
The Public's Perception of Social Work: Is It What We Think It Is?

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This article reports on the public's current perception of the social work profession as examined in a nationally representative, random digit telephone survey of 386 people. The survey asked respondents about their knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes regarding the profession and its practitioners and required respondents to make comparisons between social workers and other helping professionals such as psychiatrists, psychologists, counselors, nurses, and clergy. Results of the survey indicated that for the most part, a majority of the public understands the social work profession and in many ways recognizes its value.

Key words: national sample; perception; social work image; stereotypes; survey

Social work is still a relatively young profession. In the years since the founding of Hull House and the work done by social work's earliest pioneers, things have changed in this society. Although the current problems of today's disenfranchised people continue to have much in common with the problems of early immigrants settling in large urban areas where modern social work began, much else is different. Today, the areas of practice encompassed by social work are broader. It is possible to find social workers in all segments of the private and public sectors.

Only a few decades ago, it would have been the exception to find a social worker in private practice or working in industry; now these are frequent phenomena. Also, other factors have changed the environment in which this practice is carried out. Managed care and sweeping changes to the welfare system have introduced elements into social work that could not have been imagined 20 years ago. Moreover, modern representations of social work and social workers in the popular media often do not compliment or support the profession.

A critical consequence of these changes over the past several decades is that they have influenced how the public perceives and understands social work as a profession. Why is this influence critical, and why is it so important to know what the public thinks of social work? Social workers have shown concern for their public image since the very beginnings of professionalism (Lubov, 1965) and have had good reason for doing so. Historically, social workers have been guardians of the vulnerable and disenfranchised members of society. Social work has exemplified the value of caring for those less fortunate. Thus, if the general public is confused, uninformed, or even hostile toward social work, the profession is less able to fulfill its mission of helping those in need.

According to Vogt (1994), people are motivated to make changes on a group's behalf only if they like and approve of the group. Mere tolerance is not enough to motivate people toward change; rather, change demands public approval. Adding to this notion, it has been pointed out that as long as stigmatized groups (like social workers and their clients) are viewed negatively in

this society, people will not attempt to change discriminatory practices or oppressive policies that are detrimental to these groups (Allport, 1935; Linton, 1945).

When the public's approval of social work wanes, recruitment into the profession suffers, as does the professional credibility of social workers in both the public eye and in the eyes of other professionals. Finally, given that the public is the primary consumer of services that social workers offer, how it views social work is vital to its acceptance of social work services, as well as the policy positions supported by social workers.

For all of these reasons, it is important to examine what the public thinks of social work today so that we might influence social work's image and the public's opinion tomorrow.

In 1978 a survey was conducted that examined how the public viewed social work (Condie, Hanson, Lang, Moss, & Kane, 1978). The researchers pointed out that earlier studies of public opinion conducted in the 1950s had concluded that the public was unclear about what social workers did (Weinberger, 1967). Thus, the researchers endeavored to find out if public opinion had changed since that time. Four U.S. communities were surveyed to determine the level of public knowledge about social work, including whether the public was aware of newer as well as traditional social work roles and if certain demographic and other variables were associated with a specific response pattern.

Results indicated that in the 1970s the public had a greater awareness of social work roles than it did in the 1950s, with more respondents being aware that social workers function in a variety of roles. However, given that the percentage identifying erroneous roles (such as legal advisor) did not differ significantly from the percentage identifying correct roles (such as group therapist) and because the stereotyped image of the social worker as "child protector" continued to predominate, the researchers concluded that the public was only marginally able to accurately identify social work roles.

Somewhat more disturbing, results also indicated a reluctance by 94 percent of the sample to seek help from a social worker for personal problems, with this reluctance decreasing by only 3 percent among those who knew a social worker personally. Based on this finding, the researchers concluded that the profession might still lag be-

hind some of the other helping professions and occupations in terms of prestige.

Additional results causing concern included the possibility that some people did not recognize social workers as such in certain situations. The researchers speculated that because respondents tended not to recognize some of the atypical settings in which social workers worked and often did not recognize that social workers could be employed in private practice (in either instance professionals may not label themselves "social workers"), this might cause public confusion and a failure to recognize a particular professional as a social worker. The researchers stressed the difficulty in taking any constructive steps toward improving the public's image of social work if people did not recognize a social worker when they met one. The study recommended that similar studies be conducted periodically to determine what remedies, if any, could be applied to these problematic areas.

