Student Racial Atitudes and Perceptions of Causal Events at Entry to Graduate Social Work Education

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STUDENT RACIAL ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS OF CAUSAL EVENTS AT ENTRY TO GRADUATE SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This study assessed the racial attitudes and perceptions of causal events of 174 graduate students at the time of their entry to social work training. Results indicate that social work students had more egalitarian attitudes than nonsocial work students and were more likely to attribute causality to environmental or external factors. Black students were significantly more external than white students in their perceptions of causality. Some differences in racial attitudes and perceptions of causal events were found among social work students, depending upon area of practice specialization. Student attitudes and perceptions did not differ according to geographical regions. Implications for social work education and for future research are discussed.

The racial attitudes of professional helpers and their perceptions of social reality are widely believed to bear on the effectiveness of their work with minority clients. However, very little is currently known about the orientation of social work students toward ethnic minorities at the time they enter professional training. As a result social work educators do not know the extent to which students are already sensitive to the needs and realities of minority group persons and, hence, the extent to which change in students' racial attitudes and views is needed. This paper reports findings of an assessment of student social workers' racial attitudes and their perceptions of causal events. In addition, the study explored the extent to which the attitudes and perceptions of these entering students varied as a function of demographic factors and their anticipated specialities within

social work. These findings are then related to issues in practice and social work education.

The Importance of Racial Attitudes. Worker attitudes toward minority clients have long been viewed as a significant variable affecting the ease and effectiveness of interracial practice. As early as 1950, Brown suggested that white workers' lack of association with blacks, their negative attitudes toward minority group members, or their sense of racial superiority may result in uneasiness in interracial contacts and diminish their effectiveness with black clients (Brown, 1950). More recently, Banks (1972) wrote that the attitudes of the white helper often "constitute a serious detriment to a positive interpersonal relationship" (p. 210). White social workers, as members of the larger society and culture, may bring preconceived ideas and attitudes about minority group members to their practice (Bloomingbaum, Yamamoto, and James, 1968; Vontress, 1971; Siegel, 1974); such attitudes, beliefs, and social norms are presumed to be potentially harmful to professional practice (Curry, 1964; Block, 1968). Cole and Pilisuk (1976) view the differential treatment accorded black clients as evidence of workers' negative attitudes toward minorities. At least one study has demonstrated that counselors' ethnocentric or biased racial attitudes are negatively related to the duration of their treatment relationships with black clients (Yamamoto, James, Bloomingbaum, and Haltem, 1967). Although this paper focuses only on the attitudes of workers toward black clients, it should be acknowledged that similar concerns may be relevant for black workers who work with white clients.

The Importance of Perceptions of Causal Events. The worker's perception of causal events may also have important consequences for interracial practice. That is, workers' attribution of causality to factors under the client's own control or to factors beyond (external to) the client's control will likely influence the focus of intervention. Many practitioners hold individualistic orientations in which environmental and social influences are minimized (Sue, 1978); the problems of individual clients often are viewed as being caused by intrapsychic disturbances which require interventions that are directed toward the individual. Yet it has been noted that a practice orientation which does not enable attribution of problem causation to the social system may be inappropriate or even dysfunctional for many black

clients (Banks, 1972; Hayes and Banks, 1972). Others have viewed attribution of causality to factors located within the individual as desirable for competent practitioners (Lefcourt, 1966) and for clients as well (e.g., Baker 1979).

However it is important for those who work with ethnic minorities to have a heightened awareness of the extent to which external factors affect persons' life situations. For example, environmental restrictions often retard the growth and development of minority persons and may be the principal contributors to their problems. Therefore, a perception of causality which incorporates environmental factors should be beneficial for workers practicing with clients who are victim to such forces and therefore who perceive events in their own lives as being externally controlled. Carr (1970) has presented evidence that similarity in persons' cognitive dimensions enhances the quality of their communication. Hence we can assume that the process and outcome of treatment will be enhanced if workers' and clients' perceptions of causal events and, hence, their views of problem causation are congruent.

Research Issues. In spite of the widespread assumption that workers' racial attitudes and beliefs affect the success of interracial practice, and inspite of social work's commitment to adequately prepare students for effective interracial practice, these issues have not been adequately studied (Proctor and Davis, 1983). Although considerable research has been conducted on college students' racial attitudes (Pettigrew, 1959; Woodmansee-Cook, 1967; Gurin, Gurin, Lad and Beattie, 1969; and Rokeach, 1968) the race-related attitudes and views of graduate students preparing for social work careers have not been systematically investigated. Discussions of social workers' racial attitudes and views, as well as the means to their influence and their modification as a result of exposure to minority content, have been largely theoretical.

