Religious Affiliation/Non-affiliation: A Predictor of Social Work Students' Attitudes Toward Old Poor People

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Abstract

The focus of this study was the effect of religious affiliation/non affiliation on social work students' attitudes toward poor persons. Social work undergraduate (BSW) and graduate (MSW) students were sampled from a medium-sized university. Six versions of the KOPP questionnaire were administered, each having normative statements stratified by "poor, old poor, African-American poor, old African-American poor, Latino poor, old Latino poor" that were randomly distributed to each version. A General Linear Model (GLM) analysis was performed to discover the association between the four religious affiliation sub-groups self-identified by the social work students. The findings were significant, p £ .05 for respondents evaluating normative statements about "old poor." The findings were not significant for respondents evaluating normative statements about "old Latino poor, old African-American poor, old poor, Latino poor, African-American poor, and poor." The dependent variable "Old Poor" results indicated that No Religion showed the highest mean Knowledge of Poor People score (102.30) followed by Jewish with a mean score of 85.0909, Christian/Catholic with a mean score of 84.3309. Christian Protestant had the lowest score (80.8043).

Keywords: *old poor people, religious affiliation, social work, undergraduate, graduate*

The goal of eradicating poverty and meeting basic human needs has been defined as an imperative by social work's key professional association ("Code of Ethics preamble," 1999), as well as by the Council on Social Work Education, which mandates that all social work students study the importance of empowering vulnerable, oppressed and impoverished people ("Educational policy and accreditation standards," 2004). The profession's

admonitions to serve the poor counters a tide of public policy that has swelled since the Reagan Administration, culminating in the devolution of the welfare state and the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Responsibility Act of 1996. Social work historians have long chronicled the efforts of public policy, lawmakers and the public at large to stigmatize the poor and to ascribe blame for poverty onto the behavioral deficits rather than structural factors such as income inequality (Leiby, 1978; Patterson, 1986; Trattner, 1994). Today, many Americans remain inclined to blame the poor and their supposed shortcomings for a paucity of income, particularly regarding the question of government programs such as welfare (Phelan, Link, Moore, & Stueve, 1997). In the article that follows, we endeavor to examine whether the rising conservative tide that led to the erosion of the American welfare state has affected social work students' attitudes toward the poor. Do social work students attribute poverty to structural factors such as inequality of income and opportunity, or have they joined others in ascribing the fault for poverty on such maladaptive traits as laziness and ignorance on the part of the poor themselves?

Recent research on student and practitioner attitudes toward the poor and poverty has produced conflicting findings. Students were found in several examinations to hold values consistent with the profession's, and thus to blame economic inequality, unequal access to resources such as education, employment and housing, as the forces behind impoverishment (Gasker & Vafeas, 2003; Rehner, Ishee, Saloum, & Velasques, 1997; Rosenthal, 1993; Schwartz & Robinson, 1991). Yet, while students acknowledge the structural causes behind poverty, many may see such problems as essentially beyond correction, a factor that would deter engagement in social work designed to eliminate economic inequalities (Gasker & Vafeas, 2003). A survey of MSW candidates at three universities found that while most rejected negative and individualistic explanations for poverty, students generally did not appreciate the severity of financial deprivation associated with being poor (Rosenthal, 1993).

A study comparing client and caseworker attitudes toward welfare found that both groups endorsed economic/structural causes for poverty more strongly than they did other explanations (Bullock, 2004). However, the same study found that clients showed stronger support for progressive welfare policies and considered discrimination as a more important cause of poverty than did social workers. A study conducted at a professional conference found considerable difference between BSW and MSW attitudes toward the poor, with bachelor's level practitioners holding more negative attitudes toward people in poverty (Rehner, Ishee, Saloum, & Velasques, 1997).

The attitudes that social workers and social work students hold toward the poor need to be explored because their attitudes could influence the quality of services they deliver to this population, and, if negative, could dissuade them from practice with impoverished people altogether (Rehner, et al., 1997). Therefore, understanding factors that could influence student attitudes toward the impoverished are critical. In this study, we examined bachelor and masters level candidates' attitudes toward working with various potential client groups, focusing particularly on older citizens and the poor—two groups that have been found in previous studies to elicit negative attitudes from students and practitioners in previous studies (Cummings & Galambos, 2002; Mason & Sanders, 2004; Olson, 2002; Scharlach, Damron-Rodriguez, Robinson, & Feldman, 2000).

