Development and Validation of the Social Work Career Influence Questionnaire
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Objective: This research tested the Social Work Career Influence Questionnaire (SWCIQ) as a measurement tool for assessing career influence variables among master’s of social work (MSW) students. Method: A nonprobability sample of 589 students from six MSW programs participated in the cross-sectional survey that included the SWCIQ. Four areas of career influence were identified using factor analytic techniques and item analysis: Personal and Family Experiences, Desire To Be a Therapist, Prestige of the Profession, and the Social Change Mission of the Profession. The four subscales each contain eight items with acceptable alpha levels (.76 to .81). Results: Aspirations for private practice were positively associated with higher scores on the Personal and Family Experiences, Desire To Be a Therapist, and Prestige subscales. High scores on the Social Change dimension resulted regardless of the students’ career aspirations. Conclusions: Career choice is a multidimensional construct matching personal and social change values regardless of MSW students’ projected practice setting.

The reasons that students choose social work as a career have been the focus of research and writing for the past 40 years. Early studies focused on recruitment of students to master’s of social work (MSW) programs (Taietz, Ellenbogen, & Ramsey, 1958). Exploratory/descriptive studies published by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) as well as an early study by Kadushin (1958) explored the reasons MSW students choose social work as a career and the implications for the profession (Golden, Pins, & Jones, 1972; Pins, 1963). More recent studies of social work career choice focus on family experiences including birth order (Lackie, 1984), “excessive parentification/infantilization” (Lackie, 1983, p. 320), drug and alcohol abuse in the family of origin (Marsh, 1988), and the incidence of psychosocial traumas including addictive and/or abusive behaviors, illnesses either mental or physical, and traumatic events such as divorce, suicide, and death (Black, Jeffreys, & Hartley, 1993; Rompf & Royse, 1994; Russel, Gill, Coyne, &...
Woody, 1993). Other studies explore perceptions of power (Feld, 1987), personality type (Green, 1975; Miller, Heck, & Prior, 1988), values (Segal, 1992), and the opportunity for private practice (Land, 1987, 1988) to help explain a choice of a career in social work. The topic receiving the most attention in the literature focuses on why students and practitioners choose or reject the private practice of social work (Alexander, 1987; Cohen, 1966; Frisman, 1986; Jayaratne, Davis-Sacks, & Chess, 1991; Jayaratne, Siefert, & Chess, 1988; Strom, 1994; Wallace, 1982).

This article describes the development of an instrument to measure the multidimensional aspects of the choice of social work as a career. The article presents the general notion of career choice as well as aspects of career choice from previous studies in social work. The development of the instrument is detailed next. The data analysis provides characteristics of students’ career objectives along with an analysis of MSW students’ responses to the career instrument. Last, a discussion of the use of the instrument for admissions decisions, and recommendations for work to further the use of the instrument are made.

**Career Choice in the Life Cycle of Individuals and the Profession**

Career choice is a complex task involving decisions across stages of the life cycle. At minimum, these decisions include pursuing graduate professional education, the choice of a professional area of specialty, and choice of a practice setting following completion of entry-level practice experience. The career cycle, according to Schein (1978), “involves one’s learning, and productive contribution to an occupation or organization” (p. 22). Because of the personal investment of time and resources required by a professional career, the decision is made for the long rather than short term. In addition to the life cycle view of careers, two other perspectives are relevant to the choice of social work as a career. The ecological perspective (Germain, 1991) mentions the “fit” or “degree to which a person’s characteristics and skills match the requirements of the job” (p. 156), referring to job satisfaction. Recent work in vocational and counseling psychology is based on social learning theory and the self-efficacy concept (Bandura, 1977, 1986) to refer to the individual’s beliefs about his or her own abilities to perform successfully in a given situation including educational and career development (Betz & Hackett, 1987; Hackett, Betz, & Doty, 1985; Krumboltz, Mitchell, & Jones, 1976; Nevill & Schlecker, 1988).

The social work profession, viewed from a life cycle perspective, must continue to attract members with a valence for its central values and
commitment to its mission. Continuing to attract new professionals to social work is necessary to sustain the profession’s stated mission and to maintain or to expand the number of positions held by professionally educated social workers over time. The results for social work as an organized profession are first, the continuance of political influence on matters of importance to the profession’s members and second, professional organizations maintain power in the broader network of personal services professions through sheer numbers as well as having the resources of the membership base to carry out the organization’s mission.