Since the Condie and colleagues' (1978) study, we identified only one other study as focusing specifically on public knowledge and perceptions about social workers. In Alabama a survey of 452 adults was conducted to measure the public's knowledge of social workers in the areas of education, credentialing, types of social work settings, types of clients and presenting problems, and public attitudes about the activities in which social workers engage (Kaufman & Raymond, 1995-1996).

Although noting the limitations of their study, including the low visibility of social workers in Alabama because "the public and private human service agencies of the state of Alabama are not highly professionalized" (Kaufman & Raymond, 1995-1996, p. 32), the researchers reported that the overall attitude of their respondents toward social workers was negative. They found that higher levels of knowledge about social work and social work settings were significant predictors of more positive attitudes toward social workers. More surprising was the finding that use of social work services in the past was a significant predictor of such knowledge, but not of positive attitude toward social workers. The researchers suggested that further research was needed to clarify the meaning of these findings and also cautioned against a generalization of their findings beyond the state of Alabama, recommending that additional community-, regional-, state-, and

national-level studies be undertaken (Kaufman & Raymond).

Other research on public opinion has compared social work with a variety of helping professions to determine how social work fares in relation to these other professions. An Australian study surveyed public knowledge regarding four different mental health professions: psychology, psychiatry, counseling, and social work (Sharples, 1986). It was found that overall, the public perceived social workers as principally "studying the mind and thoughts, but helping with social problems/disorders over five times as much as psychologists" (p. 60), and also as "helping the community in practical ways" (p. 63). In essence, this study found that social workers were perceived by the public as being the most valuable and the most needed by the community of the four professions examined. Despite these encouraging findings, this study was limited to Australia, and thus, may not be comparable to the United States.

Fall and colleagues (2000) explored the public's perceptions of clinical psychologists, master's-level counselors, doctoral-level counselors, and social workers by ranking the public's confidence levels in each professional's ability to treat clinical mental health issues across five case vignettes of varying severity. Respondents were asked to rank their preferences to simulate the real-life process of selecting a mental health provider. The results of the study revealed that social workers were consistently ranked the lowest of the four professions in terms of respondent confidence. The researchers found this result to be especially troublesome in light of the fact that social work was found to be the most common choice for mental health services in the sample, with 33 percent of the respondents having seen a social worker (or having had a family member who saw a social worker) at some time in the past.

The need to obtain current and relevant information about the public's perception of social workers and of the social work profession as a whole still remains. Based on the earlier research, we conducted a survey to gain a more accurate and complete picture of how the general public currently views social work. This nationwide telephone survey listed several helping professionals from whom a person in need of help with personal problems might seek assistance: psychologists, social workers, psychiatrists, clergy, and in some questions, counselors and nurses. In addition,

bearing in mind Benjamin's (1986) commentary that "public image is a two-dimensional issue reflecting popularity and understanding" (p. 945), the survey used questions that judged respondent's knowledge of the education, salary, and roles of social workers, while also soliciting respondents' opinions about how social workers compare with the other professionals and about how social work's value and importance are perceived. A main departure from earlier research is that the current study used a nationally representative sample of the United States so that results could be discussed and interpreted on a national level. Thus, we hoped that this study would enhance the current understanding of what the public thinks of social work, which could in turn contribute to the continuing growth and value of the profession.

Method

Respondents

A nationally representative list of random digit telephone numbers was purchased from a national survey research group and was used to derive the sample for this study. The random telephone numbers provided for the study included only those that were functional and residential (that is, no fax, modem, business, disconnected, or other invalid numbers). We used a sampling with replacement procedure, in which an unanswered telephone number was called a minimum of four times during a morning, an evening, or twice on a weekend until it was either answered or eventually replaced with a new number. This was done to ensure that the sample was not biased because of when the telephone call was placed. Respondents for the study were people ages 18 and over who were residents of the household and who had had the most recent birthday in the household.

