



## The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 18  
Issue 1 *March*

Article 8

March 1991

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### Recommended Citation

Popple, Philip R. (1991) "The Introductory Course in the Undergraduate Social Work Curriculum," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol18/iss1/8>

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# The Introductory Course in the Undergraduate Social Work Curriculum

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*The content of the Introduction to Social Welfare course in 168 bachelor of social work (BSW) programs is analyzed including major concepts presented, research results and statistical data presented or assigned, theoretical perspectives used, and the perceived importance of, and methods used to develop values. Several problems with the introductory course are identified: no set body of content, minimal support by research and statistical data, frequent lack of explicit theoretical content, and an overriding emphasis on developing values. More uniformity in content is necessary in order to facilitate the development of good teaching materials and to provide a firm foundation upon which to build the rest of the curriculum.*

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) is the body recognized by the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA) as the accreditation agency for professional education for social work. CSWE has recognized and accredited bachelor of social work (BSW) programs since 1974. The accreditation standards developed by CSWE contain rather specific information on the content to be covered in the five professional foundation areas—human behavior and the social environment, social welfare policy and service, social work practice, research, and field practicum. The standards are silent, however, on what content should be included in the introductory course, or courses, and how this should be organized. The survey reported here seeks to ascertain how bachelor of social work programs handle the introduction to social welfare course.

## Purpose and Literature Review

The introduction to social welfare course has been given very little attention in the literature. Periodically there has been

a major study, or studies, of social work education that have included attention to the undergraduate curriculum. In 1951 there was the Hollis-Taylor study that included a chapter on undergraduate education (Chapter IV:155–209). The 1959 Council on Social Work Education Curriculum Study included a volume on undergraduate education (Bisno, 1959). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, when it became obvious that undergraduate programs were going to be recognized by CSWE, a whole spate of practical books and monographs on the undergraduate curriculum emerged (CSWE, 1969a; CSWE, 1969b; Feldstein, 1972; Glick, 1972; McPheeters, 1971; McPheeters & Ryan, 1971; Ryan & Reynolds, 1970). The Report of the Undergraduate Social Work Curriculum Development Project was published in 1978 (Baer & Federico). Most of these studies briefly mention the introductory course(s) but in only one instance is it discussed in any detail (Schwartz in Ryan & Reynolds, 1970). In addition, there has been one study of the introductory course as it is taught in Australia (Jones, 1982).

This lack of attention to the content and structure of the introduction to social welfare course constitutes a serious gap in the knowledge base of social work educators. It can be argued that for several reasons the introductory course is one of the most important in the social work curriculum. First, the introductory course is the one upon which the rest of the social work curriculum is built. It is so obvious that it really does not bear elaboration, that if the introductory course is weak and poorly thought out the rest of the curriculum is not going to come together as a unified whole. Second, the introductory course serves as the gateway to the social work profession for many students. A good introductory course will provide students with a sound basis on which to make the decision of whether or not social work is the career for them. Providing students with a basis for a negative decision is as valuable, if not more so, than providing them with the basis for a positive decision. A familiar figure in the social work profession is the disillusioned public welfare supervisor who entered social work because early in his or her education someone portrayed social work as a slightly different type of psychiatry. Finally, the introductory course is taken by a large number of persons who

go on to other careers, and this provides social work educators with the opportunity to sensitive them to social welfare concerns and to educate them in the perspective of the social work profession. More than 30 years ago Hollis and Taylor (1951) remarked that:

The neglect of this basic educational responsibility by the social work profession has been an important factor in the production of a generation of city and county officials, legislators, governors, educators, doctors, businessmen, lawyers, labor leaders, and citizens in hundreds of other occupations who do not have enough understanding of the purpose and operation of public and private welfare programs to give them the support commonly accorded health and education activities. (p. 161–162).

The purpose of the study reported here is to gain information on how the introductory social welfare material is handled in baccalaureate social work programs. The specific questions addressed are: (1) What are the major concepts presented and how much do these vary between programs? (b) To what extent are the concepts explicitly placed in theoretical context and what theories are applied? (c) To what extent are the concepts backed up by research and other types of data? (d) What is the role and importance of the study of values and in what ways are they presented?

