

2007

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Publication details

Post-print of: Heycox, K & Hughes, M 2007, 'What influences social work students' knowledge of, attitudes towards and interest in working with older people?', *Journal of Social Policy and Social Work*, vol. 11, pp. 49-59.

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What influences social work students' knowledge of, attitudes towards, and interest in working with older people?

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Summary

This paper reports on a study of the knowledge of and attitudes towards older people of fifty-five final year social work students at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia. It also investigated students' interest in working with older people in the future.

In terms of knowledge of older people's issues no student got all answers correct on a knowledge/myths instrument but prior participation in gerontology courses was positively correlated with scores on the instrument. Completion of gerontology courses was also positively correlated with interest in working with older people. No relationships were identified between type of prior relationships between students and older people and their knowledge or interest levels. While it was found that overall their attitudes towards older people 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.

The paper concludes with recommendations for an audit of program content on gerontology issues. The paper also notes the difficulty for researchers in accessing students' actual attitudes beyond the neutral and professionally more acceptable responses. Such courses need to challenge the common myths associated with ageing and should promote social work with older people as stimulating work that requires knowledge and skills to work in complex contexts.

Background

Population ageing points to the need for an increase in the number of social workers who can work competently with the diverse older population and their families and friends (Scharlach et al. 2000; Berkman et al. 2000). This ability to work effectively is significant whether the social workers are working in ageing-related areas or not. In their United States study Cummings et al. (2003) noted that most social work graduates, even those not working in specific ageing-related services, have some contact with older people and require relevant knowledge and skills.

Despite this situation, 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 et al. 1993, Scharlach et al. 2000, Weiss et al. 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).

Lack of interest among social workers has been linked to a lack of appreciation of the complexity of the concerns of older people (Berkman et al. 2000), to both personal and professional ageism, and a lack of supports within organisations (Scharlach et al. 2000). 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 et al. 2003). Scharlach et al. (2000) raise concerns that such stereotypes may be reflected in social workers' practice and policy decisions. A particular negative consequence is 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. Of similar concern are myths around the current and potential strengths of older people and therefore their ability to be centrally involved in more challenging interventions such as mediation, therapy, and advocacy. 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' knowledge of, attitudes towards and interest in working with older people have been conducted primarily in the United States (Tan et al. 2001, Gellis et al. 2003, Mason and Sanders 2004, Scharlach et al. 2000, Hatchett et al. 2002, Anderson and Wiscott 2003), as well as in other countries such as Singapore (Mehta et al. 2000) and Spain (Moraru 2005). This research suggests that where students participate in a gerontology course, particularly where they are in some contact with older people, they tend to have a more positive perspective of older people and seem to have an increased interest in working with them (Cummings et al. 2003; Gorelik et al. 2000; Olson 2002; Tan et al. 2001). Gorelik et al. (2000) advocate for more specific gerontology modules within courses. It should also be noted that knowledge about older people and their concerns can be obtained not only from such specific courses but also from personal and work contacts with older people (Cummings 2003). In a controlled US study of social work undergraduates, personal contact with older people was significant in their interest in

ageing and also in their interest to study and work in the area (Gorelik et al. 2000).

Additionally, research shows that students are more inclined positively towards older people where they have had a close personal relationship with an older person (Tan et al. 2001; Mehta et al. 2000). 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. 2000, 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' knowledge of, 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 field education. It should be noted that field education is a significant component in social work programs in Australia and comprises a minimum of 140 days across at least two fieldwork placements. We were also conscious of a lack of gerontology content across our own social work program and the need for students to be exposed to ageing issues and gain the skills and knowledge that are required for effective and innovative aged care practice. It is notable that within the four-year Bachelor of Social Work degrees in Australia there is no specific requirement that gerontology content be provided, although it is likely to be included in some core courses, particularly as case examples and in theoretical material relating to lifespan development.

