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## WORK WITH ELDERS EXPERIENCING COGNITIVE IMPAIRMENT: EXPLORING THE INTEREST OF SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS

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WORK WITH ELDERS EXPERIENCING COGNITIVE IMPAIRMENT:  
EXPLORING THE INTEREST OF SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS

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

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

---

by  
Cindy Avelar  
Gabriela Maria Cantu-Reyna  
June 2018

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## ABSTRACT

The aging population in the United States will increase drastically in the next decades. Consequently, the field of aging will need more social workers. Beyond the usual cognitive decline of this stage in life, older adults may face conditions that include cognitive impairment, such as Alzheimer's disease and Parkinson's disease. This research studied the extent to which personal experience and previous work exposure influences social work students' interest in working with the elderly with cognitive impairment. This study used a cross-sectional survey design and collected the participants' answers using a survey which was sent out through classroom visits and online via email; participants' answers (n=133) were analyzed using a quantitative method. Results suggested that previous work exposure to an elderly with cognitive impairment has influence on the students' current interest, while previous experience through interaction with family and friends was not an influence. Findings from this study may help promote the creation of internships or other ways of supporting social work students interested in developing a career in aging, as an increase in the number of future social workers in this field will help fulfill the needs of older adults.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### Problem Formulation

The students in the Master of Social Work programs (MSW) are at the doorstep of graduation, getting their degree conferred, and soon will be applying for jobs in a variety of settings. Even though it is impossible for them to master all the practical skills and knowledge required by the different settings in which they can work, it is expected that they will be interested in confronting the challenges that the population of our country will face in the future. In 2008, the US Census Bureau released the national population projections for the upcoming decades and predicts dramatic changes in the US population. One of the changes predicted for the upcoming years is an increase in the elderly population, which is estimated that almost one in five individuals will be older than 65 by the year of 2030 (Vincent & Velkoff, 2010). With the increase of the elderly population, the need for services for the elderly will also increase. While the areas servicing children, families or schools retain high numbers of social workers, the workforce involved in servicing elders only represents 9% (NASW, 2007). The low preference for this social work practice specialty contrasts with the increasing elderly population needs, particularly for those with cognitive impairment.

The natural physical process of aging includes normal cognitive decline as evidenced by a decrease in IQ scores (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2016). Beyond

this expected decline, there is a risk that as people age they develop additional cognitive impairment related to some Neurocognitive Disorders (NCDs). Some examples of the most common and more familiar NCDs in elders are Delirium, Major or Mild Neurocognitive Disorder due to Alzheimer's Disease (NCD due to AD), and Major or Mild Neurocognitive Disorder due to Parkinson's Disease (APA, 2013). The distinct features of each of these NCDs require that people with these conditions and their caregivers address needs that are unique and specific to the underlying presentation.

The current estimates show that one in ten adults who are 65 years and older has Alzheimer's Disease. The population with this disease in the United States reaches 5.5 million, and two-thirds of the people with Alzheimer's Disease are women. Since 2000, the deaths from this illness have increased an 89% (Alzheimer's Association, 2017). Along with these numbers, many people who have Parkinson's Disease will develop cognitive impairment with time, and the prevalence of dementia for this illness after four years of onset is 52% and increases to 60% after 12 years (Leverenz, et al, 2009).

Literature covering the labor of social workers with caregivers of people with cognitive impairment is considerably higher than those focused on providing social work services to the people experiencing cognitive impairment. Few researchers and authors have targeted their work to the provision of social work to serve the older population with cognitive impairment. The most evident implication of interests of social work students in working with this population is to

fulfill the needs of the aging population. Furthermore, the services of social workers may be relevant to increase the quality of life of people with cognitive impairment and their families, as theories and concepts that govern the profession are appropriate to address such task (McGovern, 2015).

The current social work practice with people having cognitive impairment, especially in cases of dementia, has been described as transformative; however, there is no set practice in working with this population, as it is still changing and adapting to diverse settings (Kaplan & Andersen, 2013). Cox and Pardasani (2013) proposed the use of the person-in-environment in the workplace to support employees experiencing cognitive impairment. They suggested that social workers may aid and assist employees experiencing early stages of cognitive impairment to adapt to their work circumstances.

### Purpose of The Study

The purpose of this study was to identify the extent that personal experience and previous work exposure influences the social work students' interest in working with the elderly with cognitive impairment. There are studies, based on interviews with social work students that have suggested that work exposure to older adults made them more interested in working with this population. There is limited literature about social workers practice with older adults with cognitive impairment. Personal exposure and/or previous work experience with this population may have influenced the interest of social work students planning to work in the aging field with cognitively impaired individuals.

This study sought to expand on the results of other studies that have also focused on exploring the interest of social work students on working with the elderly. This study, however, differed from others mentioned throughout this paper, as it focused on social work students' interest in working not only with the elderly but the elderly experiencing cognitive impairment.

