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# A Psychotherapy Private Practice Social Work Practicum: Expanding Our Boundaries of Field Education Placement

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Many social workers go into private practice, providing crucial mental health services; however, there is a dearth in the scholarship outlining the social work student training for these career options. It may be argued that social work students receive little or no clinical training on how to run a private practice providing psychotherapy services. To mend this pedagogical shortcoming, a private practice field education placement is a legitimate teaching opportunity to prepare social work students to meet the mental health needs of individuals, families, and the public. Authors drew on borderlands theory described by Gloria Anzaldúa as a contested space that focuses on “both and” thinking, which resonated with a sense of navigating a border filled with cultural tension between private practice and social work. Five social workers explore their unique experiences of a private practice field education placement using borderlands theory as a lens. Qualitative analysis of autoethnography narratives resulted in six themes: (1) benefits to private practice site, (2) preparation for social work, (3) private practice is social work, (4) balanced picture, (5) practicum landscape, and (6) learning opportunities. The article concludes with recommendations for social work education and research.

KEY WORDS: *field education; graduate social work; practicum; private practice; sexuality*

Social workers play a crucial role in our society by providing mental health services. Ameliorating challenges associated with mental illness is an important part of our profession’s legacy. Although many courses within social work focus on clinical issues, it is within fieldwork that students put classroom learning into practice building diagnostic and treatment skills. It is here in field education, the signature social work pedagogy, that a student “connects the theoretical and conceptual contributions of the classroom and field setting” (Council on Social Work Education, 2015, p. 13) and builds a professional social work identity (Bogo, 2015). Although the practicum experience is crucial to social work pedagogy, Bogo, Lee, McKee, Ramjattan, and Baird (2017) asserted that a host of barriers such as complicated client cases, declining agency resources, and overextended field instructors make field education more challenging to provide for students. Wiebe (2010) stated that to move the social work profession forward field standards should be adapted to promote student engagement in a variety of unconventional settings and

field objectives reconceptualized to allow us to reimagine practicum placements. However, a review of the literature found a vacuum in field education and private practice psychotherapy practicum placements (PPPPPs), thus we set out to explore the following question: Qualitatively, what are the field education experiences of MSW students placed in an urban, for-profit PPPPP site?

## PSYCHOTHERAPY PRIVATE PRACTICE DEFINED

Clinical social work involves diagnosis and treatment and seeks to address mental and emotional disorders interpersonal dysfunction, and environmental stressors (Toscone, 2016). As Brauner (2015) stated, “The private practice domain, then, is one where seasoned clinical social workers can continue to maintain a strong professional identity while engaging in the clinical work that is their passion” (p. 296). According to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) (2011), private or independent practitioners are clinical social workers who have earned an MSW from an accredited school of social work, have two years

of postgraduate work experience in a supervised clinical setting, and are licensed in the state of practice. They work in solo or group practices providing mental health services, including individual therapy, family therapy, couples therapy, and group therapy.

## DESCRIBING A PRIVATE PRACTICE FIELD EDUCATION PLACEMENT

The practicum placement site in this study differs in clinical scope, duration, and expertise from traditional mental health social work practicums that provide case management and short-term counseling through agency-based or community-based mental health centers. The practicum in this study is a for-profit psychological private practice with two PhD trained clinicians who can provide more in-depth, long-term psychotherapy specializing in relationship enhancement, sexual health, and personal wellness. Although payment can be accepted on a sliding scale, most clients are insurance or private-pay based. The practicum was the only such setting of its kind in the area and became a placement site due to students advocating for the unique clinical opportunities. The two owners, licensed social workers, were university affiliated; one was as a professor of practice and the other a field liaison. Common mental health concerns treated at the practice include anxiety, depression, addiction, family conflicts, relationship problems, parenting challenges, trauma, grief and loss, and life transitions. This is not an inpatient setting; patients with severe and persistent mental illness are referred elsewhere.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The social work profession seemingly has an internal battle of identity crisis between the clinical and social action perspectives (Toscone, 2016), with a psychotherapy identity at the center of this fiercely contested battle (Matorin, 2015; Panzer, 2015). Lingering beliefs that private practice social workers have turned their backs on the field's core mission are palpable in the sentiment, "Is private practice real social work?," a long-standing discussion in the scholarship (Kurzman, 1976). With rancorous descriptions, such as a title of Specht and Courtney's (1994) book *Unfaithful Angels: How Social Work Has Abandoned Its Mission*, independent clinical social workers have not been regarded well by some in the profession. Arguments against private practitioners are numerous, such as (a) they

are only in it for the money, (b) they don't share social work's values and don't fulfill social responsibilities, (c) they poach good social workers from agencies, (d) private practice contradicts social work's traditional role, (e) private practice discriminates against some groups, and (f) these discussions distract from the educational process of other social work students (Barker, 1991). Despite passionate debate about private practice and its place within social work (Barker, 1991; Specht, 1991), scholars (Strom, 1994) consider private practice social work well established within the profession.