### Method

A questionnaire and a self-addressed envelope were mailed to all 360 BSW programs accredited by CSWE. The questionnaire asked for responses to 20 items designed to provide a description of the introductory social welfare course. Twelve of the items were closed ended and requested descriptive information such as number of introductory courses, number and classification of students, text used, and so forth. Six of the items asked for lists of major and secondary concepts presented, theories discussed, research presented or assigned in readings, other types of data presented, and methods used to present material on values. Two Likert scale items asked for instructors' satisfaction

with the textbook used and perception of the importance of students developing "appropriate" values. One hundred seventy-three questionnaires were returned for a response rate of 48%. Of those returned, 140 were completely usable, 28 partially usable, and 5 were not usable. In addition to the questionnaire, respondents were requested to provide course outlines. Ninety-seven respondents (27%) included course outlines.

The open ended items on the questionnaire and the course material were analyzed by content analysis. Manifest content categories were set up and the occurrence of category units were counted. Content analyzed were major concepts covered in the class, theories used to analyze and explain the concepts presented, research and other data presented related to the concepts, and methods used to develop values.

## Results

### *Organization of Introductory Content*

A literature review indicated that originally most BSW programs organized the introductory content into two courses (Lyndon, 1969: 11; Sarnoff, 1969: 34; Schwartz, 1970: 2; Witte, 1970: 67). Generally, the content in one of these courses was introductory to the social work profession and dealt with things like settings in which social workers are employed (corrections, public welfare, etc.), methods used by social workers in these settings (direct practice with individuals, community organization, etc.), and social worker roles (broker, advocate, etc.). The content in the other course was introductory to the social welfare institution and dealt with topics such as social problems, the social welfare system, social welfare history, etc. In order to determine how the introductory content is currently organized the questionnaire began with several items regarding the number of introductory courses in the respondents curriculum, the title of the courses, and where the content regarding the social welfare institution is located. In addition the ninety-seven course outlines submitted were analyzed.

The initial purpose of this study was to look at the organization and content of the social welfare institution course. However, the responses to the questionnaire indicate that the

majority of programs (63%) have collapsed all of the content into one course. An examination of the course materials indicates that this has not been done on any systematic basis. Courses with the title "Introduction to Social Welfare" at different institutions may be very different depending on whether the focus is on the social work profession or on the social welfare institution. Thus, rather than looking at just the introduction to social welfare course as was originally intended, this study looks at this course plus courses with combined content.

### *Study Sample*

The enrollment in the introductory course was fairly small for most of the respondents. Fifty-eight percent of the programs responding enrolled 50 or fewer students in this course each year, 29% enrolled between 51 and 100, and only 21% enrolled over 100 students. On the average 65% of students enrolled in the introductory course were social work majors and 35% were majoring in other areas. The most common majors other than social work were psychology, sociology, and criminal justice. It is not possible to directly check now representative these figures are because no other figures are available specifically on introductory course enrollment. However, these figures correspond to CSWE data on overall BSW program enrollment that reports that programs have a median of 32.3 junior/senior majors, an average of 70.3 majors in all levels, and that 64% of students enrolled in classes are social work majors (Rubin, 1983).

### *Major Course Content*

The results of the content analysis of the two open ended questionnaire items on concepts presented, the statements of objectives in course materials returned with the questionnaire, and of the course outlines returned is summarized in Table 1.

The results indicate a good deal of similarity between courses but little uniformity. Even with the very general categories used in this analysis only 5 out of 12 content areas are evidenced in more than half of the courses. Of these 5, only historical content comes close to being universally included. In addition to the course content included in the categories, there

Table 1

*Major Content Areas Presented*

Content	Emphasis	Questionnaire Response (N=142)		Course Objectives (N=90)		Course Outline (N=88)	
		Number of Programs	% of Programs	Number of Programs	% of Programs	Number of Programs	% of Programs
History	Major	52	36.62				
	Secondary	<u>26</u>	<u>18.31</u>	66	73.33	78	88.64
Social Issues/ Problems	Major	32	22.53				
	Secondary	<u>10</u>	<u>7.04</u>	20	22.22	46	52.27
Fields of/ Practice Methods	Major	29	20.42				
	Secondary	<u>8</u>	<u>5.63</u>	46	51.11	56	63.64
Social Work Profession	Major	20	14.08				
	Secondary	<u>14</u>	<u>9.86</u>	54	60.0	52	59.09
Inequality/Power/ Oppression	Major	12	8.45				
	Secondary	<u>20</u>	<u>14.08</u>	2	2.22	12	13.64
Social Values & Social Welfare	Major	20	14.08				
	Secondary	<u>10</u>	<u>7.04</u>	48	53.33	42	47.73
		30	21.12				

