School leads effort to identify grand challenges of social work

In neighborhoods afflicted by violence and poverty, in hospitals and substance abuse treatment centers providing care to ailing patients, and in many other settings in which the social fabric is fraying or worn, social work researchers and practitioners are striving to address issues that plague society.

Major challenges exist, including fragmented systems of health and mental health care, problems of social stigma and oppression, and a need to reform the child welfare and foster care sector.

To frame these issues and bring clarity and guidance to the profession as the next decade unfolds, a group of social work scholars is leading a Grand Challenges initiative to identify and highlight the most serious societal ills that social work can and should address.

“Social work has the chance to capitalize on 100 years of history to make these changes, if we can be clear about what we have accomplished and what we could accomplish,” said Richard Barth, who serves as chair of the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare, which is coordinating the effort, as well as dean of the University of Maryland’s School of Social Work.

Assistant professor explores family communication and risk behaviors among children

Visiting scholars draw inspiration from interactions with leading researchers at USC

Doctoral students net three competitive fellowships to support their research

Haluk Soydan, Ph.D.
Director of the Hamovitch Center
Researcher draws inspiration from work with parents and children

By Charli Engellhorn

Julie Cederbaum, an assistant professor in the USC School of Social Work, engaging in the principles and practice of social work is a calling she has felt throughout her life. Even as a teenager, the desire to give her time and services for the benefit of others seemed instinctive.

“I didn’t know what motivated me,” Cederbaum said. “I just felt very natural as a listener and in helping others with their problems. It was always really easy for me to talk to people I didn’t know and engage with others.”

In her current position at USC, Cederbaum examines family communication and parent-child interactions and their possible effects on risk behavior in adolescents. Although much of her research has been directed toward HIV prevention and education for young women, it also extends to general behavior patterns of all adolescents and the role of parental relations in promoting positive behaviors.

“None of us are born with an innate ability to parent,” Cederbaum said. “What is provided in terms of knowledge and skill building helps shape the way we parent. The typical practice of the past has been to intervene with kids or parents, but studies have much less frequently focused on resolving issues as a pair.”

Cederbaum seeks to convey how family values and belief systems are major intervening factors in adolescent choices concerning risk behaviors. Parents often assume their children are receiving the messages they desire because of the activities or behaviors in which the parents participate. But that assumption is often incorrect, and a more in-depth form of communication is required.

“It’s about empowering parents to take the initiative to help shape their kids,” Cederbaum said. “Unless you tell kids what you want and what you feel is valuable, you don’t know if they are taking away the right message. What we want to be providing are modifiable skills on some level that are supported and reasonable enough for people to use with their children.”

Julie Cederbaum

As an assistant professor in the USC School of Social Work, Julie Cederbaum has focused her research on issues that affect communication between parents and children on topics such as drug use and HIV prevention.

“For Julie Cederbaum, an assistant professor in the USC School of Social Work, engaging in the principles and practice of social work is a calling she has felt throughout her life. Even as a teenager, the desire to give her time and services for the benefit of others seemed instinctive.

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Empowering both sides of the parent–child relationship through better communication leads to healthier families, Cederbaum said. Adolescents come to understand what is expected of them and why, which can induce a sense of safety and comfort in terms of openly discussing issues they are trying to resolve.

“There is enough literature that shows kids will prioritize what their parents say over the opinions of their peers if the parents remain present in their kids’ lives,” she said.

Most of Cederbaum’s early experiences in social work revolved around child welfare services. A Santa Monica native, she began working as a peer counselor at an adolescent transitional housing placement center during high school. As an undergraduate at Drew University in Madison, New Jersey, Cederbaum engaged in community outreach as part of the women’s soccer team and studied abroad in Kenya, where she helped organize the Food for Glue program, which encouraged local teens to turn in bottles of glue often used as stimulants in exchange for food.

Cederbaum also held two internships during her master’s degree studies at UCLA. At El Nido Family Center, she worked with pregnant teens.

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Cederbaum, because of both the collegiality she sensed among the faculty and its proximity to her family. Returning to Los Angeles felt like completing a circle.

“Los Angeles is where all these ideas came from,” she said. “Coming back was almost like doing homage to the people who helped lift me to where I am. The experiences I had here really shaped who I am as a researcher, scholar, and thinker. To be able to utilize my connections and engage in this community, which is so ripe for social change, is really amazing.”

