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Social work students: The learning of professional values in a graduate program

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SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS: THE LEARNING OF PROFESSIONAL VALUES IN A GRADUATE PROGRAM

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

by
Sonya Farrow
Donna Marie Monroe

June 2001
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IN A GRADUATE PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

This research attempts to explore the degree to which California State University graduate social work students' attitudes align with social work ethics and values as operationalized through the Just World Belief Scale. Results indicate that there are variances in what CSUSB graduate social work students attribute to social injustice. Several demographic variables were explored in relationship to students just world beliefs. Undergraduate degree, political affiliation, part-time/full-time status and introduction of the NASW Code of Ethics in course-work were related to significant differences. This research may facilitate a discussion concerning the most efficient way of instilling social work values and ethics into the personal value systems of graduate social work students.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to our families and friends for their unyielding support and understanding as we ventured on this journey. Many thanks and much admiration to Dr. Janet Chang, Dr. Nancy Mary, and Dr. Rosemary McCaslin. Their input and insight into this important topic was invaluable.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

Social work is a profession that is guided by many ethical obligations. Therefore, social work as a profession benefits from a critical analysis of the relationship between social work education and the ability of students to integrate social work values into their personal value systems. As social workers encounter increasingly complex ethical dilemmas, social work curriculum needs to address whether current teaching provides students with adequate tools for ethical decision-making (Haynes, 1999).

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) outlines a code of ethics that forms the basic principles from which the profession of social work must operate. The Social Work Code of Ethics includes guidelines for professional conduct and ethical responsibilities to clients, colleagues, and organizations (NASW, 1996).

The NASW Code of Ethics (1996) ascribes a core set of values. Service is a basic value that is easily recognized as helping people in need. Social workers are
also asked to confront social injustice. Thus, poverty, unemployment, and discrimination become targets for change. Through a “mindful” understanding of cultural and ethnic differences, social workers are expected to understand the inherent dignity and worth of individuals, and to acknowledge the importance of human relationships as the means of change at the individual, group, and societal level. Furthermore, social workers are expected to behave in a trustworthy manner, and to work within their arenas of competence while enhancing their professional expertise. This “constellation of values” is essential to social work’s mission of enhancing human well being while also paying special attention to the empowerment of “the vulnerable, the oppressed, and those living in poverty” (p. 1).

In light of the importance of these values to the profession of social work, it is essential that students of social work not only conceptualize these values, but also internalize them. By integrating and internalizing these values into their personal perspectives, effective social workers understand human relationships in the context of the larger social world (Germain & Bloom,
If the social workers’ primary goal is to “help people,” then how they define the relationship between people and their environment becomes particularly important. If social workers are to address social problems and social injustice, to what they attribute a problem becomes equally important.

Social work attracts a wide variety of students with differing experiences and educational backgrounds. Therefore, due to their diverse backgrounds and value orientations, the education of Master’s of Social Work (MSW) students must include a comprehensive and theoretically based framework for teaching values and ethics. Through this means, MSW students can be given the tools for effective and ethical social work.

According to the preamble of the NASW Code of Ethics (1996), social workers need to strive to understand the person in a social context and to feel concern for the well being of society. Hence, schools of social work have an obligation to the profession to produce social workers that embrace the core values from which social work must operate.
Although social issues such as oppression, poverty, and cultural diversity are addressed to differing degrees within required social work course work, California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB) does not require a class that exclusively addresses the centrality of these issues in regard to the ethical practice of social work. It may not be sufficient to simply introduce these as sub-concepts within various courses. To work toward a student’s internalization of professional social work values and ethics, it may be necessary to confront and challenge social issues more directly through a core class in ethics and values.

According to Van Soest (1996), the profession needs to encourage discussion of opposing ideologies and discuss implications for "broader social work education policy and practice." However, challenging the inherent conflict between different social theories appears to have been deemed taboo. Perhaps, underlying this taboo is a fear that challenging this conflict may work to further alienate and divide a profession that is already struggling with a division between micro and macro theoretical orientations (Abramowitz & Bardill, 1993).
The problematic nature of this division is illustrated in arguments presented by Mimi Abramovitz and D. Ray Bardill (1993) that respond to the question, "Should social work students be educated on social change?" While each author argues eloquently in defense of seemingly opposite positions, they miss what it is that they do agree upon. Bardill argues that social work needs to move toward a new way of thinking that promotes "new possibilities, new thinking, and new actions," and that the "social change" versus "people change" argument has run its course. According to Bardill, social work needs "a new dedication to discovery, to creativity, and to holistic thinking in all domains of social work." In response, Abramovitz argues the need to "reclaim and reframe the people versus social change argument in a way that allows social work to promote both." If we do not, according to Abramovitz, we will become advocates of the status quo.

This is a good example of how unnecessary division can perpetuate conflict. Both authors seem to be blinded by "paradigmatic chauvinism" (personal communication, McCaslin, 06/01/99). Presented from behind a wall of
ideological defenses as opinions in opposition, in actuality they are not; both authors have recognized the need for a paradigmatic shift.

It could be argued that both micro and macro ideologies are necessary and complimentary components of effective social work, especially considering its multidisciplinary knowledge base. By integrating micro and macro perspectives social workers can truly understand their purpose and begin to operate through a shared code of ethics that defines service, social justice, inherent worth, and human relationships as the core values of its profession.

