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James Herrick  
*University of Washington*

Calvin Y. Takagi  
*University of Washington*

Robert Coleman  
*University of Washington*

Linda Jewell Morgan  
*University of Washington*

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SOCIAL WORKERS WHO LEFT THE PROFESSION:  
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

James Herrick, Calvin Y. Takagi, Robert Coleman,  
Linda Jewell Morgan

University of Washington

ABSTRACT

Why professional social workers leave the field of social work for other types of employment has implications for social work practice and education. The study suggests that economic advantage is but one of the factors involved in choosing other employment.

Over the last several years, even before the Reagan administration began to cut deeply into social programs and to erode the social work job market, there appeared to be a general increase in the number of MSWs leaving the field for employment elsewhere. In the Seattle area alone, reports about professional social workers who are no longer in social work are commonplace. Yet little is known about this group: why they left social work, what they were then currently doing, and what they thought about their decision to change careers. Because their departures could signal the existence of serious problems in the profession and have implications for both social work practice and education, this exploratory study of 70 MSW graduates of the School of Social Work at the University of Washington was undertaken.

Literature Review

To our knowledge, no published research has been directed to the question of why MSWs leave or never enter the field of social work. While several studies over the last twenty years have been directed at identifying such factors associated with job dissatisfaction as burnout (Cherniss, 1980), role conflicts (Lewin, 1962), insufficient recognition of professional knowledge and skills (Meinert, 1975), and lack of opportunities for innovation and professional self-development (Otis and Cavagonne, 1979), the relationships between these factors and leaving the field have not been pursued (Knapp, et al., 1981).

The relevance of job satisfactions and dissatisfactions to a person's decision to leave the field entirely is not altogether clear. Any job is likely to have both satisfying and dissatisfying elements, and an accumulation of dissatisfactions might cause a person to leave a job, but not necessarily the field. Neither is there evidence that some point reached on a scale between satisfactions and dissatisfactions will tip the balance. The literature on job dissatisfactions, however, has been helpful in suggesting factors that need to be considered in this exploration of decisions to leave the field.

### Approach to the Study

The approach to the study consisted of surveying persons who had received the MSW degree from the University of Washington and were not at the time of the study employed in social work. The study population was restricted to those persons who had received the MSW degree from one school in order to set natural limits on the size of the total population, while increasing the likelihood of identifying all potential candidates for the sample.

To guide decisions as to what classes of positions should be considered "in" or "out" of the field of social work, it was necessary to arrive at a working definition of the field. For purposes of this study, positions "in" social work were arbitrarily defined as those in which an MSW degree is formally required for employment, or in which social work is an integral part of the employing system. Employment in positions not meeting these criteria were defined as being "out" of the field, and therefore included in the sample.

Persons not employed because of "normal" retirement at age 62 or older were excluded from the sample, but individuals who retired at an earlier age were included because their reasons for early retirement might be similar to the reasons that other people gave for choosing to leave the field. Individuals who never entered social work employment after obtaining their MSWs were included with those who entered employment and left.

Names of persons who appeared to meet the criteria for inclusion in the sample were obtained from two major sources: the records of the School of Social Work Alumni Association, and faculty and staff members who had knowledge about the status of former students. Not all persons who met the criteria for inclusion could be identified because many graduates do not maintain contact with the Alumni Association, the School, or its faculty. Nonetheless, 160 persons were identified and sent questionnaires.

Returns were received from 89 respondents, of which 66 were found usable. These returns, along with the responses obtained from four persons who had been interviewed earlier in a pretest of the questionnaire, resulted in a total sample of 70.\*

### Findings

The findings of this study are organized according to responses to four basic questions: Who are the respondents? What are they doing now? Why did they leave social work? What are their plans for the future?

