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Susan Savella Cole

Teresa Marie Alarcon

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FACTORS INFLUENCING SOCIAL WORKERS  
COMMITMENT TO THE FIELD OF GERONTOLOGY

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A Project  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

---

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Social Work

---

by  
Susan Savella Cole  
Teresa Marie Alarcon

June 2001

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## ABSTRACT

Using a survey research design, this project discovered factors that influence a social worker's commitment to the field of gerontology. Due to the impending "elder boom" the need for gerontological social workers is increasing. This study examined what attracted workers to enter this field and what motivates them to stay. The research also focused on the relationship between the social worker's commitment and their perceived need for training and education in the field of gerontology. This project is of particular benefit to agencies as it may identify for workers where they feel their skills are lacking. It could also be helpful in developing recruiting and retention strategies for both the public and private agencies.



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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### Problem Statement

This study explores the commitment of social workers to the field of gerontology in the 21st century. The population of the United States is aging at a tremendous rate. It is estimated that by 2025 those 65 or older will constitute approximately one fifth of the U.S. population (Choi & Dinse, 1998). As the 76 million baby boomers begin to hit their retirement years in 2011, the implications for the field of social work will be enormous. The percentage of older adults in the United States has tripled since 1900, and this population is expected to double between now and 2030. Americans are not just greater in number but they are living longer thanks to the advancements in medical technology and improved health and nutrition.

Are there enough social workers to meet the needs of this aging population? The U.S. Census Bureau reports that those groups of individuals over age 85 have grown 31% since 1900, with the fastest growing group of older adults being over 100! If this trend continues it is estimated that the centenarian population will reach 834,000 by 2050, from the estimated 70,000 currently.

There are a multitude of concerns related to this enormous group of older Americans. One problem that can be

anticipated in the future is that there will be a tremendous burden on social services and social workers, as more resources are needed to sustain this population. Housing, financial assistance, transportation and home health care are all areas with which older Americans may eventually need assistance. As people are living longer and staying in the home longer, resources will be in demand. So the question becomes will today's social worker be ready and willing to meet the challenge of providing resources to this population as we move into the 21st century?

The purpose of this study was to determine if there is a committed core of social workers that plan to stay in the field of gerontology throughout their career. We can anticipate from our projections that qualified social workers will be at a premium. Those social workers working with the elderly will need specific training and expertise if clients are to be cared for effectively. But who are these people who will advocate for the seniors and what characteristics do they bring to their practice? What kind of training do they have, and what affects their willingness to stay in the field of gerontology? These are some of the questions that are addressed in this study.

A study with the purpose of understanding the commitment of social workers to the field of gerontology is important in many ways. First, it is most important to the individual aging adult, as they are entitled to committed

social workers who provide them quality case management and services that are efficient and ethical. This information is also important to the private sector to better prepare itself for the emergence of a burgeoning industry, i.e. geriatric social work. This data is equally important to the public sector to enable social workers to effectively provide services and delivery systems with the anticipation of a larger client base.

This study is of value to schools of higher education as it examined if commitment to the field of gerontology is correlated with a social worker's perception of competence in their field. Is there sufficient training in gerontology for social workers who work with the aged? Do agencies, public or private, provide adequate training for their employees who are on the front lines? These data could be of importance in determining a desire and a need for graduate education in the field of gerontology by social workers both locally and nationally.

Additionally, this is a timely study as a need for an increase of social workers in the field of gerontology in both the public and private sectors has been witnessed. One example of this need reflects itself in a local health care Health Maintenance Organization called Senior Care Action Network, (SCAN) who provides services to seniors in an effort to keep them in their own homes rather than being institutionalized. This agency, specifically, has increased



its case managers from 10 to 25 within two years in their Riverside office, and is continuing to hire social workers at a rapid rate. This trend is also true for San Bernardino County social workers. Current reports from the Department of Aging and Adult Services (DAAS) show that the County's entire social workers list has been depleted. One supervisor revealed that out of each list of potential applicants only two or three individuals actually interview for these positions. The reality of this shortage of workers is being felt currently and will have far reaching affects in the future if this trend continues. Therefore, this study was necessary to understand what influences a social worker's commitment to the field of gerontology in an effort to prepare for this ever-expanding population of seniors.

#### Problem Focus

This project studied social workers in the aging field, the circumstances that may have led them to work in this field and which factors are keeping them here. This study also questioned social workers working in the field as to why they chose to work with the aged, and what their future career goals might be. This study addressed the issues that brought social workers to this field and those that might be pushing them away. This study examined how long the social worker has been with the agency and if they see themselves remaining in the field. Along with gender, age, and

experience, respondents were questioned as to whether or not knowledge and education are factors that influenced their decision to remain working with this specific population. Studies have shown that "social workers and other health professionals generally prefer to work with younger patients..." (Kane, 1999). Our study may shed some light on why social workers are hesitant to work with elders. With the growing and graying population, opportunities for social workers are increasing at a tremendous rate. There is concern that there may be a lack of qualified social workers whose preference is to work with senior citizens.