Racism/Sexism Agism	Major	12	8.45				
	Secondary	<u>10</u> 24	<u>8.45</u> 16.90	40	44.44	28	31.82
Systems Approach	Major	16	11.27				
	Secondary	<u>4</u> 20	<u>2.81</u> 14.08	0	.0	6	6.82
Social Welfare As Social	Major	14	9.86				
	Secondary	<u>6</u> 20	<u>4.22</u> 14.08	22	24.44	42	47.73
Conceptions of Social Behavior	Major	12	8.45				
	Secondary	<u>8</u> 20	<u>5.63</u> 14.08	12	13.33	32	36.36
Poverty	Major	8	5.63				
	Secondary	<u>10</u> 18	<u>7.04</u> 12.67	8	8.88	48	54.54
Common Human/ Needs/Worth	Major	3	5.63				
	Secondary	<u>8</u> 11	<u>2.11</u> 7.74	18	20.00	8	9.09



were literally dozens of additional topics that were included in only a few courses; for example, international social welfare, comparative political systems, *parens patriae*, and professional-bureaucratic conflict.

### *Research and Data*

Considering the emphasis that has been present for the past decade on social work becoming a research based profession, the results regarding research and statistical data are disappointing. Only 30 respondents (21.1%) indicated that they present, or assign as readings, any research whatsoever. The content analysis of course materials was a little more positive with 46.5% of the course material showing some evidence of research content, although in most cases it was slight. Several respondents indicated that because this is an introductory course they think research is not appropriate. Of those few who do present research findings or require that the student read research articles the material is varied. Several require that students read and report on research articles of their choice, some present "poverty studies," several presented the St. Paul Multi-Problem Family studies, and a few discussed Hollingshead and Redlich's work on social class and mental illness. Other than these, research used was unique to the respondent's course.

In a similar fashion less than one quarter of the respondents indicated that they presented other types of data in the introductory course. Thirty-four programs (23.9%) listed other types of data. The most common data presented came from state and federal data bases and include welfare program and social security statistics, poverty data, and income distribution data. Nongovernmental sources mentioned included American Humane Association child abuse and neglect data, League of Women Voters public assistance data, and National Organization for Women Reagonomics data. City, state, and federal budgets were also used.

### *Theory*

The findings regarding the inclusion of theory in the introductory course indicate that more attention is paid to this

than to research results and statistical data, but the findings are disappointing nonetheless. More than one-third of the respondents indicated that they do not explicitly include any theoretical content in their courses. A number responded to the question with a statement to the effect that the course was descriptive, not theoretical, and that theory would come later in the curriculum. Further, from the responses of the 61% who do include theoretical content it is apparent that many social work faculty do not think of theory in traditional social science terms, as systematic intellectual frameworks which guide knowledge building and practice. A number of items were listed by respondents as theories which would be more accurately described as observations about the American character (blaming the victim, protestant ethic), political or management strategies (Reaganomics, welfare capitalism), or approaches to practice (generalist, eclectic, person-in situation). Table 2 summarizes theories presented in the introductory course as reported by the respondents.

Table 2

*Theories Presented in Introduction to Social Welfare*

Number of Programs Teaching any Theory = 86

% of Programs = 60.56

Theory	Number of Programs	%
<i>Economic theories</i>		
Laissez-Faire	24	16.9
"Reaganomics"	8	5.63
Marxist	6	4.22
Others: Trickle down (3), Economic Determinism (2), Supply Side (1), Welfare Capitalism (1), Tax Theory (1)		

Number of Programs Teaching Economic Theory = 36

% of Programs = 25.35

<i>Social Theories</i>		
Functional	30	21.27
Conflict	16	11.27
Social Darwinism	14	9.86
"Blaming the Victim"	8	5.63
Labeling	7	5.00
Political Economy	6	4.22
Culture of Poverty	5	3.57
Symbolic Interaction	4	2.82
Protestant Ethic	4	2.82
Role Theory	4	2.82
Others: Malthus (3), Social Change (3), Exchange (3), Organizational (2), Subcultural (2), Individualism (2), Differential Association (1), Social Control (1), Political Ideology (1).		
Number of Programs Teaching Social Theories = 62		
% of Programs = 43.66		
Theory	Number of Programs	%
<i>Psychological theories</i>		
Rational Emotive	6	4.22
Maslow Hierarchy of Needs	6	4.22
Freudian	4	2.82
Ego Psychology	4	2.82
Others: Learning Theory (3), Gestalt (3), Cognitive (2), Theory X & Y (1), Behaviorism (1).		
Number of Programs Teaching Psychological Theory = 30		
% of Programs = 21.13		
<i>Social work theories</i>		
Problem Solving	10	7.04
Psycho-Social	6	4.22
Ecological	6	4.22
Generalist	4	2.82
Others: Socio-behavioral (3), Eclectic (2), Life Model (2), Person-in-Situation (2), "Various Casework" (1).		
Number of Programs Teaching Social Work Theory = 26		
% of Programs = 18.31		