As debates continue concerning the best unit of intervention, at some level the micro-macro controversy becomes rhetorical. The best unit for intervention will always be the unit of least resistance. In some situations the point of least resistance will be the individual, and at other times it will be the larger social system. Regardless, there is a need for a cooperatively interconnected approach toward social work practice.
The need to integrate both macro and micro perspectives becomes increasingly important in regard to the ethical requirements of social work. A study conducted by Jayaratne and Ivey (1983) supported this contention in that their study raised questions about the ability of clinical practitioners to maintain a professional value base. Moreover, toward producing effective social workers, their research suggests that it is essential to provide a comprehensive program that works to anchor social work students' internal values to a social context. This strategy could promote a deeper understanding of how social problems influence the well being of individuals as well as a deeper understanding of the power of individuals to create change.

According to Schwartz and Robinson (1991), effective social work depends on the attitudes and values of its practitioners. Fey (1955) contends that the social worker must have the capacity to accept others who are different in appearance, attitudes, and behavior. They must be able to value diversity, and to accept others on their own terms. Furthermore, Fey proposed that those who do not possess these traits are unable to fulfill the tasks,
functions, and obligations required of professional social workers.

The internalization of the NASW Code of Ethics may appear difficult to measure. However, through Rubin & Peplau’s (1975) "Just World Belief Scale (JWB)" this research will attempt to explore the professional ethics of CSUSB graduate social work students as measured by their just world beliefs.

The JWB is based on the premise that if one believes the world is just then one cannot believe in oppression or vulnerable people. The NASW Code of Ethics requires social workers to help the oppressed, the vulnerable, and those living in poverty. Therefore, how social workers define those in need of help and to what social workers attribute problems has real consequences for the people social workers are ethically obligated to help.

This research will be exploratory in nature and its purpose will be to examine factors that may be associated or related to CSUSB graduate social work students’ internalization of professional values as operationalized through the “Just World Belief Scale.” The limited amount of information in regard to how and to what level graduate
social work students integrate professional values into their personal value systems makes this research important to the profession.

It is expected that this research will further the discussion of the ability of CSUSB's social work program to instill social work ethics in its students. Furthermore, it may suggest that the practice of social work could be qualitatively enhanced through a more "theoretically grounded framework" for teaching social work values and ethics (Haynes, 1999). Haynes (1999) argues strongly that such a systematic and sequenced framework is necessary to teach something as abstract as values, and without it values are taught in a manner in which concepts are loosely connected and therefore difficult to internalize.
Heidler (1958) proposed a theory that attempted to explain "the crucial dimensions along which we make attributions" (cited in Weiten & Lloyd, 1994, p. 135). In defining the means by which people strive to understand human behavior, Heidler posited that some will locate the source of a "problem" to be within a person and others will attribute it to an external cause. Internal attributions often relate to a person's intrinsic character. External attributions often relate to the environment, something beyond an individual's control. According to Heidler, whether problems are attributed to an individual or to a force outside of that individual will have concrete consequences in that it will determine how the person is viewed and what steps are taken to help.

Social workers often work with minority groups and culturally diverse persons. Therefore, it would follow that attributions of blame are particularly important to social work because they contribute to stereotyping.

According to Healey (1995), stereotypes work to account for the behavior of others, and when people are
most similar to us we often ascribe positive behavior to internal causes and negative behavior to external causes. While this may work to reinforce ideas surrounding the "goodness of our people" it is counter to the goals and objectives of professional social workers (p.164).

Unfortunately, members of minority groups are not accorded this benefit. The negative behavior of minorities is most often accounted for by attributing it to internal personal character flaws. Positive behavior is attributed to something external. Healey (1995) refers to this as the "ultimate attribution error" (p. 164).

Attribution theory is a fundamental concept in social work because it suggests that the willingness to help is based on the extent to which individuals are blamed for their situation (Schwartz & Robinson, 1991). This is particularly important as it relates to minorities. According to Van Soest (1996), cultural diversity and social injustice is a reality in the United States. By the year 2020 it is expected that minorities will become 40 percent of the population and by 2050 they will be a numerical majority. However, Van Soest warns that social, political, and economic restraints still prevail and work
to reinforce existing social stratification, keeping minorities in a place of powerlessness.

Understanding of attribution is a cognitive approach to understanding human behavior. As human beings we continually sort and identify the impressions we have of our environment (Healey, 1995). These categorizations often drive our thoughts and we respond accordingly. This process is natural and necessary in that it allows us to experience a sense of predictability concerning the environment in which we live. As well it is learned through socialization.

If categorizations are made in response to socialization then increases in educational practices that work to promote greater understandings of systematic oppression and vulnerable people are justifiable. Therefore, attribution theory can be used to justify changes in social work curriculum meant to enhance the socialization of professional social workers.

However, Haynes (1999) contends that socialization is an important factor, but not the only one. It often results in mere categorization and imitation, and fails to be sufficient in helping students to meaningfully
internalize and integrate personal, social, political, and professional values. Therefore, he suggests that the teachings of professional values be presented through a theoretical framework that considers the non-linear nature of values acquisition. He also discusses the need to not only infuse values over the course of the curriculum, but to address them discretely in foundation courses.

Haynes (1999) strongly promotes the need to not only infuse values over the course of the curriculum, but to address them discretely in social work foundation courses. Haynes further emphasizes a need for data on how to teach values to social work students, and notes that educators agree that there is a need to teach value development to social work students. However, currently, it is not systematically presented and there is no adequate means for measuring program success.

