

Political Social Work Practice
A Survey of Students and MSW's

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Introduction

In an effort to make this a true group effort, all three members contributed equally to the end product. Realizing from the initial class that we had a common interest helped to make our excitement contagious. After discussing our various ideas we quickly agreed that we would separately survey both students and MSWs, we decided what questions the survey would contain and how we would distribute and collect the materials.

Due to time constraints we created and quickly distributed the surveys along with a cover letter requesting an expeditious return. Karen and Allison split the volume of student returns; separately compiling and analyzing the responses as well as commenting upon the results and their implications. Andy did the same with the MSW responses that were mailed to her home. Each group participant reflected upon their survey results based upon the readings and their individual life experiences.

By meeting each Tuesday at lunch time and again at 4 p.m. we had the opportunity to discuss the methodology, limitations, and recommendations for the UConn SSW. By reviewing the surveys together we had a sense of the trends, therefore adding our unique opinions to each of the completed entries. Our shared convictions regarding the necessity of advocating for our oppressed and disenfranchised clients and the recognition of the importance of social workers being politically active led to lively discussions. All three participants concur that given a longer period of time to conduct this type of study, the results would reveal from the respondents a desire for increased training in politics and social work. The increased training and exposure to the benefits of integrating politics into social work would be apparent in the day to day contact that we have with our clients.

Methodology

The focus of this limited study was to explore the experiences of MSW students and practicing social workers with regard to their opinion on the importance of the connection between social work and politics. Purposive and convenience sampling were used in identifying our study sample. The sample consisted of 100 students from UCONN School of Social Work, as well as 20 practicing MSW social workers.

A 13-item questionnaire was developed using fixed response questions (i.e. Likert-type scales, and yes/no format), as well as flexible response questions (i.e. open-ended format). The questionnaire solicited information from participants with regard to their knowledge of political practice and its relevance to social work, level of current involvement in politics, level of preparation received through education for work in the political arena, as well as demographic information.

In addition to the questionnaire, all participants received an introductory letter explaining the purpose of the study, and thanking them in advance for their participation. For the MSW students, the questionnaire was randomly distributed to 100 student mailboxes. Of this number, 61 were returned to us by the date indicated. For the 20 practicing MSW social workers, the questionnaire was mailed to their place of employment, with a stamped, addressed envelope by which to return the survey. Of this number, we received 17 prior to the noted end date. With a combined number of 120 questionnaires disseminated, our overall response rate was 65 %.

Data Analysis

The professional literature suggests that many social workers assume an inability to affect change through legislative process due to lack of interest, resources, knowledge or skills. However, in contrast to this view, social workers can and should advocate politically because

they understand the effects of policy on the programs and services needed by their clients (Roberts-DeGennaro, 1986). MSW programs can serve a valuable role in preparing all students to advocate politically. The results of the 29 student surveys I analyzed suggest that UCONN students are not receiving adequate preparation for work in the political arena, particularly those students in the micro disciplines. Results further indicate that the majority of students surveyed would support an increased curriculum requirement in the MSW program for political social work practice.

Results of the 29 student surveys are included as Attachment 1. In an effort to avoid diluting context, I have chosen to include a listing of all student comments made on the surveys. Follows is a brief summary of findings.

Of 29 respondents, 27 felt politics should be utilized by social workers in advocating for clients (Question 1), and all respondents felt social workers should use the political arena to promote social justice (Question 3). Clearly, from what might be termed an idealistic standpoint, students conceptually support advocating politically for client needs. Interestingly, only 7 respondents are currently engaged in political activity with clients (Question 4). Most students are presumed to be in a field placement and many to have had prior social work experience. One deficit in the survey was failure to obtain this information, as well as to ask about past political involvement. The most commonly mentioned reason noted for lack of political involvement related to time (7 of the 12 comments provided by those not involved in political activity specified time constraints).

When asked if UCONN's MSW program offered enough preparation for work in the political arena (Question 5), 19 of the respondents said no. Of these 19, all were casework (11), group work (5), and administration (2) major method students. One casework student responded with

what may be considered to be the most honest answer of all, “unsure”. Presumably, a student cannot know for certain how well education prepares one for political social work practice until graduation or an opportunity to engage in such. Nineteen respondents also indicated support of an increased requirement in the MSW program for political social work practice (Question 6). Of the nine who would not support such an increase requirement, 3 of the 4 community organization students indicated such, as well as 4 casework students and 3 group work students.