Green, Baskind, Mustian, Reed, and Taylor (2007) found that an alarming number (42 percent) of deans of social work schools felt that private practice was not in alignment with the purpose of social work education, and of the 104 respondents only one reported a required or elective course around private practice content in the MSW curriculum. Most graduate social work programs do not support private practice education, despite a majority of students reporting a desire to enter into private practice (Green et al., 2007).

Brauner (2015), countering the argument that social workers in private practice have forsaken social work values, questions whether the social work profession has abandoned the private practitioner. Brauner's participants noted a sense of pride in their professional identity and a strong connection to their social work values. They believed that rather than diluting their experience, a private practice placement provided opportunities to disseminate professional values. In addition, they emphasized their work in areas such as social justice and advocacy, noting that fees were adjusted to serve clients from lower socioeconomic strata. Brauner made a recurring plea: "As a profession, we must broadcast a strong message to consumers about the vital role that clinical social workers play in the delivery of mental health services" (p. 301).

Lord and Ludice (2012) surveyed private practice social work clinicians on the topics of treatment structure, business structure, supervision, outcome measures, continuing education, social justice, evidence-based practice, and graduate school preparation. The findings showed a significant number of social workers upholding social work values such as social justice, by engaging in political advocacy and volunteer work (NASW, 2017). There were a variety of reported payment methods available for clients to use, such as insurance, Med-

icaid, Medicare, and sliding scale fees that went as low as zero dollars per session. Additional findings showed that less than half of participants believe graduate school prepared them for practice. Among those who felt prepared, graduate education was only for the clinical aspects of private practice, not the business aspects (Lord & Iudice, 2012).

Mooradian, Knaggs, Hock, and LaCharite (2011) addressed social work private practice and field education practicums reporting on the experiences of two MSW students from one university and their field instructor. The findings identified four themes: (1) business practices literacy, (2) development of professional self, (3) case conceptualization and intervention techniques, and (4) developing a theory of practice. However, the authors did not provide much discussion. In comparison, this study reports on five students from two universities covering five years with two different field instructors. In addition to providing an in-depth cross-thematic analysis of six new themes, we discuss them in relation to the themes identified by Mooradian and colleagues (2011).

## THEORY

To provide a framework for our discussions, we drew from borderlands theory described by Gloria Anzaldúa (1999) as a contested space that focuses on “both and” thinking, which resonated with our sense of navigating a border between private practice and social work. Most notably this disputed divide was visible as we advocated for psychotherapy private practice inclusion as a viable part within the umbrella of social work education. Our discussions often had a tone of needing to justify the legitimacy of psychotherapy and private practice within the practice scope of social work. In addition, borderlands thinking encouraged students to question the experts within the academy (for example, professors and field office staff) as they positioned themselves and their field practicum among the more traditional social work agency placements.

## METHOD

The current research project is a qualitative collaborative autoethnographic study, whereby multiple researchers develop multiple narratives in relation to a shared experience (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010). We relied on a co-constructive autoethnographic model (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011); each of the student authors collabora-

tively explored their lived experience of the practicum in a for-profit psychotherapy private practice from 2009 to 2017. When researchers seek to understand milestone events in their own lives, autoethnography (Richards & Morse, 2013) is often used. Because this was a one-of-a-kind field education site for two social work schools—the only PPTPP setting, in the area—we wanted, as Morse (1994) suggested, to capture the spirit of the experience. Also, like other scholars (Gant et al., 2019; Trotter, Brogatzki, Duggan, Foster, & Levi, 2006; Turner & Crane, 2016a, 2016b), we approached this study to intensely look at a small sample, which had the advantage of practicality and providing in-depth discussions between participant authors. Patton (1990), in addressing small sample sizes, has noted that “information-rich cases [are] cases from which one can learn a great deal about matters of importance. They are cases worthy of in-depth study” (p. 181).

