

Values Integration Research in Social Work Education

Dennis T. Haynes, Ph.D.
University of Texas at Austin

Statement of the Research Problem

The profession of social work has historically placed great emphasis on the centrality of values. The transmission of professional values and ethics is singularly important according to social work educators (Noble & King, 1981). Although values research has been conducted on socialization of students to the profession of social work for the last 30 years (Varley, 1963), the body of this literature has not looked at specific curriculum input which may foster value change. The majority of research has explored differences in student values from entry into social work education to graduation, or has contrasted values of social work students with those of students in other professions. There have been few empirical studies of specific values education strategies to enhance the professional socialization of social work students (Hancock & Wilk, 1988).

Research Background

This study employs a theoretically grounded module, called the Values Integration Pyramid (VIP) developed by the author to teach professional social work values at a graduate school of social work (Haynes, 1993). This original module incorporates Jack Mezirow's (1991) Transformation Theory, one of the newer adult learning theories with potential application to social work education. The framework emphasizes critical reflectivity and psychocultural awareness, through explication of personal and societal assumptions. This historically contextual approach is consistent with social work's ecological perspective. The module integrates personal, social, political, and professional values as it moves from a conflict and diverse view to a consensus and unity orientation.

The basic assumption underlying the development of the Values Integration Pyramid module is that the currently prevalent infused model of values education is a "necessary but not sufficient" model. Infused content describes and clarifies values, but does not integrate the valuing process. Before proceeding to consider the professional values socialization of students, the educator must begin where the student is--in the realm of personal values. To begin with the personal underscores a focus on difference, before moving the student toward consensus. This research describes differences among values that students bring to social work education.

Questions/Hypotheses

The research questions are as follows:

1. Is there an association between MSW students' political philosophy and concurrence with social work values?
2. Is there an association between MSW students having taken previous course(s) with content on oppression and concurrence with social work values?
3. Do MSW students taught by the Values Integration Pyramid module have greater concurrence with social work values?

Methodology

A Solomon-like four groups design was utilized to examine the effectiveness of the Values Integration Pyramid module among graduate social work students. This quasi-experimental design incorporated a nonequivalent group design without controlled selection and a posttest-only design with nonequivalent groups. This allowed for the comparison of four groups (two intervention and two control groups), while at the same time controlling for possible test effects.

After obtaining the necessary permission to conduct research on human subjects, each member of a beginning two year master's of social work (M.S.W.) class at a large southeastern state university was asked to participate in the study. All were enrolled in one of the four sections of a required introductory course.

Sample demographics were collected via questionnaire. Close-ended questions were included on age, gender, race, marital status, number of children, religious affiliation, birthplace, family of origin's socioeconomic status, parents' education level, and years of paid social work experience. Questions concerning the subjects' political party affiliation, political philosophy, and political activity were also asked. Finally, students were asked about their undergraduate major, whether they had an unpaid social service experience, and if they had ever taken a course on oppression or been exposed to like-content in a class.

The independent variable was the intervention or education module called the Values Integration Pyramid (VIP). The intervention lasted for one month with weekly units as follows: 1) Person of the Social Worker; 2) Social Work in Historical perspective; 3) Contemporary Social Work; and 4) Integration of Personal and Social Ideology. The module consisted of the four value dimensions of personal, social, political, and professional.

The dependent variable was concurrence with social work values as measured by Abbott's (1988) Professional Opinion Scale (POS). In developing this instrument, she incorporated methodological improvements as suggested by Howard and Flaitz (1982). The four value subscales of the POS contain 10 items each for a total of 40 items and are

as follows: respect for basic rights, sense of social responsibility, commitment to individual freedom, and support of self-determination. Likert-scale response categories range from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). Greater concurrence with social work values is reflected by higher scores.

Nominal level demographic variables were analyzed using descriptive and chi-square statistics in order to ascertain similarity among the groups. To examine the association between demographic characteristics and the dependent variable, biserial correlation was utilized. Hypotheses were tested concerning the relationship between students' political philosophy and previous exposure to a course on oppression and concurrence with social values using ANOVA procedures. Statistical methods employed evaluating treatment effectiveness were ANOVA and ANCOVA.

Results

Eighty-three students or 92% of the entering two year masters of social work (M.S.W.) class participated in the study. The majority of the sample were under age 25, female, white, single, and middle class. While more than half had no prior paid social work experience and had not taken social work classes, only eight had no prior unpaid experience in a social service setting. Results of the chi-square analyses indicated that there were no significant differences among the four sections.