One response to this need for more gerontology content was the development of an elective course, 'Reflective Practice with Older People', in the School of Social Work at the University of New South Wales (Hughes and Heycox 2005). Students are requested to choose one elective course out of four to develop greater awareness of a particular target group. This course aimed to challenge students' attitudes and dispel some of their myths in relation to their knowledge of older people and their issues. Throughout the course we provided students with the opportunity to reflect on their own and others' ageism and enabled them to develop an awareness of the diversity of the older population and the range of skills and knowledge areas required to work effectively with this group. Students also considered their own hopes and fears as they grow older, as well as strategies to challenge negative cultural images of ageing. One of the important learning features of the course was student observations in settings where older people were present, such as hospital reception areas and day respite centres. While evaluations of the elective course were positive (Hughes and Heycox 2005), we were aware that not all students were being exposed to this material and felt the need to examine in more depth the knowledge, attitudes and interest levels of the wider year student cohort.

Methodology

The sample for this study comprised final year social work students enrolled in the four-year Bachelor of Social Work degree at the University of New South Wales. The project was approved by the University's Human Research Ethics Committee. Participation was entirely voluntary and no inducements were offered to students.

Data were collected through a self-completion questionnaire comprising closed questions.

Three dependent variables were examined:

1. *Knowledge of ageing issues* was measured by a 12-item knowledge/myths instrument adapted from one developed in the United States by Olson (2002). This was a TRUE/FALSE quiz that addresses common myths of ageing and practice knowledge. Correct answers were scored 1 while incorrect answers were scored as 0, meaning that the maximum score any student could achieve was 12.
2. *Interest in working with older people* was measured by a 10-point scale where 1 equalled 'I never want to work with older people' and 10 equalled 'I definitely want to work with older people'. This instrument was developed by the authors for use in a previous study that examined the impact of a gerontology course on students' interest in work with older people (Hughes and Heycox 2005).
3. *Attitudes towards older people* were measured by a 20-item semantic Likert scale developed by Sanders, Montgomery, Pittmen and Balkwell (1984). This instrument has been widely used in prior literature (Mehta et al. 2000; Tan et al. 2001; Hatchett et al. 2002) and has demonstrated a Chronbach alpha level of .967 (Sanders et al. 1984). Each item on this instrument requires a score from 1 to 7 where 1 equals a positive attribute and 7 equals a negative attribute. In our study students were asked to rate each item for four groups of older people distinguished by age and gender: women aged 65-74, men aged 65-74, women aged 75 and over, and men aged 75 and over.

The independent variables studied included students' personal characteristics (e.g. age and gender) and prior completion of a gerontology course. Students were also asked if they have had at least one prior (self-defined) close relationship with an older person. These relationships were further categorised as being a personal relationship (cohabiting or non-cohabiting) or a work-based relationship (paid work, volunteer work or student placement).

The data were analysed through frequency distributions and univariate statistics. Analysis was conducted by a comparison of means, t-tests and ANOVA. The eta correlation coefficient was calculated as appropriate for interval dependent variables and nominal independent variables. Correlational analysis involving the age variable employed Pearson's r correlation coefficient. As with all correlation statistics, the closer the Pearson's r and eta scores are 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

Respondent characteristics

The sample comprised 55 (85%) of the 65 final year students who were undertaking their final fieldwork placement. The questionnaire was administered during a seminar on campus. All but one of those who attended agreed to participate in the study, while the remaining nine students were absent from the seminar.

Most students in the study were female (49 or 89%), with an average age of 25.3 (SD \pm 5.48, range 21-41). In terms of ethnicity, 35 (64%) students identified themselves as being of Australian or New Zealand background, while 10 (18%) identified as coming from European (including UK) background, 7 (13%) from an Asian background, and one each from South American, Middle Eastern and Pacific Islands backgrounds.