When asked if social workers have a responsibility to educate politicians concerning oppressed, disenfranchised and impoverished groups (Question 7), 26 responded yes. Many comments were provided, with the overwhelming theme indicating a need to educate politicians with concern to social issues and need. Most respondents (19) felt there exists no conflict with involving political activities in social work practice (Question 8).

Question 9 was felt to offer too few choices in ranking importance of political activities. Campaign involvement appears to be regarded with the least level of significance of the activities listed, with only three respondents viewing it as very important and 7 indicating campaign involvement as not important.

The survey was answered by students in all major methods of study and broken down as follows: Administration (2), Community Organization (4), Policy and Planning (1), Casework (14), and Group Work (8). Of the 29 respondents, 22 are female, 28 are registered to vote, and 16 are members of NASW.

Limitations

The survey conducted was limited primarily by time constraints. Distributed on a Tuesday afternoon to student mailboxes, we requested a completion date of Friday of that same week. Professional surveys were mailed on Tuesday and Wednesday with a requested return date of the

following Friday. Presumably, some respondents, particularly students, may not have received the survey in sufficient time to complete. As the student survey was distributed at 2 p.m., students with Tuesday only class schedules may have left campus for the week. Additionally, the survey was administered at semester end, which may have compromised the number returned.

Additional time would have allowed pre-testing of the survey. Several questions not included would have aided the analysis of data including the following.

- ❖ Extent of prior social work experience, including opportunity for political involvement
- ❖ Identification of social work education level to date
- ❖ Increased choices in the Likert scale survey question
- ❖ University attended (Professional survey)

Twenty professionals were selected to be surveyed, as they were MSW's known to us, and were currently in practice. The optimal sampling strategy would have identified a larger population of MSW's, and a random sample selected, protecting against sampling bias. Ideally, we would have liked to poll the entire MSW student population, including STEP students.

There existed some identified interpretation problems with the term 'political activity' by some respondents. Definition of political activity should have been included in the survey instructions and perhaps should have been broken down into specific activities such as government relations, electoral politics, and policy advocacy/development.

Karen Kingston

Data Analysis

- **Should politics be used by social workers in advocating for clients?**

All 32 of the student surveys that I was responsible for analyzing answered yes to this question.

This response suggests to me that students at UCONN School of Social Work are at least aware on some level of the important connection between politics and social work. Perhaps too, this question is reflective of the importance social workers place on advocating politically for their clients.

- **Do you think registering social service consumers to vote is:**

- a. Very important 29
- b. Somewhat important 2

Of the 32 surveys, one student did not answer this question. Again, given the way the students answered, it would suggest that students recognize the important connection between a person and their environment. To empower clients to vote is to provide them with the power to effect change.

- **Should social workers use the political arena as a tool for promoting social justice?**

All 32 students that were surveyed answered yes to this question. To answer yes to this question is to presume that one understands the connection between the political arena and the power to effect change in the lives of clients, connecting core social work values with action.

- **Are you engaged in political activity in your current practice with clients?**

Of the 32 students surveyed, 20 answered No, 10 answered Yes, and 2 did not answer this question. Of those that engage in political activity currently, some examples given were: monitoring legislation, advocacy for change, taking consumers to the LOB to testify, help in creating a legislative agenda for a coalition, voter registration. Some reasons that were given to

explain why this activity is important were: awareness of policies that effect client services, and the need for politicians to represent their communities. One student wrote that although it is important, the extent of political activity is dictated by the readiness of the client.

Of those that answered No, the most repeated reason as to why not was the lack of opportunity in current placement. Another reason given was not enough experience. Still others gave the reason of high caseloads in clinical settings, and time restrictions. One student answered that he had a lack of interest to get involved in political activity, although acknowledges the importance of it by voting. This statement perhaps sums up the importance of the need to increase social worker awareness and comfort level in the political arena. If the political arena is the ultimate macro setting to advocate for social justice, as some literature suggests, then political involvement should not be dependent on a social worker's personal interest to get involved or not.

