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SATISFACTION WITH THE PROFESSION AND CAREER STATUS
AMONG BSW SOCIAL WORKERS

BY

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ABSTRACT

This study replicates "a measurement of social workers' professional satisfaction" and expands the findings to include career status among BSW graduates. It was hypothesized that (1) graduates of BSW programs who practice social work were more satisfied with selected "symbolic rewards" than those who did not remain in the profession, and that (2) MSW's will express more professional satisfaction than BSW's. A 50 percent random sample of the 538 graduates from a midwestern university for the period 1971-1980 was surveyed. A total of 172 graduates participated, representing a 68 percent response rate. BSW graduates who remain in the profession were significantly more satisfied with selected "symbolic rewards" than those who left the social work profession. MSW's are significantly more satisfied with their professional choice, their work performance, and find the monetary rewards to be more satisfying than BSW practitioners.

INTRODUCTION

What are the attitudes of BSW social work graduates toward the profession of social work? How do they perceive the recognition given to social work by society and other professions? How satisfied are they with monetary rewards, work performance, choice of social work as a professional career, and the purpose and function of social work?

Social workers' professional satisfaction has been examined by Meinert (1975), but no study has been reported which surveyed BSW graduates and those who left the profession. While Meinert studied members of

the St. Louis, Missouri, NASW chapter and excluded "students, retirees and those employed in a non social work capacity" (1974, 4), this study sampled BSW graduates regardless of their current employment status.

This study replicates "a measurement of social workers' professional satisfaction" and expands the findings to include career status among BSW graduates. It was hypothesized that (1) graduates of BSW programs who practice social work were more satisfied with selected "symbolic rewards" than those who did not remain in the profession, and that (2) MSW's will express more professional satisfaction than BSW's.

METHOD

A 50 percent random sample of the 538 BSW graduates from a midwestern university for the period 1971-1980 was surveyed. A total of 172 graduates participated, representing a 68 percent response rate. The 19-question survey asked for employment history since graduation, graduate education, academic preparation for social work practice, and demographic data.

Imbedded within the questionnaire was the seven-item social workers' professional satisfaction scale developed by Meinert(1974, 6). Respondents estimated their degree of satisfaction with each item using an 11-point scale, ranging from complete dissatisfaction (0) to complete satisfaction (10). The seven attitudinal items (Table 1) were found by Meinert to be "scalar and predictive" (1974, 14). The scale's internal consistency, one type of reliability, was determined by coefficient alpha for the midwestern study sample. The reliability coefficient for the seven item scale for those in the profession (N=115) (1) was .81, which may be considered satisfactory for both research and applied settings (Nunnally, 1978, 245).

The majority of the respondents were white (96%), female (80%), state residents (71%), and 29 years old. Two-thirds of the respondents were employed full or part-time in social work, enrolled in graduate social

work programs, or seeking a social work position; 37 (22%) have earned or were completing requirements for an MSW.

FINDINGS

The seven items and their respective mean scores are presented in Table 1. The findings reported by Meinert (1975, 64) are presented first and in rank order from highest to lowest. Findings for the midwestern study sample are first divided into two categories: in social work and out-of-social work. Significant differences (t-test) were found for the four relevant items (2). BSW graduates who remain in the profession were significantly more satisfied with selected "symbolic rewards" than those who left the social work profession.

Further analysis was conducted to ascertain the importance of an MSW and professional satisfaction. Only two respondents who obtained an MSW did not remain in the profession. The remaining 35 (completed or in progress) (3) obtained higher mean scores on all items (see Table 1) than those who remained in the profession and did not seek or were not seeking an MSW. Significant differences were found for three items: choice of social work as a professional career, own professional work performance, and monetary rewards received for social work practice. Apparently, MSW's are significantly more satisfied with their professional choice, their work performance, and find the monetary rewards to be more satisfying than BSW practitioners. Pursuing an MSW perhaps requires additional commitment and sacrifice beyond an BSW. In addition, most MSW's tend to receive more challenging, rewarding and demanding opportunities with commensurate financial rewards.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

These findings update Meinert's earlier study and extend the findings to BSW graduates, including those who leave the profession. The rankings of the items for this study are similar to Meinert's findings. This study also provides additional evidence to support Meinert's findings that "there are great differences in

the amount of satisfaction felt by social workers about important features of their profession" (1975, 65).

Recognition given to social work by other professions and society at large, and concern for monetary rewards, as measures of satisfaction, are rated lowest by this study sample and Meinert's sample, suggesting that the profession's image and importance is perceived as undervalued. The BSW graduates who left the profession rated recognition by society and other professions significantly lower than those who remained. While significant differences were not found, the MSW social worker rated recognition from other professionals and society slightly higher than the BSW practitioner.

Choice of social work as a professional career for those who remain in the profession was rated high. MSW's rated this item highest and also differed significantly from the non-MSW. Not surprisingly, significant differences were found between those who remain and those who left the profession. For many, social work is chosen despite its perceived low esteem and meager financial rewards. The out-of-social work respondents rated career choice 4.76 indicating, on the average, dissatisfaction with their choice. Interestingly, they rated the purpose and function of the social work profession much higher indicating, on the average, satisfaction with the profession's purpose. The promise of social work - "to improve the quality of life for everyone" (Social Work, 1981, 6) - may for some who leave social work remain an ideal though tempered by disillusionment with practice "reality".

While this study does not identify reasons for leaving social work, those who leave clearly differentiate themselves from those who remain. No causal relationship can be inferred, but it is interesting to speculate on attitudes of the two groups. Do some BSW graduates leave because of status needs, that is, recognition from significant others? Why are they dissatisfied with their choice? Were they dissatisfied prior to graduating or did dissatisfaction develop after graduation? Were social work positions not available, job satisfaction minimal, monetary

rewards unsatisfactory, recognition from others unsatisfying? (4)

This scale, with appropriate modifications, may reliably be used with social work students to measure their level of satisfaction with the social work profession and as a tool to facilitate discussion regarding career choice. Answers may suggest curriculum strategies and professional association activities. The education of BSW professionals, however, should address the concerns of social workers who perceive an undervaluation of their professional worth by important others and the implications for the profession.

NOTES

1. The reliability of the professional satisfaction scale was not tested for the entire sample as three items (2, 5, 6) could not be completed by those respondents not in social work.
2. Since item 2 focuses on the function of the agency, item 5 on work performance, and item 6 on monetary rewards of social work practice, they could not be responded to by those not in social work.
3. Of the remaining 35, 18 had obtained an MSW and 17 were currently enrolled in an MSW program.
4. Recent studies have addressed some of these questions. See, for example, Atkinson and Glassberg, 1983; Herrick, Takagi, Coleman, and Morgan, 1983; Mahler, 1982; and, Raffoul and McCullagh, in press.

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