Data Collection

Data were collected using a one-time fixed response survey administered by telephone to respondents by trained interviewers. Potential survey respondents were given a brief explanation of the study and asked for their participation. Respondents granted verbal consent to participate in the study after they were given the details of the study and an explanation of informed consent. To prevent any social desirability response biases in

favor of social workers that could have resulted from the explanation of the study's purpose, respondents were told that several different helping professions were to be examined in the study, but that each individual questionnaire focused primarily on only one of these professions. Thus, respondents were led to believe that they had randomly received the questionnaire focusing particularly on social workers (see Condie et al., 1978). In all, 386 respondents were recruited in this manner. Interviewers who administered the survey were primarily graduate-level social work students who were trained and closely supervised to ensure reliability.

Survey Instrument

The survey was created on the basis of some of the survey questions from earlier studies (that is, Farberman, 1997; Guest, 1948; Kaufman & Raymond, 1995-1996; Schindler, Berren, Hannah, Biegel, & Santiago, 1987; Sharpley, 1986; Wood, Jones, & Benjamin, 1986) and incorporated questions from Condie and colleagues' (1978) survey. The survey consisted of Likert scales as well as true or false, multiple-choice questions, and demographic information. Questions assessed attitudes and beliefs about social workers compared with other helpers (that is, psychiatrists, psychologists, nurses, counselors, and clergy). Some questions focused specifically on beliefs and attitudes about social workers only. Other questions probed respondents' general knowledge about social workers and assessed sources of this knowledge. The survey was first pretested using a convenience sample.

Results

Respondent Characteristics

The majority of the sample was female (67.3 percent), married (57.7 percent), and had a mean age of 43.8 ($SD = 16.8$). Most had some level of college education (64.7 percent), although 4.7 percent had no high school degree. The ethnicity reported was: white (80.1 percent), African American (6.8 percent), Hispanic/Latino (7.1 percent), Asian (3.1 percent), or other (2.9 percent). More than one-half of the respondents (53.7 percent) came from the eastern region of the United States, followed by the central (23.5 percent), Pacific (14.7 percent), and mountain (8.2 percent). Most respondents personally knew a social worker (67.3

percent) and had a history (either the respondents or a family member) of direct treatment-related experience with a social worker (55.9 percent).

General Knowledge about Social Workers

Regarding the level of educational training social workers must have, most respondents indicated that a bachelor's degree (53.0 percent) or a master's degree (32.6 percent) were necessary (Table 1). A majority (50.1 percent) also indicated the average salary range of a social worker to be \$18,000 to \$28,000.

When asked to determine which in a list of potential roles were appropriate for social workers (that is, respondents were asked to indicate whether each role listed was "something a social worker does"), respondents were also fairly accurate in identifying roles but did indicate some stereotyped biases (child protector role = 91.3 percent agreement) and some inaccuracies (legal advisory role = 33.2 percent agreement [Table 1], administers psychological tests = 47.8 percent agreement [Table 2]). It is interesting that many respondents did affirm political and community social work roles often thought to be little recognized by the public (agent of social change 59.4 percent, and community organizer 68.8 percent agreement) (Table 1).

Respondents indicated a number of sources from which they gained their perceptions about social workers, with the most common being personal experience (35.7 percent), knew a social worker (30.8 percent), television (12.4 percent) and newspapers (10.8 percent) (Table 1). From these sources, most of the sample indicated having received a positive perception of social workers (59.4 percent) as opposed to a negative one (16.1 percent).

Knowledge, Beliefs, and Attitudes about Social Workers and the Social Work Profession

In a portion of the survey presenting statements about social workers, respondents were asked to indicate whether they believed each statement to be true or false. The statements chosen for inclusion in the survey were those considered to be either facts or commonly held stereotypes (which are not necessarily true) about social workers (Condie et al., 1978). Thus, some of the statements were factually accurate whereas others were potentially inaccurate, thus requiring respondents to have some knowledge of the social work profession, or