- **Do you feel your social work education offers you enough preparation for work in the political arena?**

22 students answered No to this question, 8 answered Yes, and 2 did not respond. Of the 8 that answered Yes, 6 are macro method majors, while 2 are micro method majors. Of the 22 that answered No, 12 are macro method, while 10 are micro method. The results of this question suggests that there is not enough preparation of social workers for work in the political arena, although macro method majors may have more exposure to this area overall. According to the Wolk article, *A Cross-National Perspective on Social Workers in the Political Arena*, "the sooner social workers achieve an understanding of the importance of the relationship between community and client systems, the faster the number of social workers involved in electoral politics and government relations will increase". It is thus necessary for schools of social work to prepare social workers to get involved in political practice.

- **Would you support an increased requirement in the MSW program for Political Social Work Practice?**

Of 32 respondents, 28 answered Yes to this question, while 4 answered No. These results may indicate that students at the UCONN School of Social Work have an interest in connecting social work and politics. Perhaps this interest could aid in increasing the presence of social work in the political arena. According to Hull, Witherspoon, and Phillips (1987), students who are engaged in political activity while in school are more likely to continue this involvement once graduated (Wolk, Pray, Weismiller, & Dempsey, 1996). MSW programs can serve as a valuable tool in preparing students to connect political practice to social work.

- **Do you feel social workers have a responsibility to educate politicians concerning oppressed, disenfranchised, and impoverished groups?**

Of the 32 respondents, all but one answered Yes to this question. Some examples given as to the reasons why social workers have a responsibility to do this are: social worker knowledge of issues, social workers represent unheard voices, code of ethics, to bring about societal change, information is power, social workers are in a position to illuminate, social workers know the personal stories of the marginal groups, important advocacy tool.

The one dissenting view, from a casework major, stated that it is the responsibility of the politicians to educate themselves, not an obligation for social workers. This statement is not congruent with the Code of Ethics, which states that social workers have a responsibility to promote social justice on all levels. According to the literature, social workers are in a position to connect the personal with the political. Social workers can not afford to ignore the importance of the political arena as the forum for enhancing this connection.

- **Do you feel that there is a conflict with involving political activities in social work practice?**

Of the 32 students surveyed, 22 answered No to this question. Of this number, 16 are macro methods, while 6 are micro. Comments of these respondents were as follows: social work is influenced by politics; politics is the most macro form of social work; social worker's

responsibility is to empower people; professional, ethical responsibility; policy activities promote fundamental values of NASW; politics have a serious impact on the lives of clients; social workers need access to political arena so as to carry out mission of social work; social workers are connected to adversity of people, who better to fight for change; social workers must participate in politics to have influence in social policy.

Of the 5 students polled that answered Yes to this question, 3 out of 5 are micro methods. Their responses were as follows: social workers may pursue their own agenda; difficult for social workers to meet their clients needs and advocate in political arena given increasing caseloads and lack of funding; must be based on individual case with each client; social workers are afraid of how to approach the political arena.

Still, 5 more students were not sure if this was a conflict or not. This category consisted of 3 micro methods, 1 macro method, and 1?. Their responses included the following: only a conflict when interest of clinical clientele is in conflict, there can be conflict if social worker holds opposing views from agency mission, not familiar enough with this area. The 10 students that believed there to be a conflict, or were not sure, suggests that more attention is needed to help students identify the parameters of involving political practice in social work.

- **Please rate the following activities as you view their importance to social work: (Voter Registration, Lobbying, Campaign Involvement, Contact w/ Legislators, Participation in Demonstrations)**

The majority of the 32 respondents identified the political areas mentioned as either important or very important. Nine respondents marked one or more areas as not important. Participation in demonstrations appears to be regarded as the least significant, followed by campaign involvement, and one identified lobbying as unimportant. Of the nine, 6 are micro methods. Although there seems to be a general awareness of the important connection between politics and social work, micro methods appear less apt to recognize the importance of community work as a way of enhancing this connection. According to Wolk (1992, pp.57), “the social workers that do

actively involve themselves in the political process have a distinct preference for mainstream efforts”.

Demographics:

Of the 32 respondents, 28 are female, all are registered to vote, and 23 are members of NASW. The survey was answered by students in all of the major method areas, with the following break down by methods: Community Organization- 12, Group Work- 5, Casework- 8, Policy & Planning- 5, and Administration- 1 (one respondent did not answer this question).