This study informs agencies and local universities of the circumstances that influence social workers so they can better plan for the elder boom. This study should help public and private agencies to recruit and retain workers. By concentrating on the factors that influenced practitioners to work with the aging, agencies may see an increase in the number of workers applying for positions. For example, if the study indicates that a lack of knowledge about the population veers workers away from the aged then agencies can offer more training to workers and/or field placements to students to help social workers gain knowledge in specific areas. If workers perceive that they perform their jobs well and are knowledgeable about their clientele then they will have greater job satisfaction and will be more likely to stay within the field. Based on our

findings, agencies could offer more training according to what factors workers find important, and agencies may also be able to influence local universities to increase gerontology curriculum.

Social work education is the key to exposing future social workers to the field. The local state university currently offers minimal classes related to gerontology and has yet to develop a specialization in the field. Is this enough? Do students and practitioners feel that they have enough knowledge about the aged? According to a study by Kane, many MSW students felt that they did not have enough knowledge about the elderly. In this study, only 14.8% of 333 social work students had an interest in geriatric clients (Kane, 1999). If social work educators encourage exposure to gerontology, students and practitioners may feel more comfortable working with the elderly. That is why this project studies **factors that characterize a social worker's commitment to the gerontology field.**



CHAPTER TWO  
LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Work Education and  
the Field of Aging

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services estimated that the number of full-time professionally trained social workers needed to serve older persons and their families will be 40,000 to 50,000 in the year 2000, and 60,000 to 70,000 by 2020 (as cited in Solomon & Mellor, 1992). These numbers are greatly in excess of the number of prepared social work personnel actually in the field currently.

In response to demographic trends, gerontology education has experienced a surge over the past twenty years. The Association for Gerontology in Higher Education (AGHE) states that with the passage of the Older Americans Act (1965), the Administration on Aging provided funds to support gerontology career preparation programs in higher education (as cited in Solomon & Mellor, 1992). In 1996, 938 master's level social work students were reported by the Council on Social Work Education as enrolled in aging/gerontological social work studies, defined as either primary field of practice or social problem concentration (Euster, 1999). According to AGHE, today there are over

1,000 educational programs identified with studies of aging that are housed in over 500 institutions in the U.S. of higher education.

The nature of aging curricula has changed considerably over the years. The first generation of gerontology programs, those from the 1960's and before, were characterized by single semester courses and were based on the "medical model." These courses dealt with psychiatric aspects of aging or were survey courses on the aged as a population. Study of aging at that time was identified with illness and incapacitation of the elderly and the identification of the elderly as a vulnerable group needing advocacy. The second generation of gerontology programs dating from the 1970's to the present has shifted its focus, and views aging as a normative process in the life cycle, with its distinctive life crises and accompanying developmental tasks. Emphasis is also placed on successful aging, on intergenerational relationships, on newer therapeutic approaches, and on service development and delivery (Solomon and Mellor, 1992). Choi and Dinse (1998) feel that a more current focus on the productivity and empowerment of old age should be added to the general topics of frailty and dependence in social work education.

Studies show that exposure to the field of gerontology can have a tremendous influence on the willingness to work with the aged. "Incorporation of material directed

specifically at skill and knowledge development in social work curricula may promote more interest as well as competence in this area of practice" (Kane, 1999). In a conflicting study, McCracken (1995) found that exposure to the aged is not always positive. During a study of American student nurses receiving lectures on the elderly, the more lectures the nurses received the less positive were their attitudes toward the elderly and working with this population.

A review of the literature supports the view that gerontology education and the commitment of social workers to the field of aging are related. A survey of all Master's level graduates of the USC Leonard Davis School of Gerontology was conducted in the spring of 1995 to determine student and program success. Of the 704 graduates surveyed, 55% responded to the survey. In this study of commitment to the field of gerontology, the survey data supported a high level of commitment to the field as 81% of the respondents indicated that they enrolled in the gerontology program to secure future employment in the field of aging. The acquisition of professional level jobs was the primary motivation of the students involved (Masunaga, et al.1998). These respondents also reported high levels of job satisfaction in the field of aging and concluded that higher education in gerontology led to professional opportunities,



as the level of instruction provided superior outcomes if job placement was the goal.

