

2006

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Publication details

Post-print of: Heycox, K & Hughes, M 2006, 'Social work students' attitudes towards and interest in working with older people: an exploratory study', *Advances in Social Work and Welfare Education*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 6-14.

Published version available from:

<http://www.aaswwe.asn.au/journal.php>

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Social work students' attitudes towards and interest in working with older people: an exploratory study

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Abstract

This paper reports on an exploratory study of the attitudes towards older people of final year social work students at the University of New South Wales. It also investigated students' interest in working with older people in the future. While it was found that overall their attitudes were fairly neutral, as with international studies there were slightly more positive attitudes towards the 'young-old' than the 'old-old' and towards older women compared to older men. Additionally female students were slightly more positive than male students in their attitudes towards older people. Interest in working with older people in the future was significantly associated with prior exposure to a course on ageing issues. The paper concludes with recommendations for an audit of program content on ageing issues and the challenge for researchers in accessing students' actual attitudes beyond the neutral and professionally more acceptable responses. It also proposes some other areas for further research, such as an examination of educators' attitudes towards older people.

Social work students' attitudes towards and interest in working with older people: an exploratory study

Background

The opportunities for developing social work practice with older people seem considerable given population ageing and the fact, identified in US studies (Cummings, Galambos and Decoster 2003), that even if social workers are not working specifically in aged care settings they are still likely to have considerable contact with older people. However, despite this there is concern that there is a general lack of interest within the profession in practice with older people. For example, it is notable that in a recent content analysis of articles published between 2002 and 2005 in *Australian Social Work* only 2 (1.8%) of 112 papers related to the aged care field of practice (Bigby 2006).

A particular concern for us, as educators, is understanding students' interest in work with and attitudes towards older people. International studies consistently point to the fact that students in health and social care – including medical, nursing and social work students – frequently see practice with older people as low status and low priority when compared with other user groups or settings (Anderson and Wiscott 2003; Intrieri, Kelly, Brown and Castilla 1993; Scharlach, Damron-Rodriguez, Robinson and Feldman 2000; Weiss, Gal, Cnaan and Maglajlic 2002). In a comparative study of first year social work students' preferences in the UK, USA and Israel, the most preferred service user groups to work with were children and adolescents, while the least preferred agency setting was an old age home (Weiss et al. 2002). In part this may reflect societal ageism: young people, in general, report reasonably high

levels of anxiety about ageing and hold many negative stereotypes about older people (e.g. McConatha, Schnell, Volkwein, Riley and Leach 2003).

Scharlach et al. (2000) raise concerns that such societal stereotypes may be reflected in social workers' practice and policy decisions. Professional ageism may also play a role, particularly in the construction of social work with older people as less skilled work. According to Hugman (2000) practice with older people may not involve as much direct 'change work', as with other user groups, and thus may be mistakenly seen as not as 'real' a form of social work. In our own teaching experience students appeared to have had a limited understanding of the potential range of interventions that may be engaged in with older people, with practical assistance seen as the standard intervention strategy with this service user group. A lack of organisational supports and resources for more innovative work with older people may also act to reduce students' interest in this area of practice.

Specific studies on social work students' attitudes towards older people have been conducted primarily in the United States (Tan, Hawkins and Ryan 2001; Gellis, Sherman and Lawrance 2003; Mason and Sanders 2004; Scharlach et al. 2000; Hatchett, Holmes and Ryan 2002; Anderson and Wiscott 2003), as well as in other countries such as Singapore (Mehta, Tan and Joshi 2001) and Spain (Moraru 2005). Variables identified as correlating with more positive student attitudes towards older people include:

- Prior close relationship with an older person: those students who feel close to an older relative or an older non-relative view older adults more positively (Gorelik,

Damron-Rodriguez, Funderburk and Solomon 2000; Tan et al. 2001; Mehta et al. 2001)

- Exposure to a course on gerontology: where students take specific gerontology classes (especially where contact with older people is included) they tend to view older people more positively (Cummings et al. 2003; Gorelik et al. 2000; Tan et al. 2001).
- Gender of student: while both male and female students tend to be fairly neutral in their attitudes, female students generally appear more positive (Gellis et al. 2003; Tan et al. 2001).