Multidimensional Aspects of Career Choice

Although numerous articles appear in the literature discussing and describing the reasons that students selected social work, few of these studies explore more than a single dimension and most are exploratory in design. As a result, little is known about the multidimensional aspects attracting individuals who are willing to make the investment necessary for a career in social work. Personal values and the valence, or match, between personal values and the values of the social work profession have not been the major focus of studies examining the career decisions of social workers along with other dimensions such as family background, the desire for private practice, characteristics of the profession, and professional education.

As a response to the need for a multidimensional study of career choice, the author developed and tested the Social Work Career Influence Questionnaire (SWCIQ). The SWCIQ measures the degree to which four factors impact on the career choice of social work students.

The importance of developing measures of career choice for the social work profession lies in the need to continue to attract members who share a commitment to its values. In addition, social workers who find a place in providing services to oppressed and vulnerable groups is a necessary condition for fulfilling the social justice mission of the profession and survival of the tradition of social work in public and nonprofit service delivery networks.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE SWCIQ

Instrument Development

Development of the instrument was based on the assumption that the choice of social work as a career is a multidimensional construct and that items representing those dimensions could be developed using deductive
means. The literature available on social workers’ and social work students’
career valence points to a variety of dimensions that should theoretically
comprise the construct of career choice. A review of the content in the pub-
lished literature related to career choice in social work revealed five dimen-
sions: family of origin and life experiences, potential for private practice,
characteristics and requirements of the profession, the match of personal and
professional values, and the service motive. Each of these dimensions is
described next with references to studies examining the factor singularly in
the published social work literature.

**Personal and Family Experiences**

The first of these dimensions includes the family of origin and personal
experiences of the student (Black et al., 1993; Lackie, 1983, 1984; Marsh,
1988; Russel et al., 1993) (e.g., childhood experiences, life experience with a
social problem, providing services to families similar to your family of ori-
gin, helping people like yourself, personal life experiences, etc.). In his study
of more than 1,500 social workers, Lackie (1983, 1984) found that many
were first birth order children. Lackie used psychodynamic terms to charac-
terize social workers as exhibiting excessive identification. Other studies
using small nonprobability samples of social work students report a high
incidence of physical and behavioral health issues including substance abuse
in the students’ families of origin. These studies cannot, however, link the
family-of-origin experience to career choice. The SWCIQ includes this
dimension.

**Desire To Be a Therapist**

The second area with some evidence in the literature is the credentialing of
social workers and the potential for private practice (Butler, 1990, 1992;
Land, 1987, 1988). These articles postulated that social work credentialing
has influenced students toward private practice settings rather than tradi-
tional practice settings. Reports that MSW students indicate that they believe
they will enter private practice at some time during their career are evident in
the literature. Butler (1990) reported that 63% of 265 students interviewed in
one MSW program thought they would enter private practice. Rubin, John-
son, and DeWeaver (1986) reported that the percentage of students indicating
a desire for private practice dropped from 85% on MSW program entry to
54% just prior to graduation. Abell and McDonell (1990) reported that only
22.4% of their MSW respondents (N = 687) from 11 schools reported plans
for full- or part-time private practice. The SWCIQ includes specific items
related to this area (e.g., ability of the social worker to practice independently, availability of licensing for social workers, the opportunity for private practice, etc.). Another dimension of direct practice was included that emerged as a strong determinant of career choice: students’ identification as a therapist.

Prestige of the Profession

The third area is broadly defined as characteristics of the profession itself. This dimension included items related to the prestige of the profession and the structural variables associated with study for the degree. This dimension was addressed by Abell and McDonell (1990) who asked MSW students to rate the importance of a program’s local reputation, its convenient location, and an attractive curriculum in the study participant’s decision to enter an MSW program. Examples of items included in the SWCIQ are: length of time required for the MSW compared with other professional degrees, availability of an MSW degree program, availability of jobs in the social work profession, salary potential in the social work profession, prestige of the social work profession, and respect afforded social workers by other professionals.

