to restrict our collective ability to pursue answers?
As much as I am a proponent of an open, inclusive, poly-method view of research, I believe that social work research is unified by the single goal and purpose of engaging in research for good: for others’ good, for the social good.

Lots of people can be taught and trained to do “good research.” What distinguishes social work scholarship is that we are moved to use research to advance social justice.

Our roots – at least one branch of them - are not in the “car-window sociology” that WEB DuBois rebuked. But in settlement houses: living and working to expose, bear witness, validate, object to, and eradicate suffering and injustice...
And to use research to *transform* systems and structures.

Not to help individuals and families cope with, adapt to, or accommodate inhumane, impoverished and impoverishing circumstances, but to envision and enact something better.
These are the fundamentals of social work research. They are the core of our identities as social work researchers.

So then why do they seem so far from reach, so elusive?
Especially when we are all working so hard and pretty much all the time?

(True confession of a PhD program director: I have, based on my own work habits and strategies, encouraged students to do things like organize references as a “break”).

These are funny, and true. Which makes them sort of depressing...
Really. These conditions are literally depressing.

A few caveats: I don’t for a moment think we ought to count ourselves as extraordinarily oppressed and feel sorry for ourselves. But I also don’t think we can hold on any longer to the pretense – one that I myself am only slowly and reluctantly relinquishing – that academics and academia is some idyll of intellectual freedom.
Instead, we are constantly straining and under strain: to get grants, to get jobs, to get publications, to get tenure, to get promoted... to get out of teaching and to get off of committees.

In sharp contrast to the caricatured academic sitting around navel gazing, we’re on a treadmill of striving/straining for the next mile marker so that we can have security.
And we all fantasize about what we’ll do that day...

Again: funny. But also depressing.
Increasingly – or continually – alienation – a sense of divorce and estrangement, meaninglessness and powerlessness, seems to typify the experience of being a scholar, whether a student-scholar, a junior scholar, or a senior scholar...
With the New Yorker tenure cartoon exemplifying the idea of alienation from self.

Also related is a refrain you no doubt hear often from your faculty and which I admit to talk about often with our students and in my own thinking about my career: the idea of “marketing oneself” being “marketable”. The commodification of the self.

And to me, one of the quintessential signifiers of alienation and estrangement is the term “work-life balance”, which makes the dualist split – and opposition – between working and living explicit.
Alienation also manifests in (or infects) our relationships with others. We have:

- Two-body problem or Academic Scattering (i.e., having a partner)
- Town-Gown Divide
- Research-Practice Divide
- There was a widely circulated blog post in December about “student-shaming” posts by faculty on social media (look at the PeevishProfessor twitterfeed for an example)

And there are whole blogs and books – *Conditionally Accepted, Presumed Incompetent* are just two – that are dedicated to ways in which alienation within academia is compounded by privilege and prejudice, particularly along the interwoven lines of race, class, and gender.
Issuing a warning about scholars’ alienation from our work (i.e., our thoughts) and the act of working (i.e., thinking... hard) and the commodification of these, C Wright Mills argued:

*It is not that they [intellectuals] are “useful” but that they themselves do not control the uses made of them and their work.* (Mills, 1959/1967, p. 226)

Research questions, methods, and products (“deliverables”) are driven by factors with dubious bearing on a project’s intellectual grounds, scientific rigor, or public worth. Instead, we have to factor in expedience, which often disadvantages qualitative studies, field research, participatory action research, true grounded theory, extended archival research, intellectually-fruitful but time-intensive interdisciplinary collaborations.
As neoliberal policies and ideology bankrupt institutions, “fundability” is central in research decisions and designs. It’s true that a project’s fundability is linked to its intellectual and methodological quality. But it is also a reflection of what’s popular, what’s not controversial, and it’s inherently conservative (i.e., not risky, not bold, not innovative). There is a place for incremental science. But it should not be a monopoly holding.

Further in his lecture, Mills stated:
*We, the cultural workmen, do not have access to the means of effectively communicating images and ideas; others who own and operate the mass media stand between us and our potential publics.* (Mills, 1959/1967, p. 226)

His reference to “mass media” might be easily and aptly replaced with “academic publishing industry”:

The publications that “count” are those that appear in academic journals built on both our unpaid labor and our paid subscriptions.
And somehow, our distance – again relating back to the idea of alienation from others – whether by creating our own secret language and talking mainly to ourselves and each other or our seclusion on campuses – rather than our embeddedness (I can’t help but think of the contrast between the settlement house and the ivory tower) – has become a signifier of our status rather than of our failure.
This is the weird, distorting, bizarro circumstance of alienation.

So, that’s the “uncompromising critique” part. Now I want to move on to possible ways of redefining that reality.

Because while alienation is pervasive, it is not inevitable or immutable. Nor is our compliance with it.
I want to focus on how we might cultivate cultural conditions within academia that enable us.

