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Karen D. Stout  
*University of Houston*

William E. Buffum  
*University of Houston*

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# The Commitment of Social Workers to Affirmative Action

Karen D. Stout  
and  
William E. Buffum  
University of Houston

*This study examines the relationship of commitment to affirmative action principles, knowledge about affirmative action, and positive or negative experiences with affirmative action in a sample of 193 members of the Texas Chapter of NASW. The results were that knowledge was not significantly associated with commitment to affirmative action, although both positive and negative experience with affirmative action was strongly associated with commitment. Ways to build support for affirmative action through positive experience are discussed. Differences among sub-groups of the sample are examined.*

## Introduction

One prominent male member of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) wrote the following to the President of the Texas Chapter:

I would like to know what my sex has accomplished for me as a member of NASW. If I found out that my sex had in any way contributed to "whatever", I would not accept it. I would suggest that we need to make sure everyone has an equal opportunity to run for office but not rule out people because of sex, race, etc. That is reverse discrimination. What I want is a competent person to run and serve (Personal Correspondence, August 10, 1989).

As this comment shows, affirmative action principles are a source of disagreement within the social work profession. Many white males say that they are the victims of reverse discrimination and allege that all persons of color and white women are given unfair advantages because of affirmative action policies. Some persons of color and white women do not

support affirmative action policies because they are concerned that others might believe that they obtained their positions, not through their own efforts, but through preferential treatment. Proponents of affirmative action note that white males are often inherently given unfair advantages, therefore, policies which insure opportunities for white women and persons of color are imperative.

The purpose of this study was to survey NASW members in Texas to take the affirmative action debate out of the board room, agency hallways, and the living rooms of social workers to allow a more focused examination of issues related to affirmative action. The central question posed was: "To what degree and under what circumstances do social workers in Texas support the concept and implementation of affirmative action policies?" This research, therefore, assessed the attitudes, knowledge, and reservations of social workers regarding affirmative action policies and implementation procedures.

#### Affirmative Action, Equal Opportunity, and Reverse Discrimination

Affirmative action has been defined as ". . . any measure, beyond simple termination of a discriminatory practice, adopted to correct or compensate for past or present discrimination from recurring in the future" (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1977, p.2). Withers (undated) suggested affirmative action ". . . means taking race, sex, or national origin into account in a positive way" (p. 1). Lovell (1978) noted that affirmative action ". . . requires more than passive non-discrimination by the organization—it demands active programs of broadly applied preferential hiring systems" (p. 446). Jones (1981) stated, "The social purpose of affirmative action programs is to achieve distribution throughout occupational and professional categories, or other life chances, that is appropriately representative of the diversity of our population generally" (p.467). Jackson (1987) described affirmative action as "creative justice and compassion" (p. 40) and suggests that if a societal goal is to achieve educational and economic parity for oppressed citizens, then affirmative action is necessary.

Lovell (1978) describes equal opportunity as "the absence of overt discrimination" (p. 447) noting that public agencies have been "equal opportunity employers" for thirty years. "The distinction between affirmative action and non-discrimination is the difference between the *active* and the *passive* mode. It is illustrated by the difference between management by objectives and incrementalism" (p. 447). In testimony for the U.S. Civil Rights Commission prepared by staff at the Women's Legal Defense Fund (1985), the point was made that promises to end the practice of discrimination have not proven to be adequate.

Jones (1981) traced the origin of the phrase, *reverse discrimination*, to a dissent opinion in a 1964 court case in New York. The phrase, *reverse discrimination*, is often used "... to describe denial of a right or benefit or an expectation to a White because Blacks or other minorities are being given preference" (p. 466). Kubasek and Giampetro (1987) suggest that many people who believe that reverse discrimination is occurring in this country believe that "reverse discrimination is a violation of the principle of distributive justice because it distributes benefits and burdens on the basis of an irrelevant characteristic: race" (p. 235). Further, these authors suggest that opponents of affirmative action often feel that reverse discrimination "... violates the principle of compensatory justice. Compensatory justice requires that when one is unjustly deprived of something that he [sic] rightfully possesses, he [sic] is entitled to compensation for his [sic] loss from one who harmed him [sic] (p. 235). This argument would not allow for historically oppressed groups to be given preferential treatment, although individuals who have been harmed by individuals could seek redress for their grievances.