Social Change Mission

A fourth area focused on respondents’ personal values, the social change mission of the profession, and values of the social work profession (Costin, 1964; Gruener, 1968; Hayes & Varley, 1965; Segal, 1992; Varley, 1963, 1968). This dimension reflects the core values of the profession related to the changes necessary to achieve social justice from the perspective of Rawls (1971) and others. The tenets of social justice underlying social change for the profession are exemplified in beliefs in the worth and dignity of every person, civil liberties, equal opportunities, and access to resources essential to meeting basic needs (Northen, 1995). Items developed to reflect this dimension include: commitment to social justice, commitment of the social work profession to social change, personal values, commitment to social justice, and commitment to helping people with social problems.

Service Motive

A final area found in the literature is the service motive as a factor in the individual’s career choice (Abell & McDonell, 1990; Bogo, Raphael, & Roberts, 1993; Rubin & Johnson, 1984; Rubin et al., 1986). This dimension failed to emerge as a determinant of career choice in the present study leaving the four dimensions described earlier. The reasons for the failure of the service
motive are that (a) it may be so basic to social work that there is little variability in this factor among students and (b) it is closely bound with the social change mission as described earlier, leading to duplication rather than a separate part of the construct of career choice motivation.

In summary, the SWCIQ was developed to measure the multidimensional aspects of a student’s choice of social work as a career. Five aspects of career choice were found in a review of previous research in this area. The next section describes the method used to assess each of the dimensions of the instrument.

**METHOD**

**Instrument**

The SWCIQ includes four sections. The first requests demographic information including respondents’ age, gender, racial/ethnic identification, relationship status, and the number of MSW degree credits completed at the end of the current semester or quarter.

The second section of the instrument includes three items addressing the student’s choice of social work as a career: “When did you first become interested in social work as a career choice?”; “Was social work your first or primary career choice?”; and “Did you make a career change to enter social work?” Two contingency items are included. The first asks respondents whose first choice was not social work to indicate another career choice that was considered. The second asks respondents who indicate that they made a career change to indicate their previous career or occupation. This section asks students to indicate their undergraduate major and the year of the undergraduate degree and whether they have had paid work experiences in social work or a human-services-related position after college and prior to beginning the MSW program.

The third section includes items aimed at identifying the career goals of social work students at three future time periods: immediately after receiving the MSW degree, 2 years, and 5 years following receiving the degree. Each set of items (one for each time period—immediately, 2 years, and 5 years) asks students to indicate the setting of practice, primary focus of practice, and primary interest in an area of service delivery. The settings of practice included are: public funded agencies, not-for-profit agencies, for-profit agencies, and private practice. The primary focus of practice provides four forced choice response categories: direct practice/clinical social work, supervision, policy or planning, and administration/management. The focus of
practice areas included are: physical illness/health, mental health, juvenile justice, adult corrections, child welfare, family services, school social work, public social services, and other. These items produce data about students’ projected career goals in the three time periods.

The final section is comprised of Likert-type items of the SWCIQ to measure the students’ attitudes toward dimensions comprising career choice. Each item asks respondents to indicate “To what degree do you feel [ ] influenced your career choice?” Response categories are: not at all, a little, somewhat, moderately, and strongly. This format was chosen for scaling the SWCIQ using procedures recommended for the development of summated rating scales (Likert, 1932; Spector, 1992). A copy of the SWCIQ is included in the appendix.

Revisions to the Instrument

This article reports data combined from two nonprobability samples of MSW students with a total sample of 589 used to develop the final four dimensions of the career influences scale. A cross-sectional survey was used to collect data.

The SWCIQ has undergone two revisions. The original form of the instrument included 54 summated rating scale items designed to measure career choice dimensions. Data were first collected using a purposive sample of 308 MSW students in two schools of social work. A revised form of the instrument included 40 of the original items assessing reasons for choosing social work as a career. The second version of the scale was administered to an additional purposive sample of 281 MSW students enrolled in four schools of social work. In both instances, a faculty member in each of the MSW programs agreed to coordinate data collection and return completed instruments to the author. Students voluntarily completed the anonymous survey.