While at USC, Cederbaum has received funding for a number of projects, including a grant from the National Institute of Drug Abuse to investigate communication between mothers and sons about alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana use. She is also currently a co-investigator on a project funded by the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation exploring pregnancy, parenting, and foster youth. Cederbaum also works closely with Professor Suzanne Wenzel to adapt evidence-based HIV risk reduction interventions for use with homeless women.

In addition to her research, Cederbaum teaches two courses on topics related to social work and public health; she earned a second master’s degree in public health from the University of Pennsylvania while earning her PhD.

As she continues to pursue her research interests, she hopes to develop strategies for parents to gain proactive knowledge and skills applicable to their everyday lives.

“We have so many punitive systems, but that is not the vision I have for how this work should be disseminated,” she said. “I don’t want it to be about troubled families and fixing them. The work should hopefully influence positive parenting and positive relationships and promote family wellness as a requirement for family reintegration.”

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Technology supports scholarly exchange

When Hongbo Li came to the USC School of Social Work from China as a participating student in the school’s popular Visiting Scholars program, she expected to put her head down and grind away at her dissertation research.

To a certain extent, she has prioritized her academics, which focuses on comparing marketing efforts by public nonprofit organizations in China and the United States. But Li also found herself opening up to other aspects of American culture during her yearlong stay. “As a PhD student in China, I always have much to do,” she said. “Nobody pushes me, but I push myself. When I came here, I was able to separate my life from my job. When I work, I work hard, and then I can have some fun.”

That is an encouraging result for Cherry Short, the school’s assistant dean of global and community initiatives, who shares a concerned effort to bring a stronger sense of cultural exchange and community partnerships rather than research initiatives. She recently defended her dissertation to colleagues at UC Berkeley and UCLA using technology made available by the USC School of Social Work’s Virtual Academic Center.

“Technology is the main driving force for social work researchers and practitioners who work in health and mental health, said Haluk Soydan, director of the school’s Hamovitch Center for Science in the Human Services and cochair of the conference. “It is coming into the United States for the first time, so we are really showcasing some of the best work that this country’s social workers perform.”

Slated for June 23 to 27, the 7th International Conference on Social Work in Health and Mental Health will have a specific focus on client-centered care. Soydan said the conference, held in various venues around the world since 1995, has typically reflected various social work fields.

“We are located in the heart of a very urban and multicultural environment, which gives a special flavor to the conference,” he said. “We chose to have a conference here to give great emphasis on health and mental health issues in the United States in general but also specific to our school and the Los Angeles region.”

This approach is highlighted by the conference’s symposia series on aging, sexual orientation, cultural competence, social and economic equity, health reforms, homelessness, Latino health, military social work, and the recovery model. Guided by leading experts in technological learning, the conference will feature engaging discussion sessions, with invited researchers, practitioners, and policy makers.

USC faculty and service providers will also have a chance to exhibit their accomplishments during poster sessions, which will be presented at three-day sessions held at various community locations throughout the Los Angeles metropolitan area, from Long Beach to Sylmar.

Soydan said, “It is an opportunity for us to share our knowledge and work with others, and we’ve seen significant improvements that will be critical during the coming months as we interview local nonprofit officials, including CEOs, board members, and employees.

“If I want to do a field study, I have to talk to people,” Li said. “So I found every chance I could to talk to people in English.”

Li plans to stay until September before returning to China to complete her dissertation. Short said USC has an array of activities in cultivating relationships with Pacific Rim countries, and the Visiting Scholars program has attracted more than 20 scholars from China, Japan, and other Asian countries.

However, school leaders are reaching out to other regions as well, including northern Europe, Israel, India, and South Africa. Many participants are invited by their faculty sponsor for stays ranging from one to two years. Others seek out one of the school’s leading scholars based on their shared research interests.

Borge Skåland, a lecturer at Oslo and Akershus University College in Norway, is among the latter. Prior to pursuing his doctorate, he taught at a school for children with serious behavioral issues. When he began noticing incidences of violence in the talks against his teacher and realized they were receiving little attention, Skåland was intrigued by the lack of response from school officials and people with regard to their research, she said. “Even though they have this relationship with a specific faculty member, it’s really tough to engage them in a more holistic way.”