#### Who are the respondents?

More than two-thirds of the respondents were female (68.1%), and an even higher proportion were Caucasian (87%). For the sample as a whole, the mean age at the time of the study was 41.7, with an age range of 28-69. Two-thirds of the sample (67.1%) obtained their MSW degrees between 1965 and 1976. Most of the respondents (87.1%) took social work jobs after receiving their degrees, but nine (12.9%) never entered the field. The average length of post-master's social work experience for those who entered and left the field was 7.5 years; the mean number of social work positions held was 2.3, with an average of 3.3 years spent in each position. Nearly three-fourths (74.1%) of the respondents who were employed as social workers left the field in the period between 1975 and 1980.

#### What are they doing now?

According to their own classifications, among the 70 respondents were 10 homemakers, 11 unemployed persons, 4 early retirees, and 45 individuals gainfully employed in occupations outside of social work.

As noted in Table 1, the 45 respondents who worked outside the field of social work at the time of the study were employed in a

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\*The 160 individuals to whom questionnaires were sent represented 6.7% of the 2,396 people who received MSW degrees from the University of Washington between 1960 and 1980. All but 4 respondents received their degrees in this period. These four received their degrees between 1948 and 1957, during which time the School had granted approximately 120 MSW degrees.

Table 1  
CURRENT OCCUPATIONS OF EMPLOYED RESPONDENTS BY AUSPICE

Levels and Areas	Auspice			Total (N=45)
	Public Sector (N=13)	Private Sector Self-Employed (N=18)	Employed By Others (N=14)	
<b>I. Administration and Management</b>				
-Real estate and retail sales and service	0	7	3	10
-Large corporate enterprise	0	0	3	3
-Education	5	0	1	6
-Contracting and licensing	3	0	1	4
-Other	1	2	2	5
<b>II. Direct Practice</b>				
-Real estate and other sales	0	5	0	5
-Other professional	2	2	2	6
-Other	2	2	2	6

variety of occupations, under both public and private auspices, and at different levels. The occupations were divided into those where the principal activities involved administrative, managerial, or supervisory responsibilities, and those where the primary activities were in the direct practice of a trade or profession.

While the particular occupations of the 45 employed respondents varied widely, 15 were in sales and 9 were in other professions (including 9 in education and 3 in law). Eighteen individuals operated their own businesses, or were self-employed. The majority of the employed carried out administrative functions (62.2%), while 17 (37.8%) were in direct practice. The private sector was represented by 32 persons (71.1%) and 13 (28.9%) were employed in public agencies or organizations.

### Administrators and Managers

Private sector. Self-employed administrators or managers in real estate or other retail sales and services were typically persons who owned their businesses. One person, for example, managed his own real estate company and was engaged in the buying and selling of residential and commercial properties. Others in this category included a person who owned and managed a store that sold pesticides and related products, a machine shop owner and operator, the owner-manager of a store specializing in art objects, the proprietor of a commercial office- and building-cleaning business, and one person who managed her own investment portfolio.

Administrative persons who worked for others in the private sector included persons who managed small retail businesses, as well as those who were departmental directors in large corporations. Examples of the latter were a marketing administrator, a personnel director, a district manager of a proprietary community home health care service, an executive secretary of a medical society, a director of a university alumni association, and a director of religious education for a church parish.

Public sector. The five persons who held posts in public educational institutions carried such titles as Director of Community Development, Director of Minority Affairs, and Assistant Coordinator of Compensatory Programs. Others employed under public auspices as administrators were heads of governmental departments occupying such positions as State Director of Licensing, Administrator for Naval Contracts, and County Land Use Officer.

## Direct Practice

Private sector. Individuals engaged in the direct practice of their trade or profession in the private sector included three attorneys, three real estate brokers, one life insurance agent, two artists, one office receptionist, and a computer programmer.

Public sector. The four persons employed in the public sector included two teachers, one of whom held a Ph.D. degree in political science and taught at the college level, and one who taught in an elementary school. The other two persons employed in the public sector were an attendant counselor caring for handicapped persons in a state institution, and an instructor of mental health nursing employed in an educational institution.