## Participants

We are the participants of the study (see Table 1). On learning that Killian Derusha was interested in research, George Turner approached him with the idea to conduct this study. They then approached the other authors (that is, the other supervisor, Lisa Meyers, and four former MSW students whose placement for field education was at the site owned and operated by Turner and Meyers). An interview guide was constructed by Turner and Derusha to illuminate the practicum experience and sent out to the student authors. These questions were selected to illuminate the practicum experience and, because it had been eight years for one of the participants, survey priming (Lavrakas, 2008) was used to initiate participant reflection on their experience and enhance the quality of their answers prior to the focus group. We held a 1.5-hour meeting to review the guiding questions and new topics suggested by participants. Questions were used to guide and enrich the conversation. We gained consent to video-record participant stories and reactions to their and each other's stories.

This study focused on the experiences of a total of five MSW students: a current practicum student and four prior students. Snyder went on to earn his doctorate after graduating with his MSW (2009), Derusha was nearing graduation in a few weeks with his MSW (2017), and the other three had earned their MSW prior to the study. Participants

**Table 1: Author Participant Demographics**

Author Participant	Graduation Year	Field Instructor	Sexual Orientation	Gender	AASECT Certification	Age	Ethnicity
George Turner	NA	NA	Gay	Cis-male	Certified	NA	White
Lisa Meyers	NA	NA	Heterosexual	Cis-female	Certified	NA	White
Killian Derusha	2017	Lisa Meyers	Queer	Trans-male	Interested	20s	Biracial
Michelle Asby	2015	Lisa Meyers	Heterosexual	Cis-female	Not certified	40s	Latinx
Joy Durham	2014	Lisa Meyers	Lesbian	Cis-female	Not certified	30s	White
Amy Gray	2013	George Turner	Lesbian	Cis-female	Not certified	40s	White
Ben Snyder	2009	George Turner	Heterosexual	Cis-male	Certified	30s	White

Notes: AASECT = American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors and Therapists; NA = not applicable.

ranked their interest in private practice, with two reporting “high” levels of interest and three as “moderate.” To the question, “Does private practice fit into your future plans as a social worker?”, participants ranked it as a 3 or better on a scale ranging from 1 = never to 5 = absolutely. One person ranked their social work experience as advanced, one as novice, and the remaining three as intermediate. Current employment was as follows: one practicum student, one psychotherapist in a mental health clinic, one case manager in a hospital setting, and two outpatient therapists.

### Data Gathering

The qualitative data included (a) the surveys, (b) video recording, and (c) the collective written meeting notes. Both Turner and Derusha took notes capturing key points, quotes, feelings, and narrative descriptions of personal experiences as Turner facilitated the meeting. The notes were summarized and sent out to participants for verification, along with the meeting questions. Participants were asked to respond with a written response to any questions they wanted to expand on or which they wanted to answer but were unable to at the meeting.

### Data Analysis

First, open coding of the notes line-by-line was undertaken to generate descriptive themes. A deductive mode of analysis created a preliminary set of codes. Second, the inductive technique (Strauss & Corbin, 2014) involved adding codes as we segmented and coded the survey transcripts. Themes emerged using a constant comparative method (Morse, 1994) in which newly gathered data are compared with previously gathered data to develop

categories. Themes were initially developed by Turner and Derusha, who examined the descriptive themes to synthesize data. Third, we revisited these themes with each member contributing thoughts and personal stories in relation to the theme. All the authors then commented on these themes until a final version was agreed to. Finally, thematic analysis was used to fine-tune the identified themes, to explore their connectivity, and for its success in exploring data derived from autoethnographies (Richards & Morse, 2013). This process facilitated the production of six main themes, as presented in the following section.

### RESULTS

This study sought to illuminate a psychotherapy private practice field education site by capturing the challenges, memorable learning, and take-aways of a group of MSW students. Transcript excerpts provide illustrative examples and rich description. Six themes emerged from the inductive analysis: (1) benefits to practicum site, (2) preparation for social work, (3) private practice is social work, (4) balanced picture, (5) practicum landscape, and (6) learning opportunities. These themes provided a framework for subthemes. In this section, results of a cross-case thematic analysis are reported. As themes are introduced, excerpts from the interview transcripts are provided to bring in the participant’s voice to elucidate the point.