In addition to receiving advice and sharing ideas with Dean Marilyn Flynn, her faculty sponsor, Li said she has also benefitted from interactions with her peers, including her Ukrainian roommate and another visiting scholar from South Korea. She admits she struggled at first with the English language but found she could engage with others and has seen significant improvements. That will be critical during the coming months as she interviews local nonprofit officials, including CEOs, board members, and employees.

“The idea is to be able to link people with the same research interests and abilities with our faculty here and to be a bit more open to understanding different cultures with regard to their research,” Cherry Short
Changing health

A new project led by Erick Guerrero, an assistant professor with the USC School of Social Work, will explore how recent health care legislation affects the ability of substance abuse treatment programs to serve low-income and minority clients.

In particular, Guerrero is interested in examining how the Affordable Care Act (ACA), known colloquially as Obamacare, will improve the integration of substance abuse treatment, mental health care, and HIV prevention programs, as well as its effects on treatment outcomes among African-American and Latino clients. Guerrero’s study is one of several federally funded grants in the country focused on these questions.

“This area of inquiry is still developing, and it offers many opportunities to explore this history of health care legislation and its impact on people, particularly low-income racial and ethnic minorities,” he said.

Guerrero received a $428,327 grant from the National Institute on Drug Abuse to support the first two years of his project. Successful achievement of milestones during the initial phase will lead to funding for an additional three years, totaling $1.1 million.

The phase one of the project fits well with the framework of the ACA, which is slowly being introduced into the health care landscape over a matter of years. Guerrero hopes to establish a baseline understanding of treatment and care before the legislation is fully implemented to better understand its overall effect.

Dorothy students to benefit from competitive research fellowships

Three doctoral candidates in the USC School of Social Work are among an exclusive group of students selected to receive a graduate fellowship for advanced PhD scholars.

Lisa Davis, Mercedes Hernandez, and Diana Ray received fellowships featuring $30,000 stipends, in addition to tuition, fees, insurance, and possible travel grants for further research opportunities.

The fellowships, offered in three categories, provide support to USC students as they complete their PhD studies. Particular focus is given to programs in which research assistantships are not available and teaching is the main source of financial support, said Meredith Dichi Reitan, assistant dean of fellowships for the USC Graduate School.

“Lisa is doing very sophisticated intervention development work with a highly vulnerable population,” she said. “These funds can supercharge her dissertation, allow her to gather more data, and help her to produce more powerful publications from that data.”

Brekke said her research will increase Davis’s competitiveness in the job market and has implications for the lives of university students who are employed as junior faculty members, a sentiment shared by Conception Barrio, an associate professor who serves as a faculty advisor and mentor for Hernandez.

“I think it is to their benefit to leave the program completely equipped, not just in writing and conducting statistical analysis of data, but in how to undertake a study from conceptualization to the completion,” Barrio said. “This fellowship and experience will carry [Hernandez] through as an innovative component of the project, which combines mindfulness training and psychoeducation to enhance the well-being and community functioning of individuals with schizophrenia and similar disorders.

“The intervention is designed to help people improve their self-regulatory capacities through mindfulness training,” Davis said. “The psychoeducation portion targets stress reduction, self-care, and goal setting. The fellowship will provide me with the necessary resources to recruit participants from a community-based psychosocial rehabilitation agency, implement the intervention, and evaluate the results.”

John Brekke, Davis’s faculty mentor and advisor and the Frances G. Larson Professor of Social Work Research, said her work on this project has the potential to significantly improve how mental health agencies deliver interventions to the seriously mentally ill.

“She has the best of both worlds as a community-based psychosocial rehabilitation agency, implementing a groundbreaking social work and mental health scholarly work that will be highly influential across health-related disciplines and behavioral sciences.”

Ray said she feels unbelievably fortunate to have received the fellowship, and all three students believe the fellowship is a boon beyond their current endeavors and will benefit their professional careers.

Receiving these fellowships will clearly benefit the research careers of these three scholars, but the awards are also seen as a win for the USC School of Social Work.