Table 1

Knowledge about Social Workers

Knowledge Area	%
Educational training needed (<i>N</i> = 383)	
High school diploma	8.6
Bachelor's degree	53.0
Master's degree	32.6
Doctoral degree	5.7
Average annual salary (<i>N</i> = 375)	
\$8,000–18,000	4.5
\$18,000–28,000	50.1
\$28,000–38,000	32.5
\$38,000+	12.8
Appropriate social worker roles (<i>N</i> = 380)	
Agent of social change	59.4
Legal adviser	33.2
Group therapist	67.1
Administrator	64.6
Mental health therapist	57.0
Prescribe medication	5.2
Community organizer	68.8
Child protector	91.3
Psychiatric intern	37.3
Sources of perception about social work (<i>N</i> = 370)	
Magazines	1.9
Books	3.5
Television	12.4
Movies	3.8
Knew a social worker	30.8
Personal experience	35.7
Newspapers	10.8
Clergy	1.1
Evaluation of sources of information about social work (<i>N</i> = 372)	
Positive	59.4
Negative	16.1
Neither	10.8
Can't tell	13.7

a belief or attitude about social workers and the profession in reference to each item.

Regarding populations served by social workers, the respondents overwhelmingly endorsed two of the most positively toned statements: "Social workers work with all social classes" received 92.4 percent affirmation, and "social workers can be a great source of comfort in times of need" received 95.8 percent support (Table 2). These results suggest that the respondents both recognized the emotional support that social workers can

provide and that they were able to move away from the commonly held stereotype that social workers only work with poor and disadvantaged people. On the other hand, nearly one-quarter (23.0 percent) of the respondents demonstrated their agreement with the statement: "Social workers primarily care for people on welfare." Thus, it appears that although the public is highly cognizant of the fact that social workers do not solely work with poor people, almost one-fourth feel that working with poor people is a primary duty (which, according to the NASW's *Code of Ethics*, is an accurate perception of social work's primary duty).

The data on respondents' knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes about specific social work roles and job functions also yielded results worthy of mention. Although most agreed that social workers provide family therapy (78.7 percent), facilitate community change (65.2 percent), and serve troubled children (89.8 percent), fewer believed that social workers perform psychotherapy (22.8 percent) and use group therapy as a major service (48.6 percent). In addition, only about one-half (49.7 percent) of the respondents believed that social workers could be private practitioners; thus demonstrating survival of the notion that social workers are tied to organizations (which are likely pictured as large bureaucratic agencies) (Table 2).

To assess the current prevalence of the more negative stereotypes to have faced the profession in the past, a statement regarding attitudes that

Table 2

Agreement with Facts and Common Stereotypes about Social Workers (*N* = 383)

Belief	%
Work with all social classes	92.4
Source of comfort in times of need	95.8
Are mostly women	65.2
Primarily care for people on welfare	23.0
Take advantage of the government	18.8
Have right to take children from parents	35.0
Give people their welfare checks	7.6
Serve troubled children	89.9
Use group therapy	48.6
Provide family therapy	78.7
Facilitate community change	65.2
Conduct psychological tests	47.8
Perform psychotherapy	22.8
Can be in private practice	49.7

“social workers take advantage of the government” was presented, which unfortunately received support from 18.8 percent of respondents. Although 18.8 percent is not an overly large percentage, the statement endorses a negative connotation about social workers. Moreover, the statement that “social workers have the right to take children from their parents” attained 35 percent agreement, evidencing the likelihood of ongoing public confusion regarding the functions and authority of child welfare workers; one of the most publicized, portrayed, and media skewed of social work roles.

To further assess attitudes about social workers, respondents were asked to rate their agreement with several statements by using a Likert scale that was able to capture more detail than dichotomous true and false responses. More than one-half of the respondents (54.8 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that social workers counsel as proficiently as psychologists do, but notably, more than one-fourth disagreed with this statement (29.1 percent) (Table 3). In a similar manner, responses to the statement, “I would see a social worker if the fee was less than a psychologist’s,” received endorsement from almost one-half of the respondents (47.1 percent). A full 58.0 percent of the sample affirmed the possibility that they “may

need the help of a social worker in the future,” yet a substantial minority (25.2 percent) denied this as a potential need. The majority of respondents felt that social workers are important in addressing social problems (79.9 percent), and although some of the sample (9.0 percent) agreed that “social workers don’t make a difference in our country,” considerably more than three-quarters (84.8 percent) disagreed with this view. A strong majority of the sample (73.3 percent) also concurred that more social workers are needed, with only 8.8 percent dissenting.

