Demographic and Attitudinal Factors Associated with Perceptions of Social Work

Pat M. Keith
Iowa State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw

Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol7/iss4/7
DEMOGRAPHIC AND ATTITUINAL FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL WORK

Pat M. Keith
Iowa State University

ABSTRACT

Demographic and attitudinal correlates of perceptions of social work practice were examined among rural and urban residents. Data obtained from 301 persons indicated that attitudes toward public assistance and knowledge about social work had independent effects on perceptions of social work practice. Sex and education also explained a significant amount of the variance in attitudes toward social work with women and persons with more education having more positive attitudes. One-third of the respondents had personal experience with social work however, when other variables were considered, previous association with a social worker had no impact on attitudes. Dimensions of religiosity previously found to be related to attitudes toward social action, were not associated with attitudes toward more traditional social work practice. Future research should focus on links between attitudes toward social work and subsequent utilization of social services.

The purpose of this paper is to examine personal and attitudinal correlates of perceptions of social work practice among rural and urban residents. In commenting on the limited data available on public attitudes toward social work, Condie et al. (1978) recently observed that more research has focused on perceptions of social work by other professionals than by the public. Indeed, public attitudes toward welfare, welfare recipients, and the poor have been assessed more frequently than attitudes toward social work although Condie et al. examined personal characteristics in relation to public attitudes toward various aspects of social work. In this research, relationships between religiosity, knowledge about social work, attitudes toward public assistance, community size, and attitudes toward social work are considered in a sample of the general public.

Religiosity and Attitudes toward Social Work

In recent decades, both organized religion and social work have
endorsed greater involvement in social issues with the result that some of the goals of social work as a profession and those of social service-

social action programs sponsored by churches are frequently shared. Among other factors, both may reflect interests in social change and a concern with promoting the well-being of individuals and groups. Previous research has examined the attitudes of social workers toward social action strategies (Epstein, 1968) and the relationship between religiosity and attitudes toward social action among the general public (Marx, 1967). But there has been little investigation of how religiosity influences public perceptions of social work practice. Yet, there is reason to expect that religiosity may be associated with perceptions of social work practice.

Although religious institutions have generally been conservative forces providing legitimation for the status quo, at the same time they may also be sources of humanistic values that would support social change to assist others. The contradictory implications of religion for social action, however, have been noted in that one may view aspects of an after-life and urges acceptance of one's lot while 'another is more concerned with the realization of Judeo-Christian values in the current life' (Marx, 1967). Persons holding a more humanistic and less doctrinal orientation that incorporates the concept of involvement in secular changes might be expected to express greater support for professional helping services. More orthodox views of religion, however, entail an other-world orientation in contrast to a more temporal focus while social work practice is directed to the "here and now" rather than concern for the well-being of persons in an after-life. Thus, persons who hold more orthodox views of religion would likely have less positive attitudes toward social work than individuals with less orthodox religious values.

Earlier research indicated that religion inhibited protest and militancy while religious orthodoxy was inversely related to activism of persons to whom religion was very important (Marx, 1967; Bahr et al., 1971). This suggests that both orthodoxy and the salience that religion has for the individual may also influence attitudes toward social work practice. In this study the relative influence of three dimensions of religiosity -- orthodoxy, salience, and frequency of church attendance -- on attitudes toward social work practice are examined.

Demographic Characteristics and Attitudes toward Social Work

For the most part, demographic characteristics have not been very good predictors of attitudes toward welfare or approval of welfare services (Kallen and Miller, 1971; Ogren, 1973), but Alston and Dean (1972) found that men, the young, and the well-educated held more negative definitions of the poor. Further, Ogren observed that individuals with the least knowledge about public welfare had the most favorable attitudes toward welfare recipients. In the present research, knowledge of social work practices is examined in relation to attitudes toward social work.

Condle et al. found that professionals tended to have more knowledge of social work roles than nonprofessionals, while women tended to identify roles of social workers somewhat more accurately than men, and young people were more likely to be acquainted with a social worker than older persons (Condle et al., 1978).