Empirical study of social work students' racial views can provide data important in two ways. First, such data can inform social work educators about the favorableness of students' attitudes and their sensitivities to the needs and realities of minority persons. If, indeed, social work education is to prepare students for effective practice with minority clients, knowledge of bias in entering students'

racial attitudes and views is important data. Such data are essential if educators are to know the extent to which change in students' attitudes and views should occur. Second, knowledge of students' racial attitudes and views is important if the effects of minority curriculum content are to be systematically studied. The requirement that schools of social work make "special continual efforts" to include racial and cultural content into all basic required curriculum (CSWE, 1973) is based on the assumption that such content will enhance students' orientations toward minority clients. This impact needs to be empirically studied, and such study requires examination of change in students' views over time. The data from this study could provide a baseline for such a comparison.

This study examined the racial attitudes and perceptions of causal events held by students at the time of their entry to professional social work training. Two major constructs were of interest: students' attitudes toward minority group members and their perceptions of the extent to which external forces affect the lives of minority group persons. The purpose of the study was to provide a description of the attitudes and beliefs held by graduate students and to explore whether they varied according to a number of geographic and demographic factors. In addition, the attitudes and views of social work students were compared to those of a small control group of graduate students in other disciplines.

Method

Subjects

The sample consisted of 174 students entering their first year of a two year graduate program in social work at three universities, along with a small control group (n=20) of students entering other social science graduate programs. Social work students were drawn from universities in the south and midwest, while all control group students attended one of the midwestern universities.

Mean age for the total sample was 27.65. Social work students were older, X = 28.02, than control group students, X = 25.04 (t = 2.92, p = .006). The sample of social work students had a higher proportion of females (80 per cent) and

Blacks (12 per cent) than did the control group (48% were female, 0% were black). Thus, the gender and racial breakdown of social work students was similar to that of the field at large (Rubin, 1981). Breakdown of students by marital status was similar in the social work and control groups, with nearly two-thirds of the students married, one-fifth single, and one-fifth declaring "other" status.

During the first two weeks of the fall semester, a research assistant visited regularly scheduled classes to administer the questionnaires by which student attitudes and perceptions were assessed. Students were assured that their anonymity would be protected, that all responses were confidential, and that participation was voluntary. Very few students refused to complete the study questionnaires. After gaining the students' written consent to participate in the study, the research assistant administered the survey instruments.

Measures

Demographic Data. Student age, sex, race, marital status, major field of study in graduate school, and area of concentration (for those in social work) were assessed by a questionnaire.

Geographical Region. Previous research indicates that racial attitudes may vary according to geographical region. Because racial awareness appears to develop around the age of 4-5 (Goodman, 1952), we were interested in obtaining information regarding the geographical region in which subjects spent most of their middle childhood years (ages 5-10) and the region in which they spent most of their adolescent years (ages 11-16). Hence subjects were asked to indicate on the demographic questionnaire the states in which they had lived and for which years of their childhood and adolescence they had lived in those states.

Racial Attitudes. Student racial attitudes were measured by the Multifactor Racial Attitude Inventory (MRAI) (Woodmansee and Cook, 1967). Subjects responded to a five-point Likert scale on which they indicated agreement or disagreement with 25 statements expressing attitudes toward blacks. The higher the score on this scale, the more egalitarian the person's racial attitudes. This instrument was

chosen because of its prior use with university students (Woodmansee and Cook, 1967, Weigel and Cook, 1975) and because reported estimates of its reliability and validity were acceptable.

Perception of Causal Events. Student perceptions of causal events were measured by the Gurin Multidimensional IE Scale (Gurin, et al., 1969) The Gurin scale measures a generalized dimension of Internal-External Locus of Control (Rotter, 1966); that is, a person's perception of the extent to which events are influenced by external factors. The higher a person's score on the Gurin scale, the more he or she is believed to view events to be influenced by factors external to the individual. The lower a person's score, the more he or she is believed to view events to be influenced by his or her own behavior. A split half form of the Gurin I-E scale was used, resulting in a scale whose values ranged from 0-12.