Also interesting were results indicating that although 53.6 percent of respondents agreed that “social workers help change social policies,” far fewer (29.5 percent) felt that this was a “primary” social worker role. Likewise, even though 68.8 percent of respondents knew that “community organizer” is an appropriate social work role and 65.2 percent agreed that social workers facilitate community change, only somewhat more than one-third (38.0 percent) believed “solving community problems” to be a primary role. A large majority of the sample (92.3 percent) thought that the primary role of social workers is to help individuals and families (that is, engagement in direct practice).

Table 3

Attitudes about Social Workers

Attitude	Response Category									
	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
Social workers counsel as well as psychologists do	12.7	48	42.1	159	16.1	61	23.3	88	5.8	22
Would see social worker if fee was less than a psychologist’s	11.2	42	35.9	135	16.2	61	28.2	106	8.5	32
Social workers are important in addressing social problems	22.0	83	57.9	219	10.1	38	8.2	31	1.9	7
I may need help from a social worker in the future	13.8	52	44.2	167	16.9	64	18.3	69	6.9	26
Social workers don’t make a difference in our country	1.6	6	7.4	28	6.1	23	50.1	189	34.7	131
We need more social workers	24.9	93	48.4	181	17.9	67	5.9	22	2.9	11
Social workers help change social policies	8.3	31	45.3	169	24.7	92	19.3	72	2.4	9
Primary role for social workers										
To help individuals and families	28.4	107	63.9	241	5.6	21	1.9	7	0.3	1
To solve community problems	6.1	23	31.9	120	21.5	81	37.2	140	3.2	12
To change social policies	1.6	6	27.9	105	23.3	88				

Comparisons between Social Work and Other Helping Professions

Another means of assessing attitudes and values attributed to the social work profession involved comparing social work's "perceived value to the community" with that of other professions. In terms of this perceived value, social workers received more "very valuable" ratings (60.8 percent) than did psychologists (44.5 percent), psychiatrists (41.9 percent), or counselors (58.3 percent), but not more than either nurses (89.8 percent), or the clergy (67.7 percent) (Table 4). Moreover, when the "very valuable" and "somewhat valuable" categories are aggregated and compared, social workers lag behind only nurses in terms of perceived value (96.3 percent and 99.2 percent, respectively).

In a further attempt to explore the public's knowledge and attitude toward social workers, respondents were asked to rate the effectiveness of various professionals according to specific types of problems (Figure 1). In the social work category, social workers were most often considered to be "very effective" with problems of child abuse (58.4 percent of respondents), homelessness (56.9 percent), and domestic violence (43.1 percent). Also, in the social work category, social workers were least considered "very effective" in dealing with the "marital," "alcoholic adult," and "mentally ill adult" problem types (20.2 percent, 25.2 percent and 30.9 percent, respectively). Across all professions—social work, psychology, psychiatry, and clergy—psychology was the most frequent profession named as "very effective" for dealing with the "alcoholic adult," "abused child," "marital," "disruptive child," and "sexually abused adult" prob-

lem types. Across all professions, social work was the most frequently affirmed "very effective" profession in dealing with the "domestic violence" and "homelessness" problem types; but was least frequently affirmed as "very effective" for the "alcoholic adult," "marital," and "sexually abused adult" problem types of all the professions.

Moreover, when asked which professional group respondents would be least likely to seek for help, social workers were ranked in the middle of the five other professional groups: psychiatrists (23.9 percent), religious leaders (23.7 percent), social workers (14 percent), psychologists (8.3 percent), and physicians (4.3 percent). Finally, respondents were questioned about how they would feel if their offspring chose a given profession. Social work received the lowest endorsement of respondent's expected "happiness" if a son or daughter went into the profession (39.1 percent) (Table 5). Overall, respondents indicated that their offspring choosing nursing as a profession would bring them the greatest happiness (92.1 percent).