Study Participants

The majority of the 589 MSW students providing data were women (n = 494, 83.9%), White, non-Hispanic (n = 489, 83.6%), and single (n = 250, 42.5%). The average age of respondents was 32.1 years (SD = 9.2). Respondents received their undergraduate degree an average of 8.3 years (SD = 8.0) prior to participation in the research and were an average of 23 years old (SD = 6.3) at the time of college graduation. The characteristics of this nonprobability sample differ only slightly from reports of a national class of students for the same time period and the most recent study of this nature reported in the literature (Abell & McDonell, 1990).
More than one half of the students \((n = 364, 62.3\%)\) indicated that social work was not their first or primary career choice. The most frequently mentioned other career choices of MSW students were clinical psychology \((n = 76, 21.9\%)\), law \((n = 20, 5.8\%)\), education \((n = 40, 11.5\%)\), business management \((n = 25, 7.2\%)\), music therapy \((n = 22, 6.3\%)\), nursing \((n = 14, 4\%)\), ministry \((n = 12, 3.5\%)\), and journalism \((n = 16, 4.6\%)\). The remaining respondents not indicating social work as their first choice \((n = 139)\) indicated a variety of other career choices in the humanities, sciences, and the arts. Abell and McDonell (1990) reported that 54% of their sample considered a career in a field other than social work. The most frequently identified alternate careers were psychology, law, counseling, and education.

Most respondents indicated that they first became interested in social work as a career during postcollege employment \((n = 241, 41.3\%)\) or during undergraduate education \((n = 219, 37.6\%)\). The majority of the nonprobability sample of MSW students indicated that they majored in social work \((n = 87, 14.8\%)\), psychology \((n = 165, 28.1\%)\), or sociology \((n = 102, 17.4\%)\) during their undergraduate education.

**Item Analysis**

The first step in the scale development process explored the dimensionality of the scale using a principle components factor analytic model (Kim & Mueller, 1978; Spector, 1992). Table 1 summarizes each of the four subscale dimensions. Correlations between subscales provide initial indications that the four areas measure distinct dimensions underlying career choice for social work students. Table 2 provides these correlations. Two of the subscales of the SWCIQ are moderately correlated with the Desire to Be a Therapist (THERAPIST) subscale: Personal and Family Experiences (PFEXPER) subscale \(r = .55\); Prestige of the Profession (PRESTIGE) subscale \(r = .44\). Examining the proportion of variance (PVE) accounted for, PFEXPER and the THERAPIST subscales are found to have a fair association \(R^2 = .30\), whereas less variance is found between the PRESTIGE and THERAPIST subscales \(R^2 = .19\). PFEXPER is also found to have a moderately low correlation with the Social Change Mission of the Profession (SOCIAL CHANGE) subscale \(r = .32; R^2 = .10\). The SOCIAL CHANGE subscale appears distinctly different from the THERAPIST and PRESTIGE subscales \(r = .06\) and .03, respectively. All correlations are expected beyond chance \((p < .05)\) with the exception of the SOCIAL CHANGE and PRESTIGE subscales.

The second step in scale development was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) reliability procedures (SPSS, 1988).
### TABLE 1: Factor Loading and Item-Total Correlations

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Scale Statistics: $M = 28.5$, $SD = 6.8$, alpha = .79

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Scale Statistics: $M = 23.3$, $SD = 7.4$, alpha = .81

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Scale Statistics: $M = 30.1$, $SD = 5.9$, alpha = .76
to examine the item-remainder coefficient (the correlation of each item with
the sum of the remaining items) (Spector, 1992) and the coefficient alpha
(Cronbach, 1951). The item analysis further reduced the number of items in
the final scale to 32 and made possible the construction of subscales with
eight nonredundant items each with a score range of 8 (no influence)
to 40 (a great deal of influence). Coefficient alpha for each dimension exceeds a rec-
commended level of .70 (Carmines & Zeller, 1979; Nunnally, 1978) as is
shown in Table 1 along with the factor loading and the item-total correlations
(r). The next step was to use the four subscales to examine differences among
the 589 MSW students participating in the study.

RESULTS

Analysis of Scale Dimensions

Each dimension of the SWCIQ was analyzed using subgroups of respond-
ents employing bivariate analyses and a measure of effect size (ES) for two-
group differences and $\eta^2$ for three groups. Subscale scores were first analyzed
to determine if differences would be found among men and women respon-
dents and African American and White non-Hispanic respondents. Respond-
ents were then categorized into groups on the following variables: career
aspiration for private practice, direct social work practice versus macro
(supervision or planning and administrative practice roles), social work as a first career choice, paid work experience in social work or human services prior to the MSW program, undergraduate major (BSW, psychology, or other), and type of agency practice (public, nonprofit, or for-profit).