Despite the obvious growth in gerontology educational programs over the past twenty years, the Association for Gerontological Education in Social Work revealed that a critical restraint to the future expansion of the field, is the serious shortage of faculty members with substantial expertise in the field of aging. A 1992 survey found, though there is an increase in student interest in aging, there actually has been a decrease in gerontology curriculum content from that reported in a 1984 survey. Lack of faculty interest and crowded curricula was identified as significantly contributing to the situation (Lubben et al., 1992). A further study, (1999) conducted by Gerald L. Euster, the Graduate Director and Professor at the University of South Carolina's Certificate of Graduate Study in Gerontology Program states, "It is imperative that social work educators continue to strengthen their position among the growing number of academic gerontologists and geriatricians responding to the challenges of an aging society."

There have been multiple studies evaluating the present curriculum needs of gerontology programs in higher education. One study conducted by the Gerontological Development Project for the School of Social Work at McMaster University in Ontario, Canada, made a three-pronged

attempt to infuse gerontological content into curricula at the undergraduate, graduate, and post-professional levels (Johnson, et al. 1992). Using a community development model, the article discussed initiatives used to introduce gerontological content to these three levels of professional education.

The above study also found that attention to the development of faculty in ways that enhanced their current interests, rather than trying to replace them, was successful in increasing awareness of aging issues and developing interest. Graduate students' interests were also increased through targeted support of their work. Additionally, students' exposure to student-directed or faculty research projects, further enhanced their perception that gerontology is an exciting and worthwhile field of professional work (Watt and Meredith, 1995).

In an additional study on curriculum, Charles Fahey (1996) determined that core curriculum should involve basic information on the biology of aging as well as an introduction to theories and the life cycle. Fahey (1996) also stated that students should become familiar with how the elderly population is increasing their political force and with social welfare programs (Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid) that affect them.

One way that higher education has dealt with the need for gerontology education is through the development of

certificate programs that are multidisciplinary in their approach. A survey conducted by the Association of Gerontology in Higher Education (AGHE) through the University of Southern California, reported that certificate programs were offered by 131 of the responding institutions, while a specific gerontology degree was available at only 48 of the institutions in the survey (Johnson, et al., 1992).

Related studies by the Gerontology Certificate Program at the University of South Carolina revealed that students tended to remain committed to social work practice in a wide range of aging network and geriatric settings. Additionally, the certificate also provided advanced employment opportunities and marketability for a large number of graduates (Euster, 1999).

#### Attitudes toward the Aging

There are a variety of articles on the attitudes people have toward the aged. For the most part, people view the aged as dependent and not being able to contribute to society. Most studies found negative attitudes toward the aging. In a study about the challenges and opportunities of the aging population (Choi & Dinse, 1998) many Americans had the misconception that old age is still plagued by ill health and isolation from friends and family. People often see older persons as lonely, angry, and bored (Choi & Dinse, 1998) and not as productive citizens.

Although most social workers' attitudes were found to be neutral, some social workers and other professionals generally prefer to work with younger patients (Carmel, Cwikel, & Galinsky, 1992). It has been argued that since many schools of social work focus on children and families this is where students' interests lie (Kane, 1999; McCracken et al., 1995).

Wilderom found that perceived sufficiency of geriatric knowledge and perceived public attitude can also have an effect on deciding to work with elders (as cited in Kane, 1999). If the public perceives the elderly negatively then students and workers may be led to believe that their work with the elderly is not important and choose another field that society may view as more valuable (McCracken et al., 1995; Kane, 1999).

At this time, there appear to be few studies that examine education and attitudes, which may influence a social worker's commitment to the field of gerontology. With the support of the mentioned literature, this study has further explored the relationship between how education, attitudes, and the willingness to work with the aging affects those already working in the field.

While research is limited on this specific topic, it is an important study and could benefit social workers as well as businesses that provide services to the elderly. This study is not only important but timely to the graying

population as research repeatedly revealed the need for educated and experienced social workers in the future of gerontology.

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## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore and discover what characteristics influence social workers' commitment to the field of gerontology. Gerontological social work, which is characterized by a comprehensive biopsychosocial approach to aging, has shown an increase of student interest since its inception in the 1960's, however recent research concludes that educational curricula has not kept pace with this interest or the developing needs of our aging population. Social work is a profession with several inherent characteristics, which might be negatively construed by anyone choosing it as their life's work. However, some of these characteristics may impact the field of gerontological social work more severely. Attributes of gerontological social work that may detract from entering it as a chosen field include, but are not limited to the belief(s) and myths that:

1. Social work with the aged is focused on the individual's physical limitations and illnesses.
2. Social work with the aged does not produce significant results, as older people are unresponsive to psychosocial intervention.