Discussion

Some interesting comparisons can be made between the Condie and colleagues' (1978) study and the present one. Although about 30 years separate the two studies, some of the similarities and differences are noteworthy. Naturally, the inconsistency between the two studies in terms of populations surveyed must be taken into consideration when making such comparisons. With regard to the present study in particular, although a random selection procedure was used, examination of the final sample obtained leaves some

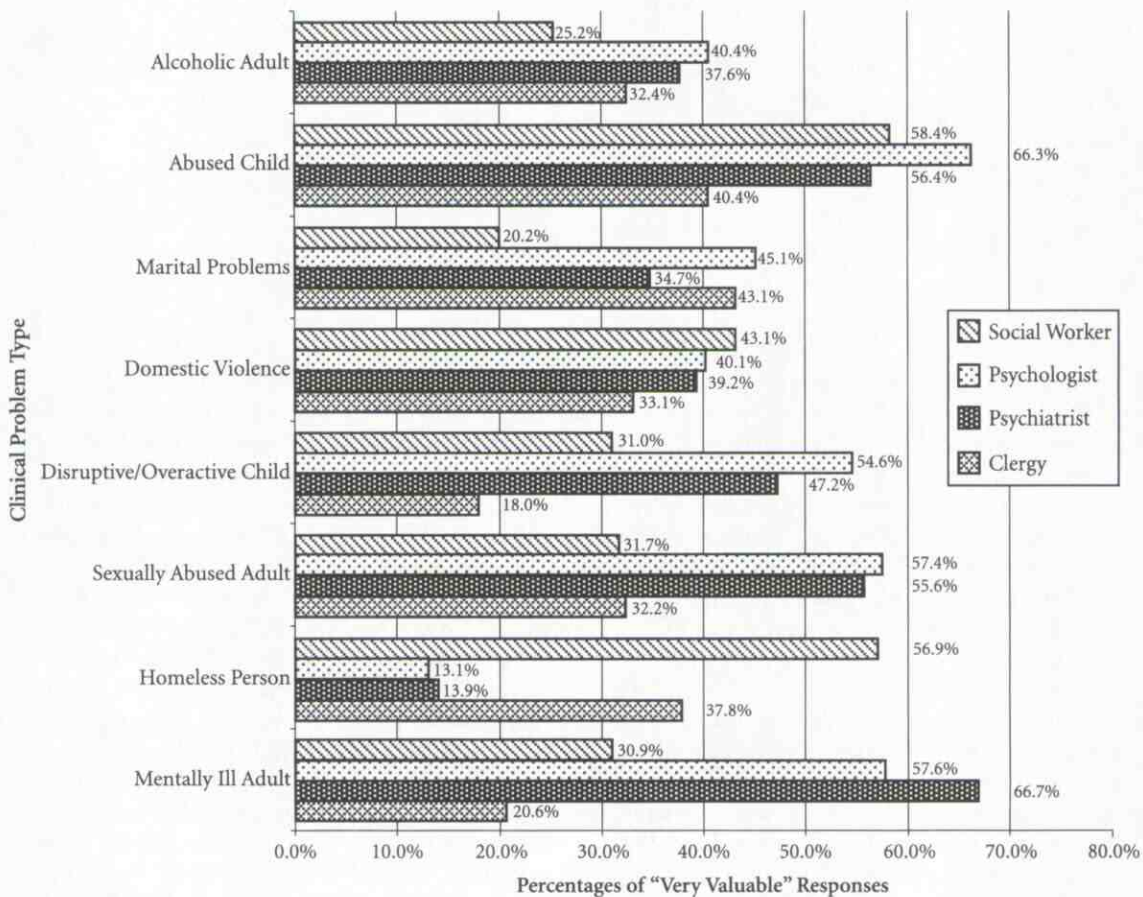
Table 4

Perceived Value of Different Professionals to the Community

Profession	Response Category							
	Very Valuable		Somewhat Valuable		A Little Valuable		Not Very Valuable	
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
Social worker	60.8	228	35.5	133	2.4	9	1.3	5
Psychologist	44.5	167	45.3	170	5.9	22	4.3	16
Psychiatrist	41.9	157	45.9	172	5.6	21	6.7	25
Counselor	58.3	218	36.1	135	4.8	18	0.8	3
Nurse	89.8	336	9.4	35	0.5	2	0.3	1
Clergy	67.7	254	6.9	101	3.2	12	2.1	8

Figure 1

Different Professionals Perceived as "Very Effective" with Particular Problem Types



concern about its representativeness of the U.S. population on several key demographic factors. Of primary concern is the apparent overrepresentation of white women who had some level of higher education. Because these particular characteristics could have the effect of influencing more positive perceptions toward the helping professions as well as increasing the likelihood of seeking services from a helping professional, the potential bias that may have been introduced by the demographic distribution of this sample must be considered when interpreting results. Moreover, given that the primary purpose of this study was to conduct an exploratory and descriptive analysis of contemporary public views toward social work,

a more detailed statistical analysis allowing further examination of these potential sample biases and other issues is left to future articles. Although we felt that it was important to interpret and assign meaning to the data obtained, we acknowledge that the data is open to a number of other interpretations (as is the case with any attempt to assign socially understood meaning to primarily quantitative information).