### Social Work and Affirmative Action Policies

The debate about compensating for the negative effects of discrimination through affirmative action policies and non-intervention with individual prerogatives has been fierce during the last decade (Fox-Genovese, 1986; Green, 1981). Nevertheless, the social work profession has a long and proud history of commitment to social justice, to ending discrimination, and to

empowering people to gain control over their lives. The *Code of Ethics* of the National Association of Social Workers requires that their members not be in any way associated with any form of discrimination, and that members promote the general welfare by working to prevent and eliminate discrimination (NASW, 1990a). The Council on Social Work Education mandates that all accredited social work education programs teach students about discrimination and infuse the curriculum with content which ensures that social workers will have the knowledge and skills to fight oppression and combat discrimination (CSWE, 1991). Supporting these expectations is the fundamental social work conceptualization of person-in-environment, a construct which requires social workers to give concerted attention to the impacts of environmental constraints, such as those which result from discrimination.

Traditional social work values are coming into heated conflict around the issue of affirmative action. The idea of affirmative action assumes that there is injustice which exists and which should be redressed, even at the possible expense of some individuals. Social workers battle for social justice for their clients, but the waters are muddied when social workers themselves are affected. The National Association of Social Workers has well-developed affirmative action goals, goals which all state chapters must achieve (NASW, 1990b). These include procedures for the hiring of chapter office staff, for the election of state board members, and the appointment of persons to all state committees. The policy requires that elections and appointments be conducted in a manner which will ensure that the volunteer leadership reflects the gender, racial and ethnic make-up of the association's chapter membership. Thus, a state chapter with 25% of the membership being racial and ethnic minority persons must have no less than 25% of its leadership also being persons from racial and ethnic groups. To assure this result, elections must be designed so that the outcome will be guaranteed to produce an elected leadership with 25% of the winners being persons from racial and ethnic groups. The way in which this is commonly done is to "double-slate" candidates for office. This means that persons from racial and ethnic groups are matched to run against other persons from racial and ethnic groups,

so that the result will not affect the board composition. This is also done for women to ensure that equity outcomes are achieved. Some social workers have felt that this procedure is unfair, especially to white males, who currently represent about 24% of the NASW membership, but many of whom have well-developed leadership track records. Across the country, many NASW members, social workers, have been expressing reservations about affirmative action principles, principles which some perceive as limiting their leadership choices and possibly even weakening the professional association itself.

### Conceptual Overview

The present study was designed to assess the extent to which members of the Texas Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers support affirmative action principles. While virtually no research on affirmative action in the social work profession has been conducted according to the NASW National Center on Policy and Practice, two general theoretical assumptions which may affect one's degree of commitment to affirmative action principles were made by the investigators. These are (1) knowledge about affirmative action principles and (2) the extent to which one has been directly affected, either positively or negatively, by affirmative action policies.

Knowledge about affirmative action is a significant issue. Affirmative action policies generally posit that fully qualified persons from groups which have been the targets of past discrimination should be given preference in hiring and promotion. NASW extends this principle to elected and appointed volunteer members. There often is misunderstanding about concepts like *fully qualified*. Many people believe that under affirmative action *unqualified* persons must be hired, elected or appointed. This is not true. If people have misunderstandings about affirmative action, they well may blame the policies instead of blaming the poor decisions of managers.

There is also considerable confusion about equal opportunity policies as contrasted with affirmative action policies. As noted earlier, many people are unaware that equal opportunity is a passive concept which means that there will be no

discrimination in, employment and promotion, and that affirmative action is an active concept which means that there will be an active attempt to recruit and mentor persons who hail from population groups which have been subject to past discrimination. The lack of understanding about the meaning and intent of affirmative action policies well may affect one's degree of support for such policies. There should be an association between knowledge about affirmative action and commitment to the principles involved. Should this prove to be correct, then educational efforts can be designed as one strategy for building the commitment of social workers to affirmative action.

The idea that people have stronger feelings about policies which affect them personally is not profound. Basically, the theory suggests that if a person or their close associates perceive that they have benefitted from affirmative action policies, they will tend to support affirmative action principles. Conversely, if a social worker or their associates perceive that they have been harmed by affirmative action policies, they will tend not to support affirmative action. This perspective is a rather direct application of behavioral theory, that behavior is shaped by its consequences. Thus, if a person applies for a position and is not rewarded for their effort by being hired, they will tend to be dissatisfied. If a person is white and attributes this outcome to affirmative action policies or calls it reverse discrimination, he or she will feel treated inequitably and tend not to support affirmative action principles. This relationship between one's experience and commitment to affirmative action is important because it suggests that the value base of the social work profession is not, by itself, sufficient unless supported by positive experiences with affirmative action. One possible strategy for building commitment to affirmative action might be, therefore, to make more visible to NASW members the positive outcomes of affirmative action.

## Methodology

### *Population and Sample*

The members of the Texas Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW/Texas) comprised the population under study. The statewide membership directory for May,

1990 was obtained and used to establish the sampling frame. NASW/Texas had 4,724 members in May, 1990, making it the seventh largest state chapter in the United States.