Student and practitioner attitudes toward poverty merit examination because they are likely to influence both the ability to empathize with impoverished clients, as well as career decisions concerning whether to work with this population. Any examination of how social work students might view work with the impoverished is made more difficult when factoring in such issues as opinions on welfare receipt, as well as conceptions regarding race. "In approaching the issue of poverty, most Americans exhibit considerable indecision and ambivalence" (Wilson, 1999, p. 421). In his seminal study of white voter beliefs about welfare receipt, political scientist (Gilens, 1996) linked opposition to the benefit to negative perceptions of African-Americans, and to the belief that these citizens are "lazy" (p. 594). The link between race and negative public attitude toward programs to assist the poor has been noted previously ((Schram & Soss, 2001; Sidel, 2000)), though the potential for racial prejudice to color social worker attitudes toward

impoverished clients has surprisingly not been explored in recent literature measuring students in BSW and MSW programs. Therefore, we build on previous literature by examining whether the client's race influences student reactions to working with a potential population.

In addition, we also hope to expand on the previous literature by exploring the question of how a student's religious orientation might be predicted to influence his/her attitudes on poverty, and on the poor themselves. Many previous studies of American perceptions of the poor have examined religion as predictors of support for social programs to reduce poverty, or to influence charitable giving (Clydesdale, 1999; Will & Cochran, 1995; Wilson, 1999). Though the influence of religion on attitudes toward the poor, and in particular on aiding and assisting impoverished people, has been examined in such disciplines as sociology (Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001; Hunt, 2002; Regnerus, Smith, & Sikkink, 1998) and political science (Wilson, 1999). A review of social work literature finds that religious identification/background have not been explored as potential variables influencing student attitudes toward poverty and the poor.

Religion and Attitudes Toward the Poor

The role that religion may play in influencing contemporary attitudes toward the poor has not been decided—possibly, because Americans as a whole are ambivalent about the question of poverty, its origins, and who constitutes the category known as "the poor." Recent research in the social sciences has found that though respondents are often found to feel sympathy for the poor in general, they are less likely to respond with empathy to recipients of government programs including welfare. Wilson (1999) indicated, Americans "instinctively feel compassionate for the unfortunate, but often doubt the fairness and efficacy of government anti-poverty programs" (p. 421.) In a study comparing mainline Protestant denomination follower (e.g., Episcopalian, Methodist, and Presbyterian) and evangelical Christian attitudes toward the poor and poverty, Wilson found that while evangelicals were more anxious to assist the poor than mainline Protestants, they were more hostile to government programs

designed to do just that. Recent analyses of American attitudes toward poverty on the part of members of various religions have delineated three core causal explanations for economic deprivation in the United States, including structural, individualistic and fatalistic attributions for impoverishment (Hunt, 2002). These three include: 1. structural explanations emphasizing disparities in distributions of wealth, resources and jobs, 2. individualistic explanations blaming the poor for such supposed deficits as laziness, irresponsibility and promiscuity, and 3. fatalistic attributions that would include explanations for poverty such as poor health or simple bad luck (ibid.). Building on previous research examining these explanations (Feagin, 1975; Huber & Form, 1973; Kluegel & Smith, 1986), Hunt (2002) used a factor analysis to isolate explanations for poverty among five religious traditions in a sample of whites, Latinos and African-Americans.

Protestants and Catholics—the dominant religious groups in the United States—were found to enforce the historically dominant explanation of individual character flaws in their efforts to understand and explain poverty (Hunt, 2002). Yet, white Catholics were more likely to blame the system for poverty than white Protestants. Thus, white Catholics were found to endorse both structural and individualistic explanations for poverty (Hunt). Jews, and followers of what Hunt considers other non-mainstream religions, were found more accepting of structural explanations to poverty. In addition, Catholics and Jews were more likely than others to use fatalistic (bad luck and misfortune) explanations in understanding poverty's causes—a finding that could be argued to reinforce the notion that Americans are generally ambivalent when it comes to explaining the causes of poverty, or to endorsing policies for alleviating it. People who professed no religious affiliation rejected individualistic beliefs about the poor, but did not score significantly on structuralist or fatalistic explanations for poverty (Hunt).

A study measuring reported charitable giving found, however, that the question of which religion an individual practiced did not influence the decision to donate money to organizations serving the poor (Regnerus et al., 1998). Non-religious Americans were found to give less money to assist the poor,

while rate of church attendance and professed importance of faith were found to be important factors positively influencing the decision to donate to charity. Conservative, evangelical Christians were found to give slightly more to organizations assisting the poor in comparison to other Christian denominations. "The conventional wisdom regarding the hostility of politically and theologically conservative Christians toward the poor appears incorrect" (Regnerus et al., 1998, p. 485). Yet, these same researchers note that the willingness to give to charity does not mean that these same groups would willingly support government public assistance programs to the poor, nor does the research demonstrate findings regarding attitudes toward the poor.