The Council on Social Work Education has outlined curriculum to address the necessity for increased sensitivity to the needs of socially oppressed populations (Carrillo & Holzhalb, 1993; Van Soest, 1996). However, Van Soest (1996) emphasizes the need for empirical
examinations of the outcome of educational models that are meant to meet this objective.

A few studies have been conducted to critically analyze social work students' attitudes in relationship to social work ethics. Research by Meyer (1983) suggested how social workers define a problem governs what is actually done in practice. Additional studies conducted by Merdinger (1982), and Sharwell (1974) indicated that social work curriculum could have a favorable influence over attitudes "toward public dependency programs and their recipients" (p.290).

After conducting a survey of social work students to determine to what degree they attributed poverty to structural causes Schwartz and Robinson (1991) called for a renewed interest in poverty related issues. By using the Feagin Poverty Scale, the researchers measured attributions of poverty through individual explanations such as laziness, structural explanations such as discrimination, and fatalist explanations such as bad luck.

The survey was given to beginning social work students, intermediate social work students, and junior-
level graduate social work students, all of who were enrolled in an accredited social work program. The questionnaire included poverty-related measures, attitudinal items, and demographic characteristics.

The findings reflect earlier research conducted by Cryns (1977), and supports the contention that social work students appear to develop beliefs about the causes of poverty that are congruent with social work values, and rated structural factors as the most salient factor related to poverty. Research subjects also accorded factors related to personal deficiencies as the least important. The degree of this association increased significantly related to years of study.

Additionally, research by Roff, Adams, and Klemmack (1984) found no differences between second year master of social work students and beginning undergraduate social work students regarding attributed causes of poverty; both groups studied by Roff et al. (1984) associated poverty with structural explanations.

Cryns (as cited in Schwartz & Robinson, 1991) conducted the most extensive assessment of social work students' attitudes on poverty related issues. Contrary
to the goals of social work educators, Cryn’s research suggested that graduate social work students more often attribute poverty to individualistic causes. Cryns concluded that social work programs may inadvertently “blunt such professionally desirable attitudes as positive appreciation of human nature and the belief of possible victimization of individuals by social forces” (p. 292).

Rubin and Peplau’s (1975) research on the attitudes of social work students is based on the concept of a “just world ideology.” According to Lerner (1980), just world thinking is conceptualized as a belief that the world is a just place where a person’s merit and fate are firmly related. This is contrary to the ethics and values of professional social workers who give considerable regard to the person-in-the-environment perspective (Germain & Bloom, 1999) and who, accordingly, should hold what are considered unjust world beliefs.

According to Van Soest (1996), “a strong belief in a just world is related to acceptance of status quo social and political institutions, non-participation in social change activities, and denigration of oppressed populations” (p. 192). Smith and Green found that just
world beliefs were negatively associated with perceptions of the extensiveness of inequality and positively associated with the fairness of such inequality (cited in Mohr & Luscri, 1995).

Rubin and Peplau's (1975) Just World Belief Scale has been used extensively with other variables such as authoritarianism, work ethic, conservatism, internal locus of control, and religious beliefs. Other findings have shown that there is an association with just world beliefs and perceptions of women's roles, helping the elderly, personal deprivation, personality, the stereotyping of physical attractiveness, and lastly, rational thinking (Furnham, 1993).

Interestingly, according to a study conducted by Merdinger (1985), BSW social work students may be predisposed toward recognizing a relationship between institutional factors and poverty. Therefore, to simply assume that external attribution is a byproduct of current social work education may be erroneous. Merdinger's research suggests that there may be something intrinsic to those who pursue BSW degrees.
Mohr and Luscri (1995) conducted similar research that attempted to measure the degree to which social work students' attitudes of a just world varied from those of a community sample. In this study social work students held less just world beliefs when compared to a randomly selected community sample. However, when the researchers examined the sub-scale of belief in an "unjust" world, they found no significant differences between the two groups. According to Mohr and Luscri (1995), this lends question to the ability to generalize Rubin & Peplau's "Just World Belief Scale" as a valid index.

However, in research conducted by Van Soest (1996), the "Just World Belief Scale" measured students' just world attribution after completing a class on oppression. Results concluded that first-year students had higher levels of just world beliefs after taking the oppression class, and second year students had lower levels then first-year students.

Van Soest (1996) discussed the limitations of her study, one of which will be a consideration of this research: differences in undergraduate curriculum. The reviewed research tended to measure differences in
attitudes and relates them to differing points in the educational experiences of specifically BSW and MSW students.

The mixed findings suggest that the just world beliefs of social work students may not be fully explained by the current social work curriculum as outlined by the Counsel of Social Work Education (1996). Perhaps, previous education is one of many factors that graduate social work students bring with them to graduate programs that influence internal versus external attribution styles. Bucher and Strauss concur and object to colleagues who ignore what students were like prior to their education and for treating them as a "tabula rasa" or blank slates (as quoted in Haynes, 1999).

It could be suggested that the aggregate attitudes of social work students are greatly influenced by the wide variety of undergraduate education that is brought into graduate social work programs. Some undergraduate degrees align more closely with social workers' person-in-the-environment model of practice while others such as psychology come from an individual view of human behavior. Consequently, it is methodologically unsound to clump
together psychology, sociology, BSW’s, human service majors, and so on, and to say, by the mere labeling of them as such, that they are the same.