Since much of the research on public attitudes has focused on attitudes toward welfare and welfare services, in this research attitudes toward public assistance in general are examined separately from attitudes toward social work and social workers. Issues involving public assistance are likely more politicized than those pertaining to other social services in that perceptions of government-sponsored assistance perhaps would tend to reflect more general political beliefs about governmental intervention than would attitudes toward social work practice.

Much of the research on public attitudes toward welfare or social work has not considered the influence of community size. Yet, Fenby (1978) recently observed that differences in the environment in which rural and urban social workers practice may influence relationships with their clients and perhaps their effectiveness. The greater visibility of social workers in small communities may also affect perceptions of the profession and of social work clients. Fenby implied that some of the consequences of high visibility in a rural area may be negative resulting in high role strain for the social worker and his/her family (e.g., difficulty in maintaining confidentiality, maintaining a professional image, separation of personal life and friendships from professional-client relationships, and over-familiarity). On the other hand, it could be argued that the higher visibility of the social worker in small communities may lead to greater knowledge and more positive attitudes toward social work in general. However, there may also be a greater emphasis on individualism and self-help among rural populations. These outlooks may be reflected in perceptions of public assistance attitudes and attitudes toward clients with a greater emphasis on individualism and more negative perceptions of social work in rural areas or small communities. In a multivariate analysis it is possible to determine the relative effect of community size, previous contact with social workers, and other variables on attitudes toward social work.

Methods

Sample

Data were collected by means of a questionnaire that included questions on attitudes toward social work, knowledge about social work, religiosity, community size and other demographic characteristics. Questionnaires were completed by 301 persons who were in attendance at Sunday worship
toward among that and the action strategies (Epstein, 1968) and the relationship between religiosity and attitudes toward social action among the general public (Marx, 1967). But there has been little investigation of how religiosity influences public perceptions of social work practice. Yet, there is reason to expect that religiosity may be associated with perceptions of social work practice.

Although religious institutions have generally been conservative forces providing legitimation for the status quo, at the same time they may also be sources of humanistic values that would support social change to assist others. The contradictory implications of religion for social action, however, have been noted in that one dimension is an after-life and urges acceptance of one's lot while 'another is more concerned with the realization of Judeo-Christian values in the current life' (Marx, 1967). Persons holding a more humanistic and less doctrinal orientation that incorporates the concept of involvement in secular changes might be expected to express greater support for professional helping services.

More orthodox views of religion, however, entail an other-world orientation in contrast to a more temporal focus while social work practice is directed to the 'here and now' rather than concern for the well-being of persons in an after-life. Thus, persons who hold more orthodox views of religion would likely have less positive attitudes toward social work than individuals with less orthodox religious values.

Earlier research indicated that religion inhibited protest and militancy while religious orthodoxy was inversely related to church activism among persons to whom religion was very important (Marx, 1967; Bahr et al., 1971). This suggests that both orthodoxy and the salience that religion has for the individual may also influence attitudes toward social work practice. In this study the relative influence of three dimensions of religiosity -- orthodoxy, salience, and frequency of church attendance -- on attitudes toward social work practice are examined.

Demographic Characteristics and Attitudes toward Social Work

For the most part, demographic characteristics have not been very good predictors of attitudes toward welfare or approval of welfare services (Kallen and Miller, 1971; Ogren, 1973), but Alston and Dean (1972) found that men, the young, and the well-educated held more negative definitions of the poor. Further, Ogren observed that individuals with the least knowledge about public welfare had the most favorable attitudes toward welfare recipients. In the present research, knowledge of social work practices is examined in relation to attitudes toward social work.

Condie et al. found that professionals tended to have more knowledge of social work roles than nonprofessionals, while women tended to identify roles of social workers somewhat more accurately than men, and young people were more likely to be acquainted with a social worker than older persons (Condie et al., 1978).