Recent literature (E.R. Canada, 1998; E.R. Canada, 2003; Dudley & Helfgott, 1990) has argued in favor of inclusion of spirituality in the social work curriculum in order to equip future practitioners with better skills when working with clients of different spiritual and religious backgrounds. One recent survey of social work faculty found a majority favoring inclusion of religion and spirituality in curricula, specifically generalist courses introducing students to the broad spectrum of religions and spiritual practices that they may encounter in work with clients (Dudley & Helfgott, 1990). By inclusion of spirituality and religion in curricula, social work education would be expanding efforts toward broadening practitioner cultural competence, given that spiritual beliefs are embedded in various cultures. Education in cultural competence typically includes a focus on self-knowledge and self-awareness regarding one's own culture, including practices, rituals and beliefs (Basham, 2004; Sowers-Hoag & Sandau-Becker, 1996). Thus, if social work educators were to include spirituality and religion, it would seem reasonable that student self-examination of spiritual and/or religious beliefs be part of that program.

Method

Participants. Social work undergraduate (BSW) and graduate (MSW) students were sampled from a medium-sized university. A stratified, disproportional sample was studied. This sample was stratified by the independent variable—social work student type. Sampling by social work student type produced sub-populations that differed in size. There were 39 undergraduate and 84 graduate students. The size of the sample reflects the different population sizes of social work student subtypes in the university setting studied. Equally weighting the subgroup means was not considered since it will not provide an unbiased estimate of the combined grand mean.

Materials. One hundred thirty-nine questionnaires were distributed to undergraduate and graduate social work students. Designated representatives at each class studied collected all questionnaires, complete or not complete. Eligibility was determined by initial qualifying questions in the questionnaire that identify whether a subject is a social work undergraduate or graduate student.

One hundred twenty-three questionnaires were returned causing a return rate of 88%. Rubin and Babbie (Rubin & Babbie, 2001) indicated that a response rate of 74% is "very good," significantly reducing the problem of response bias.

Design and Procedure. Data was collected over a period of one month. Questionnaires were administered at a rate of 10-33 per class. Questionnaires took the respondents approximately 20 minutes to complete. All questionnaires were distributed by a designated faculty representative at each class studied to control biases that may result from the collection of questionnaires by these authors. Only summary data was used, and respondent names were not required. Upon completion of his or her questionnaire, the respondent placed the questionnaire in a self-seal envelope provided during distribution, insuring anonymity.

Variables for this study include knowledge of poor people (dependent variable) and religious affiliation/non-affiliation (independent variable).

Knowledge of poor people is defined by a social work student's degree of accuracy in assessing whether empirical statements about poor people are true or false (example: most old poor people are really no different from anybody else. The majority of African-American poor people feel miserable most of the time, etc.). Normative statements are from the Knowledge of Poor People scale developed by these authors. Six versions of the KOPP questionnaire were administered, each having norma-

tive statements stratified by "poor, old poor, African-American poor, old African-American poor, Latino poor, old Latino poor" that were randomly distributed to each version. The KOPP Score scale for each questionnaire group had the following Chronbach Alpha scores: 0.802, 0.864, 0.899, 0.860, 0.869, and 0.792, which were acceptable.

Respondents in this study achieved a "knowledge of poor people" total score (KOPP) ranging from 20–120, 120 indicating the highest degree of accuracy in correctly determining whether normative statements are true or false. A respondent receiving a score of 20, the lowest score possible, indicates a complete failure to make such discriminations.

Scores were derived from a six-item Likert scale. Responses were measured by asking respondents to check whether they felt a statement was *definitely false, most likely false, possibly false, possibly true, most likely true, definitely true.* Scores for each statement ranged from 1-6. Scores for correctly identifying a false statement about older people were reversed making positive and negative scores consistent. Scores for each respondent were totaled.

Respondents were asked to check for categories measuring the variable studied. Respondents checking one of eight categories determined the type of religion which he or she has an affiliation. The categories were "Christian/Catholic, Jewish, Christian/Protestant, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Other, or No Religion."

Findings

Table 1 shows the religion sub-types mean KOPP scores for "Christian/Catholic, Jewish, Christian/Protestant, and No Religion," no other categories were checked by respondents.

A General Linear Model (GLM) analysis was performed to discover the association between the four religion sub-groups (Table 2). The findings were significant, $p \leq .05$ for respondents evaluating normative statements about "old poor." The findings were not significant for respondents evaluating normative statements about "old Latino poor, old African-American poor, old poor, Latino poor, African-American poor, and poor."