Using a proportionate stratified sampling technique, 10% of the members from each of the 20 geographic units in NASW/Texas were randomly selected. In this manner, participation from all NASW/Texas units could be assured. A total of 474 questionnaires were mailed, of which 57 were returned unopened due to change of address, death, or other circumstance. Questionnaires were returned by 193 respondents. This gives a response rate of 46.3%. According to Rubin and Babble (1989), a response rate of 50% is considered "*adequate* [original authors' emphasis] for analysis and reporting" (p. 320). Thus, this return rate is very close to that goal.

### *Instrument*

The authors developed a self-administering survey instrument to measure "Social Worker Impressions About Affirmative Action." This instrument contained sections designed to measure Commitment to Affirmative Action, Knowledge About Affirmative Action, Positive and Negative Experience of Affirmative Action, and a respondent demographic section.<sup>1</sup> The instrument scales were pretested using a class of 60 graduate social work students and modified to remove ambiguous language. Reliability estimates were examined using the study's respondents. Reliability was assessed using Chronbach's alpha for internal consistency assessment. The results demonstrate acceptable reliability for the scales (1) Commitment to Affirmative Action, alpha = .795, (2) Knowledge of Affirmative Action Principles, alpha = .560, (3) Negative Experience of Affirmative Action, alpha = .556, and (4) Positive Experience of Affirmative Action, alpha .574.

### Results

Of the 193 respondents, 74.7% were MSW's and almost 10% were BSW'S, which is consistent with the known membership of NASW in Texas at the time of the study. Also consistent with membership data was that 74.5% of the respondents were women and 25.5% were men. The gender of the respondents

was 62.1% female and 37.9% male, reflecting a disproportionately high response rate from males. NASW membership in Texas is about 76% women. By ethnicity, 12.2% were persons from recognized minority groups, not far from the known rate of 13% for NASW membership in Texas. While 73.1% of the respondents identified with the Democratic Party, 10.5% identify themselves as Republicans and 11.1% as identifying with other political parties. No party identification is claimed by 5.3%. The respondents had a mean age of 43.6 years with a range of 59 years. The age distribution is close to being normal. The job level of the respondents was 42.5% managers and supervisors; 37.9% were direct practitioners. The employment setting of the respondents reflects a continuing commitment to the traditional social work settings: public sector, 27.2%, private not-for-profit agencies, 33.3%, public universities, 6.8%, and private for-profit settings, 32.1%. Finally, the respondents self-identified themselves as practicing in different size communities. Most said they work in major metropolitan areas (61.9%), one-quarter (24.4%) said they work in mid-size cities, and 13.5% indicate that they work in either a small city or rural area. There was a supposition that some of these demographic variables might affect Commitment to Affirmative Action, however, no specific *a priori* hypotheses were proposed.

### *Measures of Association*

The correlation coefficients among these scales are found in Table 1. Curiously, Knowledge of Affirmative Action was NOT significantly associated with Commitment to Affirmative Action. Negative Experience of Affirmative Action was, as predicted, negatively associated with Commitment ( $r = -.417$ ,  $p. < .001$ ), and Positive Experience was positively associated with Commitment ( $r = .287$ ,  $p. < .001$ ). Finally, those with either Negative or Positive Experience of Affirmative Action are significantly more likely to score higher on Knowledge of Affirmative Action.

### *Response Differences Related to Demographic Variables*

Next, respondent differences in scores on the Commitment to Affirmative Action scale were examined. Predictably, women

Table 1

*Correlations Among Study Variables*

Scale Description	(2)	(3)	(4)
Commitment to Affirmative Action (1)	-.086 ns	-.417***	.287***
Knowledge of Affirmative Action (2)	1.000	.261***	.203**
Negative Experience with A.A.(3)	—	1.000	.169*
Positive Experience with A.A.(4)	—	—	1.000

scored significantly higher than men ( $t=1.97$ ,  $df$  169,  $p<.05$ ), and those who identified themselves as members of a sexual minority also scored significantly higher in Commitment to Affirmative Action ( $t=4.01$ ,  $df$  163,  $p<.001$ ). Similarly, those respondents who are members of racial or ethnic minority groups scored significantly higher than did non-minority respondents ( $t=4.06$ ,  $df$  166,  $p<.001$ ). Other demographic variables having a significant effect on Commitment to Affirmative Action include: Political Party Identification ( $F=8.897$ ,  $df$  161,  $p<.001$ ), Job Position/Level ( $F=2.509$ ,  $df$  151,  $p<.05$ ), and NASW Membership Classification ( $F=2.918$ ,  $df$  164,  $p<.01$ ). Significant differences in scores on Commitment to Affirmative Action were not found for Practice Setting (public agency, private not-for-profit, private for-profit, university), Population/City Size (major metropolitan area, mid-size city, small city, rural community), or highest Social Work Degree (BSW, MSW/MSSW, Ph.D., DSW, Ph.D. in other field, other). These results are presented in Tables 2, 3, and 4.