Prior close relationship

Most students (52 or 95%) reported having had at least one prior close relationship with an older person. Most commonly a non-cohabiting personal relationship was reported (40 or 73%), followed by a cohabiting personal relationship (17 or 31%). A smaller number of students reported a close relationship in a work context: 13 (24%) while on a student placement, 10 (18%) in paid work, and 5 (9%) while doing volunteer work.

Gerontology course attendance

Twenty-three (42%) students had previously attended a gerontology course. Most commonly (18 or 33%) this had been the course 'Reflective Practice with Older People' run by the School of Social Work. Five others (9%) had attended a course on ageing issues conducted by their employer or by a non-government organisation.

Knowledge of ageing issues

The average score on the knowledge/myths instrument was 8.5 (SD \pm 1.62, range 5-11). This represents an average 70% success rate. No students got all answers correct. Table 1 presents the percentages of correct answers for each of the items of this quiz, reordered from lowest number of correct responses to highest.

Table 1: Correct responses to knowledge/myths quiz (n=55)

Statement	Correct answer	Number correct	Percent correct
People become more resistant to change as they get older.	FALSE	15	27.3
The percentage of older people who live in nursing homes has been decreasing in the last two decades.	TRUE	22	40.0
Memory problems may be a sign of depression in older adults.	TRUE	23	41.8
Older people who are admitted to nursing homes are older and sicker than they used to be.	TRUE	27	49.1
Life satisfaction is at least as high among older people as among young people.	TRUE	37	67.3
Families are generally too quick to place their elderly relatives in nursing homes.	FALSE	37	67.3
The majority of older people live independently without assistance with activities of daily living.	TRUE	42	76.4
Alzheimer's Disease usually has a sudden and severe onset.	FALSE	51	92.7
Tactile communication, or touch, is less appropriate with older clients than with younger ones.	FALSE	52	94.5
Women and men are just as well off financially in their older age.	FALSE	52	94.5
When older clients have cognitive impairment, it is unnecessary to obtain their involvement in decisions.	FALSE	53	96.4
The risk of developing dementia increases with advancing age.	TRUE	54	98.2

No significant correlations were identified between students' knowledge of ageing issues (as measured by the knowledge/myths instrument) and their age, gender or type of prior relationship with an older person. However, as illustrated in Table 2, significant

relationships were identified between completion of a gerontology course and students' results on the knowledge/myths instrument. Those who had completed a gerontology course scored on average 9.4 (out of 12) compared to 7.8 for those who had not attended such a course. Those students who attended the elective course 'Reflective Practice with Older People' scored on average 9.6. As indicated by the eta correlation coefficients, these results suggest a moderate relationship between completion of a gerontology course and knowledge of ageing issues.

Table 2: Knowledge of ageing issues by prior attendance at an ageing course (n=55)

	Mean	F-score	Eta
No prior course attended	7.8		
Any prior course attended	9.4	16.80	.49***
Elective course attended	9.6	18.09	.53***

*** $p < .001$

Interest in working with older people

On the 10-point interest scale (where 10 equals definitely interested in working with older people) the average score was 5.13 (SD \pm 2.45, range 1-10). This indicates only a moderate interest in working with older people in the future. Six students (11%) recorded 1 or 2 at the lowest end of the scale while five students (9%) recorded 9 or 10 at the upper end.

Significant relationships were identified between prior exposure to a gerontology course and interest in working with older people (see Table 3). The mean score for those who had

never attended a gerontology course was 4.37 compared to 6.35 for those who had attended such a course and 6.78 for those who had attended the elective course ‘Reflective Practice with Older People’. No significant relationships were identified between the interest variable and students’ age, gender or type of prior relationship with an older person.

Table 3: Interest in working with older people by prior attendance at an ageing course (n=55)

	Mean	F-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

Attitudes towards older people

Students’ attitudes towards older people generally fell in the neutral to positive range on the 20-item semantic Likert scale. In Table 4 these results have been reordered from the most positive to the least positive. The less positive scores on this instrument related to older people being perceived as inactive, sick, inflexible, conservative and complaining. The most positive scores related to older people being seen as wise, kind, knowledgeable, trustworthy, friendly and good.