In exploring similarities between the two studies, a look at changes in perceptions of social work roles over time revealed some interesting results. First, although it might be assumed that as social work roles have expanded over the years, so might the public's exposure to social workers, this does

Table 5

Expectation for Happiness of Offspring According to Profession

Profession	Response Categories								M	SD
	Very Happy		Somewhat Happy		A Little Happy		Unhappy			
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n		
Social worker	39.1	147	43.4	163	11.7	44	5.9	22	1.84	.84
Psychologist	50.1	189	33.2	125	11.1	42	5.6	21	1.72	.87
Psychiatrist	47.1	177	34.8	131	10.1	38	8.0	30	1.78	.92
Nurse	58.4	220	33.7	127	3.7	14	4.2	16	1.53	.76

not necessarily appear to be the case. In the 1978 survey by Condie and colleagues, 54 percent of respondents stated that they were personally acquainted with a social worker. Oddly, in the present study, that number did not increase dramatically (55.9 percent had direct experience with a social worker, and 67.3 percent personally knew a social worker). Second, respondents' agreement with facts and common stereotypes about social workers appeared to have undergone relatively little change between the two studies. Condie and colleagues' results were 93.2 percent (92.4 percent in the present study) for "work with all social classes," 95.6 percent (95.8 percent) for "source of comfort in times of need," 25.2 percent (23.0 percent) "primarily care for people on welfare," 14.8 percent (18.8 percent) "take advantage of the government," and 8.8 percent (7.61 percent) "give people their welfare checks."

The differences in the two studies are also worth mentioning. Although most of the facts and stereotypes examined seem relatively stable based on the comparisons, it does appear that one troubling stereotype has risen. Agreement with the statement that social workers "have the right to take children from parents" increased from 19.6 percent in the Condie and colleagues' (1978) study to 35.0 percent in the present one. This power to break up families that social workers are perceived to wield is particularly concerning in regard to public relations and has probably resulted from a long media history of stereotypically depicting social workers in roles that involve child protective functions, in particular, those involving removal of a child from the home.

In addition, when each study examined some of the roles respondents felt that social workers

perform, it was most striking that in the 1978 study, 58 percent of respondents saw "child protector" as an appropriate role, but in the present study that number increased dramatically to 91.3 percent. In fact, all of the roles examined in the present study were validated at a greater rate than in the 1978 study, even those such as "legal adviser," which are not appropriate for a social worker. Again, because of comparability issues between the two samples, it is difficult to speculate on the reasons for these data patterns. Regarding emerging roles and settings for social workers, it is interesting to note that although awareness of social workers' ability to be in private practice has increased somewhat (40.0 percent in 1978 to 49.7 percent in the present study), awareness of social workers' performance of psychotherapy seems to have decreased (49.0 percent in 1978 to 22.8 percent in the present study).

In their concluding remarks on the results of their study, Condie and colleagues (1978) stated that, "this spot check of the public's attitudes toward social work produced mixed readings but an overall conviction that the profession does not fare as badly in the popular imagination as is sometimes assumed" (p. 52). Much the same can be stated here. The results suggest a generally favorable attitude toward social work and, to some degree, a general understanding of what social workers do. At the same time, it does raise some issues that the profession needs to address.