Since much of the research on public attitudes has focused on attitudes toward welfare and welfare services, in this research attitudes toward public assistance in general are examined separately from attitudes toward social work and social workers. Issues involving public assistance are likely more politicized than those pertaining to other social services. In that perceptions of government-sponsored assistance perhaps would depend to reflect more general political beliefs about governmental intervention than would attitudes toward social work practice.

Much of the research on public attitudes toward welfare or social work has not considered the influence of community size. Yet, Fenby (1978) recently observed that differentials in social work practice in rural and urban settings may influence the relationships with their clients and perhaps their effectiveness. The greater visibility of social workers in small communities may also affect perceptions of the profession and of social work clients. Fenby implied that some of the consequences of high visibility in a rural area may be negative resulting in high role strain for the social worker and his/her family (e.g., difficulty in maintaining confidentiality, maintaining a professional image, separation of personal life and friendships from professional-client relationships, and over-familiarity). On the other hand, it could be argued that the higher visibility of the social worker in small communities may lead to greater knowledge and more positive attitudes toward social work in general. However, there may also be a greater emphasis on individuality and self-help among rural populations. These outlooks may be reflected in perceptions of public assistance and attitudes toward clients with a greater emphasis on individualism and more negative perceptions of social work in rural areas or small communities.

In a multivariate analysis it is possible to determine the relative effect of community size, previous contact with social workers, and other variables on attitudes toward social work.
services in churches located in the open country and as well as in communities of 20,000 or more in Iowa. Permission to administer the questionnaire was obtained from pastors and priests. Respondents completed the questionnaire, and they were collected at the services with researchers available to answer any questions. Although a nonrepresentative limited sample is never preferred, the initial intent of the study was only exploratory and was to investigate possible relationships between attitudes toward social work and religiosity among individuals who attended churches, both rural and urban.

Characteristics of the Sample

Respondents ranged from 15 to 76 years of age with a mean age of 35. Perhaps reflecting more general church attendance patterns, more than half of the sample were women (69 percent). Yet, the sex distribution was not greatly different from that found in a random sample of the general population in four communities in an earlier study of attitudes toward social work (Condie et al., 1978).

The educational attainment of respondents was somewhat skewed toward the higher levels (Table I). This may reflect the high literacy rate of the state as a whole and is probably, in part, a function of the location of a college in one of the communities. Even so, the educational levels do not differ greatly from those reported by Condie et al. in their random sample of four western communities. They reported, for example, that about 40 percent of their sample had a high school diploma or less while in the present group of respondents, one-third were in this category.

Because one interest was to examine potential rural and urban differences, respondents were intentionally obtained from farms and small communities as well as from somewhat larger towns and cities. Consequently, about one-third of the sample were located in rural farm areas and one-third in towns and cities of 10,000 or more (Table I).

Measures

**Attitudes toward social work.** Attitudes toward social work were assessed by responses to eight statements primarily focusing on the perceived functions of social work. The content of the statements was derived from current text materials and articles. Using a five-point scale, response categories ranged from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." A score was obtained by summing across the eight statements with higher scores indicating more positive attitudes toward social work. The mean was 17.8 and the coefficient of reliability was .65 (Alpha). Representative items were: "Social workers are only needed in large cities that have slum areas"; "Most of the people whom social workers try to help could get along just as well without their help"; Social work services
interfere with the functions of the family group"; "Social work services enable individuals to play significant roles in their communities."

Knowledge about Social Work. Knowledge of social work was assessed by responding true or false to ten statements about social workers, their clients, and work environment. The number of correct responses was summed across the ten items with scores ranging from zero to ten. The mean score was 5. Knowledge questions were derived from undergraduate social work texts; however, an attempt was made to select statements for which documentation was provided. As in the instance of all of the questions, it was necessary to include statements that lay persons of various ages and educational backgrounds could understand. Representative examples were: "Social work services are directed toward a larger number of children than adults"; "Social workers have special skills to carry out programs that volunteers do not have"; "The minimum requirement for social work positions is generally a bachelor's degree"; "Social work services are often included in a hospital's service programs."