Based on previous research findings (Abbott, 1988; Varley, 1968), the first hypothesis stated that a liberal political philosophy would be associated with a greater concurrence with social work values. Due to small cell size, the categories of the political philosophy variable were collapsed to liberal and non-liberal. Although this procedure resulted in the loss of data, it did permit meaningful analysis of variance. Both pre and posttest scores on the POS were significantly higher among students who identified themselves as liberal, thus indicating a greater concurrence with social work values. Scores on the four subscales of the POS and political philosophy were also examined. Being liberal was associated with significantly higher scores on all four of the subscales at posttest. However, there was no association between political philosophy and concurrence with social work values at pretest for two of the subscales (respect for basic rights and commitment to individual freedom). Examination of the association of political philosophy with other demographic variables yielded significant correlations between this variable and political party affiliation and previous course(s) on oppression. When analyzed utilizing the chi-square test, however, these relationships were not significant.

The second hypothesis tested the relationship between having taken a course that dealt with oppression and concurrence with social work values. Results of the ANOVA procedure indicated that students who had previously taken a course on oppression had significantly higher mean scores on the POS posttest than those who had not. The oppression course variable was also found to be associated with political activity level when the chi-square analysis was done.

The main hypothesis tested the effectiveness of the Values Integration Pyramid teaching module. The author hypothesized that students exposed to the VIP module

would have higher scores on the POS than traditionally taught students. While the mean scores at posttest increased for both groups, there was no significant difference between the groups. Similarly, when examining the four value subscales, there were no significant differences found as a result of the ANOVA and ANCOVA procedures.

Utility for Social Work Practice

The mandate of CSWE curriculum policy (1992) for social work programs is to prepare practitioners to be responsible for ethical practice. This learning objective for students is premised on the condition that social work values education approaches are effective. The infused approach mandated by CSWE, to develop students' personal values awareness and skill in clarifying values conflicts and ethical dilemmas, has not been empirically validated for its effectiveness in preparing practitioners in ethical practice.

Ethical conduct is based on a solid grounding in social work values. It has been found, however, that practitioners lacking in ethical decision-making skills tend to abdicate responsibility within interdisciplinary contexts (Joseph & Conrad, 1989). To empower practitioners in their social work professional identity, reemphasis in the foundation content of values is needed. Curriculum planners and students have focused instead on practice methods and skills training. Curriculum has become top heavy with a focus on specialized content. Credit hours added to practice specialization tracks tend to be taken from foundation hours.

Effective practitioners do need to be knowledgeable and skilled, but they also need to be rooted in a solid social work base. We need to strengthen the roots of practitioners through values education. Personal, social, political, and professional values need to be explicated. To fail to explicate values may result in the unethical imposition of values on clients by judgmental practitioners. If the values which underlie social work ideology are what give identity and power to the profession (Meyer, 1981), such reemphasis has potential to empower the profession itself.

References

- Abbott, A. A. (1988). Professional choices: Values at work. Silver Spring, MD: National Association of Social Workers.
- Council on Social Work Education. (1992). Curriculum policy statement for baccalaureate and master's degree programs in social work education. New York: Author.
- Hancock, T., & Wilk, R. J. (1988). Promoting professional values: A study of two types of small group interaction. Arete, 13(2), 12-25.
- Haynes, D. T. (1993). An examination of the effectiveness of the values integration pyramid module among graduate social work students. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Florida State University.
- Howard, T., & Flaitz, J. (1982). A scale to measure the humanistic attitudes of social work students. Social Work Research and Abstracts, 18, 11-18.
- Joseph, M. V., & Conrad, A. P. (1989). Social work influence on interdisciplinary ethical decision making in health care settings. Health and Social Work, 14(1), 22-30.
- Meyer, C. H. (1981). Social work purpose: Status by choice or coercion? Social Work, 26 (1), 69-75.
- Mezirow, J. (1991). Transformative dimensions of adult learning. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Noble, D. N., & King, J. E. (1981). Values: Passing on the torch without burning the runner. Social Casework, 62(10), 579-584.
- Varley, B. K. (1963). Socialization in social work education. Social Work, 8, 102-109.
- Varley, B. K. (1968). Social work values: Changes in value commitments of students from admission to MSW graduation. Journal of Education for Social Work, 4, 67-76.