The research method used for this study was quantitative, and the authors developed an online questionnaire survey to gather data from participants. The quantitative approach was used for this study to receive a broad amount of data that informed us about the social work students who are interested in working with this population, as well as to explore if social work student interests related to personal exposure or previous work experience. The quantitative method of research also provided us with insight into the social work students that are not interested in working with this population.

#### Significance of the Project for Social Work Practice

Findings from this study have several implications. Findings can encourage social work professionals and social work students to develop policies and initiatives that can benefit and support the lives of elderlies with cognitive impairment. In addition, findings will allow for policies to be created which can potentially promote the creation of paid internships for students in social work programs, as well as promote more social work students to develop a career in this field of service. With more social workers in this field, the needs for this

population will be met. In addition to the influence this study could have on government policies and career promotion within this field, more programs and resources can also be developed to meet the needs of this population as time progresses and the elderly population with cognitive impairments expands. This study serves as a platform from which further analysis can be made as time progresses, the elderly population with cognitive impairment grows, and this service field requires more service workers.

The Code of Ethics from the National Association of Social Workers contains the core values that guide this profession, and one of most importance is the respect for the dignity and worth of the person (NASW, 2017). The mentioned core values are the foundation of the social work perspective of services provided for the elderly population. In both, Micro and Macro practice, social workers focus on ways of supporting the individual's self-determination and level of functioning (McInnis-Dittrich, 2005). This study promotes NASW Code of Ethics by identifying ways in which service provisions for this population can be expanded to meet their needs.

Within the phase of the generalist intervention process, this study represents the beginning stage and the assessment stage. This study engaged social work students by inviting them to share interests and experiences/exposure that may (or may not) drive them to this field of work. Assessment also took place in this study as current interests and experiences/exposure were explored. Data collected allowed us to infer how past

experiences and exposure to the elderly with cognitive impairment may influence social work students into working with this population in order to identify what is needed to encourage social work students in this field.

This study addressed the following question: To what extent does having personal exposure and previous work experience influence social work students' interests in working with elders experiencing cognitive impairment?

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

As mentioned before, there is a gradual expected decline of cognitive abilities as part of the process of aging. However, the challenges that the elderly population with cognitive impairment encounter are added to the common issues that people in this stage of life confront. The difficulties experienced by older individuals with cognitive impairments and the professionals who work with this population will be discussed. Perceptions of social work practice with the elderly population and previous literature will be analyzed as it relates to the current study. Lastly, the theory guiding this study's conceptualization will be discussed.

#### The Elderly Population with Cognitive Impairment

The two most common conditions of cognitive impairment in older adults are Alzheimer's disease and Parkinson's disease. As mentioned before, it is estimated that 5.5 million older adults are experiencing Alzheimer's disease in the United States (Alzheimer's Association, 2017). The estimated number of older adults living with Parkinson's disease in our country is one million (Parkinson's Disease Foundation, 2017). Beyond these numbers, there are no estimates on how many people are affected by the need of providing care for older adults suffering cognitive impairment due to these illnesses. It is of

paramount importance to understand how cognitive impairment influences the lives of those experiencing these deficits.

### Cognitive Impairment Symptoms and Behaviors

Cognition is the term that describes the person brain's ability to receive information from the surrounding environment, to understand the stimulus and process it, to keep it as an acquired knowledge, and to retrieve it when its use becomes necessary (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2016). When the person experiences deficits in this ability, we call it cognitive impairment. The DSM-5 (APA, 2013) has a section called Neurocognitive Disorders, devoted to the disorders include cognitive impairment, and provides a classification of the cognitive abilities and divides them into categories called neurocognitive domains (APA, 2013).

The most common and known disorders with cognitive impairment diagnosed in the elderly population are Alzheimer's Disease (AD), and Parkinson's Disease (PD). The medical field has unified efforts to assist primary health care providers in diagnosing the early cognitive impairment present in these conditions (Albert et al., 2011; Litvan et al., 2012; Petersen et al., 2009). The early diagnosis of cognitive impairment and its management can aid the person and family to understand and adapt to the changes in the person's functioning and improve their quality of life. Depending on severity, the impaired abilities may result in changes in activities such as managing finances, driving,



cooking, or remembering how and when to do important events (e.g., taking prescribed medications) (Wadley et al., 2007).

### Mental Health Care Needs

Older adults have health needs just as in another stage of life. However, their mental health needs may remain untreated in higher proportion. Lee and Dugan (2015) observed archival data of older adults with the purpose of understanding the discrepancy between the number of people self-reporting mental health issues (e.g. depression), and the number of people formally assessed or utilizing services. Their findings suggest that older people may feel hesitant to seek help. However, the percentage of older people with cognitive impairment seeking mental health services is higher than the one of older people without these deficits (Lee & Dugan, 2015).