Religiosity. Measures for religious importance and orthodoxy consisted of statements with five point response categories ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." Scale scores were obtained by summing across items for each of the measures.

Religious importance was assessed by six items (Putney and Middleton, 1961). The coefficient of reliability was .87 (Alpha). Representative items were "I find that my ideas on religion have a considerable influence on my views in other areas"; "If my ideas about religion were different, I believe that my way of life would be very different."

Orthodoxy was measured by six items with a coefficient of reliability of .84 (Alpha) (Putney and Middleton, 1961). "I believe there is a life after death" and "I believe there is a supernatural being, the Devil, who continually tries to lead men into sin" were two of the items.

Frequency of church attendance was measured by the question, "How often do you attend Sunday worship service?" Respondents checked one of nine categories ranging from every week to less than once a year.

Attitudes toward public assistance. Attitudes toward public assistance in general were assessed separately from attitudes toward social work. The attitudes toward social work scale attempted to examine more general perceptions of social work functions rather than attitudes toward any specific form of assistance. Four items, with response categories ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree, were used to measure attitudes about public assistance; for example, "Public assistance programs have gone too far in this country"; "Public assistance kills the spark in individuals that make this country great." On all scales higher scores indicated more positive attitudes or greater amounts.
Results

Knowledge about social work, attitudes toward public assistance, personal contact with a social worker, size of community, age, sex, education, and three measures of religiosity (importance, orthodoxy, church attendance) were entered in a multiple regression to consider simultaneously their relationship to attitudes toward social work. This statistical technique indicates the relative influence of each of the variables on attitudes toward social work. Four of the variables explained 27 percent of the variance in attitudes toward social work (Table 2). Positive perceptions of public assistance and greater knowledge of social work were correlated with favorable attitudes toward social work and explained the most variance. Attitudes toward public assistance and knowledge of social work were not significantly related to one another; thus, they had independent effects on perceptions of social work. Sex and education also explained a significant amount of variance in attitudes toward social work; women and persons with more education had more positive attitudes.

Although community size was positively related to favorable attitudes toward social work \( (r = .17) \), it did not have an independent influence on attitudes. Rather the impact of community size on perceptions of social work may have been mediated by educational level and attitudes toward public assistance. Individuals from larger communities tended to have more education \( (r = .34) \) and more positive attitudes toward public assistance \( (r = .26) \) both of which had a direct influence on attitudes toward social work.

One-third of the respondents had personal experience with social work service and for the most part the contacts were positive \( (73 \text{ percent}) \). Although contact with a social worker was weakly correlated with favorable attitudes toward social work \( (r = .13) \), when other variables were considered, previous association with a social worker had no impact on attitudes. Likewise, dimensions of religiosity, either attitudinal or behavioral (e.g. as reflected in attendance), were not significantly related to perceptions of social work. Further, none of the aspects of religiosity were associated with either attitudes toward public assistance or knowledge about social work. Dimensions of religiosity that have been found to be related to attitudes toward social action then were not associated with attitudes toward more traditional social work practices.

Summary and Discussion

Attitudes toward public assistance and knowledge about social work were the best predictors of attitudes toward social work. At one level attitudes toward public assistance probably reflect more general approval or disapproval of social intervention with the intent of effecting change.
Further, the effects of other factors on attitudes toward social work were likely mediated through their influence on attitudes toward public assistance. For example, age, community size, and education all influenced attitudes toward public assistance which in turn impacted social work attitudes. Of these factors, only education also had an independent influence on perceptions of social work.

Knowledge about social work had a direct influence on attitudes toward social work with greater knowledge associated with more positive attitudes. This contrasts with Ogren's finding that knowledge about public welfare was negatively associated with attitudes toward welfare. Furthermore, unlike attitudes toward public assistance, knowledge about social work seemed independent of most of the demographic and personal factors considered.