### Discussion

The most important finding of this study was that one's knowledge about affirmative action had no significant bearing on their commitment to affirmative action principles. This would suggest that, if one wished to achieve greater support for affirmative action, educational strategies, such as academic course content or continuing education classes, would not be effective. A more hopeful approach would be to design situations in which social workers would have positive experiences with

Table 2

*Differences in Commitment to Affirmative Action by Gender, Sexual Identification, and Ethnicity (t-tests using pooled variance estimates)*

Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD	t	df	Sig.
Gender	Women	127	23.49	5.197	—	—	—
	Men	44	21.61	6.127	1.97	169	.05
Sexual Identification	Minority	59	25.29	5.031	—	—	—
	Majority	106	21.88	5.339	4.01	163	.000
Racial/Ethnic Identification	Minority	21	27.57	4.833	—	—	—
	Majority	147	22.62	5.283	4.06	166	.000

Table 3

*Differences in Commitment to Affirmative Action by Political Party, Position, Practice Setting, City Size, NASW Membership Classification, and Social Work Degree (Oneway Analysis of Variance)*

Source	DF	SS	MS	F	Sig.
Political Party					
Between	3	706.69	235.56	8.897	.000
Within	158	4183.44	26.48	—	—
Total	161	4890.12	—	—	—
Job Position/Level					
Between	4	299.491	74.87	2.509	.044
Within	147	4387.22	29.85	—	—
Total	151	4686.71	—	—	—
NASW Membership Classification					
Between	6	478.49	79.75	2.918	.010
Within	158	4318.32	27.33	—	—
Total	164	4796.81	—	—	—

affirmative action, since persons with positive experiences are, indeed, more supportive of affirmative action. Possibilities for doing this might include experiential simulations and insuring that affirmative action "success stories" are made more visible. In all likelihood, persons who feel injured by affirmative action

Table 4  
 Mean Scores on Commitment to Affirmative Action for Oneway ANOVAs with Significant Outcomes

Political Party	Democrat	Republican	Other	None	—	—	—
	24.41	18.56	20.42	23.56	—	—	—
Job Position/Level	Top Management	Middle Management	Direct Practice	Student	Faculty	—	—
	20.73	23.79	22.66	26.17	25.14	—	—
NASW Membership Classification	Regular	Associate	Retired	Unemployed	BSW Student	MSW Student	Doc. Student
	23.23	18.88	19.50	22.33	25.67	24.40	30.67

policies are more likely to be vocal than persons who feel they have benefitted. This may lead to the creation of a one-sided negative perception of affirmative action.

Although education alone may not affect attitudes toward affirmative action, students at all levels (BSW, MSW, and doctoral) are considerably more committed to affirmative action than other social workers. This is somewhat surprising since many students are a part of the baby boom generation in which competition has been so fierce. Perhaps they are influenced by the idealistic atmosphere of universities or maybe social work faculty, who scored only slightly less positively than did students on commitment to affirmative action. One can only wonder whether this commitment will remain when the students enter the world of social work practice.

Examining the differences between and among groups on their commitment to affirmative action principles, most of the differences are predictable, providing few surprises. This does, of course, attest to the validity of the measurement scale itself. More interesting than the differences which were significant are the differences which were not significant. For example, the authors did presuppose that persons working in public settings would be more committed to affirmative action than those in private for-profit settings. This was not confirmed. Similarly, the authors thought that there would be a more conservative stance toward affirmative action in small cities and rural areas. This also was not confirmed, although social workers from rural areas scored higher, albeit insignificantly, in commitment to affirmative action than did their large city counterparts. Finally, differences in commitment due to one's social work degree was not significant and this may speak well for the unity of the social work profession across all practice levels.

This was a preliminary study designed to identify key issues and to design instruments which would be applicable with a larger nationally representative sample. That goal was achieved and a start has been made toward the development of norms for the scales of the instrument. Knowing how social workers compare with other professionals or with the general population must await later applications of this instrument, modified to fit those other populations. Frequencies of responses for each of the instrument's items can be obtained from the authors.

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## Note

In addition to the measures presented here, additional data were collected on impressions about affirmative action priorities for various groups, respondent priority ranking of groups for affirmative action attention, and a 10 item scale based on the work of Silverman (1987) which assesses respondents' affirmative action philosophies. These results are not included in this paper.