Studies also identify particular qualities of older people which correlate with more positive attitudes. Some results suggest that the 'young-old' tend to be viewed more positively than the 'old-old' (Tan et al. 2001; Mehta et al. 2001; Hatchett et al. 2002), that older women are viewed more positively than older men (Hatchett et al. 2002), and that those who may be perceived to have a better health status are also seen more positively (Hatchett et al. 2002).

This research on social work students' attitudes towards and interest in working with older people emerged from our own awareness that students frequently rate work with older people as a low preference area for placements. We were also conscious of a need for more ageing content across our own social work program and the need for students to be exposed to ageing issues and gain the skills that are required for effective and innovative practice with older people. One strategy introduced to address this is an elective course, entitled 'Reflective Practice with Older People', in the School of Social Work at the University of New South Wales (Hughes and Heycox 2005). Throughout the course we provide students with the

opportunity to reflect on their own and others' ageism and enable them to develop an awareness of the diversity of the older population and the range of skills required to work effectively with this group. Students also consider their own hopes and fears as they grow older, as well as strategies to challenge negative cultural images of ageing. In terms of course content emphasis is not just placed on practical interventions (such as those needed when arranging care packages or residential placement), but also other strategies such as therapeutic work (e.g. around grief and loss), family therapy, and conflict resolution. We also highlight a range of different settings in which social work practice is carried out with older people, not just aged care settings. An additional learning feature of the course is student observations in health and welfare settings where older people are present, such as hospital reception areas, senior citizens centres and day respite centres. While evaluations of the elective course have been positive (Hughes and Heycox 2005), we are aware that not all students are being exposed to this material and thus there is a need to examine in more depth the attitudes and interest levels of the wider year cohort.

Methodology

The sample comprised 4th year social work students who were undertaking their final placement and were present at a placement seminar at the university. The project was given ethics approval by the University of New South Wales and students were advised in advance of the purpose of the research and the voluntary nature of participation. No inducements were offered for participation.

The data were collected via a self-completion questionnaire, comprising mainly forced-choice questions.

Two dependent variables that were examined and that will be referred to in this paper were:

- Attitudes towards groups of older people; that is, attitudes towards women 65-74 years, men 65-74 years, women 75 years plus, and men 75 years plus. This variable was measured using a 20-item semantic Likert scale developed by Sanders, Montgomery, Pittmen and Balkwell (1984), a scale that has been widely used in research on this topic (Mehta et al. 2001; Tan et al. 2001; Hatchett et al. 2002). In this scale respondents are requested to circle a score from 1 to 7 where 1 equals a positive attribute and 7 equals the corresponding negative attribute. For example, 1 = happy, 7 = sad. (The midpoint 4 is neutral.) Prior testing of this instrument has established a Chronbach's alpha score of .967, indicating a high level of internal reliability (Sanders et al. 1984).
- Interest in working with older people; this was measured by a 10-point scale where 1= never want to work with older people and 10 = definitely want to work with older people. We developed this scale for use in a previous study that looked at changes in interest level after exposure a gerontology course (Hughes and Heycox 2005). Having a range of 10 enabled students to present a greater diversity of views than might have been possible with a smaller scale.

The independent variables included:

- Personal characteristics of the students, such as their age and gender.
- Prior relationship and/or work experience with older people. As with prior studies we asked students to identify where they have had at least one self-defined close relationship with an older person. This was further categorised as a personal cohabiting relationship, a personal non-cohabiting relationship, or a relationship established during paid work, a student placement/practicum, or while carrying out volunteer work.
- Exposure to any prior courses on ageing at university or elsewhere.