Table 1 KOPP Scores for Practiced Religion

What is your religion?		OLKOPP	OAKOPP	OKOPP	LKOPP	AKOPP	PKOPP
Christian / Catholic	Mean	82.2132	86.3162	84.3309	82.6103	80.6471	83.3382
	N	68	68	68	68	68	68
	Standard Deviation	18.00608	15.98715	17.47527	16.67375	16.53582	16.90987
Jewish	Mean	86.8636	85.0227	85.0909	88.1491	84.8182	87.5455
	N	22	22	22	22	22	22
	Standard Deviation	13.40769	17.08625	17.65249	16.33969	16.77835	13.78311
Christian / Protestant	Mean	85.6304	88.6304	80.8043	82.1739	83.2826	84.3913
	N	23	23	23	23	23	23
	Standard Deviation	17.35735	16.80653	19.10422	17.12627	16.59807	14.40325
No Religion	Mean	92.1000	89.7000	102.3000	93.0000	95.1000	95.1000
	N	10	10	10	10	10	10
	Standard Deviation	18.00278	18.73233	14.03211	12.72792	18.54993	12.86857
Total	Mean	84.4878	86.7927	85.2683	84.3659	83.0610	85.2439
	N	123	123	123	123	123	123
	Standard Deviation	17.20852	16.41520	18.15815	16.57732	17.01116	15.82530

Table 2 General Linear Model (GLM) Analysis

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig
Corrected Model	OLKOPP	1085.474(a)	3	361.825	1.229	.302
	OAKOPP	246.564(b)	3	82.188	.300	.826
	OKOPP	3419.553(c)	3	1139.851	3.865	.014
	LKOPP	1382.116(d)	3	460.705	1.706	.170
	AKOPP	1914.678(e)	3	638.226	2.275	.083
	PKOPP	1351.630(f)	3	450.543	1.836	.144
Intercept	OLKOPP	590630.929	1	590630.929	2005.695	.000
	OAKOPP	600419.53	1	600419.533	2189.875	.000
	OKOPP	610270.473	1	610270.473	1973.102	.000
	LKOPP	587691.692	1	587691.692	2175.659	.000
	AKOPP	580593.719	1	580593.719	2069.22	.000
	PKOPP	602845.350	1	602845.350	2456.629	.000
RELIGION	OLKOPP	1085.474	3	361.825	1.229	.302
	OAKOPP	246.564	3	82.188	.300	.826
	OKOPP	3419.553	3	1139.851	3.685	.014
	LKOPP	1382.116	3	460.705	1.706	.170
	AKOPP	1914.678	3	638.226	2.275	.083
	PKOPP	1341.630	3	450.543	1.836	.144
Error	OLKOPP	35042.758	119	294.477		
	OAKOPP	32627.400	119	264.180		
	OKOPP	36806.093	119	309.295		
	LKOPPO	32144.420	119	270.121		
	AKOPP	33389.615	119	280.585		
	PKOPP	29202.053	119	245.395		
Total	OLKOPP	914125.500	123			
	OAKOPP	959429.250	123			
	OKOPP	934519.500	123			
	LKOPP	908991.000	123			
	AKOPP	883896.750	123			
	PKOPP	924336.000	123			
Corrected Total	OLKOPP	36128.232	122			
	OAKOPP	32873.963	122			
	OKOP	40225.646	122			
	LKOPP	33526.537	122			
	AKOPP	35304.293	122			
	PKOPP	30553.683	122			

The dependent variable "Old Poor" results indicated that No Religion showed the highest mean Knowledge of Poor People score (102.30), followed by Jewish with a mean score of 85.0909, Christian/Catholic with a mean score of 84.3309. Christian Protestant had the lowest score (80.8043). Therefore, No Religion had the highest degree of accuracy followed by Jewish and Christian/Catholic. Christian Protestant had the lowest degree of accuracy.

Tukey HSD multi-comparison analysis indicated significant differences between Christian/Catholic, Jewish, Christian/Protestant and No Religion with the dependent variable "old poor."

Conclusion

Social work mandates practice with impoverished clients, yet findings from this study indicate that students' religious affiliations can potentially influence whether this population is one that future practitioners will serve. These findings contradict Tuntiya (2005) who indicated that research based on respondents selecting their denominational affiliation does not show a statistically significant effect in most cases. Tuntiya indicated that a determination must be made based on the religions respondents practice.

Students with a secular orientation were found to report the most positive attitudes toward poor clients, with students who identified themselves as Jewish the second most likely cohort to express sympathy toward impoverished individuals. Hunt (2002) explained that Jews, and followers of what Hunt considers other non-mainstream religions, were found more accepting of structural explanations to poverty. Jewish student empathy may be the product of their own legacy of oppression and persecution: Jewish identification with impoverished clients could stem from their own families' experiences prior to immigrating from Southern and Eastern Europe (Sherkat & Blocker, 1994). Jewish student activism in progressive movements, including the U.S. Civil Rights marches of the 1960s, has been well-documented (Sherkat & Blocker, 1994; Snow & Oliver, 1993). Further investigation is needed to explain the higher levels of negativity evidenced by Christian/Catholic and Christian/Protestant students.

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