Without making accommodations for variances in undergraduate education, it is not surprising that the research has not revealed more similar and consistent findings. This variable should be considered when attempting to understand the attitudes of social work students and the degree these attitudes align with social work values. Furthermore, the differing knowledge bases of social work students need to be considered when establishing curriculum goals, specifically, curriculum goals that are designed to meet the objective of producing effective and ethical social workers. Social workers who embrace social work values, and thus, are capable of producing the essential soil from which effective social work grows.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Study Design

This study attempted to explore factors that influence the professional values and ethics of CSUSB Social Work students as operationalized through the Just World Belief Scale. A self-administered questionnaire was used to explore the degree to which CSUSB social work students believe the world is just. The self-administered questionnaire included Rubin and Peplau's (1975) 20 item "Just World Belief Scale" and 15 demographic variables that were explored in relationship to the scale (see APPENDIX A).

Sample Collection

The researchers experienced no obstacles in obtaining the sample of social work students and received permission from the CSUSB Department of Social Work prior to recruiting participants (see APPENDIX B). The study used a non-probability sampling technique and the sample included both full and part-time cohorts. Due to the availability of the population, all students in the social work program were asked to participate in this study. As
a result the sample size for this research was 138 of a possible 167.

Using ordinal, nominal, and interval levels of data this study explored 15 socio-demographic variables and how these independent variables related to the dependent variable of "Just World Beliefs."

Participants were asked to respond to questions concerning parents' educational level (ordinal), religiosity (ordinal), political association (nominal), age (interval), and gender (nominal). The study also explored variables that were more directly related to social work such as undergraduate degree (nominal), amount of coursework in ethics and values (nominal), satisfaction with, and perceived importance of, education in ethics and values (ordinal). The study also explored prior social work experience (interval), specialization area (nominal), and cohort (nominal). As well the questionnaire asked whether the student received Title IV-E funding (nominal). Title IV-E funding is money offered by the State of California to students if they agree to work for a California State child protective agency for a designated period of time after earning their MSW degree.
The questionnaire included the "Just World Belief Scale" which is a twenty-question standardized scale used to measure people's attitudes towards social injustice. In two separate studies reported by Rubin and Peplau (1975), the "Just World Belief Scale" had a previous reliability of .80 and .81. Although the previous alpha scores appear more than adequate, one limitation of this index is that it does not control for social desirability, in that social work students may respond in accordance to what they deem "politically correct." This could potentially compromise the findings of this study. However, the "Just World Belief Scale" does attempt to measure something difficult, and with a few revisions could evolve into a very useful tool for measuring social work ethical educational outcomes.

**Procedures**

The gathering of data was accomplished by visiting one core class session for each cohort: first and second year full-time; first, second, and third year part-time. To decrease the possibility of a student taking the survey more than one time, only one core class per cohort/specialization was visited. Due to the possibility that
students other than social work students may enroll in
elective course, elective courses were not used as a means
for obtaining data.

Prior to administering the questionnaire,
participants were advised that the purpose of the study
was to explore social work students' perceptions and
beliefs about the world and social justice. Procedures
for completing the questionnaire were explained and
students were encouraged to ask questions.
Confidentiality was also addressed as well as the
researchers need for informed consent (see APPENDIX C).
Furthermore, students were advised of their rights to not
participate and how, at their request, they could be
removed from the study at a later date.

A pre-test was administered to a community sample in
early January 2001, and was conducted to evaluate face
validity. A pre-test helped to assure the clarity of the
research questions. In an effort to eliminate any
difficulties that might arise as a result of pre-testing
the instrument, participants in the pre-testing were
encouraged to ask questions to debrief. Individuals who
participated in the pre-test were not included in the
final study. The final questionnaire was offered to respondents in early February 2001.

Protection of Human Subjects

This study is in compliance with University and Institutional Review Board standards. Anonymity was protected by not requiring any identifying information on the questionnaire. However, on each questionnaire there was a random number and the debriefing statement contained a corresponding number. Within the instructions the respondent was asked to remove the debriefing statement (see APPENDIX D) and to retain it in case, at some later date, they requested to be removed from the study. In such a case, a student could be removed through the non-identifying number.
CHAPTER FOUR

DATA ANALYSIS

Results

Initially, the data was analyzed by using descriptive univariate statistics such as measures of central tendency and dispersion. Subsequently, a correlation matrix was developed and the appropriate inferential statistic was applied to those variables that appeared significant within the matrix. Independent T-tests, chi-square, and Pearson’s correlation were used to explore interpretive associations between the nominal, ordinal, and interval levels of data.

Demographics

The following information describes the sample of CSUSB graduate social work students who cooperated in this research (see APPENDIX E). For the 2000-2001 academic year, California State University, San Bernardino enrolled 167 graduate social work students. This study recruited 138 of the total students enrolled. Of the participants in this study (N=138), 82.6 percent (n=114) were female, and 16.7 percent (n=23) were male (MD=1). Participants ranged in age from 22 to 56 years old with an average of
36 (M=35.96). However, the modal age of this sample was 24 years of age.

The majority of students surveyed, 56.5 percent, were enrolled in the Children, Youth, and Families specialization (n=78), 34.8 percent of the individuals were enrolled in the Mental Health specialization (n=48), and the smallest, 8.7 percent, were enrolled in the Macro specialization (n=12).

Together, first year and second year full-time CSUSB social work students (n=62) constituted 44.9 percent of the respondents. First, second, and third year part-time students (n=75) constituted 54.3 percent of the respondents.

The majority of respondents, 67.4 percent, indicated that they did not receive Title IV-E funding for their graduate social work education (n=93). The remainder, 31.9 percent indicated that they had received the title IV-E state funding (n=44) (MD=1).