But first, a more in-depth look at the good news. The data seem to suggest that social workers are by and large viewed in a favorable light, unlike the results reported in the Kaufman and Raymond (1995-1996) study. Perhaps the fact that this current study included respondents from across the

nation, in contrast to one southern state, is in part responsible for this. The questions associated with social work's value to the community and country, the need for more social workers, and respondents' estimations of their happiness in the event that their children became social workers all yielded percentages suggesting positive attitudes toward and beliefs about social workers. For instance, only nurses were ranked as being more valuable to the community than social workers. Moreover, nearly 85 percent of respondents disagreed with the statement that social workers do not make a difference in our country, and approximately 73 percent agreed that we need more social workers. Next, when asked about social workers' degree of effectiveness in helping with a variety of problem types, most respondents seemed to view social workers as helpful to some degree in most situations, although they were regarded as more helpful for some problem types than for others.

The data regarding the role of social workers provided some support for the contention that the public has an improved awareness about the modern range of social work roles and activities and that overall, the public is relatively well aware of the functions social workers perform. As an example of improved awareness of social work roles, social workers serving as "agents of social change" was endorsed by 59.4 percent of respondents, contrasted with 44.8 percent in the Condie and colleagues' (1978) study, the "administrator" role was endorsed by 64.6 percent as opposed to 30.8 percent in the Condie study, and the role of the social worker as "community organizer" was agreed with by 68.8 percent, contrasted with 49.2 percent in the Condie study. However, as an added caveat, despite these improvements in perceptions of potential social work roles, the data did demonstrate that the public still recognizes direct practice roles as the **primary** roles for social workers, as opposed to community practice and social policy-oriented roles. This result could be interpreted in a several ways. For example, rather than viewing it as an indication of lacking awareness or acknowledgment of the ability of social workers to primarily perform nondirect practice functions, it may simply reflect respondents' knowledge that most social workers are still working mainly in the direct practice arena.

In contrast to the more positive findings, some data suggest that the public does not necessarily

share the same level of esteem for social work that the profession would hold for itself, nor does the public fully recognize all of the modern range of social work roles and activities. Looking at the results associated with the various helping situations posed to the respondents, social workers were found to be less helpful than psychologists regarding the majority of problem types presented, with the exceptions of domestic violence and homelessness. Moreover, only somewhat more than one-half of respondents felt that social workers are able to counsel as well as psychologists do, whereas fewer than one-half agreed that they would see a social worker if the fees were less than a psychologist's. Approximately 77 percent of the respondents answered "false" to the statement that social workers perform psychotherapy. In addition, approximately one-half of the respondents did not believe that social workers could be engaged in private practice. Regarding historical roles and activities, social workers still remain largely and stereotypically associated with child abuse and homelessness services issues.

Although the results of this survey are mainly positive and allow room for some degree of optimism about the public's perception of social workers, they do leave the impression that there is still a long road ahead both in terms of enhancing social work's public image and in accurately educating the public about professional social workers' roles, activities, and competencies. This same impression was noted more than 15 years ago by Comley (1985), who commented that the major reason the public does not understand the profession or think positively about social workers is that social workers have not adequately provided the public with information about who they are and what they do. Hence, better information would provide the public a more accurate base on which to judge the social work profession.

Thus, the results of this present survey call into question the issues of where social work fits in with the public's view of the helping professions and how clearly the public truly sees social workers and what they do. If our profession is genuinely concerned with the answers to these questions, we must conduct a closer examination of what can be done to present a more coherent picture of ourselves. One possible answer is provided by Tower (2000) who explained that historically, social workers have left the shaping of social work's public image to media producers who hold

no investment in the future of the profession. Thus, it has been suggested that a lack of positive media attention is the reason that social work is "not uniformly known and endorsed by the public" (Brawley, 1995, p. 1676). Tower suggested that social workers should make a concerted effort to learn about the media and become more involved with it (including producing their own media projects and teaching students about the media in social work courses). In argument for these suggestions, Tower made a poignant statement, "Social workers are responsible for debunking myths when the public is misinformed about the profession and the people served by it. . . . If social work is dissatisfied with its image in television, movies, and popular literature, it must cease its dependency on people outside of the profession to portray it fairly" (p. 575).

In conclusion, it appears that although the situation for social work's public image is not as bad as we might imagine, there is undoubtedly room for growth and improvement. Perhaps most important, but also most daunting, social workers themselves are best suited to enhance the public's knowledge and opinions about the profession. Although we often seem to gently blend into the background, not attracting too much attention; suffice it to say that if we do not develop a level of comfort with singing our own praises, no one else is likely to step forward to sing them for us. ■

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