### Medical Related Challenges

The elder with cognitive impairment has additional issues, and their needs have to be addressed differently. Callahan et al. (2006) studied the care that primary physicians provide for older adults with major cognitive impairment. Their findings suggested that the quality of care for older patients with cognitive impairment and of their caregivers increased significantly with close collaboration with the primary care physicians and without any increase in medication dosage for patients (Callahan et al., 2006).

## Perceptions of Social Work Practice with the Elderly Population

The social work field provides the flexibility to develop a career providing services to different populations in diverse practice settings. Social workers within the field of Geriatric Social Work provide services to the elderly, and their perception about this endeavor is relevant to understand what implies to work within this area of practice. In this regard, Sung and Dunkle (2009) studied how social workers perceived that they show respect toward their older adult clients when working with them. Their findings suggest that the most recognized ways that social workers utilize to show their respect towards older adults is the use of appropriate language when speaking with them, as well as when greeting and saluting them. Other expressions of respect they found were seeking their advice, listening to them, and acknowledging their birthdays (Sung & Dunkle, 2009). Interactions between the older adults and social workers are dependent on the older adults' cultural and ethnic background amongst other things.

From another standpoint, Naito-Chan, Damron-Rodriguez, and Simmons (2005) looked at identifying what the competencies of Geriatric social workers are. They interviewed four different focus groups with participants who were older adults, caregivers, employers, and graduated social workers. Older adults identified that the social workers showed competency when they provided them with important resources such as transportation and care. Employers identified, among other competencies, that the social workers can assess elders using a comprehensive approach (Naito-Chan, Damron-Rodriguez, & Simmons, 2005).

In addition, employers consider that cultural competence and having self-awareness are important skills in social workers. Caregivers recognized the ability to provide emotional support and resources as essential competencies in social workers. Finally, recently graduated social workers identified as important competencies having self-awareness, ability to do a geriatric assessment, recognizing the uniqueness of the person, and being culturally competent (Naito-Chan, Damron-Rodriguez, & Simmons, 2005).

As mentioned above, cognitively impaired older adults represent a portion of the elderly population, and addressing their needs is increasingly important for their well-being. McGovern (2015) has expressed that services social workers provide for people suffering dementia, a feature of major cognitive impairment, are beneficial because the theories guiding the services of social workers fulfill the needs of this population. The theories she mentions in her work are the strengths perspective, the use of self, and family systems theory (McGovern, 2015). These applied theories help foster stability within the family in order to cope with and adjust to changes as the disease progresses.

#### Research on Social Work Students and the Elderly Population

The concern for the interest and attitudes of social work students in working with older adults has been addressed in many studies, and the number of studies focused on social work students interested in working with elders with cognitive impairment is limited. Chonody and Wang (2014) explored the interest

of students of social work in pursuing to practice in the Gerontology field in Australia, England, and United States. The results of this exploration suggested that only 5.4% of the participants in the sample were interested in working with older adults. The current frequency of contact with an older adult correlated with the interest in working in the Gerontology field of practice. The fear of personal aging process positively correlated with avoidance of work with this population and death anxiety did not correlate with it. Exposure to aging content in classes was not significantly correlated to interest working with older adults (Chonody & Wang, 2014).

Mason and Sanders (2004) did a qualitative study on social work students' attitudes towards working with the elderly. They interviewed 22 master's level students who had completed internships with older adults and noticed that the students who showed interest in working with older adults had been exposed to contact with this population in the past. One of the 22 students in the study, expressed that the interest on working with this population originated from participating in a gerontology class. The findings from this study suggested that previous life experiences with this population were a great influence on students who became interested in working in the field of aging. The researchers mentioned that participants recommended increasing student exposure to this population to promote interest in the field (Mason & Sanders, 2004).

Hermoso, Rosen, Overly, and Tompkins (2006) reported the results of a pilot intergenerational program called Strengthening Aging and Gerontology

Education for Social Work, which was implemented by the Council on Social Work Education. This pilot program was implemented to support the inclusion of Gerontological content in social work curriculum. Additionally, it promoted the participation of social work students and elders on advocacy for the elderly, and social work students' intergenerational positive experiences with elders. At initial observations, 50% percent of participants in this program expressed they had had contact with older relatives, and 19% had had contact with older adults through volunteer work or in church. Observations from measures at the end suggested an increment on students' interest in doing social work, being involved in aging issues, and doing social advocacy for this population (Hermoso, Rosen, Overly, & Tompkins, 2006).

Other publications also address the interest of social work students to work with older adults and their attitudes towards the elderly. Their findings provide similar information, and also contradictory to the data in the studies mentioned above (Anderson & Wiscott, 2003; Cummings & Galambos, 2002). Nevertheless, the findings from some of these studies show that social work students have little interest in working with the elderly. This study attempted to build on the findings from previous studies and to understand the current interest among social work students in this important field.