CSUSB graduate social work students were diversified in their undergraduate education. Psychology majors accounted for 41.3 percent (n=57) of the sample, Sociology 27.5 percent (n=38), others 17.4 percent (n=19), and
Bachelor's of Social Work (BSW) equaled 11.6 percent (n=16) (MD=3).

When asked about how religion influenced their world views (MD=1), the majority of CSUSB social work graduate students, 29.7 percent, indicated that their world views were "very much so" framed in specific religious beliefs (n=41). Approximately, 24 percent of the sample indicated that their views were "moderately" framed in religious beliefs (n=33). Approximately 27 percent (n=37) indicated that their world views were "somewhat" framed in religious beliefs, and 18.8 percent of respondents (n=26) indicated "not at all" in regard to framing their world views in specific religious beliefs.

The survey indicated (MD=3) that 8 percent of CSUSB social work graduate students (n=11) considered their political affiliation as "radical left," 34.8 percent indicated "progressive" (n=48), while 42.8 percent responded "moderate" (n=59), and 12.3 percent indicated "conservative" (n=17). None of the respondents indicated that they held the political affiliation of radical right.

The majority of CSUSB graduate social work students, 60.1 percent and 58 percent, indicated that their mother
and fathers’ educational levels were high school or less (n=83, n=80). Approximately, 12 percent of respondents (n=16) indicated that their fathers had a post-graduate degree, and 8.7 percent indicated that their mothers earned post-graduate degrees (n=12). Of the respondents, 16.7 percent reported that their fathers were community college graduates (n=23) and 17.4 percent of their mothers (n=24).

Approximately 10 percent of respondents indicated that their mothers had a university degree (n=14), and approximately 11 percent indicated that their fathers did (n=15). Respondents indicated that 3.6 percent of mothers and 2.9 percent of fathers had some graduate training (n=5, n=4). Overall, this sample of CSUSB graduate social work students had parents with limited educational experiences and fathers were slightly more educated than mothers were. In regard to course work aimed at developing professional ethics and values, the majority of CSUSB graduate social work students, 61.6 percent, indicated that they had received an “adequate amount” (n=85) of course work in ethics. In comparison, 6.5 percent felt that they had received “little or none” (n=9). A
number of students, 15.9 percent, reported that they received "a lot" (n=22) of course work in ethics, while 15.2 percent, indicated that they felt that they received less than an adequate amount (n=21). The majority of respondents, 87.7 percent, reported that instructors used the NASW Code of Ethics in their classes (n=121). However, 11.6 percent (n=16) reported that they had "no" classes that included the NASW Code of Ethics. Most participants (98.6 percent) felt that social work ethics and values were important to very important (n=136). However, 1.4 percent felt these factors were "less important" (n=2). No respondents indicated that social work ethics and values had "no importance."

Just World Beliefs

The following figure, Figure 1, describes the just world belief mean scores for this sample of CSUSB graduate social work students. Researchers relied on Rubin and Peplau's (1975) 20-item Just World Belief Scale (JWB) to measure CSUSB social work graduate students' belief that the world is just and that people's fate is strongly aligned with their merit.
The questionnaire’s internal reliability (Cronbach’s Alpha) measured .71. While this is not extremely high, it is within an acceptable “moderate” range. The JWB Scale asked respondents (n=123) to indicate on a four point Likert the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with questions related to just world beliefs (see APPENDIX A). Nine of these questions were scaled in the direction of unjust world beliefs and 11 were scaled in the direction of just world beliefs. Participants’ mean scores for the
Just World Belief Scale were computed by scaling all items to reflect unjust world beliefs. Subsequently, higher scores aligned better with social work values and indicated that the respondents' view of the world was unjust. Lower scores indicated that the respondents' view of the world was just.

After computing the highest possible score and dividing it by the total number of scale items, a scoring system was developed. A score between 0 and 20 indicated that the respondent believed that the world was "very just." A score between 21 and 40 indicated that the respondent felt the world was "just." A score between 41 and 60 indicated "unjust" world beliefs and a score between 61 and 80 most aligned with social work values in that it indicated "very unjust" world beliefs.

The mean score for this sample of CSUSB graduate social work students was 51.99 (n=123) indicating that the majority of respondents, 82.6 percent, felt the world was "unjust" (n=107). Whereas 5.8 percent saw the world as "very unjust" (n=15), and .7 percent felt the world was a "just" place (n=1). None of the CSUSB social work
students surveyed indicated that the world was "very just."

Key Findings

To explore factors that may influence CSUSB social work students' "just world beliefs" researchers examined demographic questions as described earlier: four resulted in significant findings and are explained below.

Figure 2. Mean Scores for Full and Part-Time Students.

A t-test revealed that full-time students had significantly higher unjust world beliefs than did part-time students. Mean scores of 53.19, and 50.97, were obtained after combining all full-time cohorts (n=62) and
comparing them to all part-time cohorts \( n=75 \), and without consideration of time spent in the social work program (e.g. first-year, second-year, or third-year).

The second significant finding concerned political affiliation (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3. Mean Scores According to Political Affiliation.**

![](image)

*61-80=very unjust; 41-60=unjust; 21-40=just; 0-20=very just

After collapsing "radical left" and "progressive" to form the category "liberal," and further combining "moderate" with "conservative" to form the category of "conservative," an independent t-test \( t=2.54, df=119, \)
P<.01) revealed that those individuals having liberal political affiliations had higher unjust world beliefs than their conservative counterparts (53.3 and 50.99).

