GRADUATING BSW STUDENT ATTITUDES TOWARDS VULNERABLE POPULATIONS AND THEIR PREFERENCES TOWARDS INTERVENTIONS TO SERVE THEM

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Abstract: *A one-time cross-sectional survey was administered to 78 fourth-year social work students at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater campus during the 2000/2001 academic year to explore graduating seniors' attitudes towards poverty, delinquency and the elderly as well as students' preferred interventions towards these vulnerable populations in the United States. Additional survey items included student perceptions towards individually-oriented versus socially-oriented goals of the social work profession, preferences regarding age of client, client population preferred, preferences regarding place of employment, and types of services, interventions, and practices preferred. After calculating mean scores, ANOVA tests revealed statistically significant findings in student ideologies and practice preferences. The potential impact of these findings on social work education and practice will be discussed.*

Key words: *student attitudes, residual, institutional, social welfare*

INTRODUCTION

An on-going ideological debate in the field of social work centers on the origins of client problems in living and the ensuing interventions intended to solve them. The seminal works of Wilensky and Lebeaux (1958) illustrate this ideological rift, with the origins of people's problems being polarized in either an individual responsibility (residualist) approach or a societal responsibility (institutional) approach. Various social scientists have reported on the connection between student attitudes and beliefs towards client populations and the resultant impact on service delivery (Applebaum, 2002; Manoleas, 1994; Stacey, Singer and Ritchie, 1989; Tan, Hawkins, and Ryan, 2001; Van Soest, 1996). Similarly, the connection between societal values, beliefs, and attitudes towards vulnerable populations and the resultant social welfare policies, programs and practices that flow from them has been elaborated on by numerous authors (Bankston, 2003; Braithwaite, 1986; Lasch, 1995, Specht and Courtney, 1994). This paper will explore social work student attitudes toward vulnerable populations and their preferences towards interventions intended to serve them.

METHODOLOGY

A one-time cross-sectional survey was administered to 78 fourth-year BSW social work students at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater campus during the 1999/2000

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academic year. Eighty-nine percent of the participants were women, 58% of whom were under the age of 28 years. Sixty-nine percent of the participating students were not married. The surveys were distributed in both the fall and spring semesters during the final year of studies, with voluntary student participation and complete confidentiality. The survey instrument utilized was developed as part of an international study of social work student attitudes, with this author collaborating on the chapter concerning U.S. social work student attitudes (Weiss, Gal, and Dixon, 2003).

FINDINGS

PROFESSIONAL IDEOLOGY

Student attitudes toward the causes of poverty and delinquency, the ways that society should deal with poverty and the goals of the social work profession were explored.

Attitudes towards poverty

The possible causes of poverty were examined from three different approaches: 1) psychological, 2) social, and 3) lack of motivation. A Likert-type scale of 17 items was utilized with possible responses ranging from a high of 5 (strongly agree) to a low of 1 (strongly disagree). The internal consistency of all three of the possible causes of poverty (factors) measured was high with a = .88 for "social causes", a = .78 for "psychological causes", and a = .86 for "lack of motivation" causes. The mean score for the "social causes" of poverty factor was 3.47, for the "psychological causes" of poverty factor was 2.26, and for the "lack of motivation" poverty factor was 1.94. The greatest degree of support among United States social work students in explaining the causes of poverty was the "social causes of poverty" approach which places the origins of poverty within the social environment, versus the "lack of motivation" cause which places responsibility on the lack of personal effort to find work etc. The "psychological causes" of poverty, such as attributing poverty to emotional problems, had a moderate level of support among students. In an ANOVA test, these differences were found to be statistically significant, $F(2,154)=110.20; p<.001$. In the paired samples comparative t-tests, all three explanations for "causes of poverty" were found to have significant differences, $p<.001$.

Attitudes towards delinquency

Three possible causes of delinquency were also examined: 1) "psychological causes" 2) "social causes" and 3) "considerations of gains and losses". A Likert-type scale of 17 items was again utilized, with possible responses ranging from a high of 5 (strongly agree) to a low of 1 (strongly disagree). The internal consistency of all three of the possible causes of delinquency (factors) measured was again quite high with a = .84 for "social causes", a = .77 for "psychological causes", and a = .78 for "gains and losses considerations". The mean score for the "social causes" of delinquency factor was 3.16, for the "psychological causes" of delinquency factor was 2.42, and for the "consideration of gains and losses" causes of delinquency factor was 3.10. The support among

United States social work students in explaining the causes of delinquency was nearly the same for both "social causes" and "consideration of gains and losses" causes. Less support was found for the "psychological causes" of delinquency factor.