“Getting these fellowships and having this kind of work done here is a feather in our cap as a doctoral program,” Barrio said. “I think these students will be wonderful examples of the kind of candidate for faculty positions we produce in our program.”

AWARDS

AWARDS

AWARDS (continued on page 7)

GUERRERO (continued on page 7)
Study explores sexual functioning among veterans

PHYSICAL INJURIES AND THE PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF WAR CAN HAVE DEVASTATING CONSEQUENCES ON THE SEXUAL FUNCTIONING OF SERVICE MEMBERS AND VETERANS.

Despite recent advances in protective gear, members of the U.S. military face a serious risk of genital injuries due to improvised explosive and other unique aspects of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Psychosocial challenges, such as posttraumatic stress disorder and depression, can also exacerbate issues with sexual functioning and libido.

A new study led by the USC School of Social Work’s Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans and Military Families (CIR) is among the first to directly address the topic, which has been plagued until recent years.

“Psychosocial problems and physical injuries can have negative effects on sexual functioning and libido among military personnel, issues that will be explored in a new study at the USC School of Social Work,” said Anthony Hassan, a research assistant professor who is leading the project. She noted military personnel may be even less willing to speak up about problems with sexual functioning, “They have a certain culture that they are used to living with. There’s definitely stigma around the issue.”

Funded by a $650,000 gift from the Iraq Afghanistan Deployment Impact Fund via the California Community Foundation, the 18-month project will involve gathering data about the scope of the problem through literature reviews and surveys with veterans and service members.

Insight from that process will inform a training toolkit with resources for social workers and behavioral health care professionals, social work trainers and case managers, military personnel, issues that will be explored in a new study at the USC School of Social Work. The toolkit will be offered to behavioral health professionals, social work scholars and researchers, and other professionals who work with military populations.

“The toolkit will be offered to behavioral health professionals, social work scholars and researchers, and other professionals who work with military populations. The research training team plans to hold a short training conference to raise awareness of the issue and disseminate materials developed during the study,” said Hassan.

He said there are efforts underway to redesign the gear, which includes a thinner garment worn at all times and a heavier device used by soldiers on foot patrol. Regardless, the equipment is largely designed to protect against debris from a blast rather than a direct explosion, and serious injuries remain a distinct possibility.

Beyond physical disfigurement, the psychological scars of war often disrupt sexual functioning, which can exacerbate those same psychological problems, creating a negative cycle that damages relationships with spouses and significant others.

In addition to reaching out to reconstructive surgeons and contacts at military hospitals and an expert on sexual functioning, the research team plans to conduct a survey with community-dwelling veterans to gain a better understanding of how sexual issues are perceived and handled in general. That information will inform a training toolkit focused on the most critical issues related to sexual functioning, as well as guidance for professionals on how to broach the topic with clients.

“It’s about finding the best way for a clinician to start the conversation,” Wilcox said.

The toolkit, which will feature video vignettes, case scenarios, resources, and assessment tools, will be embedded as a module in a course on human sexuality offered to master’s students at the USC School of Social Work beginning next year.

“The objective is to educate providers so they at least know how to do an assessment and be able to make appropriate referrals or know what treatment models are out there that are available,” said Dr. Dori Whisler, a clinical professor and licensed social worker who teaches the course. “The educational component will also raise the awareness among the general population and sensitize them to the psychological and social issues of blast injuries.”

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Another component of the project is an effort to advocate for change at a policy level. For instance, Hassan said there is concern that Veterans Health Affairs and the Department of Defense produce treatment protocols for veterans who have suffered injuries to their reproductive and urinary tract systems. Both have in vitro fertilization and counseling for spouses. Although health care insurance for injured service members covers some fertility care, it doesn’t pay for embryo implantation or sperm donation care for spouses in most cases, he said.

Hassan noted that a similar collaborative effort had taken place years ago between scholars at USC and UCLA, but they met a number of roadblocks that would be difficult for institutions located farther apart. During a recent conference on doctoral education, Mor Barak noted that the approximately $600,000 grant is one of approximately 60 made by the fund, which has distributed nearly $250 million to various efforts to address issues faced by service members and veterans.

“IADF is the largest philanthropic intervention in the lives of service members, veterans, and their families ever known in this country,” Berglass said of the fund, which was established in 2006 by a then-anonymous donor.