Figure 4. Mean Scores According to Type of Undergraduate Degree.

The third significant finding is illustrated in the above figure and was related to undergraduate education. Initially, there were no significant findings. However, after combining sociology, human service, liberal arts, and BSW majors, it was found that students with undergraduate degrees related to social science (n=51) had
lower just world beliefs (m=53.25) than those with undergraduate degrees in psychology (n=52) (m=51.12) (t=-2.12, df=101, p<.04).

Parents' education had no significant association with this sample's just world beliefs. Furthermore, gender, age, specialization, year in the program, religiosity, and perceived amounts and importance of ethics education, did not show a significant association with CSUSB social work students' just world beliefs.

However, while it does not support the hypothesis of this research or the literature, a fourth significant association emerged when students were asked if they had had a course that utilized the NASW Code of Ethics. Those students who reported not having a course that utilized the NASW Code of Ethics had higher unjust world belief scores than those that had had a course, 54.93 and 51.67, respectively (t=-2.28, df=120, p<.02).
CHAPTER FIVE
DISCUSSION

If the premise of this research is correct, that is, if one believes the world is just, one cannot believe in the existence of oppression and vulnerable groups as required by the NASW Code of Ethics, than this study may have important implications for social work education. Not surprisingly, the majority of CSUSB graduate social work students felt that the world was indeed unjust. However, considering the focus on oppression and social injustice inherent to social work values, one would hope that CSUSB graduate social work students would have had scores that more greatly reflected a belief in a "very unjust" world, a world where a person's fate did not reflect their merit.

However, the "Just World Belief" scores of CSUSB graduate social work students may not be fully accounted for by possible lacks in education in social work ethics and values. Low scores may just as well be an indicator of conservative times. Generally, society has recently become more centered on individual responsibility as reflected in the narrowing of social welfare entitlements.
as seen, for example, in the recent change from Aid to Families with Dependent Children to Temporary Aid to Needy Families. The fact that the majority of CSUSB graduate social work students indicated that they were not liberal in their political beliefs supports a conservative trend.

However, research by Merdinger (1982) and Sharwell (1974) suggests that social work education can have a favorable impact on students' attitudes toward the poor. The results of this research supported Merdinger and Sharwell's argument, in that, significant differences were found in the just world beliefs of psychology undergraduates and social science undergraduates who were currently enrolled in the CSUSB graduate social work program.

Psychology majors reported significantly higher just world beliefs than their social science counterparts. This supports Van Soest (1975) suspicion that undergraduate education has important consequences regarding a student's ability to integrate social work values and ethics into their personal belief systems. This may be attributed to the fact that psychology majors enter the social work program from a behavioral science
framework that places an emphasis on the medical model (or individual causation) opposed to the broader person-in-the-environment model used in social sciences.

The fact that "time in the program" yielded no significant findings in regard to students' just world beliefs suggests that the means by which the CSUSB social work program attempts to teach professional ethics and values to its students may not be having much of an impact. Compounding the issue is that 16 of the 138 students surveyed indicated that they had not had a course that utilized the NASW Code of Ethics.

The topic of social work ethics and values requires a broad approach. Course work needs to be inclusive and involve issues as they relate to social injustice, and not so narrowly focused on direct practice issues of confidentiality, self-determination, and "do no further harm."

Furthermore, this research supports Haynes (1999) who emphasized the need for social work ethics to be taught in core classes and not simply infused across curriculum. He argued that students need a theoretical framework for learning values so that they can integrate social,
personal, political, and professional values into a core set of ideals that reflects social work values and thus facilitates ethical decision making.

Correspondingly, Lerner (1980) asserted that a strong belief in a just world reinforces acceptance of the status quo and reifies oppressive political institutions. This is contrary to the NASW Code of Ethics (1996) that calls for social workers to promote responsiveness of social institutions, to confront social injustice, and to create positive social change. According to Germain and Bloom (1999) when students are able to integrate social work values into their personal perspectives they can begin to understand human relationships within a larger social context.

Limitations

As with all other research, this research may be limited in that it is quite possible that there are spurious and intervening variables that may influence an individual's integration of social work values and ethics. As well, it is not possible to measure every variable while also remaining parsimonious.
However, the major limitation of this study is in its instrument. Social work students are educated in how they, as social workers, are to perceive the world. Therefore, in response to the Just World Belief Scale, students may have indicated the "socially correct" or what they perceived as correct, and not necessarily their personal world views. Rubin and Peplau's (1975) Just World Belief Scale is not very sophisticated in its formulation and could be more subtle in what it is attempting to measure.

Another limitation of this study is the inability to generalize findings to other situations. While the study included almost all of the CSUSB 2000-2001 graduate social work students, the findings cannot be generalized to incoming students, past students, or to students at other schools of social work.

Future Research

This exploratory study may be important in that it could lend itself to future research to evaluate changes in just world beliefs after years of practice in the field. The fact that all except 29, 2000-2001, CSUSB graduate social work students were surveyed makes this
sample more easily accessible and therefore a follow-up study could be conducted.

It would also be interesting to compare CSUSB graduate social work students' just world beliefs with those of a community sample. As well social work students could be asked by the department to complete the Just World Belief Scale when they were asked to complete other outcome measurements. This could be a means of measuring program success regarding ethics and values education. It may also be interesting to look at the just world beliefs of social work educators to see if they too reflect the ideals of the profession.