In an ANOVA test, these differences were found to be statistically significant, $F(2,154)=32.25;p<.001$. In the paired samples comparative t-tests, significant differences were found between the social and psychological "causes of delinquency" as well as the psychological and considerations of gains and losses examinations, $p<.001$. However, no significant difference was found between the social and considerations of gains and losses "causes of delinquency", $p<.05$. Congruent with the Whitewater student's attitudes towards the social causes of poverty, the social causes of delinquency were perceived to be most influential, followed by psychological causes in both cases.

Preferred ways of dealing with poverty

Three different approaches to dealing with poverty were examined: 1) extending state social welfare services, 2) psychotherapeutic treatment of the individual, and 3) reductions in state support or punitive policies. A Likert-type scale with 15 items was again utilized, with possible responses ranging from a high of 5 (strongly agree) to a low of 1 (strongly disagree). The internal consistency of all three of the possible ways of dealing with poverty were very high, with a = .83 for "extending state social welfare programs", a = .84 for "psychotherapeutic treatment of individuals", and a = .84 for "minimizing state assistance". The mean score for the "extending state social welfare programs" approach was 3.79, the mean score for the "psychotherapeutic treatment of individuals" approach was 2.46, and the mean score for the "minimizing state assistance" approach for dealing with poverty was 1.98. Students clearly favored the "extending of state social welfare programs" approach to dealing with poverty, with the least support going towards the "minimizing of state assistance" approach. There was a moderate level of support for the "psychotherapeutic treatment of individuals" approach to dealing with poverty.

In an ANOVA test, these differences were found to be statistically significant, $F(2,154)=140.72;p<.001$. In the paired samples comparative t-tests, significant differences were found between all three approaches to dealing with poverty, $p<.001$.

The goals of the social work profession

Two primary types of social work goals were explored in this survey:

1) individually oriented goals and 2) socially oriented goals. Six items focused on individual-oriented goals such as "dealing with the difficulties of the individual" and five items were socially oriented such as "furthering social policy that supports the principle of social justice". A Likert scale was again utilized for respondents to rank the degree of importance of each of the goals, with a score of 5 indicating "very great importance" to a score of 1 indicating "very little importance". The internal consistency was calculated with a = .81 for "individual oriented goals" and a = .83 for "society-oriented goals", indicating a high degree of internal consistency for both measures. The

mean score for socially oriented goals was 4.24 and the mean score for individually oriented goals was 4.38, with no significant difference found between the importance that the Whitewater students attributed to the two types of goals for the social work profession.

PROFESSIONAL PREFERENCES

Preferences regarding age groups

Student preference in terms of their readiness/preference to working with various age groups of clients was measured, once again utilizing a Likert scale, with a 5 indicating "a very large degree" of preference and a 1 indicating "a very little degree" of preference in working with each age group. The mean scores of the level of readiness/preference to working with different age groups were as follows: Children M = 4.03, Adolescents M = 3.96, Young Adults(18-21) M = 3.73, Adults M = 3.38, and Elderly (65+) M = 2.43. Interestingly, the degree of student preference declined steadily over the life span, but the sharpest decline in preference came with the elderly population. In an ANOVA test, these differences in student preference were found to be statistically significant, $F(4,308)=24.05;p<.001$. In the paired samples comparative t-tests, no significant differences were found between the first three age groups (children, adolescents, and young adults). However, significant differences were found between all three of these age groups and the last two age groups (adults and elderly), $p< .05$, with a significant difference also found between adults and elderly, $p< .001$.

Preferences towards different population groups

Students were asked to indicate the degree to which they would prefer to work with each client population following graduation. A Likert scale was again utilized with a 5 = "to a very large degree" and a 1 = "to a very little degree". The mean score of each of the client groups is presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Mean scores of student preferences towards different population groups

Population	Mean	Population	Mean
single parent families	3.83	drug addicts	2.81
juvenile delinquents	3.78	mentally ill	2.78
adolescents in high school	3.75	HIV-positive victims	2.73
abused/neglected children	3.63	adults delinquents	2.68
victims of sexual abuse	3.40	unemployed	2.62
people w/ learning difficulty	3.24	Immigrant families	2.59
poor	3.24	chronically ill	2.40
married couples	3.16	chronically ill elderly	2.17
disabled	3.02		
homeless	3.00		

In an ANOVA test, these differences in student preferences regarding population

groups were found to be statistically significant, $F(17,1241)=16.37;p<.001$. In the paired samples comparative t-tests, no significant differences were found between the four population groups with the highest student preferences (single parent families, juvenile delinquents, adolescents in high school, and abused and/or neglected children), $p<.01$. Victims of sexual abuse were also a highly preferred client population, but significantly less than single parent families, $p<.01$. The client group least preferred by students was the chronically ill elderly, with significant differences found between this group and all the other client groups, $p<.05$. The chronically ill and immigrant families were also low in student's level of preference.