Few statistically significant differences were found for these demographic characteristics of respondents on the subscales. Comparing men and women respondents, only on the SOCIAL CHANGE subscale did women score higher ($M = 30.4$, $SD = 5.8$) than men ($M = 28.5$, $SD = 6.5$), $t(584) = 2.80$, $p < .01$, $ES = .29$. Scores on two subscales were statistically different when African American respondents were compared with White non-Hispanic respondents. The difference on the THERAPIST subscale (means = 20.8, $SD = 6.9$, and 23.6, $SD = 7.4$, respectively) was statistically significant, $t(549) = 2.82$, $p < .01$, $ES = .41$. On the PRESTIGE subscale, African American respondents scored higher as a group ($M = 23.9$, $SD = 7.8$) when compared with White non-Hispanic respondents ($M = 21.3$, $SD = 7.0$), $t(544) = 2.85$, $p < .01$, $ES = .37$.

### Comparison of SWCIQ Scores and Practice Setting Aspirations

The PFEXPER subscale scores were higher and statistically significant for respondents indicating they aspire to private practice, $t(481) = 8.3$, $p < .0001$, $ES = .74$, and direct social work practice versus macro practice in their social work careers, $t(491) = 4.41$, $p < .0001$, $ES = .41$. The same direction in scores was found for respondents indicating that they desire to practice in a for-profit setting in each point in their career (immediately, 2, and 5 years following MSW graduation) when compared with respondents indicating nonprofit and public agency practice auspices for all time intervals, $F(2, 282) = 12.37$, $p < .0001$, $\eta^2 = .37$. Scores on this subscale were also higher for those indicating that social work was not their first career choice, $t(498) = 2.25$, $p < .05$. $**p < .01$, two-tailed significance.

### TABLE 2: Pearson’s Product Moment Correlations Among Subscales

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<td>THERAPIST</td>
<td>.06*</td>
<td>.44**</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>SOCIAL CHANGE</td>
<td>.03</td>
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NOTE: THERAPIST = Desire To Be a Therapist subscale. SOCIAL CHANGE = Social Change Mission of the Profession subscale. PRESTIGE = Prestige of the Profession subscale. PFEXPER = Personal and Family Experience subscale.

*p < .05. **p < .01, two-tailed significance.
.03, ES = .22. Work experience prior to the MSW program did not result in statistically significant differences in scores on the subscale, \( t(503) = .44, p < .66 \).

Analysis of the THERAPIST subscale resulted in findings in the same direction as the PFEXPER subscale. This was an expected finding as initially indicated by the moderate, positive correlation between these subscales (see Table 2). Statistically significant higher scores on the THERAPIST scale were found for respondents indicating a desire to engage in private practice, \( t(556) = 10.4, p < .001, ES = .86 \), and in direct social work practice, \( t(569) = 6.4, p < .0001, ES = .59 \). Respondents indicating a choice of practice in the for-profit arena scored higher on this subscale when compared to respondents indicating a choice of practice setting in the nonprofit or public sector, \( F(2, 327) = 38.6, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .19 \). In addition, those with an undergraduate major in psychology and those with other undergraduate degrees scored higher on this subscale in a three-way comparison with respondents holding the bachelor’s of social work (BSW) degree, \( F(2, 579) = 7.71, p < .001, \eta^2 = .03 \).

Respondents indicating that social work was not their first career choice had scores indicating that the THERAPIST area was a more influential determinant in career choice, \( t(576) = 1.94, p < .05, ES = .17 \). Finally, work experience did not result in statistically significant differences in scores on the THERAPIST subscale, \( t(580) = .35, p < .73 \).

Results from analysis of the PRESTIGE subscale were more mixed. Aspirations for private practice, \( t(552) = 2.62, p < .01, ES = .22 \), resulted in statistically significant higher scores on the PRESTIGE items. Again, this was expected from the positive correlation between the subscales. Respondents indicating a preference for practice in the for-profit sector scored higher when compared with respondents indicating a preference for practice in public or nonprofit settings throughout the first 5 years of their careers, \( F(2, 325) = 3.32, p < .04, \eta^2 = .02 \). In addition, respondents with a BSW degree scored lower on the PRESTIGE subscale when compared with respondents holding a psychology undergraduate degree or other undergraduate majors, \( F(2, 574) = 10.5, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .04 \). There were no statistically significant differences in the scores of respondents on this subscale for direct versus macro practice, \( t(566) = .66, p < .51 \); social work as a first career choice, \( t(571) = .37, p < .71 \); or work experience prior to the MSW degree, \( t(575) = .27, p < .79 \).

