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Taylor & Francis Group

Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment

ISSN: 1091-1359 (Print) 1540-3556 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/whum20

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To cite this article: Sherrill Clark LCSW, PhD (2007) Social Work Students' Perceptions of Poverty, Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment, 16:1-2, 149-166, DOI: 10.1300/J137v16n01_10

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J137v16n01_10

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Sherrill Clark

ABSTRACT. Over a period of 14 years (1991-2004), graduate social work students (n = 2,213) in ten California schools were surveyed about their perceptions of poverty as they entered and exited their graduate programs. Entering students expressed preferences for societal/institutional change methods to address poverty, as opposed to methods of individual adaptation and were even more inclined upon graduation. Implications for social work education and practice are identified.
doi:10.1300/J137v16n01_10

KEYWORDS. Poverty, student perceptions, social work education

INTRODUCTION

The social work profession is committed to the values of service and social justice, especially in terms of helping the poor and disadvantaged (NASW, 1999). Some scholars have argued that the profession has abandoned this commitment because a growing number of social work graduates choose to work with primarily middle class, Caucasian individuals with non-chronic emotional issues in private practice using

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Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment, Vol. 16(1/2) 2007
Available online at http://jhbse.haworthpress.com

doi:10.1300/J137v16n01_10

psychotherapeutic methods (Rubin, Johnson, and DeWeaver, 1986; Rubin and Johnson, 1984; Specht, 1990; Specht and Courtney, 1994). Others argue that the experiences of oppression and vulnerability are not unique to the poor and that people from all social classes have problems that create disadvantages and therefore can benefit from the aid of professional social workers (Butler, 1990; Wakefield, 1992).

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of students with regard to the causes of poverty and the methods to address it. Students were surveyed upon entry and exit from ten graduate social work programs in California over a period of 14 years. The study was guided by the following questions:

1. What do social work students think causes poverty and what are the best methods for addressing it?
2. Should social work help individuals find a mode of adaptation to the world around them or should the emphasis be placed on societal/institutional change?
3. Should social work practitioners devote equal attention and equal resources to all social class groupings or primarily to the problems of the poor?

This report of an exploratory study consists of a brief literature review of studies about social workers and students regarding their perceptions of the poor, the results of a survey that addressed the research questions, and a discussion of the findings and their implications.

BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

This brief review begins with a seminal study of public perceptions of the poor in America (Feagin, 1975). Its findings provide a basis for comparing the views of students with the general population. From a 1969 public opinion survey consisting of 11 items, Feagin (1975) was able to cluster the perceptions of Americans about the poor into three factors: (1) individualistic (the responsibility of the individual), (2) structural (external to the individual and due to societal/institutional forces), and (3) fatalistic (something that could happen to anyone, such as bad luck). Given the predominant American beliefs in the worth of independent action, hard work, and individualism, poverty is seen as failure by not living up to the expectations of a capitalistic society (Weber, 1958). Not surprisingly then, Feagin's survey respondents

(including those who reported incomes below the poverty level) placed a great deal of importance on individualistic causes for poverty. The two most important reasons for poverty were "lack of thrift and proper money management by the poor themselves and lack of effort on the part of the poor" (Feagin, 1975, p. 97). Only Black Protestants and Jews attributed more importance to structural factors for explaining poverty than other groups. In addition, when it came to their views of the role of government in helping the poor through public welfare policy, the majority took an individualistic anti-welfare position in every instance except one. They indicated that "too many people are on welfare who should be working," "they are having illegitimate babies in order to get more welfare," and "they are not honest about their need for welfare" (Feagin, 1975, p. 103). In the one exception related to a pro-welfare position, a plurality of respondents agreed that welfare "was too little to live on" (Ibid). Feagin's scale of 11 items has been used in more recent studies of the reasons for poverty, for example to distinguish between races/ethnicities in Hunt's (1996) report on southern Californians.