Data were analysed through frequency distributions and univariate statistics. Bivariate relationships were also analysed through comparison of means, t-tests and ANOVA.

Correlation coefficients were produced by the eta statistic. Like other correlation statistics the closer the eta score is to 1 the greater the association between the two variables, while the closer the score is to 0 the lower the association.

Limitations to the study include the fact that the research was carried out with one cohort of students at one university and consequently the sample was relatively small, particularly the sub-group of males. Another limitation was that the researchers were known to the students in their role as university lecturers. A further limitation, in terms of establishing causal relationships, was that we only surveyed the students at one point in time and that the study was not set up with a pre-test of the dependent variables or a control group.

Findings

Sample characteristics

Fifty five (85%) students completed the questionnaire out of the total 65 final year students. Of the 10 that were missing one did not wish to complete the questionnaire and the other nine were absent from the seminar. The mean age of the sample was 25.3 years; the median age was 23 years; with the youngest being 21 years and the oldest 42 years. Of the sample 49 (89.1%) were female. Thirty-four students identified their ethnicity as Australian, and a further four identified as European Australian, two as Australian Asian, one as South American Australian and one as Middle Eastern Australian. The remaining students identified their ethnicity as European (3), UK (3), Asian (4), Pacific Islands (1), New Zealand (1) and Eurasian (1).

Prior close relationship with an older person

As with international studies (Gorelik et al. 2000) the vast majority of the sample had at least one close relationship with an older person (52 of the students or 95%). The non-cohabiting personal (e.g. family or friend) relationship was the most frequently reported type of close relationship (40 students or 73%). While 17 (31%) students in the sample reported having at least one close cohabiting personal relationship, a smaller number of students (13 or 24 %) reported a close relationship while on a student placement, on paid work (10 or 18%) or on volunteer work (5 or 9%). One student reported a close relationship with an older neighbour.

Attended a prior course

Just under half (23 or 42%) of the students had previously attended a course on ageing issues. It should be noted that most of these (18 or 33% of the sample) had attended an elective course on 'Reflective Practice with Older People' run in the School of Social Work. Only 5% of the students had attended a course on ageing/older people as part of their work and 4% had attended one run by a non-government organisation.

Interest in working with older people

In relation to student interest in working with older people in the future, the average score for this sample was 5.13 (10 = definitely want to work with older people); while the median was 5. This indicates only a moderate interest in working with older people. In terms of range, three people scored 1 and three people scored 2. That is, 11% of the students were in the low interest range. At the other end two people scored 9 and three scored 10. That is, 9% were in the highest interest level range.

We looked at a range of factors that may have impacted on students' interest in working with older people. There were no significant relationships identified between interest levels and age or gender of students, or the type of prior close relationship with an older person. We did, however, identify significant positive relationships between prior exposure to a course on ageing issues and interest in working with older people (see Table 1). This relationship was even stronger for those who had attended the elective course on ageing in the School of Social Work, compared with those who had no prior exposure to a course on ageing issues.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Attitudes towards older people

In terms of students' attitudes towards older people, the average scores for all groups of older people were mainly in the neutral to positive range (see Table 2). The less positive scores related to perceptions about older people as active, healthy, flexible, progressive and uncomplaining. Most positive scores related to older people being seen as wise, kind, knowledgeable, trustworthy, friendly and good.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

In relation to the attitudes composite score (where 20 = most positive and 140 = most negative), students had more positive attitudes towards older women (an average of 65.9) than towards older men (68.8) and were also more positive towards the 65-74 year olds (64.5) than the 75 plus age group (71.5). This trend of less positive attitudes towards the older groups and towards men was reflected across most of the characteristics studied. For example, Table 3 highlights the scores in relation to the least positive items. No significant associations were identified between students' age, exposure to an ageing course or the nature of their prior close relationship with an older person and their attitudes towards the four target subgroups of older people.