#### Benefits to Practicum Site

Having students at the practicum allowed for clients to receive case management services. Students could also see clients at a lower sliding scale fee than private practice clinicians. Derusha stated,

“My clients were below the poverty line. . . . I assisted further by helping with resource acquisition and taking a client to the food pantry multiple times.” Another benefit of having students was that they encouraged the pursuit of macro practice and advocacy. For example, two student authors engaged in policy advocacy with their supervisor by meeting with a state legislature to discuss Medicaid coverage.

### **Preparation for Social Work**

**Integration in Current Work.** Student authors were asked how the knowledge and skills gained from the practicum have been integrated into their current practice. Derusha shared that it was a suicidal client “that stood out, because I was not expecting this at my practicum . . . I was nervous.” This student recognized that they felt insecure in their ability and unable to trust their own skills, but how seeking supervision helped their own anxiety, a tool that they have carried forward into their current role. Snyder stated, “I am also much more willing to accept and take ownership of my own mistakes.” The other student authors reflected on the skills they learned in the practicum. Durham reported, “I started building the foundation of my clinical skills at my practicum. I use these skills all day, every day: crisis intervention, assessment, building rapport, discharge planning, treatment planning.”

**Traditional Social Work.** Student authors reflected on their experiences engaging in traditional social work practice in the agency, including case management, social justice pursuits, and encompassing core social work values. Supporting this idea, Asby stated, “I provided referrals and other general case management tasks.” Derusha shared, “I met with a legislative member to advocate for Medicaid billing, took a client to a food pantry, helped a client apply for Section 8 housing, wrote a letter for a trans client to change the gender and name marker on their legal documents, and also accompanied this client to court to help them change their name.”

**Vulnerable Populations.** Addressing the myth that private practice only caters to privileged communities, interns reported on the experience of working with diverse and vulnerable populations, including clients who identified as youth, elderly, HIV positive, sex workers, racially diverse, gender and sexual minorities, gender nonconforming, in-

tellectually or physically disabled, and having personality disorders. Elaborating on this concept, Asby shared, “I had voluntary and involuntary clients; one client that sticks out is a young Black female mother of three whose kids went into state custody, and part of her reunification included anger management and therapy.” Derusha also noted, “Half of my caseload consisted of transgender and gender-nonconforming clients. We worked on gender identity development, coming out issues, transitioning, legal name changes, dating while trans, pronoun and name change assertion skills, and safety planning.” Gray reflected that her work seemed to give a client new perspective, sharing, “A client was living in poverty and came to counseling [volunteering] to pay \$1.25 [for his session] to work on his relationship goals.”

**Social Justice.** Student authors elaborated on the promotion of social justice in their practice and how their unique position as students allowed for more holistic services for clients. Gray elaborated on her advocacy efforts, stating that her client struggled “to navigate the court-ordered treatment options to get his children back. We discussed . . . how the system is [not optimal for everyone] involved. . . . I encouraged [advocacy] for himself and his children.” Asby met with school officials and researched state policy on comprehensive sex education to advocate for better sexuality education in public schools.

### **Private Practice Is Social Work**

The students noted their experiences in practice that encompassed the values of traditional social work practice. Snyder offered, “I would argue that clinical practice is centrally focused on client strengths.” Derusha reiterated the practicum dedication to social work values by stating, “I worked with many different populations and tried to be culturally competent, promoted social justice, self-determination, and the dignity and worth of my clients.” Asby elaborated on the attention to social work values: “I utilized supervision to discuss and process social work values.”

### **Balanced Picture**

**Support.** The uniqueness of the practicum invited a variety of reactions from others, especially from the other students when discussing practicum experiences in the classroom setting. Derusha noted

that many of his peers “were jealous of my opportunity to be in a private practice setting, especially peers at agency placements where they were having negative experiences.” Gray added that most peers were supportive: “My peers were intrigued by my opportunity to provide therapy at a private practice placement. Many [wished they had] been given the opportunity to do something similar.” Durham stated, “My practicum was clearly the best!”

**Barriers.** The student authors also noted that the practicum created barriers within their program because of the content and requirements of [agency-centric] class assignments and remarks from instructors. Derusha noted, “Papers would be on agencies, focusing on dilemmas on staffing and rules. With such a small practicum, it made it difficult to complete assignments, but teachers were often flexible and supported me.”