## Workforce Within the Social Work Practice Area of Aging

It is unknown how many more social workers are needed to fulfill the needs of the aging population. Therefore, it is relevant to become aware of the workforce that is already providing services in the field of practice that serves older adults. The NASW Center for Workforce (National Association of Social Workers, 2007) released a study in 2006 to find the number of licensed social workers that were providing services within different fields of practice. The survey indicated that 37% of social workers work in the practice area of mental health, 13% in child welfare and families, 13% in healthcare, and 9% in aging.

The Occupational Outlook Handbook, by the Bureau of Labor Statistics from the United States Department of Labor (2017), reports that in 2014 there were 649,300 social workers in active practice. From them, 159,310 (approximately 24.5%) were working in healthcare. More detailed data indicates that from this practice 34,460 (almost 5% of the total number) were working in home health care and nursing homes. It is assumed that the 5% mentioned above were serving the elderly population in 2014, compared with 9% in 2006. Overall, this data suggests that social workers have a lower preference in working with the aging population. These numbers support the purpose of this study, as the results are relevant to gain awareness of the interest that students have or may not have in pursuing work within the field of aging with cognitive impairments; it also provides a better understanding of what currently influences their preference.

## Theory Guiding Conceptualization

The theory used to conceptualize this study is Atchley's Continuity Theory (Kolb, 2004). The concept of continuity is present in the lives of adults through their growth and adaptation. Kolb describes Continuity Theory and expresses that older adults are inclined to maintain the same thoughts, preferences, and relationships as forms of adaptations as they age (Kolb, 2004). The idea of continuity can provide a framework to understand that students of social work following their own continuity may feel more inclined to work with children and families, and not with elders, as they can relate more to the former mentioned rather than the latter. This preference about work will reinforce the student's preference for maintaining relationships with people within their same age range and similar experiences. The Continuity Theory supports other psychological theories of human development as it is based on the idea that the individual's personality traits are set and stable across stages and through life (McInnis-Dittrich, 2005).

## Summary

The need for social work services, in addition to health care services, are important for the mental health and wellbeing of elderly individuals with cognitive impairments and their caregivers. Social workers are imperative to servicing this population, although a small population, in order to assist with the difficult transition and progression of cognitive impairing diseases. Needs and challenges

experienced by the elderly with cognitive impairment were presented. Social work perceptions and involvement with this population was reviewed. Lastly, the theory guiding conceptualization for this research project was discussed.



## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS

#### Introduction

This study sought to identify to what extent personal experience and previous work exposure with the elderly experiencing cognitive impairment influences social work students' interests in working with this population. This chapter will discuss how this study was carried out to identify the extent of social work student's interest in working with the elderly population with cognitive impairments. Specifically, the study design, sampling method, data collection and instruments will be discussed, as well as, the procedures for collecting the data, the protection of human subjects, and data analysis.

#### Study Design

This study sought to identify the extent to which social work students are interested in working with the elderly with cognitive impairment based on personal experience and previous work exposure, and for this purpose the researchers used a cross-sectional survey design. This study is a descriptive study as it builds on previous research regarding social work students' interest in working with the elder population. However, this study targets more specifically the interest of social work students in working with the elderly with cognitive impairment. The research method used for this study was a quantitative study

using a survey to allow for identification of a relationship between social work student interests in working with the elder population with cognitive impairment and their personal experience and previous work exposure.

Quantitative research methods have both strength and limitations. One of the strengths is that the survey allowed for identification of a relationship between social work students interests in working with the elderly with cognitive impairment and personal experience or previous work exposure. Another strength to using a quantitative survey method is that it allowed for the collection of a larger pool of data to analyze. A study design limitation is that the use of online survey does not allow for observation of participants, thus, non-verbal language cannot be taken into consideration for the results. In addition, participants can potentially provide responses that can result in outliers for the survey.

### Sampling

A purposive sample of social work students from a Masters in Social Work (MSW) program was used for this study. This purposive sample was utilized as it pertains to the question to be studied. Approval for data collection of social work students was requested to the Director of School of Social Work. There was a total of 133 surveys collected from participants of the Masters in Social Work student cohorts. The quantitative survey method allowed for a greater amount of data collection from MSW students.

## Data Collection and Instruments

This study utilized a cross sectional survey method to collect data from the MSW students. The Dependent Variable (DV) examined in this study was the current interests of social work students in working with the elderly with cognitive impairments as measured by a Likert scale. As an example, the students' current interest was measured by: not having interest, somewhat interested, and very interested. Two independent variables (IV) identified were: 1) personal experience and 2) previous work exposure. IV-1 (personal experience) was measured by whether social work students have had personal experiences with an elderly with cognitive impairments through family members and friends. IV-2 (previous work exposure with older adults with cognitive impairment) was measured by previous work exposure with an elderly with cognitive impairments. An instrument to collect data was created for this study with the purpose of addressing the research question of this study. Additionally, the questions gathered demographic information from participants. Questions and scales for this survey study were reviewed by the research advisor and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to implementing the study.