In contrast, the perceptions of social workers about poverty, the poor, and the willingness to help with public funds reflect different understandings about the root causes of poverty. Societal or institutional racism, job discrimination, and bad economic times are seen as the primary causes as opposed to individual causes such as laziness or the unwillingness to work hard (Roff, Adams, and Klemmack, 1984). It is no surprise, then, that most of the research on social work student attitudes about the poor found that the majority of social work students viewed poverty as a function of external sources, rather than internal shortcomings of the individual (Grimm and Orten, 1973; Reeser and Epstein, 1987; Rehner, Ishee, Salloum, and Velázquez, 1997; Roff, Adams, and Klemmack, 1984; Rosenthal, 1993).

However, previous research is mixed about student views of the profession's strategies for helping the poor and disadvantaged. Those who are or who want to become social workers are more apt to attribute societal causes for poverty than individual causes and prefer institutionalized political/social advocacy to address those problems. They show more willingness to help the poor when the reasons for poverty are unstable (short term), unintentional, and not due to internal causes (individual shortcomings). The demographic factors that help to explain the willingness of social workers to help include: minority status, region of the country, graduate school attended, political orientation, graduate degree, and socioeconomic background. All practice specializations (casework, group work, and community organization) appear to

be associated with a positive desire to work with the poor. At the same time, a significant minority of social work students preferred to pursue the development of a private practice. Political activism may mean advocating for the profession, not necessarily for better policies for the poor. It is not clear what role social work education plays, since only one of the studies used a pre- and post-design to test for changes before and after MSW study (Bogo et al., 1993 and 1995). However, the studies by Reeser and Epstein (1987) and Roff, Adams, and Klemmack (1984) were the primary sources for framing this study.

Roff, Adams and Klemmack (1984) surveyed three groups of students at one university to determine attitudes and values regarding government support (paying taxes or providing welfare) for the poor. Using attribution theory as their conceptual framework, the authors noted that differences in willingness to help the poor were based on whether the reason for the poverty was seen as internal or external, stable or unstable, and intentional or unintentional. These attributes about the cause of poverty have been historically associated with the concepts "worthy" and "unworthy" poor. Those who are poor due to internal, stable, intentional reasons (e.g., not willing to work hard over the long term) are the least likely to evoke a helping response from public policy (Feagin, 1975; Roff et al., 1984, p.13). Roff et al. hypothesized that MSW students would: (1) hold more favorable attitudes toward using public funding to help the poor than other students; (2) be more impartial than others, as a result of the professional commitment to the poor, and (3) be more likely than others to attribute poverty to external sources. They expected to find that second year MSW students (n = 29) would be more committed to professional values than those enrolled in an introductory undergraduate social welfare class (n = 30) and that the graduate students enrolled in the introductory social welfare class, in turn, would be more committed than those in an introductory sociology class (n = 142) that was open to all liberal arts majors.

They found support for their first hypothesis; namely, that MSW students were significantly more likely to help the poor, regardless of the reason for being poor, than were students in the introductory sociology course. However, the second and third hypotheses were not supported. Contrary to the hypothesis that MSW students would be impartial, both the second year MSW group and the introductory social welfare class students were unwilling to use public funds to help the "unworthy" poor (those unwilling to work hard). In fact, second year MSW students were significantly less likely to help those who were not willing to work hard than were the introductory sociology students. The MSW students were

significantly more willing than students in the sociology class to use public funds to help the poor when the reasons for need were unstable, external, and unintentional (e.g., in bad economic times), and under stable, external, and intentional conditions (e.g., job discrimination). Although MSW students and those in an introductory social welfare class were more inclined to help the poor, there were no statistically significant differences between the MSW students and the introductory social welfare students.

Even though the first hypothesis was well supported, it was not possible to distinguish whether this result was due to the professionalizing influences of the MSW program, self-selection, or screening of MSW applicants. Further generalization was limited by the composition and size of the sample (i.e., small number of students at only one university). Roff et al. (1984) concluded by recommending that social work education continue to teach about the harm caused by the stereotyping of the poor as well as the causes of poverty.