Table 4: Attitudes towards older people (n=55)

Characteristic	Mean	Characteristic	Mean
Wise/Foolish	2.56	Happy/Sad	3.47
Knowledgeable/Ignorant	2.62	Independent/Dependent	3.61
Interesting/Boring	2.68	Optimistic/Pessimistic	3.76
Kind/Unkind	2.80	Attractive/Unattractive	3.78
Good/Bad	2.82	Tolerant/Intolerant	3.87
Trustworthy/Untrustworthy	2.83	Healthy/Sick	3.92
Friendly/Unfriendly	2.87	Uncomplaining/Complaining	3.92
Generous/Selfish	3.12	Active/Inactive	4.02
Neat/Untidy	3.19	Flexible/Inflexible	4.05
Productive/Unproductive	3.46	Progressive/Conservative	4.25

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

Some differences were noted in students' attitudes towards particular groups of older people as distinguished by gender and age. Composite scores for the four groups of older people ranged from 20 (most positive) to 140 (most negative). Students generally displayed more positive attitudes towards older women (65.9) than older men (68.8) and towards people in the 65-74 age range (64.5) rather than those 75 years of age and over (71.5). This trend was reflected across most items of the scale. In Table 5 the scores for the least positive items are presented to illustrate this pattern. No significant associations were identified between students' age, completion of a gerontology course or the nature of their prior close relationship with an older person and their attitudes towards the four target subgroups of older people.

Table 5: Age and gender 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

Some differences were noted according to the gender of students and their attitudes towards these particular groups of older people. As illustrated in Table 6, male students were generally less positive towards each group of older people than were female students. These results were not statistically significant, most likely due to the small number of men in the sample. This is consistent with the gender make-up of social work programs in Australia.

Table 6: Age and 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

Discussion and implications

While there is some variation, overall the results of this Australian study are consistent with international findings on social work students' knowledge of and 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 knowledge, 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. Students demonstrated only about a 70% understanding of ageing issues, as measured by the knowledge/myths instrument. It is particularly concerning that most students felt that older people are less able to change than younger people. There was also a clear lack of knowledge about the shifts that have taken place in the aged care sector, notably the increasing proportions of older Australians receiving care in the community rather than in institutional care.

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. 2000, 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 such as wise, kind and trustworthy. Like the results on the knowledge/myths instrument, these results on attitudes also 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 fieldwork placements and elective courses in social work, they tend not to choose aged care practice. 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. 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 an important factor that was related to knowledge of and interest in working with older people, although unlike other studies (Gorelik et al. 2000, Tan et al. 2001, Mehta et al. 2000) in this study it was not found to be associated with more positive attitudes. Given that this study did not involve a pre- and post-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 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. 2000, 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).

Given the findings identified in this study we would emphasise the importance of social work students being exposed to ageing issues, both in elective courses and integrated throughout core courses within the degree program. An important focus of such courses should be content which challenges students' stereotypes and negative images of old age. Although our study did not identify significant relationships between the type of close relationship with an older person and students' attitudes, knowledge 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 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. field placements) in aged care settings and in other settings where older people are likely to be present. Educational strategies should maximise and foster direct contacts between students and older people. More generally the social work profession should 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 aged care and ageing 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 despite having been conducted in Australia, the issues around student knowledge of older people's issues, their attitudes towards and interest in working with older people are very relevant to other countries. The research found that exposure to a gerontology course was associated with students' knowledge of and interest in working with older people. 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 the coverage of gerontology issues on social work degrees via an audit of social work programs. All gerontology content, whether it is in elective courses or integrated within core courses, needs to challenge the common myths associated with

ageing and should promote social work with older people as stimulating work that requires knowledge and skills to work in complex contexts.

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