The Race IE scale assesses persons' beliefs regarding the control black individuals are able to exercise over events which affect their lives. The Gurin Multidimensional IE scale was chosen because it enabled distinct measurement of a generalized locus of control (reflecting a personal ideology or beliefs about one's own capacities to exercise control) and an ideology about control which Black Americans can exercise. Thus in comparison to other measures of IE, the Gurin scale provides an additional measure of perception of causal events specific to blacks, that of Race IE. Higher scores reflect respondents' beliefs that the situation or status of blacks is influenced by factors external to, or beyond, their personal control. Lower scores reflect respondents' beliefs that the situation or status of blacks is influenced by their own behavior, that is factors under their personal control. All 13 items of Gurin's Race IE scale were used; values ranged from 0-13.

Results

Racial Attitudes

A one way analysis of variance procedure was used to compare the racial attitudes of students by their various areas of academic concentration. On a scale whose values ranged from 1-5, the mean score of social work students on the MRAI was 4.39 (n = 174). The control group of non-social

work students had significantly less egalitarian attitudes (X = 4.10, n = 20) than social work students (F = 3.18, p = 0.026). Focusing on differences within the group of social work students, those in administration and policy had slightly more egalitarian attitudes (X = 4.52, n = 14) than direct practice students (X = 4.37, n = 129), though the differences between these groups of social work students were not significant.

We were also interested in whether students entering social work schools in different geographical regions of the United States differed in their racial attitudes; this question was explored by a one way analysis of variance procedure. In this analysis, the factor geographical region had three levels corresponding to the school's location — upper midwest, south, and midwest border state. Scheffe and Duncan tests were used for pairwise comparisons. The findings indicate that students' racial attitudes did not vary significantly according to locale of school, although the results approached significance (F = 2.80, p = .06). Students entering graduate school in the south had slightly more egalitarian scores (X = 4.5, n = 14) than students in the midwest (X = 4.46, n = 52) and students in a midwest border state (X = 4.33, n = 92).

The effect of social work students' prior geographical region of residence on their racial attitudes was explored by two separate one way ANOVA's, one for residence during childhood and one for residence during adolescence. In this analysis, the factor of geographical region had four levels — east, south, midwest, and west. No significant differences were found.

T-tests were used to compare the racial attitudes of social work students by race, marital status, and sex. Attitudes were not found to vary significantly by these demographic factors. Finally, the correlation between student age and racial attitude was not significant.

IE and Race IE

One-way ANOVA's were used to compare the IE and Race IE scores of students by their areas of graduate study. Scheffe and Duncan tests were used for pairwise comparisons. Students in different areas of graduate study had significantly different IE scores (F = 2.66, p < .05). Pairwise comparisons revealed that direct practice students

were significantly more external in orientation (X = 6.19, n = 110) than administration and policy students (X = 5.00, n = 14) or the control group of non-social work students (X = 4.67, n = 15). With respect to Race IE, student concentration did not have a significant effect. That is, direct practice, administration and policy, and control group students did not differ in their perceptions of the influence of external forces on the lives of blacks.

Whether students entering schools in different geographical regions varied in their perceptions of causal events was again investigated by one way ANOVA's. Students' perception of causal events, whether measured by the general IE scale or the Race IE scale, did not vary significantly by region of school.

As in the analysis of racial attitude scores, one way ANOVA'S were used to test for effects of prior geographical region of residence on IE and Race IE scores. No significant differences were found in IE or Race IE scores as a function of students' region of residence during childhood nor their residence during adolescence.

T-tests indicated that among social work students, Blacks and whites differed significantly in their perceptions of the influence of external factors on persons' lives (t = 3.16, p < .0001). The mean IE score for black students (X = 7.9; n = 16) was significantly more external than the mean IE score of white students (X = 6.0, n = 141). Race IE scores of black and white students also differed significantly (t = 4.5, p < .001). Blacks were significantly more likely to perceive environmental forces as influential in the lives of blacks (X = 9.31, n = 13) than were white students (X = 6.9, n = 117).

T-tests were also used to test for differences in IE and Race IE between male and female social work students. Male and female students did not have significantly different IE scores. However, Race IE scores varied significantly by student gender (t = 2.01, p = .05); male students (X = 7.93, n = 27) were more likely to perceive external forces as influencial in the lives of Blacks than were female students (X = 6.57, n = 89). T-tests revealed no differences by marital status, and the correlations of age with IE and Race I-E were not significant.