Causes of Poverty and Activist Strategies

In contrast to assessing perceptions and attitudes, Reeser and Epstein (1987) focused on the extent to which social workers use social activism to improve the lives of the poor by comparing the 1960s and 1980s attitudes of social workers toward the poor. Citing 1960s and 1970s national surveys of the general population's views of poverty, they hypothesized that the conservative 1980s would have the effect of decreasing social work activism; in essence, social workers in the 1980s would be less willing to participate in social activism and advocate for the poor than social workers in the 1960s.

Epstein (1969) distributed a self-administered survey sampling to every third social worker name that appeared on the New York City NASW member list in 1968, resulting in a sample of 1,020 and a response rate of 65%. Reeser and Epstein (1987) compared the responses to the same questions obtained in 1968 with those obtained by Reeser in 1984 as administered to a sample of 1,333 NASW members from the national membership list, resulting in a sample of 657 and a response rate of 57%. Although the authors do not elaborate, the two samples compared were significantly dissimilar with respect to agency auspice, race, religion, and position, but not on gender. There were more social workers in the mental health field and in private practice in 1984 than in 1968. Fewer were employed in the public sector in 1984 than in 1968. Social worker perceptions of the causes of poverty were classified in

terms of: (1) individualistic (the poor lack motivation), (2) structural (powerful interests are opposed to the solution to poverty), (3) technological (we don't know enough to solve the problems of poverty), or (4) interest group related (people don't get together to talk about the problems of poverty). The individualistic and structural classifications (Reeser and Epstein, 1987) are similar to internal/external characterization of the poor by Roff et al. (1984). The technological and interest group classifications are strategies rather than characteristics of the poor.

Reeser and Epstein (1987) measured commitment to activist strategies by asking respondents to rate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the view that social workers should use various strategies to achieve change; the responses ranged from working within systems (e.g., providing expert testimony at a legislative hearing) to strategies that operate outside the system (e.g., organizing protest groups). Epstein (1968) characterized activist goals in two ways: (1) using social change methods to focus on the problems of poverty, and (2) using individual methods to help people adjust to their circumstances.

Contrary to expectations, Reeser and Epstein (1987) found that more social workers in 1968 thought the poor lacked motivation and that society lacks the technical knowledge to solve poverty than those in the 1984 sample. Fewer social workers in 1968 thought that powerful interests were opposed to solving poverty and that the upper classes must be forced to help. More than half of the 1984 participants (53%) thought that powerful interests were opposed to addressing poverty were to blame for the existence of poverty, rather than the individual shortcomings of the poor. Nearly half of the 1968 participants thought interest groups were not addressing the problems collectively and that the poor must organize to help themselves (less than a third agreed in 1984). A larger proportion of the 1984 respondents believed that we need to make basic changes in the system and that the poor should be able decide on what they need (81 versus 51%) than 1968 participants (61 and 35%, respectively).

Regarding the involvement of the profession in activist strategies, more than 84% of the participants in both years (1968-1984) preferred consensus-building forms of activism (e.g., conducting studies and delivering direct services). While more than two-thirds of participants in both years approved of confrontational forms of activism (e.g., using formal protests), non-confrontational strategies (e.g., educational activities) were supported by 28% in 1968 and 41% in 1984. In general, the participants in 1984 held more activist views about the causes of poverty and the need for activist strategies than did the respondents in 1968.

However, when it came to activist goals for the profession, the 1968 group responded more positively to societal change (rather than individual adaptation) and devoting social work resources to the poor rather than to those in need across all social classes (53 and 51%, respectively) than did the 1984 cohort (37 and 23%, respectively). In contrast, more social workers in 1968 provided services to poor clients than in 1984 (50 versus 42%). This apparent contradiction was explained by Reeser and Epstein (1984) in terms of: (1) more opportunities for supporting the poor through government programs in 1968 than in 1984, and (2) the increasing demands for social services in 1984 in the context of a more conservative policy environment where helping the poor adapt to their environment was more acceptable than seeking to change societal institutions. Reeser and Epstein (1984) concluded that the majority of social workers in 1984 agreed that achieving consensus within existing societal structures was the best method to address poverty, unlike the social workers of 1968 that saw the role of the profession as dissenting from the status quo. However, neither group was willing to use conflict to achieve societal change. Both groups preferred to work with a mixed group of clients, not exclusively with the poor.