## Procedures

For this study, the researchers utilized a self-administered survey questionnaire to collect quantitative data. The survey was distributed through in class participation and online participation.

The researchers requested permission from professors to visit MSW classrooms, Tuesday/Thursday, cohorts for survey distribution. For participation in classrooms, the researchers presented students the informed consent and the student survey in hard copy to manually sign with an "X" to provide their consent, and then input their answers to the survey questions. The informed consent ratified that the study had the approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and that participation was voluntary. The researchers informed participants it would take 5 to 10 minutes to complete the survey; however, participants took about 5 minutes to complete. The researchers also informed participants the same survey was sent out via email and asked participants to not retake the survey if they had already completed it online. The surveys were collected once the participants completed their responses. After participants completed the student survey, they were provided with a brief debriefing statement and a copy of a blank consent form with the IRB stamp of approval on it.

For survey distribution online, the researchers requested the support from staff of the School of Social Work to distribute an email advertising the study and inviting social work students in the MSW program to participate. This email

contained a hyperlink to the survey and was sent to potential participants through the email server of the school. The invitation email included the researchers' names and emails and instructed participants to contact them if they had questions. The researchers utilized Survey Monkey as the website to create the online survey for this study. Potential participants clicked the hyperlink sent through email and a Survey Monkey web page opened containing the informed consent to participate in the study. Participants were able to read it, and then, by clicking a check box with an "X" at the end of the page they acknowledged the information provided and accepted to participate in the study. After accepting participation, the webpage opened the survey for social work students and they were able to read the questions and input their answers which took 5 to 10 minutes to complete. After participants finished answering the survey questions, the web page directed them to a brief debriefing statement, and they finalized their participation.

Quantitative data collected from the participants' answers were inputted in SPSS software for analysis, and researchers compiled and discussed the findings from the study.

#### Protection of Human Subjects

The ethical approval for this study was obtained by applying for a review from the IRB regarding the study procedures and instruments. The informed

consent clarified that participation in this study was anonymous, and participants were asked only general demographic data without asking them for their names or any identifiable information. The informed consent also clarified that the researchers will keep participants' answers confidential. The researchers assigned numbers to participant surveys and their answers to the survey are only identified by the numbers. The data collected from online surveys are stored in a USB drive with password encryption, and along with the paper surveys, placed in a locked drawer to be kept confidential. In the case that any additional documents about the data need to be produced in paper, they will be stored in a locked drawer as well. Researchers will keep the data and documents for one year, and after that time these papers and information will be deleted or destroyed.

### Data Analysis

Quantitative data collected from the participants' answers was analyzed with the IBM SPSS Statistics 25 software. The researchers utilized correlation and Multiple Regression analysis to examine the data from questions formulated, which were related to the IV-1 (personal experience with an elderly with cognitive impairment through family and friends), the IV-2 (previous work exposure with an elderly with cognitive impairment), and to the Dependent Variable (current interest of social work students in working with elderly population with cognitive impairment). Other variables that were analyzed in the study were: age, gender,

ethnicity, and current year in the MSW program. The analysis assisted researchers to understand the relationship between the mentioned variables.

### Summary

This study pursued to understand if the interest of students of social work in working with the elderly with cognitive impairment is influenced by their personal experience or by previous work exposure to this population. Social work students contributed with their participation to better understand their current interest regarding working with this population. The quantitative methodology and the design of this study assisted researchers to accomplish the purpose of this study.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

#### Introduction

This chapter informs the results obtained in this study. The first part presents the results that provide information about the composition of the sample, such as demographic data. The second part presents results about participant enrollment, ways of learning about this population, knowledge about cognitive impairment, and future interests in working with this population. The final part of this chapter reports the results from the correlation and multiple regression tests utilized to analyze the participant's answers to questions related to their current interest and their previous interaction with an elderly with cognitive impairment through family and friends or through work experiences.

#### Presentation of Findings

##### Demographics

This study gathered information from 133 participants who are social work students currently enrolled in the Master's in Social Work program in a School of Social work. The age in this sample ranged from 22 to 59 years old, with the average age of 30.98 ( $SD=8.4$ ).

The sample of participants consisted of 82.7% females, 16.5% males, and 0.8% that declined to disclose their gender. In terms of ethnicity, the majority of



students identified themselves as Latinos, which accounted for 54.9% of the participants, followed by the students who identified as White with 23.3%, students who identified as Black/African-American with 9%, students who identified as Asian/Pacific Islander with 2.3%, and students who identified as having another ethnicity with 10.5%. Students who identified themselves as having other ethnicity also included participants who reported they identified themselves as having more than one ethnicity.

