

Undergraduate Students' Motives for Studying Social Work: The Case of Estonia

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Abstract

This article examines Estonian undergraduate social work students' (n = 73) motives for studying social work. Using qualitative data (reflective journaling), students' responses indicated altruistic values as one of the dominant reasons for enrolling social work studies, specifically in two categories: helping others and self-realization. The study found that direct and indirect experience of social services can be also seen as influential motive for the students. Students' reflections suggest that a career factor "different career choices" suggests that students find the diverse nature of the social work profession attractive, enabling to work in different settings with different people and organizations. Recommendations for future research are outlined.

Keywords: Social work, students, reflective journaling, university, altruistic values, Estonia

1. Introduction

Career choice is a very important type of choice people make in their lives (Li, Hou, & Jia, 2015). The motivation functions as a decisive factor in choosing the profession (see Urbonienė & Leliūgienė, 2004). Social work is one of the professions in which the universe of moral values plays an important role (Giurgiu & Adrian Marica, 2013, p. 373). As Bogo (2006) indicates, “mastery of social work practice involves the integration of the knowledge and value base of the profession with the personal self of the social worker” (p. 3). Social work education has a significant role helping students to acquire social work values (Urbonienė & Leliūgienė, 2007). Therefore, the intent of this qualitative study was to gain a greater understanding of Estonian undergraduate social work students’ decision to enroll in social work studies. To provide context for the study, a brief overview of the literature related to the conceptual basis for the study is provided.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 The Profession of Social Work

National Association of Social Workers (2008) define the primary mission of the social work profession as to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people. Social workers promote social justice and social change with and on behalf of clients. Kopeikin Brill (2001) and Bradley, Maschi, O’Brien, Morgen & Ward (2012) emphasise the commitment to improving the lives and circumstances of most vulnerable. This profession is conditioned by the acceptance of essential attributes strongly influenced by a set of moral values such as equity, social justice, human solidarity, respect and care for others (Giurgiu & Adrian Marica 2013, p. 373). Historically, the social work profession has demonstrated its unique commitment to honouring the dignity and worth of human beings and belief in the transformational power of human relationships (Norton, 2012, p. 299).

Nsonwu, Casey, Cook & Armendariz (2013) discuss the concept of head, hand, heart, and soul which are reflections of the complex experiences of social workers and the wisdom of practice in action; the head indicates to learning the applicable laws and policies of social work, hand is the core of social work interaction with clients, heart symbolises the emotional call to serve those in need, and soul refer to beliefs concept that supports and sustains a commitment to the profession in times when social workers are challenged with ethical and moral dilemmas. Urbonienė & Leliūgienė (2004) state that the competences in this profession should be developed in the course of training through theoretical studies and practical activity. They elaborate further that only education is not sufficient because the quality of social work depends also on individual’s specific features, physiological characteristics, value system, professional interests and other factors.

2.1 Studies on Motives for Studying Social Work

Students enter the field of social work for a wide variety of reasons, but nearly all are motivated to help people (Hanson & McCullagh, 1995: see Pope & Kang, 2011, 442). Research with social work students has suggested that, as well as altruistic values, personal life experiences may influence career choice (see Moriarty & Murray, 2007), also knowledge and interest in social work settings, self-realisation, thinking one is good at an activity, ideological coherence, direct exposure to work-relevant activities, etc. (Bright, Pryor, Wilkenfeld, & Earl, 2005; Campanini & Facchini, 2013; Dennison, Poole, & Qaqish, 2007; Lent et al., 2002). Bright, Pryor, Wilkenfeld & Earl (2005, p. 22) discuss about contextual factors, which can be divided into structural (environmental influences surrounding us, e.g., opportunities to engage in different activities or vocations, socio-economic factors, geographic factors, and educational opportunities) and personal environmental influence (e.g., parental and family influences, friends, teachers, etc.).