3. Social work with the aged is focused primarily on death and dying.

#### Research Question and Design

Considering the low ratio of social workers working with the aged compared to social workers employed in other settings, i.e. mental health and children and families, these beliefs about gerontological social work may have a powerful effect on some social workers. This study has addressed, "what factors characterize a social worker's commitment to the gerontology field."

This project used as a research design, a quantitative cross-sectional survey. This cross-sectional design involved making a single observation for one period of time. This survey was intended to explore how committed social workers are to the field of aging. The questionnaire requested demographic data and open-ended questions were asked regarding respondent's education, and the initial, continuing, and negative influences that have affected their commitment to this field. Since some of these questions had areas to provide comments, these responses were extracted and analyzed as part of the research. The remaining questions were designed using a Likert scale.

An implication to be considered in the use of survey design studies is that all survey questions are predetermined by the researcher(s). It is hoped that the use

of open-ended questions within the questionnaire, will allow for comments by the respondents to reveal their true feelings, thus overriding any barriers of the research instrument.

### Sampling

Members of the population of interest were social workers from the public and private sector who are currently working with the aged population. Senior Care Action Network (SCAN), a private sector health care provider located in four counties of southern California, and the San Bernardino County Department of Aging and Adult Services, provided the pool of respondents for this study. A total of forty-eight subjects have been surveyed for this study. This sample was accessible to both researchers as they are both currently working within these two agencies.

### Data Collection and Instruments

Participants were asked to complete a 23-question survey. This survey focused on participants' education, training, and factors that influence them to continue working in this field. The dependent variables were defined as the social worker's level of commitment and continued commitment. The first level of commitment was measured by how many years they have worked in the aging field. The second level of commitment was determined by respondents'

answers to questions regarding their education and training, attitudes towards the aging, and working conditions.

A survey was developed as no prior instrument was found for this type of study. Common demographic questions like age, gender and ethnicity were asked. In addition the respondents were asked for their highest level of education. If the respondents had a Masters degree they were asked to indicate if it was in Social Work. The study hoped to compare agencies so the respondent's current position was asked as well as length of employment.

To determine a level of commitment the respondents were asked for years and months of experience working with the elderly. The respondents were also asked whether or not they planned to continue working with the elderly. Due to questions regarding education the survey also asked respondents if they planned to continue their education and if so what was their educational goal.

The survey was developed to identify influences that relate to the respondents level of commitment. Three questions asked respondents to check all that apply. These questions asked the respondents to mark those factors that initially influenced, continued to influence and are negative influences. To further examine these factors Likert scale questions were asked regarding training/education, attitudes toward the aging and working conditions.

A strength and weakness of this study was the open-ended questions. Strength was identified as open-ended questions allowing participants a space for comments in the survey. It is hoped that the use of open-ended questions within the survey allowed for comments by the respondents to reveal their true feelings, thus overriding any barriers of the research instrument. Weaknesses of the survey instrument were that comments from respondents were too brief and often synonymous with the other choices in the questions. Those questions with comments often had to be recategorized for analysis.

#### Procedure

The survey was given to social workers employed with the Department of Aging and Adult Services (DAAS) and Senior Care Action Network (SCAN). Susan Cole administered the surveys to the employees of SCAN, while department supervisors administered surveys to the DAAS employees. SCAN employees were distributed their surveys at the end of a case conference meeting. The employees were instructed to fill out the survey on their own time. Upon completion of their survey, the respondents were instructed to keep the debriefing statement and return their survey and consent form to a specified location.

The Interim Director of Department of Aging and Adult Services distributed the surveys to the Deputy Directors of

the East and West Valley regions. Each Director in turn dispersed the surveys to staff supervisors who distributed the surveys to staff. Each Director was given collection boxes for the employees to return the survey.

Each survey respondent was assured their anonymity, and provided a debriefing statement to allow for questions following the survey if needed. This was a one-time survey administered during the spring quarter of 2001. All survey data was obtained by April 2001.

#### Protection of Human Subjects

Confidentiality and anonymity was stressed throughout the entire research process. Personal names were not included on the completed questionnaires. An informed consent was attached to the front of the survey, (see Appendix A.) It described the purpose, risks and benefits associated with participation in the study. Participants were instructed to remove and sign the consent before beginning the survey.

The researchers provided a debriefing statement to the participant indicating whom to contact for additional information or questions about the results of the study.

The population studied included a limited amount of males. As such, it was our goal to assure these individuals that the study preserved their anonymity, as all data were reported in aggregate form only.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

#### Demographics

The ages of the respondents in this study were between 23 and 66 years old. The majority of respondents (58.7%) were under forty years old (See table 4.1).