#### Enrollment, Ways of Learning, Knowledge, and Future Interests

The enrollment status of participants in the MSW program was also examined. The highest number were full time students in the first year of the program and they accounted for 22.2% of the sample, followed by full time student in the second year, 21.4% and part-time first year students, 20.6%. Second year part-time students' account for 16.7%. Third year part-time students were also 16.7%. First year pathway accounted for 1.6% of participants and third year pathway accounted for 0.8%. There were no participants from the second-year pathway cohort.

For this study, researchers included variables to examine the sources through which social work students learned about cognitive impairment in the elderly. Independently, the variables examined were if they learned through family members, friends, education, and through work. The variable called way of learning intended to identify from how many sources the participants learned about cognitive impairment in the elderly. From the total of participants examined

independently, 43.6% of them reported that they had learned about cognitive impairment in the elderly through family members, 15% through friends, 55.6% through education, and 34.6% through work. From the total number of participants identifying from how many sources they learned about cognitive impairment, 49.6% learned from one source, 21.1% learned from two sources, 9.8% learned from three sources, 7.5% learned from four sources, and 12% reported not having learned about cognitive impairment in the elderly.

One variable was how participants would rate their knowledge about the elderly with cognitive impairment, and the highest occurrence was for having an average knowledge, which accounted of 39.1% of the sample, followed by 30.1% who rated their knowledge as good, 27.8% who rated their knowledge as poor, and 3% who rated their knowledge as excellent.

Finally, participants were asked how they would rate their future interest in working with the elderly with cognitive impairment. Results suggested that 44.4% of participants were not interested, followed by 39.1% who were somewhat interested, and 16.5% who were very interested in working with this population. Table 1 presents a summary of the descriptive statistics obtained from the mentioned variables.

Table 1  
Descriptive Statistics

---

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Enrollment	126	2.93	1.514
Learned through:			
Family Members	133	.44	.498
Friends	133	.15	.359
Education	133	.56	.499
Work	133	.35	.477
Ways of Learning	133	1.51	1.070
Future Interest	133	1.72	.732

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## Current Interest in Working with an Elderly with Cognitive Impairment and Previous Experiences

The findings of this study showed that from the sample of social work students interviewed 39.4% reported they were not currently interested in working with this population, 44.7% reported they were somewhat interested, and 15.9% were very interested.

The researchers conducted correlation and multiple regression analyses to examine the relationship between the students' current interest in working with older adults with cognitive impairment, and the potential predictors of previous exposure with this population through interaction with family and friends, as well as previous exposure with this population through work experiences. The numbers suggest that the student's current interest in working with older adults with cognitive impairment is not associated with one's interaction with elderly family members and friends with cognitive impairment. However, one's work experience is associated with the students' current interest in working with this population. The multiple regression model is displayed in Table 2.

Table 2  
 Summary Statistics, Correlations, and Results from the Regression Analysis.  
 Multiple Regression  
 Weights

Variable	Mean	Std	Correlation with current interest	b	$\beta$
Current Interest	1.78	.745	-	-	-
FandF	1.74	.684	.182	.135	.124
InteractionWork	1.95	1.036	.342*	.229*	.319

\*  $p < .05$

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

#### Introduction

This chapter will expand on major findings from this study and relate findings to existing literature. Implications and recommendations for social work practice, policy, and research will be discussed. Limitations for this will also be presented.

#### Discussion

##### Form of Interaction

This study focused on the context of the interactions with elderly with cognitive impairment and correlation to MSW students' interest in working with this population. Specifically, this study looked at exposure with this population through interactions through work, family and friends, and how those interactions correlated with current interest in working with this population. Findings suggest that the participant MSW students were more interested in working with the elderly with cognitive impairments when having previous interactions with this population through work compared to those who had interactions through family and friends. While this study focused on the sub population of the elderly with cognitive impairment compared to the general elderly population, work exposure seems to play a role in increasing student interest in working with this population. A study which looked at frequency of interaction and quality of relationship

between MSW students and the elderly with cognitive impairment reported similar results consistent with a correlation between exposure to the elderly and future student interests in working with the elderly population (Chonody & Wang, 2014).

Results for this study reported no significant association between interactions with the elderly through family and friends and MSW students. A study examining the general elderly population reported students who interacted with the elderly who were not family members were more likely to pursue a career in working with the elderly population (Eshbaugh, Gross, & Satrom, 2010). Another study looking at associations between graduate social work students and interactions with close elderly family members reported contrary findings in which an increase in student interaction with elderly family members correlated with an increase in student interest in working with the elderly population (Cummings & Galambos, 2002). Differences between the studies may relate to population differences studied as this study focused on a sub population of the elderly experiencing cognitive impairments. Differential factors between exposure to the elderly population and the elderly population with cognitive impairments and their influence on social work students' interest were not accounted for in this study which constitutes further research. While family and friends were not correlated to current MSW interests in working with this population, interactions with this population through work can facilitate an interest for students with this population.