Our analyses determined that among social work students racial attitudes and perceptions of casual events were interrelated: racial attitude scores correlated significantly with both IE, (r = .18 p< .007) and Race IE, (r = .17 p =.009). Hence, students with more egalitarian racial attitudes were also more external in their perceptions of casual events. In addition, IE and Race IE were found to be significantly correlated, r = .33 p < .000. Among control group students, the only significant correlation was between the racial attitude and Race IE variables, r = 51, p = .006. That is, students with more egalitarian racial attitudes were more external in orientation, but only in their perceptions regarding the influence of factors affecting Blacks.

Discussion

The findings of the study suggest that social work students hold egalitarian racial attitudes. Moreover, the attitudes of social work students as a group were found to be more positive toward minority group persons than were those of other graduate students. Persons entering social work training appear to be attitudinally homogeneous despite their differences in geographical background. Although other studies have shown that geographical region of residence influences persons' racial attitudes (Pettigrew, 1959), the racial attitudes of social work students did not vary as a function of their geographical region of residence during childhood and/or adolescence. Moreover, students attending social work graduate schools in different geographical regions of the U.S. - southeast, upper midwest, and midwest border states - did not have significantly different racial attitudes. Finally, the racial attitudes of social work students did not differ significantly as a function of sex, race, age, or marital status. These findings may suggest that social work students tend to hold similar racial attitudes despite diversity in a number of background characteristics; however, even among social workers, it was somewhat surprising to observe no difference between blacks and whites with respect to favorableness of racial attitudes. It is possible that the lack of significant differences between black and white students reflects the operation of social desirability effects. That is, they may have responded favorably because they believed they were expected to do so. Ceiling effects may also be

responsible for the great similarity in student responses to some questions, i.e., the instruments may not have been sufficiently sensitive to subtle attitudinal differences.

The findings also indicated that social work students were more external in orientation than were graduate students in other disciplines. However, social work students were not significantly more external than other graduate students on the Race IE scale. Other research (Jayaratne, 1981) has compared the IE scores of social work practitioners to samples of the general population and concluded that social work practitioners were more external in orientation. What was not clear from prior research is whether the profession attracts externally oriented persons or if social work education increases persons' external orientation. The results of the present study indicate that at the time they enter graduate professional training, social work students are already more external in orientation than persons entering other areas of graduate study. However, the extent and direction of change in internal-external orientation as a function of professional training remains a question for further study.

On both measures of perception of causal events—the IE and the Race IE scales—black social work students were significantly more external than were white students. This finding is consistent with results of other studies (Gurin et al., 1969) and might be expected in light of the fact that blacks, as a function of their minority status, may experience less personal control over events in their own lives. Indeed, Gurin et al. (1978) hypothesize that among minorities and low income groups, a low sense of personal control likely reflects "a correct perception of a harsh environment over which they had little control" (page 292). Therefore it should not be surprising that black social work students' perceptions of causal events were more external than those of whites. Consequently their perceptions of control and of problem causation may correspond more closely to those of black clients than would the perceptions of white social workers.

Male and female social work students did not differ significantly in their general internal – external orientation, although males were more external on the Race IE dimension. Prior investigations have found females in the general population to be more external than males (Gurin,

Gurin, and Morrison, 1978), although in one study of social work practitioners, females were more internal than males (Jayartne, 1981). The need for further research on this issue is clearly indicated in order to determine whether, indeed, there are sex differences and to identify possible factors bearing on those differences.

Direct practice students were found to be more external in orientation than administration and policy students. This was a surprising finding in that direct practice students chose interventions which focus on individuals, while administration and policy students chose to focus their interventions on social systems. However, students' views of problem causation and their choice of intervention may not be as inconsistent as it would first appear. Among both groups of students the focus of intervention may be viewed as compensatory to their perception of problem origin. That is, direct practice students may choose to intervene with the individual to compensate for problems whose origins they perceive as residing within the social system. Similarly administration and policy students may perceive a need to intervene with the system in order to compensate for problems which they attribute to individual difficulties.