Social Work Student Desire to Work with the Poor

Three studies focused on the background characteristics of the graduate social work students to determine which individuals wanted to work with the poor. Grimm and Orten (1973) found correlations between positive attitudes towards the poor and: (1) holding undergraduate degrees in social work or sociology, (2) receiving undergraduate degrees from universities not in the south, (3) having little or no previous work experience in fields other than social work, and (4) having interest in casework, group work, or community organization. Being married with children and coming from a lower socioeconomic background were correlated with less sympathetic attitudes towards the poor. Rehner, Ishee, Salloum, and Velázquez (1997) found that Mississippi social workers with graduate degrees (PhD, DSW, or MSW) who identified themselves as left-wing and moderate liberals had more positive attitudes towards the poor than those who did not have graduate degrees and identified themselves as right-wing or moderate conservatives. In contrast, Rosenthal (1993) discovered that none of the background characteristics of first and second year MSW students was related to whether or not students had positive attitudes toward the poor. Each of these studies used different scales for their correlations: Peterson's

"Disguised-Structure Attitude Scale" (Grimm and Orten); "Attitudes Toward Poverty" Scale (Rehner et al.); "Belief in the Individual Cause of Poverty and the Antipathy to the Poor" Scales (Rosenthal). These studies have limited generalizability due to small sample sizes and correlational design. However, they were used to identify relevant variables for this study.

While the previous studies did not compare the attitudes of students before and after completing their graduate social work program, there are a few exceptions. One study by Bogo, Michalski, Raphael and Roberts (1995) examined the practice preferences of students using pre- and post measures in a Canadian MSW program but these preferences were not related to working with the poor. In contrast, drawing upon the same database as this study, Perry (2003) found that students dedicated to working with the poor were: (1) primarily African American, (2) from a low socioeconomic background, (3) self-identified as leftwing-progressive or liberal, and (4) had experience working with the poor, primarily in community mental health settings prior to entering graduate school. While these differences were significant upon entry into MSW programs, they tended to be less significant upon graduation (Perry, 2003).

Preferred Client Populations

With regard to the preferred client populations, three studies found that the majority of students prefer to work with clients who present non-chronic psychological problems as opposed to those clients with long-term chronic or seemingly intractable problems such as poverty, disabilities, and criminal activities (Butler, 1990; Rubin and Johnson, 1984; Rubin, Johnson and DeWeaver, 1986). In contrast, Abell and McDonell (1990) found that students "placed high value on working with the disadvantaged" and "reported choosing social work over other degrees because of the professions' traditional commitment to such populations" (Abell and McDonell, 1990, p. 63).

Studies indicate that students from minority racial/ethnic backgrounds tend to show more interest in working with disadvantaged groups and less interest in private practice when compared to Caucasian students (Rubin and Johnson, 1984). Abell and McDonell (1990) found that minority students placed a higher value on social work's traditional commitment to disadvantaged populations than did Caucasians and also found

that significantly fewer minorities than whites reported plans to enter private practice (3.9% of minorities compared with 27% of whites).

In summary, the few studies found in the literature suggest that social workers and social work students do not share uniform perceptions of the poor. While student perceptions of the poor parallel those of the general public, differences emerge when assessing the demographic characteristics of the students.

METHODS

This study was designed as a pre-post, self-administered survey to all entering (between 1991 and 2000) and exiting (between 1993 and 2004) social work students in 10 accredited MSW programs in California. The design of the survey instruments drew upon prior research related to attitudes about the poor, strategies for addressing poverty, and the role of varying demographic characteristics (Abell and McDonell, 1990; Feagin, 1975; Golden, Pins and Jones, 1972; Reeser and Epstein, 1987).

A matched data set of 2,213 students was derived from an entry only data set (n = 8871) and a graduation only data set (n = 6,194). The matched set compared favorably with the entry alone and graduation alone data on the demographic characteristic as noted in Table 1.