Sex was also an important predictor of attitudes toward social work with women holding more positive attitudes than their male counterparts. Women's slightly greater knowledge of social work practices correspond to the observation by Condie et al. that women were somewhat better able than men to identify the roles of social worker. Although they did not consider social work practices, Heisler et al. (1971) also found that men more than women had negative definitions of the poor. Sex differences in attitudes may be a reflection of the personality characteristics and roles frequently attributed to women. Considerable evidence suggests that women are believed to be more nurturant, expressive, and, therefore, perhaps more likely to endorse assisting and helping others. On the other hand, the instrumental roles frequently ascribed to men would emphasize individualism, perhaps rejection of help, and possibly encourage a tendency to be less supportive of those who are engaged to provide help professionally.

Clearly, despite the similarity of some of the goals that organized religion and social work may share, dimensions of religiosity have little salience for attitudes toward social work. Persons who were more humanistic and expressed greater concern that religion relate to the present rather than the hereafter (i.e. those who exhibited less doctrinal orthodoxy) were not any more likely to be supportive of social work services than persons who had more conventional religious beliefs. Among persons with less orthodox beliefs, social services were not especially identified as a means by which some of the tenets emphasizing help, assistance, and the well-being of others in the present world could be implemented. Although the attitudes toward social work scale was not constructed to reflect social action beyond that traditionally included in social work practice, religiosity might have been more closely associated with attitudes if measures of specific types of activism had been used.

Contrary to some speculation, persons in smaller communities seemed to have less opportunity for contact with a social worker. However, contact in either rural or urban communities was benign in terms of any
influence on attitudes toward social work. Condie et al. (1978) also observed that contact with a social worker made little difference in the level of knowledge about the profession. A possible reason that contact had little or no influence on attitudes may be due to issues of confidentiality in which social workers may reveal little about their work and hence diminish their impact on the attitudes of persons with whom they associate. More information about the nature of the contact or the extent of the acquaintance between social workers and the public might differentiate the positive and negative effects of interaction with social workers on attitudes toward the field and practice.

Although some research has found demographic factors to be poor predictors of attitudes toward welfare or welfare services (Kallen and Miller, 1971; Ogren, 1973), in this investigation two demographic factors (sex and education) were among the primary determinants of attitudes toward social work. Research then should continue to examine demographic variables and include additional measures such as occupation, income, and marital status. Future research should also focus on links between attitudes toward social work and subsequent behavior with respect to utilization of social services. Although personal characteristics of utilizers and nonutilizers of services have been investigated (Keith, 1978; McKinlay, 1979), examination of how personal attributes interact with attitudes toward provision of service to influence usage needs to be undertaken as well.

REFERENCES

Alston, J.P. and Imogene Dean

Bahr, Howard M., Lois Franz Bertel and Bruce A. Chadwick

Condie, C.O., J.A. Hanson, N.E. Lang, D.K. Moss and R.A. Kane

Epstein, Irwin

Fenby, Barbara

Kallen, David J. and Dorothy Miller

Keith, P.M.
Marx, Gary T.  

McKinlay, J.B.  

Nelson, Hart M., R.L. Yokley, and T.W. Madron  

Ogren, Evelyn H.  

Putney, S. and R. Middleton  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>69.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>30.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-25</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>39.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-35</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>18.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46-55</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56-65</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66 and over</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not graduate from high school</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school graduate</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>40.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College graduate or more</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>27.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Characteristics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farm</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>34.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 2,500</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>23.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2,500-10,000</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10,000 or larger</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>31.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Zero-order Correlations and standardized partial regression coefficients for attitudinal and demographic characteristics and attitudes toward social work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>r</th>
<th>b</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Attitudes toward public assistance</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Social Work Knowledge</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Church Attendance</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Contact with Social Worker</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Religious Importance</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Community Size</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Religious Orthodoxy</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

R = .551; R² = .30