Preferences in regard to places of employment

Students were asked to indicate the degree to which they would prefer to work in 16 different potential places for employment following graduation. A Likert scale was again utilized with a 5 = "to a very large degree" and a 1 = "to a very little degree". The mean score of each of the places of employment is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Mean scores in student preferences in regard to places of employment

place of employment	mean	place of employment	mean
student counseling center	3.84	marriage counseling agency	2.95
an elementary school	3.54	a public assistance office	2.92
a juvenile probation service	3.44	a general hospital	2.88
an adoption agency	3.42	adult probation service	2.82
an infant health clinic	3.34	a prison	2.80
a shelter for battered women	3.21	a mental health hospital	2.71
a workplace	3.09	a day center for the elderly	2.26
Drug rehabilitation program	2.96	a nursing home	2.06

In an ANOVA test, these differences in student preferences regarding places of future employment were found to be statistically significant, $F(15,1140)=12.25;p<.001$. In the paired samples comparative t-tests, significant differences were found between the most preferred place of employment (student counseling center) and all other locations, $p<.05$. An elementary school, juvenile probation service, and adoption agency were also all preferred jobs by students. Significant differences were found between the two least preferred places of employment, a nursing home and a day center for the elderly, and all other locations, $p<.05$. However, there was a significant difference between the least preferred job (old age home) and the next least preferred job at a day center for the elderly, $p<.01$.

Students were requested to score their preferences with regard to future employment in four different service sectors after graduation. A Likert scale was again utilized with a 5 = "to a very large degree" and a 1 = "to a very little degree". The mean score of each of the types of service is presented in Table 3 below:

Table 3: Mean scores in student preferences with regard to types of services

type of service	mean
private practice	3.58
government	3.46
for profit	3.36
non profit	3.28

In an ANOVA test, these differences in student preferences regarding types of services were not found to be statistically significant, $F(3,231)=.92;p>.05$.

Preferences regarding types of intervention

Students were asked to score their preferences regarding four different types of professional intervention strategies which social workers often employ in their work. A Likert scale was again utilized with a 5 = "to a very large degree" and a 1 = "to a very little degree". The mean score of each of the types professional intervention strategies is presented in Table 4 below:

Table 4: Mean scores of student preferences regarding types of intervention

type of intervention strategy	mean
psychotherapy	3.45
material assistance	3.42
forensic	3.32
policy practice	3.08

In an ANOVA test, these differences in student preferences regarding types of intervention strategies were found to be statistically significant, $F(3,231)=3.69;p<.05$. In the paired samples comparative t-tests, significant differences were found between the two most preferred types of intervention strategies, psychotherapy and material assistance, and the two least preferred interventions, forensic social work and policy practice, $p<.01$. There was not a statistical difference between the two most preferred intervention strategies or between the two least preferred strategies.

Preferences regarding types of practice

Students were asked to score their preference regarding two general levels/types of social work practice: 1) macro level and 2) micro level. A Likert scale was again utilized with a 5 = "to a very large degree" and a 1 = "to a very little degree". The mean score of each of the types of social work practice is presented in Table 5 below:

Table 5: Mean scores of student preferences regarding types of practice

type of practice	mean
micro	3.76
macro	2.99

In an ANOVA test, this difference in student preferences regarding type of practice was found to be statistically significant, $F(1,77)=36.40;p<.001$, with Whitewater students clearly preferring micro-level practice over macro-level.

DISCUSSION

As mentioned earlier, this study was conducted to illuminate the contemporary professional ideologies and preferences of graduating BSW social work students at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. This discussion will focus on the above findings and their relationship to historical and contemporary trends in social work education, practice, and the social welfare system in the United States. Based on this limited sample, it would appear that U.S. students do perceive the origins of poverty and delinquency as being within the social environment, not within the individual. However, while this more institutional (liberal) ideological perspective was apparent in students' perceptions concerning the origins of poverty, it was not consistent with their most preferred types of intervention strategies, psychotherapy and material assistance (a more conservative, residualist approach). Student preferences regarding type of practice, with students clearly preferring micro-level practice over macro-level, was also contradictory to their institutional view of the origins of poverty.