Table 4.1. Age of Respondents

Age	# of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Under 30	13	27.1
30-39	14	29.2
Over 40	19	39.6
Missing system	2	4.2
Total	48	100

The ethnicity of respondents was divided into the following categories: Caucasian, African American, Asian, Hispanic, Native American, or other (See Table 4.2). From this survey of forty-eight participants, 15 respondents were Caucasian (31.3%), 7 were African American (14.6%), 2 were Asian (4.2%), 20 were Hispanic (41.7%), 2 were Native American (4.2%), and one was reported as other. Forty-two respondents reported they were female, five were reported male, and one did not answer the question.



Table 4.2. Ethnicity of Respondents

Ethnicity	# of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Caucasian	15	31.3
African-American	7	14.6
Hispanic	20	41.7
Asian	2	4.2
Native American	2	4.2
Other	2	4.2
Total	48	100

Level of education was examined with the majority of respondents listed as having a bachelors degree (66.7%). Eight respondents (16.7%) held masters degrees with (12.5%) awarded as Master of Social Work. The remaining (12.5%) of respondents reported to have some college education. Additionally, 29 respondents (60.4%) stated they plan to continue their education, while 15 respondents (31.3%) stated they were currently students.

Other factors examined were related to participant plans to continue working with the elderly. Of those surveyed thirty-seven respondents (77.1%) reported they plan to continue working in the field, with 3 respondents (6.3%) stating no, and 8 respondents (16.7%) stating they were unsure.

Of those surveyed, experience in the gerontology field ranged from a few months to many years. Participants'

experience ranged from six months to fifteen years working with the aged population. Survey data also revealed that respondents had worked for their employers ranging from four months to twenty-three years. Of those participants working for SCAN™, the majority were currently in the position of Personal Care Planner™ II, while the majority of social workers at the Department of Aging and Adult Services were in the position of Social Worker II.

#### Presentation of Findings

Three questions in the survey were examined to assess factors that influenced a social worker's decision to work in the field of aging. Respondents reported 15 or (31.3%) were "initially" influenced by college courses that led them to the field. Twenty-one or (43.8%) were initially influenced by prior work in the field. Seven respondents reported "other" as an influence, five revealed that this was their first job, often out of college, or their job was a promotion from a lower position.

Respondents were surveyed as to what influential factors "continued" to keep them in the field of aging. Twenty-two or (45.8%) indicated that salary and/or working conditions is one factor that influences them to stay. For SCAN employees, (56.3%) agreed with the above statement. The

Department of Aging and Adult Services social workers, (40.6%) also agreed that salary and working conditions influenced their continuance in the field of aging.

Additionally, respondents were asked what they considered to be negative aspects of working with the elderly. A low percentage of respondent's, (22.9%) stated that no room for advancement/job opportunity was seen as a negative aspect of working with the elderly. However, when analyzed by agency, almost one-third of respondents from the Department of Aging and Adult Services reported (31.3%) that they would consider no room for advancement/job opportunity as a negative aspect of working with the elderly.

Additional data were reported to determine respondent plans to continue to work in the field of aging. Of the total respondents (N=48), (77.1%) answered "yes" to the above question. By agency, (75%) of SCAN employees, and (78%) of DAAS employees answered "yes" to this question (See Table 4.3). When separated by position, the higher the level position, the less respondents answered "no".

Table 4.3. Do you Plan to Continue Working in the Field of Aging? (by Agency)

Agency	Yes		No		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
SCAN	12	75	4	25	16	100
DAAS	25	78.1	7	21.9	32	100
Total	37		11		48	

Other data included the examination of the relationship between a respondent's age and their plan to continue working with the aged. The research revealed that the older the respondent the more likely they were to continue working with the elderly. Of those respondents under the age of thirty, only (38.55) plan to continue working in the field of aging. As age increased the percentages increased, for those age 30-39, (85.7%) plan to continue working in the aging field and for those over the age of forty, (94.7%) plan to continue working in the aging field (See Table 4.4).

Table 4.4. Plan to Continue Working with Elderly by Age

Age	Yes		No		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Under 30	5	38.5	8	61.5	13	100
30-39	12	85.7	2	14.3	14	100
Over 40	18	94.7	1	5.3	19	100
Total	35		11		48	

The relationship between a respondent's experience in the field and their plan to continue working in the aging

field was examined. The respondents who had more than five years experience in this field were more often to answer "yes" to planning to continue work in the field than those respondents with less than five years experience. Of those with over five years experience in the field, (94.4%) answered "yes" to the question, did they plan to continue working in the field, while (66.7%) of those with less than five years answered "yes" (See Table 4.5).