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

As Table 4 illustrates, there were some consistent differences between male and female students' attitudes, however these differences were not statistically significant. This is most likely because of the small number of men in the sample – a factor common to social work programs. In this sample male students demonstrated less positive attitudes than female students. Again, however, it is important to note that the students did not rate any of the groups of older people in the negative range of scores.

INSERT TABLE 4 HERE

Discussion and implications

While the limitations of the study need to be borne in mind, overall the results of this research are consistent with international findings on social work students' attitudes towards older people and their interest in working with them in the future. It is notable that in our study the nature of a prior close relationship with an older person was not significantly associated with interest levels or attitudes. Overall, students' interest in working with older people was moderate and arguably moderate-to-low for those who had never attended a course on ageing issues. Similarly students' attitudes tended to range between positive and neutral; rarely did they report negative attitudes towards older people. This finding and the range of positive and less positive responses provided by the students are broadly in line with other studies (Mehta et al. 2001; Tan et al. 2001; Hatchett et al. 2002). It is noteworthy that students' less positive perceptions of older people related to such items as their levels of activity, health, and flexibility, while their most positive perceptions related to items as wise,

kind and trustworthy. These results tend to reflect both the common negative and positive stereotypes of older people.

While on the surface it is reassuring that social work students did not express overtly negative attitudes towards older people, we are unable to discount social desirability as playing a role in students' responses. On reflection we maintain concerns that where students are required to make choices in terms of their learning, such as for placements and elective courses, they tend not to choose practice with older people. Previous research on attitudes instruments suggests that they are particularly susceptible to students adjusting their views in line with their perception of the desired responses and to appear non-judgemental (Morrison and Morrison 2002). That our research was carried out by their university lecturers may have exacerbated this problem, especially for the group who did the 'Reflective Practice with Older People' course. Attitudes towards older people instruments need to better account for such factors. Lessons may be learned from the development of homophobic attitudes instruments (Morrison and Morrison 2002), which have strived to overcome this problem. Further development of attitudes towards older people instruments is needed to ensure that any hidden negative attitudes or stereotypes are able to be measured.

Attendance at a course on ageing issues was a factor that was related to interest in working with older people, although unlike other studies (Gorelik et al. 2000; Tan et al. 2001; Mehta et al. 2001) in this study it was not found to be associated with more positive attitudes. Given that this study did not involve a pre-test or a control group it is difficult to determine the degree of impact of the course on students' interest levels. It is possible that they were already interested in work with older people (that is why they chose the course) or that other

intervening variables affected the result. Nonetheless the result does conform to international findings, including those based on more rigorous quasi-experimental designs (Cummings et al. 2003; Gorelik et al. 2000).

Consistently students reported less positive attitudes towards the older target groups (i.e. 75 years and over); again these findings confirm those of international studies (Tan et al. 2001; Mehta et al. 2001; Hatchett et al. 2002). It is possible that perceptions of reduced health among the older age groups, as hypothesised by Hatchett et al. (2002), may have influenced students' responses to some items. However, while less positive attitudes may be expected towards the 'old-old' group in relation to items such as health, dependency, or the perception of them as active, it is surprising that these trends were apparent across most attitude items. And although the results were not statistically significant, it is notable that male students were consistently less positive towards each of the four target groups than female students; this appears in line with significant findings from previous research (Gellis et al. 2003; Tan et al. 2001).

Further research in this area may benefit from an investigation of academic and field staff's attitudes towards older people and a comparison of these with students' attitudes. More detailed examination of how students perceive work with older people would also be valuable. This may include an analysis of what intervention strategies (e.g. counselling, practical assistance, case management) students believe are possible and appropriate with this service user group, and to what extent these strategies are viewed as challenging or interesting. It may also be of value to compare the attitudes of students from different year cohorts, as well as study attitudes over time and at different tertiary institutions.