However, importantly, if just world beliefs are to truly measure a persons alliance with social work values, then the measurement, as designed by Rubin and Peplau (1975), may have to be adjusted to control for social desirability. Perhaps by creating more complicated vignettes as opposed to asking respondents to agree or disagree to simple value-laden questions such as “Basically, the world is a just place,” a scale could be developed to better measure the just world beliefs of social work students and other helping professionals.
Another avenue for future research would be to examine the relationship between part-time students' higher unjust world beliefs compared to full-time students. It may be that a component exists in the full-time program that is complimentary to ethics and values that could be included in the part-time program. However, it just as well may be found that the relationship between high just world beliefs and part-time students may be attributed to an intervening variable related to the fact that a large number of part-time students indicated that they held more conservative political beliefs.

Furthermore, if future research revealed that more conservative students consistently attended the part-time program, a component could be added to address this issue such as making instructors aware of the need for an increased emphasis on ethics and values.

Another recommendation for further research surrounds the significant relationship between those students who claimed they did not have a course that utilized the NASW Code of Ethics and their unexpected lower just world beliefs. The fact that this contradicts the literature makes it an interesting factor to be further explored.
Further exploration may reveal that the small number of those who indicated that they had not had a class may have affected the significant findings.

Additionally, research may be designed to explore how just world beliefs may contribute to the micro-macro division as described by Abramowitz and Bardill (1993). It may be discovered that changes could be made that better direct how ethics and values are taught and start us all on the same page in regard to how micro problems often arise from macro issues.

Implications

Clearly, this research has uncovered variances in how CSUSB social work students perceive their world and social injustice as measured by just world beliefs. Furthermore, it may support a critical exploration of how social work ethics and values are currently taught at CSUSB, and if its current mode is the best means for doing so.

As well, in regard to the large number of students who held less than liberal political beliefs, this research may open the door to discuss the conflicts between conservatism and social work. This is important due to the liberal framework related to social work and
the relationship between conservative political affiliation and just world beliefs among CSUSB graduate social work students.

The issue of political affiliation and social work ethics could be addressed through curriculum that focuses more discretely on ethics and values. As well it could be addressed in terms of recruitment.

In terms of recruitment, it could be made more clear that social work is a profession that is often congruent with liberal political ideology and its purpose is to create a better goodness of fit between people and their environments. With this stance clearly in the forefront, students can make qualitatively informed choices about what a career in social work entails.

Moreover, requiring additional pre-requisites that entail a broader person-in-the-environment perspective may resolve part of the issue. Currently, the only pre-requisite for entering the program is one that addresses socialization. This perhaps is not adequate enough to assure that those who enter the program have a “just good enough” understanding of how social issues create individual problems.
Conclusion

To understand values and ethics as a basic principle of social work means having a personal belief system that would be considered similar. Personal and professional principles are easier to maintain if they are comparable. These values and ethics help create a social worker that is capable of interactions with others while modeling caring, nonjudgmental, and compassionate behavior. This could be considered a condition for accomplishing one's professional tasks without being a detriment to the client.

Furthermore, if as a profession we are to proclaim that we adhere to a basic set of core values as defined by a professional code of ethics, then we as a profession have an obligation to instill these core values into the belief systems of social work students. The means to do so is through an education in ethics and values that is grounded in theory, and not haphazardly offered throughout the curriculum.

These researchers would argue that ethics and values education must be presented in a structured manner that is meant to assure that those who enter the field understand
their commitment to the vulnerable and oppressed. Ultimately, such an approach to ethics education might work to bridge the micro-macro division. It is possible that a theoretical and uniform method of addressing ethics and values may preserve the fundamental underpinnings of social work by defining the person in-the-environment as the primary principle for understanding how the larger social structure contributes to and perpetuates individual problems.

According to an editorial written by the editor-in-chief of the Journal of Social Work,

It is our professional responsibility to reflect and promote the values of the profession, ... we should not assume that students will automatically understand and espoused the values of the profession; for all those embarking on a social work career 'there is knowledge to be acquired...and principles with which to become familiar.' Our responsibility to beginning professionals, however, does not end with ensuring that they can recite the values of social work. Values should not remain isolated in policy statements, textbooks... They must be discussed, critically reviewed, debated, understood, and, eventually practiced within a changing context... [Ethics and values] must be a critical component of the educational preparation of our students. (Allen-Meares et al, 2000)
APPENDIX A:

QUESTIONNAIRE
QUESTIONNAIRE

Please answer by circling your response to the following demographic questions:

1. Age______

2. Gender:
   1. Male
   2. Female

3. What year are you in?
   1. First year
   2. Second year
   3. Third year
   4. Fourth year

4. Are you Title IVE?
   1. Yes
   2. No

5. To what extent would you say your "world view" is framed in specific religious beliefs?
   1. Very much so
   2. Moderately
   3. Somewhat
   4. Not at all

6. Father's years of education
   1. High school or less
   2. Community college graduate (AA and/or AS)
   3. University graduate (BA and/or BS)
   4. Some post graduate training
   5. Post graduate degree
7. Mother’s years of education
   1. High school or less
   2. Community college graduate (AA and/ or AS)
   3. University graduate (BA and/ or BS)
   4. Some graduate training
   5. Post graduate degree

8. Prior Social Work experience?
   1. Yes
   2. No

9. Indicate the amount of social work experience.
   1. Less than 1 year
   2. 1-3 years
   3. 4-6 years
   4. 7-9 years
   5. More than 10 years
   6. Not applicable

10. What did you major in? (check one)
    1. Psychology
    2. Sociology
    3. Liberal arts
    4. Human services
    5. Social work (BSW)
    6. Other, specify

11. What is your specialization?
    1. Mental health
    2. Children, youth, and families
    3. Macro practice
12. Do you think you received much course work in Social Work ethics and values in the MSW program?