The most interesting findings are the results of the Commitment to Social Change subscale. Only one of the career aspiration variables, the type of agency practice, was statistically significant among groups of respondents. The finding is in the expected direction indicating that respondents with career aspirations in the for-profit sector scored lower on the SOCIAL CHANGE items than respondents indicating public or nonprofit settings as
their choice for their career patterns, although the variance accounted for is negligible, $F(2, 329) = 6.46, p < .002, \eta^2 = .04$. When respondents’ scores on the SOCIAL CHANGE subscale were compared for career aspiration variables (private practice, $t[559] = .94, p < .35$, and direct vs. macro practice, $t[572] = .92, p < .36$), the results did not result in statistically significant differences on the SOCIAL CHANGE subscale. The comparisons for social work as the first career choice, $t(579) = 1.19, p < .24$, and work experience, $t(583) = .54, p < .59$, were not statistically significant. It was expected that respondents with a BSW degree would differ from those with a psychology undergraduate major and those with other bachelor’s degrees. Whereas respondents with a BSW scored higher on the SOCIAL CHANGE subscale ($M = 31.1, SD = 6.5$) when compared with psychology and other undergraduate majors (means = 29.8, $SD = 5.6$, and 29.9, $SD = 5.9$, respectively), the difference was not statistically significant, $F(2, 582) = 1.68, p < .19$.

**Exposure to the MSW Program and Subscale Scores**

To explore the influence of exposure to the MSW curriculum, a sample of respondents from one MSW program ($n = 171$) were examined in two groups: respondents with 30 or fewer MSW credits and those with 31 to 60 program credits. Respondents included in this analysis were somewhat dissimilar in proportions of gender (87.6%, $n = 155$ women), race/ethnicity (22.3%, $n = 39$ African American; 70.9%, $n = 124$ White non-Hispanics), and age ($M = 31.8$ years, $SD = 9.4$) from the entire sample of respondents. Regardless of these differences, there were no statistically significant differences in the mean scores of respondents with 30 or fewer credits or those with 31 or more credits on the four subscales. The students’ $t$ values for the four scales were as follows: PFEXPER, $t(171) = 1.03, p < .30$; THERAPIST, $t(171) = .32, p < .75$; PRESTIGE, $t(171) = .36, p < .72$; and SOCIAL CHANGE, $t(170) = 1.58, p < .12$.

**Multivariate Analysis**

To examine the contributions of respondents’ career aspirations to scores on the four subscales, multivariate analysis was conducted. The model used to examine the subscales involved entering variables previously identified as statistically significant in a stepwise regression analysis.

A two-step solution was obtained for the PFEXPER subscale accounting for little of the variance (10%). Career aspirations for private practice entered the equation at Step 1 ($R = .297, R^{2hi} = .085, \beta = .297$). Direct versus macro practice entered at Step 2 ($R = .325, R^{2ad} = .099, \hat{\beta} = .138$). Choice of private
settings for practice and first choice of a career other than social work failed to enter the equation.

Results from the regression equation for the THERAPIST subscale were more promising. Three variables entered the equation accounting for 22% of the variance in scores. Preference for the for-profit settings of practice entered on Step 1 ($R = .445, R^2_{adj} = .195, \beta = .445$). An undergraduate major in psychology entered on Step 2 ($R = .459, R^2_{adj} = .206, \beta = .114$). The preference for private practice entered on the final step ($R = .471, R^2_{adj} = .215, \beta = .183$). Variables failing to enter the stepwise equation were: direct practice, first choice other than social work, and race (African American).

Analysis of the PRESTIGE subscale accounted for only 4% of the variance. Two variables (undergraduate major not in social work and preference for private settings of practice) entered the equation in order. Undergraduate major contributed little to the variance ($R = .188, R^2_{adj} = .032, \beta = .188$). On Step 2, preference for private settings added little ($R = .217, R^2_{adj} = .041, \beta = .109$).