3. Method

3.1 Sample

The study was conducted among second year undergraduate social work students participating an elective class “Basics of Child Protection” at one university in Estonia. All 81 students who enrolled in the class were invited to participate in the study; 76 students provided agreement, representing a response rate of 93.8%. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 26 years. Gender distribution shows that most of the respondents were female (n = 73).

3.2 Data Collection

To achieve the study objective, reflective journaling format was used for data collection. There is an increasing amount of writings about the value of the reflective journaling (Epp, 2008; Harris, 2008; Goodsett, 2014; Wong, Kember, Chung, & Yan, 1995; Lavery, 2012; Langley & Brown, 2010). Langley & Brown (2010) address that reflective journaling enables students to practice critical analysis and reasoning. According to Goodsett (2014), reflective journaling can be stream of consciousness. At the end of each class, students were given questions to reflect their thoughts about discussed subject (new ideas and concepts, e.g., three important keywords from today’s class and explain why; 3–2–1: three new skills/knowledge/information I have learned, two questions I have and one thought/skill that I would like to explore/develop further etc.). Students were instructed to record their answers in their journals. At the end of the class (November 2014), the students’ journals were reviewed by the authors of the current article in order to identify students’ motives for studying social work and also to gain feedback for the course. All participants gave their informed consent to participate in the study and were not compensated.

3.3 Data Analysis

The following question of the journal is analysed in this article—why did I enroll in social work studies? The data was analysed using the principles of content analysis, informed primarily by Padgett (2008), consisting of unitising, categorising and pattern searching. The data was manually coded. First, the responses were read through in order to gain an overall understanding of the nature of the data. Coding involved repeated readings of the journals to discover patterns in order to code the data into potential meaning units. Next, after responses were read independently and initial labels (sub-categories, categories and domains) compiled, the author and the co-author discussed the findings and establish a list of labels (these were compared and refined, and listed under existing or new labels). Consistency in the common labels was achieved by reaching a consensus. The responses were then read again to extract quotes supporting these labels. Thus, the reliability of the data analysis was enhanced by two researchers (the author and the co-author) conducting the data analysis. Sample extracts for nature of questions are presented in Table 1 to illustrate the connections between the raw data and the conclusions drawn. The responses were quantified in order to see the frequencies of responses. Data analysis was conducted in the Estonian language, and afterwards translated into English.

4. Results

Students provided different reasons for enrolling in social work studies. Based on the data analysis, five main domains can be outlined: (i) altruistic values, (ii) personal environmental influence, (iii) career factors, (iv) educational opportunities, and (v) other motivations, see Table 1.

Table 1. Students' motives for studying social work

Domains, categories, subcategories, and examples	Frequency
ALTRUISTIC VALUES	
Helping others, e.g., <i>"I wanted to help people and solve their problems"</i>	52
Self-realization (promotion of the profession, self-growth), e.g., <i>"I want to see the change in the society and I want to part of it"</i> , <i>"I want to accomplish something"</i>	26
Ideology	
Humanity, e.g., <i>"I believe in humane and holistic approach with people"</i>	3
Basic values and ethics of helping profession coincide with personal values, e.g., <i>"I have seen lot of injustice related to people"</i>	2
PERSONAL ENVIRONMENTAL INFLUENCE	
Personal experience of social services	
Need in the family: direct (self, disabled brother, grandmother, parental alcohol abuse), e.g., <i>"I have a brother with special needs and that has influenced my career choice"</i>	18
Need in the community: indirect (neighbours, other community members), e.g., <i>"I saw people who needed help from a social worker and I became interested"</i>	11
Volunteer work, e.g., <i>"Most of my free time I have spent helping those in need of support"</i>	3
Personal qualities	
Characteristics (tolerance, patience, positivity, good communication skills, cooperation), e.g., <i>"I am tolerant and a good listener"</i>	12
Self-challenge, e.g., <i>"I wanted to challenge myself"</i>	4
Family influence	
Parent (mother as a social worker), e.g., <i>"I have been growing up with a social worker"</i>	2
Sibling (sister as a social work student), e.g., <i>"my older sister studied this profession and suggested me to take the same path because of my personal characteristics"</i>	1
Career counselling, e.g., <i>"the test indicated that I should work with people"</i>	1
CAREER FACTORS	
Different career choices (across disciplines, with different clients), e.g., <i>"social work is multifaceted, I can work everywhere"</i>	24
Job opportunity, e.g., <i>"steady job in the local government"</i>	2
Prestige, e.g., <i>"people will respect me and my decisions"</i>	1
EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES	
New knowledge, e.g., <i>"to learn and get new ideas and develop as a competent helper"</i>	14
Methods, e.g., <i>"how to interact with others"</i>	8
OTHER MOTIVATIONS	
Interest	
Social work clients, people in general, e.g., <i>"I wanted to work with people since I was a child"</i>	14
Person-environment interaction, e.g., <i>"I am interested in the relations between people and the environment"</i>	5