In summary, the results of this survey indicate that although most students recognize the important connection between politics and social work, there exists an uncertainty of what to do with it. Although there is not enough data to support a positive correlation, these results hint at a disconnect between the macro and micro focus of social work practice. Perhaps more attention should be directed toward bridging the gap between these two systems that have more in common than not. After all, it can be argued that “the interconnectedness of micro and macro roles is the heart of social work” (Netting, Kettner, & McMurtry, 1998).

Overall, the profession of social work seeks to work with marginalized groups whose voices are under-represented. It is important then for social workers to create an avenue for these voices to be heard. What better place to accomplish this than stepping up to the public arena of politics! Given this, more attention in the curriculum needs to be paid toward demystifying the political arena for social workers so as to increase their participation in this important area of practice.

Recommendations

Research indicates that those students pursuing a macro level method are more likely to participate in political social work practice. Micro practitioners, by far the majority, often pursue practice in clinical environments, and appear less prepared to work in the political arena. At the UCONN School of Social Work, more students pursue micro methods of practice. Given this, more attention should be paid in preparing micro practitioners to participate in political social

work practice. Implications for Schools of Social Work are great, particularly at the graduate level. Hull (1987) and Witherspoon & Phillips (1987) posit that those students participating in political activities while in school are more likely to continue political involvement post-graduation (Wolk, Pray, Weismiller, & Dempsey, 1996).

Results of the survey indicate that the majority of students in UCONN's MSW program will be inadequately prepared to pursue political social work practice. Of the 61 students surveyed, 34 are pursuing micro methods of study. To adequately prepare all students to work in a political arena, our recommendation would be completion of an expanded survey to include the following:

- ❖ Pre-test
- ❖ Clearly define what is meant by political involvement/advocacy
- ❖ Administer survey mid semester in the spring
- ❖ Increase number of response categories to 5 in likert scale questions
- ❖ Allow greater response time
- ❖ Administer to all matriculated UCONN MSW and STEP students
- ❖ Identify a sampling frame of UCONN MSW graduates

The UCONN School of Social Work should consider revising the application process of the MSW program to include a preliminary advising piece on major method selection. Advisors should recommend to those students electing a micro practice method of study, completion of a macro practice second method. An alternative suggestion may be to require a political social work practice course in the micro practice sequence.

Units on political social work practice should be developed and included in all BASC courses at UCONN School of Social Work. Students, regardless of method, would be taught how to advocate politically. These courses are required by all students and lend themselves to such discussion. Course work should also include involvement of students in political advocacy, utilizing real opportunities (i.e. participating in local demonstrations, following the progress of a

Bill, or working on a campaign). Schools of Social Work cannot ignore the importance of political practice to the profession. The responsibility lies with social work programs to foster interest and underscore the importance of social work involvement in political activity.

Finally, results of the survey should be provided to field education staff. More political placements in field education should be sought and students should seek ways within agencies to advocate politically, regardless of type of placement. Additionally, given that the legislative agenda is dominated by social service issues, perhaps schools of social work could be established as resources for the General Assembly.

Student Survey Results (29)

1. Should politics be used by social workers in advocating for clients?

Yes – **27** No – **2**

2. Do you think registering social service consumers to vote is:

- a. very important -**21**
- b. somewhat important - **5**
- c. important only after all other client needs are met - **3**
- d. not at all important – **0**

3. Should social workers use the political arena as a tool for promoting social justice?

Yes – **29** No - **0**

4. Are you engaged in political activity in your current practice with clients?

Yes – **7** No – **22**

Yes:

- ❖ Active in advocating for Latino/Latina population
- ❖ Agency is a member of CT Association of Non Profits
- ❖ Bring plight of clients to the attention of government
- ❖ Advocate for legislation affecting nursing homes
- ❖ Work with highly political cases that are watched closely by the governor and commissioner (i.e. sex offenders)
- ❖ As a feminist therapist, work to reinforce the personal process (personal is political)

No:

- ❖ Lack time and confidence
- ❖ Lack time
- ❖ Position does not lend itself to political involvement
- ❖ Still learning the ropes of politics
- ❖ Overloaded with school
- ❖ Lack time; disillusioned by the process
- ❖ State employee (but is involved in neighborhood politics)
- ❖ Lack time
- ❖ State employee
- ❖ Limited contact with clients
- ❖ Lack time
- ❖ Not currently working