Not only to counter our own alienation and sense of overwhelm but also to contribute meaningfully to social change.
To begin, we should work to ensure that our PhD programs and schools are safe spaces.

And let me clarify quickly and adamantly: “safe spaces” are often equated with sanitized, censored, comfortable spaces. This is certainly not what I mean and in fact is opposite to the radical intention behind original calls for safe spaces (akin to the depoliticization of “empowerment”).

Safe spaces were meant to be those in which people have the opportunity to express and say what is sanctioned elsewhere, to deviate from normative scripts. This echoes the attachment theory concept of a secure base, which is key not because it is where children stay, but because it is what allows them to explore.

Research is built on creativity and daring. Daring to say what we don’t know or were wrong about, daring to propose and test a possible answer... knowing we might be wrong, knowing we might be corrected or criticized and not fearing that. Safe spaces are those in which students – and all of us – are held to high standards of methodological rigor, intellectual depth, and social meaning, and in which our efforts to meet those standards are supported and our failures are forgiven. Safe spaces liberate us, they don’t protect us.

We want students to take risks and innovate. Solving social problems and “Grand Challenges” that are entrenched in an unjust status quo necessarily involves disruption. Making our students feel secure will make them bolder and better researchers.
Somewhat counterintuitively, I would also argue that helping students feel safe: to admit what they don’t know, to float that crazy idea, to make that new connection means that we have to stop pretending that academia and those of us who inhabit it are somehow extraordinary.

Might it not help reduce conditions of alienation (the town-gown divide, or the research-practice divide, and of course, the imposter syndrome that haunt us all if we stopped talking only to each other, writing in a weird secret jargon-y language, and acting – pretending – like we’re just so special. We’re all just regular people here, doing our part to try and figure out a better way to live together.

One piece of this that is especially relevant to PhD students and to helping cultivate the feeling of safety that is a prerequisite of bold research is that the mystique surrounding academia and professional success obscures models of what is possible and how it is possible. I know from my own personal experience how crucial it was to have glimpses into my professors’ whole lives.

And just as adults ought to make more of their mistakes visible to young people – and especially how they fixed them and moved along, I think the same is true for senior scholars. It is no shame or surprise – or shouldn’t be – that behind every achievement on our CVs are many rejections, mess-ups, missed opportunities, and unquantifiable effort. Academia is sort of like baseball, in this regard. We make outs far more often than we get on base.

These form our shadow CVs. In the interest of “being the change you wish to see....” I thought I’d share some of my own mistakes and missteps. You can see my curriculum vitae online, but here is my curriculum mortis:
And just like my CV, my shadow CV also continues to grow.

Mistakes and failures do not stop happening.

But they do not stop achievement and progress, either. In fact, I am a firm believer that we learn more from hard losses than easy success.
Just as the CV doesn’t capture the drafts and revisions, the good faith efforts and best of intentions, it also doesn’t really capture the importance of our work and the magnitude of our contribution.

How many publications we have and where we rank as authors might do this. So might citations and impact factors.
Or they might not.

Impact factors are known to be spurious and there is documented publication and author inflation: the rate of publications is increasing and so are the number of authors on papers. But studies such as these show that these increases are artifacts of “publication maximization strategies” and an academic system’s use of the quantity of “deliverables” as a proxy for intellectual contribution (and whether you should get a raise... or get to keep your job).

It is usually *not* that our projects are just that much more complicated or that we’re breaking new ground at a rapid rate. It’s that in response to the pressure to publish more, we are publishing more. And sacrificing quality for quantity.

The pressure to publish, the push for numbers, keeps ramping up. I hear faculty and PhD program directors talk about this and worry over it. But the only question we seem to ask is how can we get PhD students to publish more? How can we get them on projects sooner?

But what about a more fundamental question: How can we get off this crazy train and get back to standards and criteria that hinge on quality and regard quantity as icing (yummy at first, nauseating if you have too much in the absence of cake).
How can we define and cultivate more sensible, meaningful metrics?

1. Most simply, how about if we weighted – especially in our hiring and tenuring - a single meaningful publication more heavily than several derivative, redundant, hair-splitting ones?

Technology has made publishing so much easier, particularly in terms of space, whether how easy it has become to collaborate across the globe (geographical space) or how online journals don’t have to worry about word count or the number of articles that fit in an issue. But one thing technology has not solved is time. Try as we might, we can’t increase it. The best we can do is figure out how to lifehack the most out of our allotted 24 hours. Flooded by infinite information and pressure yet still with finite time: we triage. None of us are poring over every single article in our fields (remember: regular people). We read “key people.” We read “top journals.” We skim. We narrow our interests and curiosity.

2. Refusing to comply with publication inflation may decrease our publications. But it will increase our time: time to read; time to think; time to carry out the complex but innovative project; time to build collaborations across disciplines and in communities; time to rest. And this will make us better at our jobs: better thinkers; better researchers; better advocates.