As reported in table, students' responses in the reflective journal indicated altruistic values as one of the dominant reasons for enrolling social work studies, specifically in two categories: helping others and self-realization. Students expressed the concern for the welfare of others (disadvantaged ones), and the lack of adequate care and attention from the society, including social workers. This kind of concern was mentioned as crucial in choosing the helping profession—to become a good social worker. Some of the students related helping others to solving their problems for their future clients (social worker as the expert). Direct and indirect experience of social services can be also seen as influential motive for the students. This was somewhat related to the concern of people not getting help they needed. Several students believed to have right characteristics for social work profession. Family influence was reported as minimal. A career factor, different career choices, suggests that students find the diverse nature of the social work profession attractive, enabling to work in different settings with different people and organizations.

5. Discussion

Urbonienė & Leliūgienė (2004) indicate that individuals who choose social worker's career the human orientation dimension should dominate. Similar to previous studies, the current analysis shows that altruistic motivations dominated, but students were also influenced by personal environmental and career factors. Waterman (2002) argues that altruism is a very common trait among social workers—the need to help others. Students who participated in the current study reflected the concern for the disadvantaged in the society. Considering Nsonwu, Casey, Cook & Armendariz (2013) concept of head, hand, heart, and soul, it can be said that students' responses reflected the emotional call to serve those in need (the "heart"), somewhat the other components—wish to work with people, interaction with them (the "hand"), the need for knowledge (the "head").

Nevertheless, there is one finding that needs to be elaborated further, students' idea of a social work from a traditional deficit-based point of view, where the social worker is the expert, making decisions/finding solutions for the client, not with the client. In social work literature, there has been a great deal of discussion about two paradigms: the traditional deficit-based approach and the strengths-based approach (Cowger, 1994; Karoll, 2011). Deficit discourse intensifies the belief in thinking of the client as a helpless individual by blaming, emphasizing vulnerabilities and failure, and therefore limits trustful relationships (Gardner & Toope, 2011). Practitioners have started to challenge traditional views with the strengths-based approach, originating from the resilience and capacities of their clients rather than their deficits, viewing the client as the expert of his/her situation (Saleebey, 2006; Yip, 2006). Therefore, social work education in the studied university needs to focus more on the concept where social worker acts with and for the client. Students who participated in the study emphasised the need to solve the problems from the expert standpoint, although few students pointed out the difference in their thinking before and in the middle of their studies—social worker' role is working for and with the client, not solving their problems but empowering the clients in this process.

5.1 Implications for Research

Findings points out the need to (i) further examine compatibility between students' personal values and social work values, (ii) explore further external factors such as salary, particularly because there was no indication on this issue.

5.2 Limitations

There are several limitations which apply to this study. One limitation that is similar to those of most qualitative studies is in the qualitative sampling. The findings of data are exclusive to the particular study contexts and caution must be taken in generalizing the findings beyond this sample. Another limitation is the

use of only one data collection method. The use of several data collection methods (e.g., interviews) addressing this subject would allow making more definite conclusions.

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