

Factors Associated with Choosing Social Work as a Major and Timely Graduation

Allison Nelson

East Carolina University

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A student's major is a serious decision that has the potential to impact them for a lifetime. It is not a decision entered into lightly, taking into account many factors that will have a significant effect on their future successes. It is advantageous for faculty members and administrators to be interested in how students make these decisions, as the students are the key to the success of not only individual degree programs, but institutions at large. Ethically and strategically, those in authority should be addressing the factors related to retention of students from the moment they begin their freshman year. A deeper understanding of how students select their major could lead to better strategies on the part of advisors, departments, and whole institutions (Morgan, Jackson, Reeves, & Reece, 2017). For social work, assessing the mindset of prospective students could lead to better recruitment to strengthen and diversify the field (Bowie & Nashwan, 2018). Unfortunately, these factors are rarely studied in the realm of social work education, despite the clear benefits of doing so.

Gender

It is of no surprise to anyone in the social work field to hear that the professional labor force is female-dominated. Gender segregation is still at play in many academic fields of study, social work included. Cultural norms – such as the ideal of femininity – contribute heavily to this divide in academics and professionals. Research holds that many characteristics of femininity are internalized through socialization processes as children and adolescents, and these norms lead to a possible “internalized preference” for “feminine” jobs (Beutel, Burge, & Borden, 2018, p. 115). This often means a career like social work, where the root of the work is in caregiving and is very relationship-oriented. They also suggest that women who conform to this norm expect

less monetary gain and place less importance on STEM, therefore leading them to social work (Beutel, Burge, & Borden, 2018). On the other hand, Hirsbrunner, Loeffler, & Rompf (2012) found that males are generally more motivated by job security and pay rather than humanistic concerns.

Past Experiences and Circumstances

Socioeconomic Status

A student's socioeconomic status (SES) is reported by many to be one of the strongest predictors in the decision-making process for students, namely in the choice of tertiary study. The three main characteristics of SES that factor into student decision making include parents' education levels, parents' occupation, and parents' income. These aspects factor into a student's perceptions of their possibilities in higher education, as well as their perception on life as a whole based on how their SES has impacted their upbringing. Social capital, or the resources that enhance a person's connections with the environment, as well as cultural capital, or the non-economic resources created by high levels of education or the experience of middle to upper class values, are produced as a result of a person's SES throughout their life (Arnaut & Ozlen, 2013). Because SES is interrelated with a number of other factors that affect quality of life, a student will likely take this matter into account when deciding their field of study.

Negatives Experiences & Traumas

When compared to students of other majors, social work students have a high incidence of early-life psychosocial trauma in contrast to their peers. In one study, almost three-fourths of the sample of social work students had experienced a dysfunctional family. Evidence suggests that early negative experiences force some into premature responsibility within their families, therefore predisposing them to a career that takes care of vulnerable others. As a result of early

trauma, many individuals develop empathy, which is a crucial trait social workers must possess (Olson, 2002). Among the traumas experienced by social work students are emotional abuse, sexual abuse, physical illness, mental illness, family tragedy, or other various negative experiences. It is a common trend with social workers that hardships they may have faced early in life motivated them towards the profession in the first place. These traumas indicate a higher level of vulnerability in the field of social work for students and professionals that, for the sake of the well-being of these individuals, deserves to be looked into further to inform practices within education about self-care and to support educational and professional retention (Thomas, 2016). Other social work students reported that they had a negative experience with a social worker and therefore want to create more positive experiences for those who deal with social workers going forward (Stevens et. al., 2012).

Positive or Neutral Experiences

While many social work students report negative early life experiences or poor interactions with past social workers, Dennison, Poole, and Oaqish (2007) found that affiliation with a social worker consistently had a positive impact on interest in the field. Other researchers have consistently noticed this trend to be true, especially when past experiences with social workers were positive ones (Stevens et. al., 2012). More positive experiences noted that led students to social work include high school experiences, job shadowing, and volunteer or paid work in a social work setting (Morgan et. al., 2017 and Dennison et. al., 2007).

Altruism

It is clear among the literature that altruism is one of the top reasons students choose social work. Some wish to tackle specific injustices or inequalities within American society, while others have a more general humanistic motivation. This altruistic motivation suggests an

essential moral element that in turn implies a degree of goodness within those that possess this passion (Stevens et. al., 2012). When researchers asked college students what factors are most important in choosing their career, many answered that making contributions to society was at the forefront. However, little research has explored to what extent this reasoning relates to career outcomes. Specifically, among helping professionals, it is common for them to explain their reasoning as simply wanting to help others (Duffy & Racque-Bogdan, 2010). According to Stevens et. al. (2012), social work students went further to explain that they were motivated by the prospect of empowering others – that is, helping individuals to improve the quality of their own lives. In education and among professionals, social work is ultimately viewed as an attractive career choice that is both meaningful and contributes to societal wellbeing.

Academic Factors

It is notable that in one study, although dated, researchers found that two-thirds of social work students had considered another career path before settling on social work (Hanson & McCullagh, 1995). Another found that helping professionals have more positive academic self-concepts, are more likely to be satisfied with their field of study, expect higher grades, and have intrinsic interests in what they are studying. This same study found that feelings towards previous academic achievement in high school influenced students' value systems. They concluded that while intellect and other “institutional variables” certainly play a role in major selection, they are not the only factor at play (Anne & De Lisi, 2001, p. 45).

Conclusion

While there is an insufficient amount of current research on the specific topic of major selection among social work students, the existing literature is clear and consistent in its research. Among social work students, the noteworthy factors that play a role in major selection

are as follows: femininity and gender, past experiences – most notably early life traumas – altruism, and academic factors. Within these factors exist differences, however the themes are ever-present throughout the research. More exploration is crucial to understanding these common factors and the implications they carry for faculty and administrators on how to recruit and retain students in an effort to strengthen the profession of social work.

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