The questions related to strategies for addressing poverty were derived from Feagin's (1975) Attitudes Toward Poverty Scale and Reeser and Epstein's survey instrument (1987). The following statements (with a Likert-type response pattern of agree-disagree) used the structural, technical, interest group and individual classifications developed by Reeser and Epstein (1987):

- Powerful interests are fundamentally opposed to the solution of the problem of poverty.
- We do not as yet possess the necessary knowledge and techniques for abolishing poverty.
- People representing different interests do not often enough sit down together to work out problems.
- Those people who are better off will never give up anything to the "have nots" unless forced.
- Poor people are not adequately motivated to take advantage of existing opportunities. Poor people have not been organized to demand better treatment by society.

TABLE 1. Background Characteristics of MSW Student Respondents Matched at Entry and at Graduation

Demographics	At Entry (n = 8,871)	At Graduation (n = 6,194)	From the Matched Set (n = 2,213)
Educational program status (%)			
Full time	70	74	78.7
Gender (%)			
Women	86.6	83.4	86.6
Race/Ethnicity (%)			
African American	6.5	8.0	6.5
American Indian	.5	1.2	.5
Asian American	7.6	10.0	7.7
Caucasian	66.9	56.6	66.9
Hispanic/Latino	14.2	16.4	14.2
Mixed/Other	4.3	7.8	4.3
Citizenship status (%)			
Non-Citizens	3.9	4.8	3.9
Childhood socioeconomic background (%)			
Lower	20.1	29.1	20.1
Middle	67.4	61.8	67.4
Upper	12.5	9.2	12.5
Relationship status (%)			
Divorced	7.4	9.8	7.4
Domestic partner	5.1	6.5	5.1
Married	25.2	32.2	25.2
Separated	2.0	2.3	2.0
Widowed	.4	.8	.4
Never married/single	59.9	48.3	59.9
Religion (%)			
Protestant	30.3	27.4	30.3
Jewish	10.5	8.6	10.5
Roman Catholic	26.0	27.2	26.0
Muslim	.3	4.2	.3
Hindu	.2	3.1	.2
Buddhist	1.7	18.6	1.7
None	21.6	4.5	21.6
Other	9.4	9.2	9.4

TABLE 1 (continued)

Demographics	At Entry (n = 8,871)	At Graduation (n = 6,194)	From the Matched Set (n = 2,213)
Political party affiliation (%)			
Republican	11.5	10.0	8.9
Democrat	64.7	69.2	70.3
Peace and Freedom	.9	1.1	.7
Socialist	1.7	2.0	2.1
Libertarian	.4	.6	.9
Green	1.7	2.3	2.1
Labor	.1	.1	.0
Nonpartisan	19.0	14.8	14.5
Other	n/a	.9	.4
Age in years			
Youngest	21	23	23
Eldest	75	78	78
Median	26	29	26
Financial aid (%)			
IV-E, IV-E+ combo	n/a	13.6	13.5
Non IV-E		48.4	59.7
none		23.3	26.8
Number of years of prior experience in social work			
Minimum	0	n/a	.2
Maximum	29		5
Mean (SD)	3.31 (2.66)		2.0 (1.65)

In addition to the attitudinal items, additional survey items included: motivations for entering graduate school, career aspirations, attitudes towards the poor/poverty, political and social action activities, prior work experiences, and demographic characteristics at two different times during the course of their graduate study–when they entered the MSW program and when they graduated. Works by Golden, Pins, and Jones (1972) and Reeser and Epstein (1990) were used to design questions that evoked the social work students' attitudes and beliefs toward the poor and poverty. Questions regarding students' motivations for entering graduate school were based on the work of Abell and McDonell (1990). Finally, questions concerning students' future career interests,

including preferred client groups and case situations, were adapted from the work of Rubin and Johnson (1984), Rubin, Johnson, and DeWeaver (1986), Butler (1990), and Santangelo (1991).