### Practicum Landscape

**Strengths.** The format and structure of a private practice practicum allows students to have a unique field education experience that differs from their peers. Students reflected on the practicum’s strengths, noting that supervision was reportedly more available and of higher quality, perhaps speaking to the often-staggering caseloads and crisis environment of community mental health. Durham noted, “There is *no* better way to learn and develop clinical skills than by doing; I was always given the opportunity to ask questions and get feedback.” A more intimate practice setting was noted as a strength by Derusha, who shared, “A small agency made communication easier.” Another strength noted by Gray was the flexibility of the practicum.

**Challenges.** The practicum’s unique structure also had challenging areas, most notably obtaining clinical hours. Gray highlighted this, sharing that “developing a caseload is a difficult endeavor for a student in a private practice. Outreach efforts were helpful and a learning experience.” Derusha repeated this theme, remarking that

building your own caseload can be difficult at first, so it is hard to get clinical hours . . . but over time I was able to get more than enough. My supervisor helped by allowing me to shadow her in some of her sessions.

### Learning Opportunities

Overall learning was ranked positively by students. Student authors remarked having more direct client contact and observing a social worker providing therapy as highlights of their learning. Durham shared, “I was afforded more opportunities to practice a wider range of clinical skills.” Students appreciated the ability to gain a realistic picture of how much money can be made in private practice, with Derusha reflecting, “I thought private practice therapists made more money,” and commenting on the hassle of insurance reimbursement. It is noteworthy that Snyder acknowledged being surprised to learn “how lonely” private practice can be and how incredibly beneficial it was to learn that “there are several aspects of building and maintaining a business that are unfulfilling to me, which helped me clarify my professional interests.” Next, specific learning subthemes will be discussed.

**Business of Psychotherapy.** Regarding the business of psychotherapy, skills learned included billing, marketing, speaking, and networking. Gray shared, “Learning how to collect fees was, very normalizing and important”; Derusha noted, “I got to utilize skills—such as discussing payment, dealing with insurance, taxes, and chart organization—that I will use in the future.”

**Clinical Arc.** Mirroring other more traditional practicum placements, student authors agreed that the practicum experience allowed them to practice the therapeutic process or clinical arc. Asked to elaborate on this process, Asby shared, “I completed assessments, devised treatment plans, [provided] therapeutic interventions, and [practiced how to] terminate.”

**Supervision.** Supervision is a required facet of social work practicums. Students reflected on their experiences participating in supervision and how their experiences differed from peers. Asby shared, “My experience was difficult at first. I learned quickly how to accept feedback, and also be vulnerable to my insecurities and mistakes; in essence it was therapeutic and also educational.” Expanding on how supervision contributed to her learning, Gray noted that she felt her supervision had “an advantage over her peers,” clarifying that

I felt empowered and supported. . . . I was encouraged to try new things and continue to ask questions in order to best help my clients.

My peers indicated having very little of that type of support or openness with their supervisors.

Also noting prior lackluster supervision, Derusha shared,

My last practicum's supervisor was very busy and often was hard to communicate with. . . . Since I am [now] in constant contact with my supervisor, I can communicate with her almost instantly. This made discussing clinical issues very helpful.

## DISCUSSION

As stated by Brauner (2015), "Private practice does not inherently represent the antithesis of our mission, but rather, represents the potential to deepen and extend it" (p. 301). Moving for-profit psychotherapy private practice social work to a prominent space within academy discourse not only supports the minting of quality mental health professionals, but also publicizes a valuable public message about the vital role of private practice clinical social workers in community mental health services. Themes illuminated students engaged in progressive and substantive learning as they critically considered whether this placement adequately prepared them for social work practice. Findings indicated that learning was diverse, useful, and challenging. Overall, results suggest that a PPPPP has value to field education. We will first discuss the relevance of the findings from our six new themes to the social work scholarship and then reflect on the Mooradian et al. (2011) study findings.

In regard to theme 1, benefits to the practicum site, the private practice setting benefited in numerous ways including direct connection with the current literature and research through the students' classroom work. In addition, students provided yet another layer of giving back to the community. Although the practicum site owners already offered free speaking to area nonprofits such as PFLAG and routinely saw reduced-fee clients, services were expanded to include more case management and additional lower sliding scale appointments including space for no-fee clients. In a for-profit setting there can be a dilemma of balancing reduced-fee and full-fee clients. Client management is not limited to private practice,

with nonprofit services under increasing pressure to maximize their services and social workers under time limits and client quotas. However, it is worth noting that teachable opportunities exist with students in discussing serving marginalized communities, the limits of and differences in a private practice versus a clinic versus case management, and time management in supporting clients beyond a traditional therapy hour. Furthermore, clinicians in their role as mentors were able to pursue their interests in more macro social work such as community development, legislative advocacy, and policy reform. If social work schools were to embrace private practice psychotherapy field education placements, they might influence a new, hybrid practice model that uses students to incorporate more traditional social work roles into private practice, thus shaping the practice modality from within.