### Why did they leave social work?

In Table 2, the reasons given for leaving or never entering the profession of social work by the employed group are compared with those given by all other respondents.

The reasons given by respondents for their decisions to leave the field tended to be of three types: 1) those critical of certain aspects of social work employment and reflective of frustration or discontent, 2) those referring to personal life circumstances, and 3) those citing the attractions of non-social work activity or employment.

As shown in Table 2, the employed group was much more critical of social work than were the homemakers, the unemployed, and early retirees. The specific criticisms most often mentioned referred to low salaries, the unavailability of suitable jobs, the uncertainties of funding for programs and positions, and burnout related to heavy workloads and stress on the job. Additional reasons included a belief that social work is ineffective in helping people or in resolving the major problems in society, criticisms of agency politics, regulations, and red tape, and conflict with supervisors or other agency staff. Similarly, the employed group more frequently (30.2%) emphasized the attractions of non-social work employment or activity than did the comparison groups (10.9%). Interestingly, these attractions were couched in terms of better opportunities for further education, for broadening of knowledge and skills, and for achieving one's career goals outside of social work. Additional attractions referred to the possibility of greater financial reward and security. The employed group also believed that their new jobs made better use of their skills, were more challenging, and

Table 2

REASONS FOR LEAVING OR NEVER ENTERING SOCIAL WORK  
BY CURRENT STATUS

	HM/UE/Ret <sup>1</sup> (N=25)		Employed (N=45)		Totals (N=70)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Criticisms of social work employment	14	30.4	59	55.7	73	48.0
Personal reasons	27	58.7	15	14.2	42	27.6
Attractions of non-social work activity or employment	5	10.9	32	30.2	37	24.3
TOTALS	46	100.0	106	100.1	152	99.9

<sup>1</sup>HM = Homemakers; UE = Unemployed; Ret = Early Retirees.

<sup>2</sup>The three priority reasons given by each respondent are included. Some respondents gave fewer than three reasons.



offered the possibility of helping people in tangible ways.

Conversely, personal considerations ranked first in importance for the homemakers, unemployed, and early retirees for their decisions to leave or never enter the field (58.7%) as compared with the employed group (14.2%). Many of the homemakers, for example, chose to leave social work employment in order to devote themselves to their children and families, to care for family members who were ill, or to tend to their own health problems.

#### What are their plans for the future?

As shown in Figure 3, only five (7.1%) of the total sample planned to seek social work employment in the future. Of the employed group, the largest number (77.8%) intended to remain in their present positions because of the opportunities available for advancement, development of skills, greater income, a higher degree of responsibility, or simply their enjoyment of the work they were doing. Another three (6.7%) intended to seek other non-social work positions. Seven (15.6%) planned to seek other unspecified employment, in or outside social work, depending upon circumstances.

#### The Findings Revisited

While the limited size of the sample makes it difficult to draw definitive conclusions, the attempt was made to subject the data to closer examination in order to determine what, if any, relationships emerge. The analyses included the relationships between stated reasons for leaving social work and 1) year of graduation, 2) years of social work experience, and 3) school experiences. In addition, the satisfactions and dissatisfactions that employed respondents reported for previous social work and current non-social work jobs were compared. Finally, current salaries of employed respondents were compared with their last salaries in social work.