It is also possible that the apparent lack of correspondence between students' I-E and their chosen focus for intervention may reflect a lack of unidimensionality in the measure of locus of control. Students' responses to the I-E scale may reflect their sense of personal control, independent of control contingencies presumed operative for their clients. Thus social workers who hold an internal locus of control for themselves may not necessarily also presume that clients can exercise control over events in their lives. Although Rotter (1966) presented early evidence of the unidimensionality of his scale which is widely presumed to be unidimensional, recent evidence indicates that at least some subjects distinguish their own sense of personal control from the sense of control they assume operative for others. Blacks appear more likely than whites to distinguish the ways in which their own outcomes are determined as opposed to the way outcomes are determined in the society at large (Gurin et al. 1969; Lefcourt, 1966). This study highlights the need to examine the control ideology which social workers presume operative for minority persons. Moreover it serves to sensitize professionals to the likely distinction between their

own sense of personal control and the control contingencies which many client groups experience.

In spite of the plausable distinction between workers' personal control and the control contingencies they presume operative for clients, the practice literature has assumed that a perception of internal control is desirable for both professionals and clients. Internality has been associated with such adaptive behavior as intellectual ability and achievement, positive self-concept, mastery, willingness to help others, and acquisition of helping skills (Midlarski, 1971; Lefcourt, 1976; Baker, 1979). Indeed an external orientation has been widely viewed as maladaptive (Lefcourt, 1966) such that increasing clients' internality has been, implicitly or explicitly, one of the major purposes of psychotherapy and social intervention programs (Baker, 1979). The premise of this study, expressed also in some of Gurin et al.'s discussions, is that external orientation among some client groups — those who have experienced discrimination and oppression, in particular — reflects an accurate reading of social reality. Indeed rather than reflecting pathological perceptions which need to be modified, an external orientation has been found to be positively associated with higher self esteem among minority youth (Hendrix, 1980).

Conclusions

The results of this study need to be interpreted cautiously due to the limitations of the sample. The control group was particularly small in comparison to the number of social work students. In addition, the number of males, black students, and students declaring a specialty in administration and policy were relatively small although their proportions in our sample generally reflect their proportions in the population of social workers as a whole.

The findings of this study clearly indicate that social work students enter professional training already holding racial attitudes which are more positive than are the attitudes of students entering other fields of graduate study. Such attitudes may be viewed as facilitative to their future work with minority clients.These findings should not be interpreted as indicating that the attitudes of entering social work students are sufficiently favorable toward black clients or other minorities. Furthermore, it is quite possible that

because white Americans have had greater exposure to blacks than to some other ethnic groups, many individuals may be more familiar with Blacks than they are with other ethnic minorities. Hence, further research efforts focusing on student attitudes toward other minority groups, e.g., Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans, are also necessary and should be undertaken.

Additional research is also needed regarding the relationship of racial attitudes and helping effectiveness. Results from prior studies, although not focusing on professional helping encounters, indicate that prejudiced persons avoid contact with members of ethnic groups different from their own (Harding, Proshanky, Kutner, and Chein, 1969). However, some findings indicate that once whites have actually engaged in helping behavior or performed a personal favor for Blacks, their attitudes toward Blacks became more positive (Blanchard and Cook, 1976). Such findings suggest that students' contact with minorities or their opportunities to engage in interracial helping behaviors may result in more positive racial attitudes. Furthermore, social psychological research indicates that without such experiences, students with unfavorable racial attitudes may avoid contact with minorities — whether through refusal to choose interracial settings, reluctance to accept minority clients, or premature termination of their treatment with minority clients. Hence, schools of social work might selectively place students with limited exposure to minorities in practicum settings where they would have opportunity for interracial helping experiences.

Further research is needed on social work students' perceptions of causal events and their consequences for practice. Such research should view perception of causality as multidimensional, distinguishing between perceptions which are operative for the worker's personal life and perceptions which are legitimate for clients. These issues have a number of implications for social work education. Social work curriculum should include content about social reality and perception of causal events among at-risk populations. Moreover, social work curriculum should enable students to explore possible differences between their own views and those of their clients. Finally, curriculum should address the consequences of these differences for the helping process.

This study assessed the racial attitudes and perceptions of casual events among entering social work students. What further remains is the very difficult task of investigating the impact of minority content on social work students' racial attitudes and views (Proctor and Davis, 1983). Until such answers are forthcoming, social work educators should be sensitive to students' attitudes toward minority clients and should remain firm in their commitment to expose students to a wide range of information about minority groups.

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