Professor Hassan, director of the Iraq Afghanistan Deployment Impact Fund, said the goal was to provide doctoral students potential and for students to see what their future employment options might be. Professor Hassan, director of the Iraq Afghanistan Deployment Impact Fund, said the goal was to provide doctoral students potential and for students to see what their future employment options might be. Professor Hassan, director of the Iraq Afghanistan Deployment Impact Fund, said the goal was to provide doctoral students potential and for students to see what their future employment options might be.
“It’s an opportunity for our field to square its scientific and social justice aspirations and to communicate more effectively within the profession and to other professionals and the general public about what social work is working on, what its capacity is, what its needs are to solve important problems, why it’s a fascinating and compelling field to be a part of, and what important advances to our quality of life could occur with advances in our social work science,” Barth said.

“Many times, the people who will actually be implementing the research will be the people in the room who are coming up with those ideas,” he said. “As a participant in the initial stages of the initiative, Browning said he is hopeful that the project will lead to an even stronger working relationship between the Office of Schools of Social Work, as it becomes more detailed that you lose interest but that you can attract the attention of a lot of people, but you have to do it in a manner that is not so broad vision for the profession can begin to restructure and develop this new strategic plan for the department, which involved brainstorming sessions and discussions among thousands of members of staff. "How do you succinctly describe what you want to do in a manner that is not so detailed that you lose interest but that you capture the spirit of what you want to do?" he said. "There is a need to think in a broad enough manner that you can attract the attention of a lot of people, but you have to drill down to the detail level with some of the challenges to make it specific enough that you see some actual changes." Browning described two distinct components of such a project: the final product and the process of developing that final product. He said considering how people will view the Grand Challenges Initiative in a decade or two is a critical component of its success. "Many times, the people who will actually be implementing that roadmap won’t be the people in the room who are coming up with those ideas," he said.

"Social work is at a crossroads. It has a large number of challenges in areas such as child welfare, it is constantly being challenged on all sides by other professions, and it has a gender problem, much like engineering, in that it doesn’t attract many men." Marilyn Flynn

"There is a need to think in a broad enough manner that you can attract the attention of a lot of people, but you have to drill down to the detail level with some of the challenges to make it specific enough that you see some actual changes." Philip Browning

"It has a large number of challenges in areas such as child welfare, it is constantly being challenged on all sides by other professions, and it has a gender problem, much like engineering, in that it doesn’t attract many men." Rami Benbenishty.
Heather Halperin has been selected to receive the Lifetime Achievement award from the San Fernando Valley unit of the National Association of Social Workers. The clinical associate professor has dedicated her career to issues involving children and families, as well as the education of aspiring social workers. In addition to assisting with field placements at the USC School of Social Work since 1983, Halperin has worked closely with families affected by child abuse, neglect, and violence. She also maintained a private practice in the San Fernando Valley for more than three decades.

Associate professor Maria Aranda received the California Elder Mental Health and Aging Coalition’s Older Adult Leadership and Advocacy Award in recognition of her efforts to improve the mental health and well-being of aging Latinos in the state. Aranda has led and contributed to multiple behavioral and epidemiological studies and has been widely acknowledged for scholarship on problem-solving therapy as a treatment for depression with older and middle-aged Latinos.

Clinical professor and associate dean of field education Marleen Wong received the George D. Nickel Award for Outstanding Professional Services by a Social Worker in recognition of her work with traumatized populations, including those affected by school shootings, terrorist attacks, and natural disasters. A preeminent expert in school crisis and recovery, Wong has developed mental health recovery programs and crisis and disaster training for school districts and law enforcement in the United States, Canada, Israel, and Asia.

William Vega, Provost Professor and executive director of the Roybal Institute on Aging, received the Rema Lapouse Award from the American Public Health Association. The honor is given annually in recognition of excellence in psychiatric epidemiology and the scientific understanding of mental health disorders.

Dean Marilyn Flynn received the first Provost’s Prize for Innovation in Educational Practice at the USC Academic Honors Convocation. The award honors achievements by members of the USC community who advance the university’s mission and prestige in higher education. Flynn’s accomplishments include establishing the school’s military social work program and launching the Virtual Academic Center, the first web-based master’s of social work program at a major research university.