As would be expected from the previous analysis, almost none of the variance was explained (5%) in the equation exploring the SOCIAL CHANGE subscale. Two variables entered the equation: preference for public agency practice ($R = .194, R^2_{adj} = .035, \beta = .194$) and gender recoded as a dummy variable (women, 1; men, 0) ($R = .227, R^2_{adj} = .046, \beta = .119$).

**DISCUSSION AND APPLICATIONS TO SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE**

Analysis of data focused on describing the development of the SWCIQ to measure influences in choice of social work as a career. Previous studies have emphasized the incidence of episodic or enduring behaviors in the family of origin of the social worker and the association of these behaviors in the self-selection process associated with choosing to pursue a degree in social work (e.g., Lackie, 1983; Marsh, 1988). Findings from this study of 589 MSW students indicate that the personal and family-of-origin experiences of the student contribute to some degree to the choice of social work as a career. These data indicate that this factor contributes to the career aspirations of the social work student in private practice versus the public service arena. The family of origin of the social work student may be an important motivation toward a career choice in social work but this is a factor on which the student or potential student has little control. Results of this study provide some indications that students desiring to practice independently may be motivated more by
personal influences than those students who project a social work career in
the public service arena.

Items related to the profession itself (PRESTIGE) do not appear to con-
tribute to career choice to a great extent but rather to decisions about career
options such as practice setting. Abell and McDonell (1990) reported that the
versatility of the MSW was of primary importance to their study participants’
choice to enter an MSW degree program. One possible reason that the
PRESTIGE items in the SWCIQ do not indicate that this is a strong area of
career choice is that MSW students have moved past the point in the
decision-making process addressed by many of the variables in this subscale
such as the length of time required for the MSW degree, admission require-
ments, and the availability of an MSW program. The items included in the
SWCIQ are more applicable to a career decision than to the decision of a stu-
dent to enter a specific university’s MSW program.

The THERAPIST subscale distinguishes a group of MSW students in the
expected direction. The career aspiration associated with private practice and
the for-profit settings of practice comprises a subset of MSW students who
differ from those indicating macro practice as a career commitment for ser-
vice in public sector organizations. Students with an undergraduate major in
social work are more likely to indicate practice preferences for public sector
social work. In addition, students indicating that social work was their first
career choice scored lower on the THERAPIST subscale.

There appear to be two types of aspiring practitioners: students aligned
with private practice and those motivated to work in the public sector. Both
types of students value the mission of the profession. The reasons that stu-
dents choose social work as a career as indicated in this study are closely
aligned with the values of social change and social justice as central concepts
in social work. Personal experiences of the students are interwoven with
career aspirations for public or private sector practice and commitment to the
profession’s values. These personal experiences seem most closely aligned
with a desire to be a therapist.

Personal Values and Career Choice

One of the most important findings of this study was the contribution of
the match of personal and professional values related to the social justice mis-
mission of the profession in the career choice of students. This seems to fit with
the use of the self-efficacy model as an explanation of career choice (Krum-
boltz et al., 1976). With one exception (practice in the public setting), there
were no statistically significant differences in the scores of subgroups of
respondents on the SOCIAL CHANGE subscale. The correlations between
the SOCIAL CHANGE and THERAPIST items were negligible, indicating that these subscales address separate dimensions of career choice. Students who profess a desire for private practice or for-profit settings of practice during the first 5 years of their careers indicated by their responses to these items that the social justice mission of the profession was an important factor in their career choice. Respondents scored relatively high on this dimension ($M = 30.1, SD = 5.9$) indicating a high degree of commitment to indicators representing the dimension of commitment to social change.

Results from this and previous studies of career choice among MSW students contribute to knowledge of social work educators by describing students’ background and the influence of family and personal histories in the choice of social work as a career. Some of the assumptions made about differences in commitment to social work values among students indicating a preference for private practice are not borne out by these data. Further examination of this important factor in future research is indicated. This is particularly true if the profession is to continue as the major supply source for the human services industry.