5. Do you feel your social work education offers you enough preparation for work in the political arena?

Yes – **9** No – **19** Unsure – **1**

Note: Yes respondents were made up as follows:

Admin – 0

CO - 4

P&P - 1

CW - 2

GW - 2

No respondents were made up as follows:

Admin – 2

CO - 0

P&P - 0

CW - 11

GW - 5

None - 1

Unsure respondent was CW major method

6. Would you support an increased requirement in the MSW program for Political Social Work Practice?

Yes – **19**

No – **9**

Maybe - **1**

7. Do you feel social workers have a responsibility to educate politicians concerning oppressed, disenfranchised, and impoverished groups?

Yes – **26**

Other – **3**

Yes:

- ❖ The good fight needs to bring constant illumination
- ❖ Politicians must be made aware of these real issues
- ❖ Politicians are not exposed to many groups' voices
- ❖ These are the groups most unempowered in the political arena
- ❖ (yes and no) Politicians should be aware of presenting needs and should visit oppressed communities
- ❖ Social workers are the experts in social policy

- ❖ If social workers don't do it, who will
- ❖ Politicians have no clue
- ❖ To raise awareness of issues; recognize advocacy exists for such groups
- ❖ Our politicians are generally removed from the issues that concern most social workers; however, these issues impact society as a whole
- ❖ Most advances in social welfare/social reform throughout history have occurred via change in legislation and policy; change will not occur without education; who better to do the educating than social workers
- ❖ Politicians do not understand what oppression entails
- ❖ Social workers should insure the clients' voice is not ignored
- ❖ Without education, politicians will not have the knowledge to make decisions
- ❖ How else will politicians know the issues faced by our clients
- ❖ Politicians ultimately make the decision
- ❖ Politicians have the power to introduce/pass legislation to meet client needs; part of our responsibility is to communicate to legislators directly; I am coordinating a "Day of Testimony" on May 15 – clients and service providers will speak their needs to legislators
- ❖ If we don't, who will
- ❖ Politicians have no clue

Other:

- ❖ Depends on the type and needs
- ❖ To a small degree but it is more important for social workers to act on behalf of these groups

8. Do you feel there is a conflict with involving political activities in social work practice?

Yes – **6**

No – **20**

Depends – **1**

No answer - **2**

Yes:

- ❖ If you hold only one view and put it on people, you limit yourself to only those who agree with you; if you use politics or power to help others (as a means, not an end) then it is useful to social work
- ❖ Time taken away from direct client care; potential for sacrifice of client's immediate needs for a larger agenda
- ❖ There are risks – power corrupts; balance is difficult; when is activity for self vs the client
- ❖ Any social worker getting involved with politics must be cautious of own bias and always take into account who is being represented
- ❖ Conflict may exist due to varying opinions and political beliefs of individuals; if the political beliefs of an agency head differ from a social worker in the agency, which political belief gets communicated to the population served

No:

- ❖ Social workers should feel a duty to work on the macro level for social change; the political arena lends itself to being the area which controls policies
- ❖ If the social action/change is desired by client/community
- ❖ Sometimes it is necessary for change
- ❖ Social workers can assist clients in obtaining services and provide a voice

- ❖ Social workers must advocate for the oppressed or interests will not be served
- ❖ Working with all systems is a part of our history, including government
- ❖ Must be with client approval/permission
- ❖ It is necessary to get attention and dollars
- ❖ A part of social work practice is political
- ❖ Involving political activities is crucial to making the social work profession more efficient and better able to serve our clients
- ❖ One seems to support the other
- ❖ It is important for many workers to advocate

9. Please rate the following activities as you view their importance to social work.

	Very Important	Important	Not Important
Voter Registration	17	8	3
Lobbying	13	14	1
Campaign Involvement	3	18	7
Contact with Legislators	19	6	3
Participation in Demonstrations	10	14	4

Note: question not answered by one student

10. Are you registered to vote?

Yes – **28** No – **1**

11. Are you a member of NASW?

Yes – **16** No – **13**

12. What is your major method?

Admin – **2** CO – **4** P&P – **1** CW – **14** GW – **7**

What is your second method?

Admin – **10** CO – **3** P&P – **2** CW – **5** GW – **8**

Note: question not answered by one student

13. Gender?

Female – **22** Male - **7**