Concerning student attitudes towards the causes of poverty and delinquency in the United States today, the greatest degree of support in explaining both of these social problems was the "social causes of poverty and delinquency" approach which places the origins of poverty and delinquency within the social environment, versus the "lack of motivation" cause of poverty or "psychological" cause of delinquency factor, which places responsibility on the individual. However, students did perceive the causes of delinquency as nearly the same for both "social causes" and "consideration of gains and losses" causes. Congruent with this professional ideology, students clearly favored the "extending of state social welfare programs" approach to dealing with poverty (clearly a more institutional, liberal approach), with the least support going towards the "minimizing of state assistance" approach (a residualist, conservative approach). There was a moderate level of support for the "psychotherapeutic treatment of individuals" approach to dealing with poverty.

There were no significant differences found between the importance that the Whitewater students attributed to socially oriented versus individually oriented goals for the social work profession. This is reflected in the student ranking of "protecting groups at risk" goal as the most important goal of social work followed by "developing social services" and "increasing social acceptance of diverse social groups" respectively. Interestingly, students saw "providing consultation services to other professionals" as the least important goal of their profession. Thus, this finding provides no clear distinction between social work goals aimed at individual (residual) versus societal (institutional)

goals of social work from our students' perspective.

Next, student preferences concerning client age, population, place of employment, type of service, type of work, and professional strategies were examined. Interestingly, the degree of student preference declined steadily over the life span, but the sharpest decline in preference came with the elderly population. While no significant differences were found between the first three age groups (children, adolescents, and young adults), significant differences were found between all three of these age groups and the last two age groups (adults and elderly). This finding appears to reflect the youth-oriented nature of U.S. society (Kornblum and Julian, 2001), and, while not indicative of blatant ageism, it would indicate that student preferences have been impacted by this social norm concerning the status of the elderly in the United States today.

No significant differences were found between the four population groups with the highest student preferences (single parent families, juvenile delinquents, adolescents in high school, and abused and/or neglected children). Victims of sexual abuse were also a highly preferred client population, but significantly less than single parent families. The client group least preferred by students was the chronically ill elderly, with significant differences found between this group and all the other client groups. This finding is congruent with the above findings concerning student preferences favoring younger clients. The chronically ill and immigrant families were also low in student's level of preference.

Significant differences were found between the most preferred place of employment (student counseling center) and all other locations. An elementary school, juvenile probation service, and adoption agency were also all preferred jobs by students. Significant differences were found between the two least preferred places of employment, a nursing home and a day center for the elderly, and all other locations. Once again, student preferences favoring employment locations serving younger client populations over the elderly is clearly demonstrated.

The differences in student preferences regarding types of services were not found to be statistically significant. While ranked first, private practice was not significantly more preferred than work in a governmental agency, work in the non-profit sector, or work in the for-profit sector respectively.

Significant differences were found between the two most preferred types of intervention strategies, psychotherapy and material assistance, and the two least preferred interventions, forensic social work and policy practice. As mentioned earlier, this more conservative, residualist approach to social work practice is not congruent with students' more institutional (liberal) ideological perspective concerning the origins of poverty. This contradiction between student ideology and practice was also reflected in student preferences regarding type of practice, with students clearly preferring micro-level practice over macro-level practice.

CONCLUSION

In closing, it would appear from this study that while students do conceptually and ideologically embrace a more liberal, institutional explanation for the origins of pov-

erty and delinquency in the United States, they clearly prefer intervention strategies that engage client populations at the individual/micro level, reflecting a more conservative, residualist approach to social work practice. This could largely be due to trends in social work education in the United States away from community organization/empowerment models of intervention towards a more individual, psychotherapeutic approach. Finally, in addition to this micro-level preference of intervention, we also see a student preference bias towards younger client populations. If indeed indicative of overall social work student attitudes in the United States today, this is potentially problematic given current population demographics in the U.S. and the rapid increase in retirement age and older Americans (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2000). How to bridge this gap between ideology and practice, integrating both micro and macro-level intervention models towards vulnerable populations, while instilling a sensitivity towards the growing needs of the elderly is a major challenge facing the social work profession in the United States today.

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