	<i>Miscellaneous theories</i>	
Systems	32	22.53
Poverty	4	2.82
Others: Humanism (3), Progressivism (1), Ethical (1), Critical (1)		
Number of Programs Teaching Miscellaneous Theory = 34		
% of Programs = 23.94		

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*Values*

The one area in which the respondents were consistently in agreement is that of the importance of students developing an "appropriate" value system as an objective for the introductory course. The item on the questionnaire gave no indication of what this value system might be, assuming that respondents would know what was meant. This assumption was borne out by the fact that only 2 of the 140 respondents indicated any feeling of ambiguity about the item. On a 7-point scale with 1 indicating most important and 7 indicating little importance, the mean response was 1.7. The distribution of responses is summarized in Table 3.

Table 3

*"How important do you think it is for students to begin to develop an appropriate value system in this course?"*

	Number of responses	
Most important	1	74
	2	50
	3	6
	4	6
	5	2
	6	2
Little Importance	7	0

---

N = 140  
 $\bar{X}$  = 1.7

---

The means faculty employ to help students develop an appropriate value system are so diverse as to almost defy categorization. What categorization was possible is presented in Table 4. The "other" category is comprised of a number of methods like a "value auction," autobiographical sketch, reading articles authored by persons with differing political perspectives, and "myth debunking."

Table 4

*"If you indicated that the development of an appropriate value system is an important objective, what are some of the ways you seek to achieve this objective?"*

Method	Number of Programs	%
Value clarification exercises	23	16.43
Experiential exercises	15	10.71
Reflective class experiences	14	10.00
Study of NASW and/or NABSW Code of Ethics	12	8.57
Role playing	8	5.71
Debates	6	4.28
Small group discussion	6	4.28
Analysis of case examples	6	4.28
Other	29	40.71
No response	40	28.57
		N = 140

*Note:* Number of Programs exceeds N and percent exceeds 100 due to programs listing more than one method.

## Discussion

The results of this survey of the introductory course in the social work curriculum are troubling. What emerges is a picture of a course with no set body of content, minimally supported by research or other statistical data, often with no explicit theoretical perspective, with an emphasis on developing values. A recent analysis of the social policy curriculum, in which introduction to social welfare is generally considered the

first course, resulted in similar findings, the author concluding that "a laissez-faire doctrine seems to prevail" (Seipel, 1980, p. 53).

The fact that the course has no uniform body of content can be explained as a result of three factors. The first is historical. When the baccalaureate social work curriculum was first envisioned, the recommendation was for two introductory courses. One was introductory to the social work profession and was related to the sequence of courses designed to teach methods of social work practice, the other was introductory to the social welfare institution and was related to the sequence of courses designed to familiarize students with social welfare policy. Over the years two thirds of the programs have collapsed this material into one course. Sometimes this one course is the same as the social work course and sometimes as the social welfare course, most often it is a varied mix of concepts from both. The second factor accounting for the lack of uniform content in the introductory course is that this reflects the state of the profession. Social work has never had a uniform view of itself, and the debate regarding what social work is continues to rage. The final reason is what may be called benign neglect. Over the last 15 years there has been only one article published dealing with the introductory course, and that was published in Australia (Jones, 1982). The result of this neglect has been that each BSW program has developed the course almost entirely on its own.

The miscellaneous jumble of content in the introductory course reflects, or is reflected by, the textbooks available. Jones (1982) notes:

In other fields of study there tends to be more agreement on content and approach. Introductory textbooks in established subjects such as economics, psychology, Australian politics, and sociology tend to follow common themes. . . However, amongst those involved in teaching social welfare there is less agreement on basic content. A review of recent North American or Australian texts. . . shows a remarkable diversity of approach and content. (p. 10)

A quick review of texts used by respondents found that some take a social problems approach (Johnson, 1986; Zastrow,

1986); some take an introduction to the social work curriculum approach (Federico, 1984; Morales and Sheafor, 1983) some take a sociology and economics welfare approach (Bell, 1983; Dolgoff & Feldstein, 1984); and one is basically a history of social welfare (Compton, 1980).