Use of the SWCIQ

Development of summated scales involves judgment and, consequently, human error. Replication using these scale items would provide further evidence of the applicability and accuracy of the measurement instrument for the assessment of factors influencing career decisions among social work students and applicants for MSW programs. Results of the smaller sample of MSW students’ contrasting scores on the subscales for those in the foundation and second year of the program indicate that the measure is stable over time in relation to the contribution of the educational program as assessed using a cross-sectional purposive sample.

The advantage of this instrument is its ease to administer resulting from the self-report nature of the scales and the length of the total scale. The cross-sectional nature of these data do not, however, answer questions regarding the criterion-related validity of the SWCIQ. Longitudinal data following a cohort of students from entrance into an MSW program through graduation and well into their careers is necessary to provide predictive validity of any measure assessing career decisions at entry. Use of the instrument in a study of applicants accepted and rejected from an MSW program could provide further evidence of the discriminant validity of the measure as a tool in the admission process.

Unfortunately, the market economy in which social work and other human services professions operates may negate the realities of career choice at
entry and outcomes measured in terms of practice following completion of professional education. Reasons for social workers’ preference for agency-based employment are pointed out by Strom (1994) as job security, regular client referrals, predictable working hours, health care benefits, paid holidays, opportunities for professional growth and development, as well as supervision and effective administration. It is important to note that earlier studies contrasting MSW students’ choice of social work practice in private versus agency based (public or not for profit) appear to be based on a definition of private practice as fee-for-service in an autonomous setting. There appears to be a blurring of the private practice of social work (and that of other mental health service providers) with the pervasiveness of managed care for mental and physical health care services in the United States. A definition of private practice as a fee-for-service arrangement or as solo practice is not a clear conceptualization that differentiates this practice setting from social work practice in public or not-for-profit settings. Thus, the argument that social workers aspiring to practice social work in a private practice setting may be saying more about the administrative arrangements of that practice and the desire of students for autonomy in practice outside the public setting than a rejection of service provision to vulnerable persons.

**Challenge to Social Work Education**

It is incumbent on schools of social work to continue to attract highly qualified members for the profession. The results of this study indicate that recruitment for the profession should ideally begin during high school and the first year of undergraduate studies. Participants who made their career choice early and those indicating that social work was their first choice of a career appear to be more closely aligned with the central mission of the profession: social change and social justice. It is the role of public and not-for-profit organizations to provide a work environment that is challenging and rewarding. During the educational process, the field practicum experience should afford students the opportunity for enriching public and not-for-profit agency experiences.

The value base of students’ choice of a career in social work is, however, borne out by these data. Regardless of the arena of practice, MSW students admitted to professional schools during the mid-1990s appear to have a commitment to social justice and social change. This value base is the raw material available for influence through the educational process. The challenge to social work faculty is to provide a rich learning experience for students to remain committed to the values of the profession following graduation and at
the same time produce graduates who are sought after by the organizations delivering services to vulnerable persons.

Appendix

Social Work Career Influence Questionnaire (SWCIQ) Items

Personal and Family Experiences
Your childhood experiences.
Your own life experience with a social problem.
Your commitment to provide services to families similar to your family.
Your commitment to help people like yourself.
Your personal life experiences.
Your commitment to provide services to families experiencing dysfunction.
Your commitment to help people with similar life experiences to your own.
Your personal therapy.

Desire To Be a Therapist
The availability of licensing for social workers.
The ability of social workers to practice independently.
The availability of third party (insurance) payments to reimburse the services provided by social workers.
The salary potential in a social work position.
The opportunity for private practice as a social worker.
The prestige of the social work profession in the provision of therapeutic services.
The opportunity to work as a marital or family therapist.
Your desire to be a therapist.

Prestige of the Profession
The prestige of the social work profession.
The length of time required for the MSW degree compared with others.
The admission requirements for the MSW.
The respect afforded social workers by clinical psychologists.
The availability of jobs in the social work profession.
The availability of an MSW program.
The ease of obtaining an MSW degree.
The respect afforded social workers by the medical profession.

Social Change Mission of the Profession
Your commitment to helping people with social problems.
The stated values of the social work profession.
Your commitment to social change.
The match of your personal values with the values of the social work profession.
Your commitment to provide services to persons experiencing poverty.
The commitment of the social work profession to advocacy on behalf of clients.
The commitment of the social work profession to social change.
Your commitment to social justice.

NOTE: MSW = master’s of social work.

REFERENCES