Given the findings identified in this study and those from previous international research, we would emphasise the importance of social work students being exposed to ageing issues, both in stand alone courses and integrated in a range of different courses throughout a degree program. Such courses could include content that challenges students' ageism, including their stereotypes and negative images of old age. For example, educators could invite older people from community organisations to be guest lecturers. Additionally, older people could be included in case scenarios and role plays used in different courses across the program. These scenarios and role plays would not necessarily have to focus on aged care, but simply include older people as significant figures in other people's lives (e.g. as lobbyists or community advocates).

Although our study did not identify significant relationships between the type of close relationship with an older person and students' attitudes and interest levels, overseas studies have identified the importance of exposure of students to older people in promoting more positive attitudes. This latter point was borne out in the evaluation of the elective course run at the University of New South Wales, with students particularly valuing their observations of older people in health, welfare and aged care settings (Hughes and Heycox 2005).

Consequently we would still emphasise the importance of social work students gaining more practice experience (e.g. placements) in aged care settings and in other settings – such as hospitals and Centrelink – where older people are likely to be present. Educational strategies can be enhanced by the inclusion of direct contacts between students and older people. More generally the social work profession could promote work with older people as an important and skilled field of practice. As a starting point for these strategies we would recommend an

audit of gerontology content in social work programs. This would be a similar audit to that recently conducted on the level of mental health content in Australian social work degrees (National Standards Implementation Group Secretariat 2003).

Conclusion

This paper reported on a study of final year social work students and found that exposure to a course on ageing issues was associated with students' interest in working with older people in the future. While student attitudes were generally in the neutral range, the old-old and older men were viewed less positively than the young-old and older women. More work needs to be done to obtain a better insight into the actual attitudes of students, in light of our perception that their responses on research instruments do not fully match the choices they make. Also in terms of the extent of exposure of students to both course content on ageing and older people, we need more information on what social work courses are currently doing via an audit of social work programs. It is critical that we gain a better understanding of students' attitudes towards and interest in working with older people given population ageing and the increasing opportunities for social work practice with older people both in aged care and other settings. As a profession social work has much to offer in the delivery of services to older people. However – as evidenced in the small number of papers on aged care published recently in *Australian Social Work* (Bigby 2006) – there is still a long way to go in advancing social work scholarship and practice with older people.

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Table 1: Interest in working with older people by prior attendance at an ageing course (n=55)

	Mean	<i>F</i> -score	Eta
No prior course attended	4.37		
Any prior course attended	6.35	5.27	.414**
Elective course attended	6.78	14.67	.467***

** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 2: Attitudes towards older people (n=55)

Characteristic	Mean	Characteristic	Mean
Wise	2.56	Happy	3.47
Knowledgeable	2.62	Independent	3.61
Interesting	2.68	Optimistic	3.76
Kind	2.80	Attractive	3.78
Good	2.82	Tolerant	3.87
Trustworthy	2.83	Healthy	3.92
Friendly	2.87	Uncomplaining	3.92
Generous	3.12	Active	4.02
Neat	3.19	Flexible	4.05
Productive	3.46	Progressive	4.25

Note: 1 = most positive, 4= neutral, 7 = most negative

Table 3: Age & gender older people target groups by less positive characteristics (n=55)

	Healthy v. Sick	Active v. Inactive	Flexible v. Inflexible	Progressive v. Conservative
Women 65-74	3.52	3.69	3.69	4.00
Men 65-74	3.71	3.67	3.97	4.12
Women 75+	4.11	4.36	4.24	4.47
Men 75+	4.34	4.36	4.31	4.42

Note: 1 = most positive, 4 = neutral, 7 = most negative

Table 4: Age & gender of older people target groups by student gender (n=55)

	Female	Male	Total
Women 65-74	62.2	69.5	62.9
Men 65-74	65.4	70.8	66.1
Women 75+	68.4	72.5	68.8
Men 75+	70.9	75.6	71.5

Note: 20 = most positive, 80 = neutral, 140 = most negative