3. Very concretely, we might take up Sean’s Massey’s proposal that we track the impact validity of our work. this isn’t just a matter of coming up with something to say in the token implications section of a manuscript. But designing a study for maximum impact, just as we design a study to have maximum psychometric validity. And to capture how it can be taken up by our publics (i.e., the communities we serve).

Part of what slows, obstructs, and dilutes our impact and makes it so difficult to track, it seems, is that our “deliverables” our so abstruse. They need to go through a separate translation machine before they can be of use to anyone. And unless we’re the ones doing that translation, who knows whether the translation is accurate or we’re playing a game of telephone.

Instead of accepting a “trickle down” model of knowledge generation (that knowledge flows in one direction; that one day, somehow, something we publish will be cited in a policy or inform a practice approach) we need to engage...
...in direct exchange with others. We are doing a better job of this across disciplines, but we need to be more ambitious and move beyond the ivory tower. There’s a whole world out there. Let’s adapt the clinical adage of “starting where the client is” to research so that we’re communicating where our stakeholders are and in a common language. Going to them, not expecting them to come to us. Who serves whom, after all?

I’ve been thinking about the dissertation and how it might be retooled following the do-less-better-and-with-impact approach that I just talked about. A dissertation is meant to show a student’s ability to carry out original research, and to help them exercise skills they will need in their careers. Surely being able to convey our ideas and our findings effectively to diverse publics is a “competency” we want our graduates to have (arguably, it is the best test of understanding).

So what if we build this in to our dissertations? What if we adopt a multi-dissemination dissertation: a single study from which students would select and create an array “products” to disseminate findings: a policy brief? a tool for use by community members or agencies? An op-ed for a national news outlet? And what about beyond text: A visual work for advocacy and awareness-raising purposes? Convening a public forum? Providing a training? And yes of course: a peer-reviewed research paper. This isn’t about abandoning academic discourse, it’s about enriching and complementing it. And not pretending it’s the only one conversation in the room or the only one that counts. It’s about being sure that we and our students are not one-trick ponies or rendered irrelevant or powerless over our own ideas and work by our monolingualism.

If students were to pursue such multi-dissemination dissertations: communities benefit from direct, unmediated access to new knowledge and opportunities to give their feedback, to inform our next steps; universities benefit by looking more relevant and in touch; social work benefits by not just being included in public discourse but framing it; scholars benefit from not feeling like we toil in obscurity on things that no one reads. It’s a win, all around.

The multi-dissemination dissertation, impact validity, demystifying academia, supporting risk-taking by reducing stakes, opening up time to read/think/discuss widely and deeply: these work together to increase the chances that what we’re doing matters, that we’re engaged in what Patricia Hill Collins named intellectual activism: speaking truth to [those with] power and as speaking truth to [with] people. Intellectual activism is not about renouncing positivism, empiricism, objectivity (though it does invite critical analyses of these). It is not so much about how we conduct research as remembering why, for whom, to what end.
I want to share an excerpt from a graphic novel that actually was a dissertation (an outstanding model of an unconventional dissertation) about visual thinking and the tyranny/constraints of text. How text is one lens for viewing/understanding/communicating.

But it is not the only one. And it is not The Right One.
It is also a warning about disciplinarity (as in blindered clannishness, as in 
disciplining/training our minds to perceive and act in narrow, singular ways) and how 
expertise and sophistication, fancy techniques and tools, may allow a deep view...
...but only one...

And how “deprivileging” this view...
...and joining it with others is the only way we can truly expand our understanding of what is and what is possible.

This echoes much of what was discussed in the session yesterday about preparing students for team / transdisciplinary / translational science.

In addition to a powerful illustration of the necessity and naturalness of a transdisciplinarity (remember, we had to be educated, professionalized, and trained into being social workers; we weren't born this way), I think this also applies to researchers and the importance for us to be engaged and in constant conversation with diverse publics. We need to work in concert with those who have different vantage points, different pieces of the puzzle, so that we can be of service in movements for social justice, so that we are carrying out not only good research, but also research for good.
Social work researchers are often seen as marginal. If, that is, we are seen at all. (You can get a PhD in social work??)

This is trying and demoralizing and angering. But there is power to be leveraged in outsider status. Living on the fringe of the ivory tower (in the garage? A tent pitched in the backyard?) also means that we live closer to communities. And we see the cracks in the tower’s façade.

Instead of banging on the door to be let in, let’s lead the way to reshaping academia, to intellectuals “repossessing our cultural apparatus” as Mills urged and using it to the benefit of others.

To end with Mills (since I started with Mills), from his 1959 lecture, *The Decline of the Left*. He issued a charge that applies to us as scholars, as social workers, and as social work scholars:

> We must stop whining about our own alienation long enough to use it to form radical critiques, audacious programs, commanding views of the future.
> If *we* do not do these things, who will?

(Mills, 1959/1967, p. 233)