This exploratory study is part of an evaluation of long-term title IV-E funded public child welfare stipend and training program related to pre-service curricula and staff retention in public child welfare agencies. This multi-site, longitudinal effort examines the effects of MSW education on this stipend program designed to encourage MSW students to work with the poor, especially those who use the public child welfare system. This research was supported by the California Department of Social Services.

Design

To facilitate the data analysis, the researchers devised a participant-generated ID code that maintained student anonymity yet enabled the researchers to match students' entry surveys with their graduation surveys. Application was made through the University of California Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects and an exemption was granted based on the educational purposes of the study. Students were given assurances of confidentiality and anonymity.

The entry surveys were administered to all MSW students in California at orientation (or as close to that time as reasonably possible). The graduation surveys were administered right before graduation two, three or four years later. The entry data set (n = 8,871) included all responses obtained from students entering an accredited MSW program in California between 1991 and 2000. The graduation data set (n = 6,194) included all responses obtained from the graduating student population starting in 1993 and ending in 2004. The matched set compared favorably with the entry alone and graduation alone data on the demographic characteristic as previously noted in Table 1.

To compute response rates, the numbers of entering students were compared with the student enrollment statistics that schools report annually to the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). Graduation numbers from each of the schools were obtained separately and used to develop the graduation response rates. The overall response rate was 76% for the entering students and 48.5% through 2003 for graduating students. According to Perry's analysis of the data in 2001, 90% of all MSW students in California participated in the entry, graduation or both surveys (Perry, 2001).

Limitations

It is also important to note that this exploratory study has the following methodological limitations:

1. Survey of self-reported information can lead to a social desirability bias (responding in a way that participants think they should).
2. Some sampling bias in which the matched data set under-represents minorities, part time students, and older students.
3. There is no *a priori* way to determine the extent to which all of the schools in the study are comparable to one another with regard to how they implement their CSWE accredited curriculum (e.g., how much attention is given to poverty in the required social policy, practice and the human behavior and social environment courses?).

FINDINGS

Perceptions of Poverty

Upon entry into graduate social work programs, 88% of the student respondents agreed or strongly agreed that societal institutions had to be changed in order to eradicate poverty; at graduation the percentage was only slightly higher (89.2%). In addition, while 57.9% of the students at entry agreed or strongly agreed that poor people were in the best position to decide what is best for themselves and 73.8% held this view at graduation, perhaps an indication that client self-determination is one value that is being learned in social work school.

Overall, the students' top two reasons for the existence of poverty as perceived were: (1) powerful interests are fundamentally opposed to the solution of the problem of poverty (structural) and (2) people representing different interests do not meet enough to work out problems (interest group). The percentage of those who thought that powerful interests were contributing to the persistence of poverty grew from 53.3% at entry to 64.3% at graduation. A similar increase occurred with agreement on the statement about whether the poor are well organized (32.6% at entry agreed or strongly agreed and that percentage increased to 36.1% at graduation) as well as the perception that those who are better off will

not give up anything to solve the problems of poverty (24.5% at entry and 31.6% at graduation).

With respect to major response items that reflected a decline from entry to exit, several are worth noting: (1) People representing the poor do not sit down often enough to talk to each other (46% at entry and 41.5% at graduation; (2) There is insufficient knowledge to do away with poverty (21.5% at entry and 17.8% at graduation); and (3) The poor were not adequately motivated (15.8% at entry and 5.8% at graduation). These limited findings suggest that the social work graduate programs may have some effect on decreasing stereotypes of the poor.

Student Characteristics

As noted in the third column of Table 1, the matched sample could be described as primarily single women who attended graduate school full time, two-thirds of whom were Caucasian from middle class backgrounds, affiliated with the Democratic Party (70%), with a median age of 26, and religiously identified as Protestant, Catholic or Jew (66.8%). There were no statistically significant differences in the views of students in terms of their year in school or the school attended. However, there were statistically significant differences with regard to childhood socioeconomic background and race/ethnicity.