Table 4.5. Plan to Continue Working with Elderly by Experience

Years of Experience	Yes		No		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
< 2 years	7	58.3	5	41.7	12	100
2-5 years	13	72.2	5	27.8	18	100
> 5 years	17	94.4	1	5.6	18	100
	37		11		48	

Additionally, the relationship between current students and their commitment to the field of aging was examined. Of the students surveyed, (46.7%) answered "yes" to planning to continue working in the aging field. The research also assessed how many of the current students preferred elderly versus younger clients. Of those fifteen current students surveyed, seven (46.7%) agreed that they prefer the elderly



to younger clients, the same percentage as those who want continue working in the field.

The remaining questions were in Likert scale format, and examined how the influence of three variables, namely, a respondent's education/training, attitudes of working with the elderly, and working conditions, affected a respondent's level of commitment to the field of gerontology. Chi-squares were run on those variables with possible significant correlation.

The variables, "I feel adequately trained" and "prefer elderly vs. younger clients" were analyzed (see table 4.6). The null hypothesis was not rejected ( $p=.614$ ). However, it is noteworthy to report that a majority of the respondents (66.7%) who felt that they were adequately trained to work with the aging population, also preferred to work with the elderly versus younger clients.

Table 4.6. Prefer Elderly Clients vs. Younger Clients and feel Adequately Trained to Work with the Elderly

Prefer Elderly vs. Younger Clients	I feel adequately trained to work with the elderly					
	Agree		Disagree		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Agree	32	66.7	4	8.3	36	75
Disagree	10	20.8	2	4.2	12	25
Total	42		6		48	100

$\chi^2 = .254, df = 1, p = 0.614$

Responses from both SCAN and DAAS were compared regarding their attitudes toward social work with the aged. Both agencies recognized (91.7%) that working with the elderly is not focused on death and dying. Other variables that were compared are as follows, "education prepared me to work with the elderly" and "the elderly are not as receptive to interventions." The null hypothesis was rejected ( $p=.003$ ) so that respondents who agreed that their education has prepared them to work with the elderly, disagreed that elderly clients are not as receptive to social work interventions as other populations.

Table 4.7. Education Prepared me to Work with the Elderly and Elderly are not as Receptive to Interventions

Education prepared me to work with the elderly	The elderly are not as receptive to interventions as younger clients					
	Agree		Disagree		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Agree	2	4.2	29	60.4	31	64.6
Disagree	7	14.6	10	20.8	17	35.4
Total	9		6		48	100

$$x^2 = 8.690, df = 1, p = 0.003$$

Respondents were asked if their employers offered adequate training. Sixty percent of all respondents agreed that their employer does offer adequate training. SCAN

employees' felt less adequately trained than DAAS employees. Almost sixty-nine percent of SCAN employees disagreed to being adequately trained, only twenty-five percent of DAAS employees disagreed (see Table 4.8). Almost half (42.8%) of the Social Worker I's that responded disagreed that their employer offers adequate training. Of SCAN Personal Care Planner™ II's that responded, (60%) disagreed that their employer offered adequate training (See Table 4.6).

Table 4.8. My Employer offers Adequate Training on Working with the Elderly

Agency	Agree		Disagree		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
SCAN	5	31.3	11	68.8	16	100
DAAS	24	75	8	25	32	100
Total	29		19		48	

$$x^2 = 8.537, df = 1, p = 0.003$$

In respect to working conditions, the last variable analyzed was related to caseload size and its effects on respondent attitudes (See Table 4.9). While the chi-square did not quite reject the null hypothesis, (p = .064 vs. the rejection level of .05) it was revealed that (56.3%) of those who responded felt that the number of clients on their caseload affects their level of commitment to this field. It should be noted that DAAS employees were almost split 50/50, with (46.9%) agreeing, while SCAN employees agreed that the

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

#### Introduction

This study discovered factors that influence a social worker's commitment to the field of gerontology. The purpose of this study was to determine if there is a committed core of social workers that plan to stay in the aging field throughout their career. Due to the impending elder boom the need for gerontological social workers is increasing. We have determined that qualified social workers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be at a premium.

The results of this study indicated that thirty-seven respondents (77.1%) reported that they plan to continue working in the field of aging. Further questions revealed the factors that influenced them to stay in the field. Of those most prominent, (48.8%) of respondents were initially influenced by college courses that led them to the field. This would support Kane's belief that exposure to the field of gerontology will have an impact on an individual's willingness to work with the aged. An additional factor of influence included salary and/or working conditions with (45.8%) reporting this as important to their continued commitment to the field.

The most significant data revealed that the longer respondents worked in the field the more likely they were to

number of clients on their caseload will affect their level of commitment to the field.