1. A lot
2. An adequate amount
3. Less than adequate
4. Very little or none

13. In your MSW classes did you take a course that used the NASW Code of Ethics?

1. Yes
2. No

14. If yes, which class _____________________________ What is your perceived importance of social work ethics and values?

1. Very important
2. Important
3. Less important
4. Not important

15. Where would you place yourself on the political spectrum? (circle one)

1. Radical left
2. Progressive
3. Moderate
4. Conservative
5. Radical right
Instructions: Using a 4-point scale, please circle the response after the statement that is closest to how much you agree or disagree. For example, a score of 4 would indicate you strongly agree with the statement. Remember there are no correct or incorrect answers. Scale:


1. I've found that a person rarely deserves the reputation he has.

2. Basically, the world is a just place.

3. People who get "lucky breaks" have usually earned their good fortune.

4. Careful drivers are just as likely to get hurt in traffic accidents as careless ones.

5. It is a common occurrence for a guilty person to get off free in American courts.
6. Students almost always deserve the grades they receive in school.

7. Men who are in shape have little chance of suffering a heart attack.

8. The political candidate who sticks up for his principles rarely gets elected.

9. It is rare for an innocent man to be wrongly sent to jail.

10. In professional sports, many fouls and infractions never get called by the referee.

11. By and large, people deserve what they get.

12. When parents punish their children, it is almost always for a good reason.

13. Good deeds often go unnoticed and unrewarded.
14. Although evil men may hold political power for a while, in the general course of history good wins out.


15. In almost any business or profession, people who do their job will rise to the top.


16. American parents tend to overlook the things most to be admired in their children.


17. It is often impossible for a person to receive a fair trial in the USA.


18. People who meet with misfortune have often brought it on themselves.


20. Many people suffer through a situation that is no fault of their own.

APPENDIX B:
DEPARTMENT APPROVAL
December 6, 2000

To Whom It May Concern:

This letter gives permission to Ms. Donna Monroe and Ms. Sonya Farrow to carry out their study entitled "Social Work Students: The Learning of Values in a Graduate Program." They will be surveying students in core required courses (approximately 150 students) using the questionnaire that they have developed for this study. **My only condition is that I see, and have input into, the informed consent that will be used with this study.**

Sincerely,

Teresa Morris, Ph.D.
Associate Professor and Chair
APPENDIX C:

INFORMED CONSENT
INFORMED CONSENT

Study of Social Work Students View of the World

The study in which you are about to participate is designed to investigate social work student's view of the world. Donna Monroe and Sonya Farrow are conducting this study under the supervision of Dr. N. Mary, Professor of Social Work. The Department of Social Work sub-committee of the Institutional Review Board, California State University, San Bernardino, has approved this study. The university requires that you give your consent before participating in this study.

In this study you will be asked to respond to questions on your view of the world. The task should take about 10 to 15 minutes to complete. All of your responses will be held in the strictest of confidence by the researchers. Your name will not be reported with your responses. All data will be reported in-group form only. You may receive the group results of the study at Pfau Library upon completion of the Spring Quarter of 2001.

Your participation in this study is totally voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time during
this study without any penalty. When you complete the task, you will receive a debriefing statement describing the study in more detail. In order to ensure the validity of the study, we ask you not to discuss this study with other students.

If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact Donna Monroe, Sonya Farrow or Professor Mary at (909) 880-5506.

By placing a check mark on the line below, I acknowledge that I have been informed of, and that I understand the nature and purpose of this study, and I freely consent to participate. I also acknowledge that I am at least 18 years of age.

Place a check mark here:  

Today's date: 
APPENDIX D:

DEBRIEFING STATEMENT
Debriefing Statement

The study, you have just completed, was designed to investigate social work students' views of the world. In this study the Just World Belief Scale was used to assess social work students' beliefs on social injustice. Also, its purpose is to explore if infusing social work values and ethics over the course curriculum is sufficient for anchoring the values needed for ethical decision making.

Thank you for your participation and for not discussing the contents of the Just World Belief questions with other students. If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact Donna Monroe, Sonya Farrow or Professor Mary at (909) 880-5506. If you would like to obtain a copy of the group results of this study, please contact Pfau Library at the end of the Spring Quarter of 2001.
APPENDIX E:

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REFERENCES


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ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES

This was a two-person project where authors collaborated throughout. However, for each phase of the project, certain authors took primary responsibility. These responsibilities were assigned in the manner listed below.

1. Data Collection:
   Assigned leader: Sonya Farrow
   Assisted by: Donna Monroe

2. Data Entry and Analysis:
   Assigned leader: Donna Monroe
   Assisted by: Sonya Farrow

3. Writing Report and Presentation of Findings:
   a. Introduction and Literature
      Assigned leader: Donna Monroe
      Assisted by: Sonya Farrow
   b. Methods
      Assigned leader: Sonya Farrow
      Assisted by: Donna Monroe
   c. Results
      Assigned leader: Sonya Farrow
      Assisted by: Donna Monroe
   d. Discussion
      Assigned leader: Donna Monroe
      Assisted by: Sonya Farrow