There were statistically significant differences in the attitudes of students upon entry when taking the race and ethnicity of students into account. Caucasian students were more likely to support the individual adaptation strategy while students of color (all minority groups were combined due to the small number of respondents) were more likely to support a strategy focused on societal/institutional change ($\chi^2 = 7.797$, $df = 1$, $p = .005$). However, at graduation the differences were not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 2.069$, $df = 1$, $p = .150$). Among those who changed their attitudes between entry and graduation (34.8%), Caucasian students were more likely to shift their attitude from individual adaptation to the societal/institutional change strategies.

At entry and at graduation, students from lower socioeconomic class families were most likely to support the allocation of public resources/attention primarily to the poor, while students from upper socioeconomic families were more likely to think that resources/attention should be given equally to all social groups, not just the poor. Among those whose attitudes changed from entry to exit, however, students from lower socioeconomic class families were most likely to change their attitudes

from allocating resources/attention primarily to the poor to giving resources to all social groups equally, while students from middle socioeconomic class families were most likely to change their attitude from allocating resources equally to all social groups to primarily giving to the poor.

Among those students whose opinions did not change from the time they entered school until they graduated (65.2%), students from lower socioeconomic families were most likely to support societal/institutional change as a better approach to addressing poverty, while students from upper socioeconomic families were more likely to choose individual adaptation. Among those who changed their attitude (about 35%), students from middle class socioeconomic families were more likely to change their attitude from individual adaptation to societal/institutional change while students from upper socioeconomic families were more likely to change their attitudes from societal/institutional change to individual adaptation.

In summary, most entering social work students in this study agreed that societal and institutional changes are needed to address the causes of poverty. This preference remained strong from the beginning of to the end of the MSW experience for the entire matched sample. Table 2 summarizes the findings on the changing perceptions of poverty and the poor from entry to graduation. At graduation, (65.2%) stood by their original entry statements with respect to individual adaptation versus societal/institutional change. Consistent with previous studies, the majority of entering social work students (54.1%) thought that focusing on societal/institutional change was a better strategy than individual adaptation for achieving for addressing the needs of the poor. At graduation, 64.3% (up from 50.9%) agreed that focusing on societal/institutional change was a better strategy than individual adaptation.

CONCLUSION

The primary purpose of this exploratory study was to examine student perceptions of the causes of poverty and strategies for addressing poverty in this country. The sample consisted of 2,213 social work students who entered graduate school from 1991 to 2000 and who graduated from 1993 to 2004. This study supports the findings from other research that found that students' race/ethnicity affected their perceptions of and interest in working with the poor.

TABLE 2. Changes in Social Work Students' Responses to the Research Questions from Entry to Graduation

	On Entry to Social Work School		At Graduation	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Question 1: Should social workers help the individual find a mode of adaptation to the world around him/her, or should emphasis be placed on societal/institutional change? Which would you favor if you had to make a choice?				
Individual adaptation	1007	45.9	774	35.7
Societal/Institutional change	1187	54.1	1393	64.3
Total	2194	100	2167	100
Question 2: Should social workers devote equal attention and equal resources to all social class groupings or primarily to the problems of the poor?				
Give to all groups equally	1260	57.5	1056	48.3
Give primarily to the poor	933	42.5	1130	51.7
Total	2193	100	2186	100

Most students in this study agreed that the traditional mission of social work emphasizes helping the poor and disadvantaged through direct services and advocacy in the form of political and social action. One of the unique contributions of the social work perspective is an understanding of human behavior in the context of the social environment in order to move "from a case to a cause" (Cooper, 1977, p. 361). This study suggests that there is some movement from case (e.g., individual adaptation) to cause (e.g., social/institutional change) within a graduate social work program but further research in the form of post-graduate follow-up studies are needed to assess the depth and breadth of this change.

Implied in the pre-post design were questions about the role that graduate social work programs may play in shaping these perceptions as well as the speculation that the lack of student interest in poverty might negatively influence what is taught. Given the limitations of this study, one of the most intriguing speculations relates to the yet-to-be documented/evaluated specific role (courses, fieldwork, socialization, prior experiences, and passions, etc.) that graduate social work education plays in promoting strategies to change societal institutions in contrast to helping individuals adapt to the circumstances of poverty.

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doi:10.1300/J137v16n01_10