Table 4.9. Caseload Size affects Commitment to Aging Field

Agency	Agree		Disagree		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
SCAN	12	75	4	25	16	100
DAAS	15	46.9	17	53.1	32	100
Total	27		21		48	

$\chi^2 = 8.537, df = 1, p = 0.064$



stay in the field. Of those with 5 years experience or more, (94.4%) stated they plan to stay in the field. Additionally, the older the respondent, the more likely they were to continue in the field.

This study was also concerned with respondent attitudes toward the aged, and whether they felt adequately trained to work in the field. Of those who felt adequately trained, (66.7%) also preferred to work with the elderly vs. younger clients.

When asked about caseload size, the respondents felt that the number of their caseload affected their level of commitment to this field. DAAS employees (46.9%) and SCAN employees (75%) both agreed that the level of caseload would affect their level of commitment to the field.

#### Implications for Social Work

This study is both important and timely. As the 76 million baby boomers begin to hit their retirement years in 2011, the implications for the field of social work will be enormous. So it is important to determine if today's social worker will be ready and willing to meet the challenge.

This study informs agencies and local universities of the circumstances that influence social workers to stay in the field. Perhaps this study can assist with retaining and training efforts as social workers that feel competent in the field tend to stay.

In conclusion, one recommendation to universities would be to increase the exposure of gerontology courses to social work students both undergraduate and graduate, as the research revealed that this was a significant factor in their initial decision to work in the field. Secondly, social workers in public and private agencies that felt adequately trained to perform their duties, often preferred to work with the elderly vs. other populations. Therefore, it is crucial to agencies to provide initial and ongoing training in the field of gerontology in effort to recruit and retain their social workers.

APPENDIX A  
INFORMED CONSENT



## INFORMED CONSENT

We, Susan Cole and Teresa Alarcon are requesting your participation in a research study as part of our graduation requirement for the Masters of Social Work Program at California State University, San Bernardino. This research study is examining the commitment of social workers to the field of gerontology in the 21st century. At least 50 social workers from both the private and public sector will be asked to participate in this survey process. If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to fill out a questionnaire that will take approximately 15-20 minutes of your time. Participation is entirely voluntary and you are free to withdraw from participating at any time during the survey.

The information collected during this survey will be strictly confidential, and the results of this survey will be reported only in group form. In no way will individuals participating in the survey be identifiable.

If you choose to participate in this study, we ask that you provide an X in the space provided below. This mark below, not your name, will indicate that you have read the informed consent and that you are at least 18 years of age, and that you have been fully informed of the nature of the study and agree to participate.

\_\_\_\_\_ Mark  
Thank you for your participation.

APPENDIX B  
QUESTIONNAIRE

**QUESTIONNAIRE**

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Do not put your name on this survey.

Gender: Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity: Caucasian \_\_\_\_\_ African American \_\_\_\_\_

Asian \_\_\_\_\_

Hispanic \_\_\_\_\_ Native American \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

Level of Education: Some College \_\_\_\_\_ BA/BS \_\_\_\_\_

Masters \_\_\_\_\_

MSW Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Number of years working with current employer: Years \_\_\_\_\_

Months \_\_\_\_\_

What is your current position? (please check one)

SCAN : Personal Care Planner:

Level 1 \_\_\_\_\_ Level 2 \_\_\_\_\_ Level 3 \_\_\_\_\_ Level 4 \_\_\_\_\_

DAAS:

Social Worker I \_\_\_\_\_ Social Worker II \_\_\_\_\_ Social Service

Practitioner \_\_\_\_\_



SURVEY QUESTIONS

- 1) How many years experience do you have working with the elderly population?

Years \_\_\_\_\_ Months \_\_\_\_\_

- 2) Do you plan to continue working in the field of aging?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ Unsure \_\_\_\_\_

- 3) Do you plan on continuing your education?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ Unsure \_\_\_\_\_

If yes, what is your educational goal?

(explain) \_\_\_\_\_

- 4) Are you currently a student?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ Major \_\_\_\_\_

- 5) What INITIALLY influenced you to work with the aged population?  
(check all that apply)

\_\_\_\_\_ College courses or instructors

\_\_\_\_\_ Unable to work in desired field

\_\_\_\_\_ Internship/field work with the elderly/aged

\_\_\_\_\_ Prior work with the aged

\_\_\_\_\_ Other (explain) \_\_\_\_\_

- 6) What influences you to continue working in the field of aging?  
(Check all that apply)

\_\_\_\_\_ Salary and working conditions

\_\_\_\_\_ Enjoy working with the elderly

\_\_\_\_\_ Job opportunities/ Room for advancement

\_\_\_\_\_ Degree in social work/gerontology

\_\_\_\_\_ Other (explain) \_\_\_\_\_

7) What would you consider to be negative aspects, (if any) of working with the elderly?