Reasons for leaving and year of graduation. The reasons for leaving social work were classified according to the major categories of criticisms of social work, attractions of non-social work employment, and personal. When these reasons were grouped according to the respondents' year of graduation from school, the graduates in the period 1966-1971 cited criticisms of social work employment nearly four times as often as they did either attractions of non-social work or personal circumstances. On the other hand, those who received their

Table 3  
FUTURE PLANS BY STATUS

Future Plans	HM/UE/Ret <sup>1</sup> (N=25)		Emp]oyed (N=45)		Totals (N=70)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Remain in current position	3	12.0	35	77.8	38	54.3
Move to non-social work position	3	12.0	3	6.7	6	8.6
Move to social work position	5	20.0			5	7.1
Unspecified employment	3	12.0	7	15.6	10	14.3
Part-time employment	1	4.0			1	1.4
Retire	7	28.0			7	10.0
Other	1	4.0			1	1.4
No response	<u>2</u>	<u>8.0</u>			<u>2</u>	<u>2.9</u>
TOTALS	25	100.0	45	100.1	70	100.0

<sup>1</sup>HM = Homemakers; UE = Unemployed; Ret = Early Retirees.

MSW degrees in later years (between 1972 and 1979) divided their responses nearly equally between criticisms and attractions, while personal reasons dropped to less than 10% of the responses. For the total sample of employed respondents, the criticisms of social work employment outweighed the attractions of non-social work by nearly two to one.

Reasons for leaving and years of social work experience. For individuals whose social work experience was one year and less, the reasons for leaving the field were equally divided between criticisms of social work and attractions of non-social work employment. However, respondents with more social work experience tended to give criticisms of social work as reasons for leaving far more often than they cited attractions of outside employment.

Reasons for leaving and school experiences. From the total sample of 70, 42 (60.0%) indicated that their school experiences had nothing to do with their decision to leave the field. One did not respond, but the remaining 27 (40%) who did indicate that their school experiences contributed to their decision to leave, cited various inadequacies of the educational program. Typical comments referred to the lack of curriculum integration, deficiencies in or the nonexistence of career and academic counseling, the quality of instruction described as "uninspiring and lacking rigor," the lack of relationship between study, career and professional goals, and practicum placement, and the failure of education to prepare students "for the harsh realities of practice." Additionally, a few respondents expressed general criticism of the School for continuing to turn out large numbers of graduates in the face of a declining job market, as well as for producing graduates who were described as being incompetent or lacking in professional values.

Satisfactions and dissatisfactions with social work jobs as compared with current jobs. The 38 persons who had held jobs in social work and were employed in non-social work occupations at the time of the study were asked to indicate what they most liked and disliked about their social work and current jobs in order to ascertain how these likes and dislikes compared with their reasons for leaving the field. In other words, are specific job dissatisfactions in social work the same as those reasons given for leaving? Or are the satisfactions found in current non-social work employment related to what had been perceived as their attractions?

Although the 38 respondents named a large variety of best-liked and most-disliked aspects of their earlier social work and current non-social work jobs, the item that was most frequently mentioned as best-liked for both had to do with the challenging nature of the work--described as "stimulating," "creative," "interesting"--involving the opportunity to utilize their knowledge and skills to the fullest degree, and in the process to develop their potential. This item was mentioned by 29 (76%) of the respondents as a satisfaction in social work, and by 30 (79%) for their current employment (see Table 4). In second place for social work, named by 18 (47%) of the respondents, was a liking for specific job duties such as program planning, client advocacy, and staff management. The second-ranked item for current employment was "autonomy," by which is meant having control over the use of one's time, how much or little to work, and freedom to make decisions. Positive relationships with clients, customers, and staff ranked third as enjoyable features of both social work and current employment. Salary or income occupied fourth place among satisfactions in current jobs, with 11 (29%) of the respondents so indicating, but was unranked for social work (3%).

The most frequently mentioned dislike of social work employment related to agency structure. Included in this category were complaints about rules and regulations, red tape, and agency politics. Interpersonal conflict, primarily with administrators, supervisors, and co-workers, but also including clients, was the second most disliked feature of social work employment. Since interpersonal relationships on the job were important sources of satisfaction, conflict can be expected to be an important source of unhappiness. The single most important dislike in current jobs was the pressure and stress of work connected with long hours and the necessity to produce in an efficient and effective manner. In most instances, however, people making this complaint tempered their opinions by saying that the pressure was not really a burden, as they liked the challenge and there were payoffs in personal gratifications, recognition, and financial rewards. Several of these respondents noted in contrast that hard work over long hours is not often acknowledged, rewarded, or even supported in social work.