Findings for theme 2, preparation for social work, overwhelmingly found the experience valuable, countering the argument that students in a private practice setting would not experience traditional social work such as case management and advocacy or working with vulnerable populations. Moreover, student authors reported exposure to a hallmark of social work, the biopsychosocial approach. Student authors went on to work in a variety of social work sites including more traditional agency work: Derusha is currently in a private practice, but he spent the previous year in a community mental health center. Snyder provides psychotherapy at an outpatient clinic. Gray works at a family agency providing coparenting support. Durham works with individuals with co-occurring substance use and mental health disorders at an intensive outpatient program. Asby works with law enforcement crisis intervention teams. It could be surmised that this practicum experience provided a solid social work foundation for employment in more traditional agency work with diverse populations.

Perhaps even more compelling were the results for theme 3, private practice psychotherapy is social work. This disputed space, the border (Anzaldúa, 1999) between social work and private practice, was seen in the tangled and often overlapping student discussions around their experiences. This navigated boundary between private practice and social work was illuminated to be twofold: students arguing that private practice is a valuable field site

where quality social work learning can occur, and that private practice is a legitimate social work practice. Although potentially viewed as conflated, students would seamlessly transition between the two, highlighting borderlands “both and” thinking in the meaning-making of their experience. Students unanimously concluded that their placement was valuable and legitimate social work.

Challenging the argument that independent social workers are elitist and private practice represents the antithesis to social work values, student authors reported treating diverse socioeconomic clients and echoing similarities with prior studies (Brauner, 2015) in which students noted an integration of social work approaches and values such as working from a strengths perspective and person-in-environment approach; addressing client dignity, social justice, advocacy, vulnerable populations, and the importance of relationships; and connecting clients to community resources.

An analysis of theme 4, balanced picture, suggests that many of the student authors’ peers were envious of their placements. Curiously, student authors reported overwhelmingly that their peers commented on the taboo nature of the placement. These peers displayed awe and shock that the placement was approved by the social work program, indicating that students are not typically presented this type of placement choice during discussions; nor are they familiar with this type of placement through academic discussions within their courses.

Of particular note are the findings from theme 5, the practicum landscape. This type of practicum is not for all students. Student authors noted the challenges associated with building a caseload, which created a certain amount of anxiety. Student authors, unlike their peers, had to curate their own caseloads, which demanded a certain amount of motivation and independence. Equally important was that students had to be able to manage ambiguity and a lack of structure. All of the student authors brought drive, maturity, and adaptability to the experience. It is also important to note that two of the students identified as lesbian and one as trans. Research (Turner, Pelts, & Thompson, 2018) has noted that microaggressions are present in the social work academy. Thus, having a safe space where sexual orientation and gender identity are celebrated, a crucial and understudied aspect of

practicum placements for queer students, added to the student authors’ sense of being supported.

Findings for theme 6, learning opportunities, indicated that both supervision and clinical skills acquisition were available in the practicum, but all students felt that the quality was better than what was experienced during their first-year placement. This may indicate that PPPPPs can help students customize and attend to details not afforded in a more traditional practicum site. One takeaway that may be unique to a PPPPP is the learning of the business side. It may be argued that social workers need strong financial literacy skills. Being able to collect money and discuss a client’s budget was a part of the student author’s learning. These skills may be overlooked within more traditional social work settings where billing and insurance are often handled by a different department within an agency. The business of clinical practice (for example, marketing, billing, contracts) is not for everyone. A PPPPP experience may help students make a more informed decision and highlight to some that they prefer a more traditional social work settings where they can focus on just the clinical aspects of the work.

In addition to the student authors identifying six new themes that we have discussed here, this study identified four Mooradian et al.’s (2011) study findings and expanded on these themes. Student authors provided in-depth reflection on the following: (a) business practices literacy, (b) development of professional self, (c) case conceptualization and intervention techniques, and (d) developing a theory of practice. We now provide an analysis of each of these Mooradian themes.