(check all that apply)

- Salary and working conditions
- Difficult to work with elderly
- No room for advancement/Lack of job opportunities
- Lack of knowledge about elderly population
- Other (explain) \_\_\_\_\_

**INSTRUCTIONS: For the following items please check:**

SA for Strongly Agree

A for Agree

D for Disagree

SD for Strongly Disagree

8) I feel that I am adequately trained to work with the aging population.

SA \_\_\_\_\_ A \_\_\_\_\_ D \_\_\_\_\_ SD \_\_\_\_\_

9) My education has prepared me to work with the elderly?

SA \_\_\_\_\_ A \_\_\_\_\_ D \_\_\_\_\_ SD \_\_\_\_\_

10) More university courses are needed on problems/issues related to the aged.

SA \_\_\_\_\_ A \_\_\_\_\_ D \_\_\_\_\_ SD \_\_\_\_\_

11) I prefer to work with elderly clients verses younger clients.

SA \_\_\_\_\_ A \_\_\_\_\_ D \_\_\_\_\_ SD \_\_\_\_\_

12) Elderly clients are NOT as receptive to social work interventions as other populations.

SA \_\_\_\_\_ A \_\_\_\_\_ D \_\_\_\_\_ SD \_\_\_\_\_

13) I feel a sense of personal accomplishment as a social worker for the aged.

SA \_\_\_\_\_ A \_\_\_\_\_ D \_\_\_\_\_ SD \_\_\_\_\_

14) Working with the aged is focused on an individual's physical limitations and weaknesses.

SA \_\_\_\_\_ A \_\_\_\_\_ D \_\_\_\_\_ SD \_\_\_\_\_

15) Social work with the aged is focused primarily on death and dying.

SA \_\_\_\_\_ A \_\_\_\_\_ D \_\_\_\_\_ SD \_\_\_\_\_

16) Social work with the elderly is meaningful and a necessary human service.

SA \_\_\_\_\_ A \_\_\_\_\_ D \_\_\_\_\_ SD \_\_\_\_\_

17) Children generally need more protection and advocacy than seniors.

SA \_\_\_\_\_ A \_\_\_\_\_ D \_\_\_\_\_ SD \_\_\_\_\_

18) It is easier to work with the elderly than with children/younger adults.

SA \_\_\_\_\_ A \_\_\_\_\_ D \_\_\_\_\_ SD \_\_\_\_\_

19) There are more job opportunities working with the elderly than with other populations.

SA \_\_\_\_\_ A \_\_\_\_\_ D \_\_\_\_\_ SD \_\_\_\_\_

20) My employer offers adequate training on working with the elderly.

SA \_\_\_\_\_ A \_\_\_\_\_ D \_\_\_\_\_ SD \_\_\_\_\_

21) Working conditions (hours/location) have an effect on my decision to work with the elderly.

SA \_\_\_\_\_ A \_\_\_\_\_ D \_\_\_\_\_ SD \_\_\_\_\_

22) The number of clients on my caseload affects my level of commitment to work in the field of gerontology.

SA \_\_\_\_\_ A \_\_\_\_\_ D \_\_\_\_\_ SD \_\_\_\_\_

23) Social workers who work with the elderly get equivalent salaries to those who work with other populations.

SA \_\_\_\_\_ A \_\_\_\_\_ D \_\_\_\_\_ SD \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX C  
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT



### Debriefing Statement

You have participated in a research study by Susan Cole and Teresa Alarcon, graduate students in the Masters of Social Work Program at California State University, San Bernardino, which is examining the commitment of social workers to the field of gerontology in the 21st century.

If you have any concerns or questions regarding this study or your participation in it, you may contact Dr. Rosemary McCaslin, Field Research Advisor, California State University, San Bernardino at 909-880-5507, or email at [rmccasli@csusb.edu](mailto:rmccasli@csusb.edu).

Results of this project will be available in the Pfau library in the Summer 2001. Thank you for your participation and support.

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## ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES

This was a two-person project where authors collaborated throughout. However, for each phase of the project, certain authors took primary responsibility. These responsibilities were assigned in the manner below.

### 1. Data Collection:

Assigned leader	Susan Cole
Assisted by	Teresa Alarcon

### 2. Data Entry and Analysis:

Assigned leader	Teresa Alarcon
Assisted by	Susan Cole

### 3. Writing Report and Presentation of Findings:

#### a. Introduction and Literature

Assigned leader	Susan Cole
Assisted by	Teresa Alarcon

#### b. Methods

Assigned leader	Teresa Alarcon
Assisted by	Susan Cole

#### c. Results

Assigned leader	Teresa Alarcon
Assisted by	Susan Cole

c. Discussion

Assigned leader

Susan Cole

Assisted by

Teresa Alarcon