### Level of Current Interest

Findings for this study reported 15.9% of MSW students were currently interested in working with the elderly with cognitive impairments. In addition, another 44.7% of students in this study reported they were somewhat interested in working with the elderly population with cognitive impairments, suggesting more than half percent of students in this study were considering working with this population. Other studies reported 5.4% and 10.2% of participants respectively (social work students and non-social work students) were interested in working with the general aging population compared to 15.9% interested in working with the elderly with cognitive impairments reported in this study (Chonody & Wang, 2014; Anderson & Wiscott, 2003). Furthermore, social work students from a study in 2004 suggested students should expose themselves to the elderly population in the work field in order to gain the most experience and exposure (Mason & Sanders, 2004). An increase in work interactions with the elderly can potentially influence students interest in working with the elderly population which may also influence the increase in interest with sub populations such as those with cognitive impairments.

### Limitations

This study has methodological limitations and well as limitations related to the researchers, and this affects the generalizability of the results obtained. One limitation is the composition of the sample in relation to the current enrollment in



the MSW program, as students' interest in working with older adults with cognitive impairment may vary depending on the year in which they are enrolled. It was not the intention of this study to analyze the current interest in relation to the year of enrollment. This limitation may be an interesting point to approach in future research. Likewise, there was an uneven number of participants from each cohort in this study, and there was a higher number of them identified as having a Latino ethnicity. Future research may contemplate utilizing a different design to include an even number of students, as well as from diverse culture and ethnic backgrounds, in order to compare results between groups and identify different factors influencing student interests.

Another potential limitation of this study was related to the process of gathering data. An email inviting participation was sent out during the same week researchers were recruiting in the classrooms for the same study, with the risk of students having double participation. Researchers approached this potential limitation and intended to minimize risk of occurrence by instructing students that if they had already answered the online survey, they had to abstain from participating in the printed survey during the classroom visit. Researchers interested in utilizing a double method for gathering data, online and in person, may benefit from considering implementing the gathering process in several stages.

The use of a self-reported questionnaire/survey to gather data from students represents another limitation because their responses may be

influenced by social desirability and therefore lead to an overestimation of the current interest. In addition, another limitation noted was that although researchers paid special attention to ensure clarity in the questionnaire/survey, it was not tested beforehand to address and avoid possible systematic errors.

A limitation for the researchers was that the time available to finalize this study was limited, and therefore other study designs were not suitable options for consideration. For example, a longitudinal study to follow up on the students' interest in working with older adults with cognitive impairment was not possible given the time constraints. Future research may consider utilizing a longitudinal design, to build on the results of the present study in order to analyze if interests change.

### Recommendations for Social Work Practice

The results obtained in this study have implications for the field of social work at both macro and micro practice levels. The findings in this study suggest that social work students with previous work exposure to older adults with cognitive impairment are currently interested in working with this population. Furthermore, 39.1% of the interviewed students reported that they were somewhat interested on working with this population in the future, and an additional 16.5% indicated that they were very interested. Therefore, there is an opportunity of supporting the expressed interest of students, increasing the future

number of social workers in the field of aging, and specifically working with older adults with cognitive impairment by promoting work exposure to this population.

An important aspect of macro practice social work is addressing the needs of communities by promoting solutions and empowering community members to embrace change (Brueggemann, 2014). Communities of social work students and the one's consisting of older adults experiencing cognitive impairment, may both benefit from macro social work labor. This can be done through promotion of policies and creation of philanthropic foundations, as these initiatives can provide the means to plan and implement social work internships, externships, and mentoring, with the focus on exposure to social work with older adults with cognitive impairment. Another way of supporting this interest is to develop collaborative work with interdisciplinary teams providing health care for older adults, such as senior health centers or outpatient health care facilities, promoting educational settings for social work students. In such settings, students can increase their work exposure to older adults with cognitive impairment and aid health care providers to attend the psychosocial needs of older adults with cognitive impairment. This approach will result in a reciprocal benefit as students will gain work exposure, and older adults may increase their opportunities of having an early diagnosis and addressing their health needs. The additional social work staff working with this population may help increase the quality of life of older adults receiving services in a variety of health care settings.

In addition, macro social workers may support the interest of students by following the generalist model of practice in this profession to aid in the creation and implementation of a curriculum for training on cognition care and social work for students. Such training will support the students' interest as they would acquire knowledge about cognitive impairment in older adults, which may be useful when they engage in internships and externships.