A comparison of reasons given by the employed respondents for leaving the field and their likes and dislikes in social work jobs shows that while economic reasons rank first in importance for leaving, only one person listed low salary as a specific dislike of social work employment, perhaps because no one expects to make a fortune as a social worker. On the other hand,

workload, stress, and burnout tied for second in importance as reasons for leaving, and was cited by only six (16%) of the respondents as a source of dissatisfaction in social work. And despite the fact that the respondents liked many of their specific job duties in social work, they also experienced a "shift in interest" sufficient for it to qualify among the top reasons for leaving the field.

A comparison of satisfactions and dissatisfactions with current employment with reasons for leaving the field showed that economic reasons ranked first for leaving, but only 11 (29%) of the respondents ranked current salary as an area of satisfaction. Autonomy, a highly ranked feature of current work, is clearly related to the respondents' strong dislike of bureaucratic structure and politics in social work. Workload, stress, and burnout were frequently mentioned as reasons for leaving, and continued to be the chief source of dissatisfaction in current employment.

As was stated earlier, social work was seen as providing a challenge as well as positive relationships with clients, customers, and staff. These were also sources of satisfaction in current employment. Thus neither of them appeared among the high-ranked reasons for leaving the field.

Salary. Given the weight of economic factors as the most important reasons for leaving social work, salaries in respondents' last social work position prior to leaving were compared with their current salaries. The most striking finding is that only 6 (16.7%) of the respondents earned more than \$20,000 in their final social work position, whereas 23 (51.1%) earned more than \$20,000 in their current employment. However, the mean length of time spent in the current job was 4.5 years, with a range of 2 months to 21 years. Given the effects of inflation and normal salary increases, it is difficult to say what salaries they might have earned in social work had they remained in the field. The salary range for the last social work job was from \$8,900 to \$29,000, compared with a range of less than \$10,000 to more than \$75,000 in current employment. Salaries for those who had held two or more social work jobs reflected a steady increase. There was no significant difference in current salary between those who left school to go directly into non-social work employment and those who entered social work before leaving. The data suggest no relationship between social work experience and subsequent income.

Table 4

COMPARISON OF MOST FREQUENTLY MENTIONED  
 LIKES AND DISLIKES OF SOCIAL WORK AND CURRENT EMPLOYMENT  
 REPORTED BY EMPLOYED RESPONDENTS  
 (N=38)

	<u>GREATEST LIKES</u>		<u>Current</u>	<u>GREATEST DISLIKES</u>	
	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>		<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
<u>Social Work</u>					
"Challenge"	29	76	"Challenge"	30	79
Specific job duties	18	47	Autonomy	24	63
Relations with clients/staff	16	42	Relations with clients/ customers/staff	14	37
			Salary/income	11	29
<u>Social Work</u>					
Structure/politics	16	42	Workload/stress/ burnout	17	45
Interpersonal conflicts with clients/staff	12	32			

## Summary and Discussion

This study of professional social workers who had left the field to pursue other interests and careers was undertaken as an exploratory inquiry to open up areas of concern for later research. Toward this end the effort can be considered successful, for it does raise a number of questions that will be noted later on. Originally there had been an implicit assumption that the exodus of social workers from the field signified problems stemming possibly from a variety of sources: the nature of social work itself (e.g., the intangibility of results); the status of social work in society (e.g., lack of prestige or financial rewards); the conditions of practice (e.g., heavy caseloads); the educational process (e.g., preparation not relevant to practice); the characteristics of the persons involved (e.g., personal ambitions); or any other causally related factor that might emerge. The hope was that if the respondents would indicate their reasons for leaving, the problems could be identified, and then appropriate solutions proposed. Needless to say, the situation is not so simple, but some of the findings, summarized below, appear to bear out certain of the assumptions.