It can be argued that the lack of uniformity in the introductory course is not a problem. What is important is the whole curriculum and that all of the material specified in the CSWE accreditation standards is covered somewhere in the curriculum. There are several problems with this argument. The first, and probably least important, is the matter of student transfers. Most programs will have students transferring in and out each year. It creates problems for both faculty and students when transfer students get to advanced courses and find they have not had necessary prerequisite material. The second reason lack of uniformity is a problem is that it makes the task of textbook and teaching material development very difficult. Social workers need to come to some agreement as a profession and an academic discipline on what content should be in the introductory course so they can systematically develop texts and supporting material. Finally, the lack of uniformity in the introductory course reflects a lack of agreement in the profession about who social workers are and what they are about. In the author's opinion, this is *the* issue in the profession today and one that needs to be resolved. The first course in the series seems to be a good place to start.

In a similar fashion it can be argued that the lack of research and descriptive data about the social welfare institution in the introductory course is not a problem. We are currently witnessing a reaction to the empirical emphasis in social work that has been present for the past 15 or so years (for example, see Davis, 1985, & Heineman, 1981). The argument, admittedly oversimplified here, is that social work has overemphasized empirical knowledge and underemphasized intuitive knowledge. Although this argument may have some merit in certain areas of social work knowledge, it is not applicable to the introductory course. For a beginning understanding of social welfare, students need facts. They need to know poverty rates; relationships between poverty and other variables such as race and sex;

correlates of mental illness, child placement, unemployment, drug usage; data regarding effectiveness of intervention; the list goes on and on. The argument presented here is not that empirical research is the only road to knowledge, but that it is a necessary starting place.

There is also an argument that the lack of explicit theoretical content in 40% of the courses does not constitute a problem. Several of the respondents summarized this on the questionnaire by stating that the course is descriptive, not theoretical. Hoover (1980) lists the uses of theory as: (a) Theory provides *patterns* for the interpretation of data; (b) Theory *links* one study with another; (c) Theories supply *frameworks* within which concepts and variables acquire *special significance*; (d) Theory allows us to interpret the *larger meaning* of our findings for ourselves and others. (p. 39) Facts, or descriptions, without theory have little meaning. If a student is not exposed to patterns, links, frameworks, and the larger meaning of material presented in introduction to social welfare, the course will have little lasting value.

The one area in which the courses are clearly in agreement is the emphasis on study and development of appropriate social work values. Even this can be viewed as a problem. Meinert (1980), for example, has said:

Deeply embedded in the profession is the belief that institutionalized social work is based on a trinity of identifiable knowledge, values, and skills. Certainly a shared body of knowledge and skills exists in social work. This article strongly questions, however, whether a system of values is truly present. It argues that values in social work are nonexistent; they are a myth, a myth we can live without. If social workers do possess any "values," they are not unique ones, but only preference patterns shared by the general population. (p. 5)

Meinert concludes that:

... the most prudent and realistic position would be for social work education and practice to eliminate values completely from public statements and emphasize only its knowledge and skill components. (p. 5)



Meinert's conclusions may be a bit drastic. However, they do serve to emphasize that if social workers are going to place values in the central position in the introductory course, they need to devote time and effort to clearly specifying what values to pass on, what the basis is for them, and how to communicate them.

The CSWE accreditation standards do specify that social work values are to be clearly dealt with in the curriculum, although they do not specify exactly where this is to occur. It appears that most programs have identified the introductory course as the appropriate location for at least part of this content.

### Conclusion

The introductory course in the social work curriculum has been ignored by the profession. The result has been that programs have developed the course more or less independently of one another with the result of little uniformity or, in some cases, even little similarity between one course and another. Each individual professor in each individual program presents whatever material he or she considers applicable in whatever manner they think effective. The two exceptions are that programs appear to generally include content in the introductory course on history and at least part of the CSWE mandated content on values. Other than the wide diversity of content, the major shortcoming of the introductory course as it is currently taught in most programs is that it is generally atheoretical and lacking in research content.

The Council on Social Work Education asserts that it is concerned that minimum content be included in the curriculum somewhere, not with exactly how programs organize their curriculum to provide the required content. This is a good policy and the author is not advocating for more intrusive accreditation standards. The problem, rather, is one of the state of social work as an academic discipline. Sociology, for example, has no accreditation at all, yet sociologists have reached agreement about the content and organization of their curriculum material and this is reflected in the organization of the introductory course. A debate needs to begin in the social work profession

regarding what constitutes basic organization and content of the introductory course and this debate needs to continue until the issue is resolved.

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