Reflecting on the theme of business practice literacy, the student authors unanimously agreed that the practicum experience improved their knowledge of billing and working with insurance. There was also an agreement that the practicum gave students a realistic expectation of what it means to be a private practice social worker.

The practicum placement provided challenges for the students, honing their skills and developing a professional sense of self. Reflecting on this second Mooradian theme, the student authors noted that the practicum provided them with the confidence needed to work professionally as a social worker. As Derusha reported, “I learned how to be a fully fledged social worker. [The practicum]



gave me the confidence and experience that I wanted to gain from grad school.”

A variety of intervention techniques were taught, including cognitive-behavioral therapy, sensate focus, mindfulness techniques, motivational interviewing, acceptance and commitment therapy, and various relationship therapy techniques. Student authors reflected on the third theme, case conceptualization and intervention techniques. As Gray noted, “The ability to discuss observations and learn from a professional was invaluable to my skill development.”

The final theme, developing a theory of practice, provided insight to the importance of supervision. As noted by Asby, “It was useful to observe cognitive-behavioral therapy in action with my field instructor and her clients.” In addition, Gray offered that “developing a theory of practice was integrated in learning through conversations with my practicum supervisor and in weekly writings.”

### Limitations

This study was exploratory in nature and no interventions took place. The sample size relied on the experience of only five student authors who had an interest in private practice psychotherapy. Furthermore, Derusha was a current practicum student. And while attempts were made to mitigate the influence of social desirability, peer pressure, and response bias, it is difficult to know the extent or the impact of any of these on the student coauthors.

### Implications for Social Work Education and Research

There is a crisis in field education, specifically related to practicum shortages, field instructor recruitment and retention, and field education coordinator workloads (Ayala et al., 2018). As Perry (2009) noted, “Specialization of interests within the profession (and graduate curriculum) may not be a bad thing if the need is documented and the market demands such” (p. 66). A potential solution is schools of social work capitalizing on private practitioner alumni. Other mental health professions like psychologists and marriage and family therapists have staked their claim as the go-to mental health practitioners, but social work seems resistant to embrace an identity as a “distinct, vibrant and worthy clinical profession” (Brauner, 2015, p. 302). None of the student authors reported receiving course work in the MSW programs that addressed incorpo-

rating social work values into private practice, nor were there any elective classes suggesting that private practice was a viable career path. This marginalization of private practice as an illegitimate social work service area feeds into one of social work’s secrets—a hierarchical culture of privileging some social work placements while shaming other choices to the outskirts or borders. Borderlands theory may provide an opportunity to situate PPPPPs as a challenge to the normative academic approach to typical placements. Similar to Mule’s (2016) description of queer theory, the idea of us occupying a boundary allowed us to explore how to disrupt, deconstruct, and disorder the dominant cultural framework within the institution of social work placements. Rejecting this binary of good or bad social work placements, where private practice psychotherapy is viewed as inappropriate, borderlands theory acknowledges a “both and” perspective.

Research on alternate practicum placements is limited (Abram, Hartung, & Wernet, 2000; Kittle & Gross, 2005). Research should examine private practitioner views regarding having a social work student placed within the practice to discover potential roadblocks. Also, it would be informative to identify the breadth of for-profit psychotherapy private practice with specializations (for example, grief, sex therapy, couples) and note unique learning opportunities for students. Expanding this research to identify potential systemic barriers, such as field education staff, field liaison, or practice professor bias, is merited.

### CONCLUSION

A PPPPP can provide MSW students a valuable field education experience. However, to nurture this useful student learning environment, social work education must promote private practice as a “legitimate developmental trajectory for social workers” (Brauner, 2015, p. 300). Considering field education in this effort is a logical choice for the academy. To cross the discursive divide (borderland) between social work and private practice, the academy must abandon its divisive and exclusionary views on private practice psychotherapy, entering into what Licona (2005) described as a new third space, a place of “shared understanding and meaning-making,” where “dualities are transcended to reveal fertile and reproductive spaces” (p. 105). Not only does this embrace potential new practicum placements, but it legitimizes social workers provid-

ing psychotherapy in private practice settings. This strengthens social work's place among mental health professionals, increases social works visibility as an essential bedrock of psychological services, and perhaps more important, acknowledges the critical role social work plays in the well-being of individuals, couples, families, and communities. **SW**

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