Two-thirds of the sample (67%) received their MSW degrees in the years between 1965 and 1976. Most of them entered social work practice (87%), and were successful in their work. As a group, they had risen steadily in rank, increased their breadth of responsibility, and advanced in salary (Patti, et. al., 1979). Despite their dislike of agency structure and regulations and their conflicts with supervisors and administrators, they stayed in the field for an average of 7½ years, perhaps because the enjoyable aspects of their jobs were sufficient to offset the negatives. For some, the frustrations and discouragements inherent in the work led to burnout, a factor contributing to their decision to leave.

The development of outside interests and the discovery that certain occupations offered the possibility of combining elements of what they had enjoyed in social work, while simultaneously eliminating what they had disliked, made the idea of switching careers attractive. In their view, not only did the new jobs offer interesting challenges to their skills, but they also gave promise of brighter financial futures. Even though most of the respondents had found their initial social work positions with little difficulty, the problems that some had in finding suitable social work employment after several years of experience were additional reasons for considering work outside the field,

retiring early, or choosing to become full-time homemakers. For the last two groups, family, health, and other personal considerations helped contribute to the decision. Most of the respondents (93%) left the field between 1972 and 1980.

Having made the change, the respondents appeared pleased with their situations. They liked the autonomy of their current jobs, their relationships with customers or clients, the feeling of being able to help people in tangible ways, and the support and recognition they received for their efforts. Although their current incomes were not so much greater than they might have earned had they remained in social work, some believed that their prospects were unlimited. What they most disliked about their current work was the stress associated with long hours and heavy responsibilities, but they minimized this as a problem because they saw it as "coming with the territory." Most expected to remain in careers outside of social work.

Finally, the respondents noted that their social work education and experience have been useful to them in their current work. For about one-half, the MSW degree itself helped to open doors to employment. For most of the others (75%) the knowledge and skills they brought to their jobs were directly applicable. Foremost among these were the interpersonal, administrative, and organizational skills they had gained in social work education and practice. Interestingly, despite their employment outside the field, about a third of the respondents stated they still thought of themselves as social workers, while another one-sixth thought of themselves as social workers in some ways but not in others. For the most part, even those who no longer thought of themselves as social workers were positive about their former professional identity and liked to think of themselves as "helping people."

A number of areas for further exploration are suggested by this study. A basic one has to do with the overall question of whether professional social workers are indeed leaving the field in substantial numbers. If so, are they leaving at a higher rate now than in the past? And does it constitute a problem? Our society may not need as many social workers as previously. And young people may not be as interested in pursuing social work as a career as in previous periods of history. Nevertheless, the profession of social work and schools of social work have an interest in the future development of the field. A longitudinal career progression study, following people receiving their MSW degrees in a given time period, would provide a useful data base for analyses of trends, rates of leaving, and reasons given.



Second, it is not known if there are significant differences between those who stay in social work compared to those who leave. A comparative study could explore such factors as abilities, characteristics, motivations, and experiences of these populations.

Based upon the criticisms that the respondents in this study had of social work employment (e.g., agency politics, regulations, and red tape), and of their enjoyment of autonomy in their current jobs, is this an area of concern to practice? If so, are there ways of increasing worker autonomy in social work so as to decrease the sense of dissatisfaction noted here?

Further, does it help to know that social work knowledge and skills are transferable to other occupations as indicated by our sample? More specifically, what are the skills that are transferable? Are there implications of this finding for social work education? That is, given the declining social work job market and the trend toward lowered application rates to schools of social work, does this suggest a different kind of role for social work educational programs in the future?

Finally, the limited size of the sample used in this study, as well as the restrictions of locale, suggest the desirability of repeating similar studies with larger samples and in other parts of the country. Out of such research might come more definitive findings for consideration by the profession, individual social workers, the practice field, and social work education.

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