Finally, at the micro level of social work practice, the initiatives and organizations interested in promoting the interest of students may reach out for social work students at the bachelors and masters levels of education to engage them in attending educational training or committing to internships and externships like the ones mentioned above and offer individual support and mentoring.

### Conclusion

Cognitive impairment is a progressive condition. It affects the lives of older adults and also impacts the lives of their families and friends. The labor of social workers may create a difference for them. However, creating a difference for this population cannot occur without an increase in social worker involvement in this field of work. It is crucial that research continue to expand on identifying factors that help contribute to social work interests in working with this population in order to best prepare social work students for this field and best meet the needs for the elderly with cognitive impairment. As stated above, cognitive impairment

affects the lives of the elderly and many others. Researchers in this study sought to observe contributing factors to the workforce to support and better serve those lives.

APPENDIX A  
STUDENT SURVEY

## STUDENT SURVEY

1. What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_
2. What gender do you identify with?  
 Male  Female  Decline to disclose
3. What is your ethnicity?  
 Black  White  
 Asian/Pacific Islander  Native American  
 Latino  Other
4. Please mark all that apply to you regarding your current enrollment in the MSW program.  
 First year  Second year  Third year  Full time  
 Part time  Pathway distance
5. Where did you learn about elderly individuals with cognitive impairments?  
Please mark all that apply.  
 Family members  Friends  Education  Work  
 I have not learned about elderly individuals with cognitive impairments
6. How often do you interact with an elderly individual with cognitive impairments through **family** currently or in the past?  
 Not at all  Sometimes  Usually  Always
7. How often do you interact with an elderly individual with cognitive impairments through **friends** currently or in the past?  
 Not at all  Sometimes  Usually  Always
8. How often do you interact with an elderly individual with cognitive impairments

through **work** currently or in the past?

Not at all    Sometimes    Usually    Always

9. How many months of work experience do you have in working with elderly individuals with cognitive impairments?

\_\_\_\_\_

10. How would you rate your knowledge of elderly individuals with cognitive impairments?

Poor    Average    Good    Excellent

11. **Currently**, how interested are you in working with elderly individuals with cognitive impairments?

Not interested    Somewhat interested    Very interested

12. **After graduation**, how interested are you in working with elderly individuals with cognitive impairments?

Not interested    Somewhat interested    Very interested

Developed by Cindy Avelar and Gabriela Maria Cantu-Reyna



APPENDIX B  
INFORMED CONSENT



California State University, San Bernardino  
Social Work Institutional Review Board Sub-Committee  
APPROVED 1/19/2018 VOID AFTER 1/19/2019  
IRB# SW1825 CHAIR *[Signature]*

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences  
School of Social Work

**INFORMED CONSENT**

The study in which you are asked to participate is designed to examine the interest of social work students currently enrolled in a MSW program in working with the elderly population with cognitive impairment. The study is being conducted by Cindy Avelar and Gabriela Cantu-Reyna, graduate students under the supervision of Dr. Armando Barragan, Assistant Professor in the School of Social Work at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB). The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board Social Work Sub-committee at CSUSB.

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of the study is to examine the interest of social work students in a MSW program in working with the elderly population with cognitive impairment.

**DESCRIPTION:** Participants will be asked of a few questions on their demographics, their current interest in working with older adults with cognitive impairment, and their current year of enrollment in a MSW program.

**PARTICIPATION:** Your participation in the study is completely voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the study or discontinue your participation at any time without any consequences.

**CONFIDENTIALITY OR ANONYMITY:** Your responses will remain anonymous and data will be reported in group form only.

**DURATION:** It will take 5 to 10 minutes to complete the survey.

**RISKS:** There are no foreseeable risks to the participants

**BENEFITS:** There will not be any direct benefits to the participants

**CONTACT:** If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Barragan at (909) 537-3501

**RESULTS:** Results of the study can be obtained from the Pfau Library ScholarWorks database (<http://scholarworks.lib.casusb.edu/>) at California State University, San Bernardino after July 2018.

**This is to certify that I acknowledge this information and I am accepting to participate in this study**

**Please mark with an X \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_**

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5500 UNIVERSITY PARKWAY, SAN BERNARDINO, CA 92407-2393

The California State University • Bakersfield • Channel Islands • Chico • Dominguez Hills • East Bay • Fresno • Fullerton • Humboldt • Long Beach • Los Angeles  
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APPENDIX C  
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

## DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

The study you have just completed was designed to examine to what extent does having personal experience and previous work exposure influence social work students' interests in working with the elderly experiencing cognitive impairment. We are particularly interested in analyzing the relationship between personal experiences and previous work exposure and the interest of social work students in working with this population. If there are unforeseen negative emotions that arise due to the questions asked within the survey, there are resources available on campus. Resources to help with this process include on campus services in the Student Health and Psychological Counseling Center. To make an appointment for counseling services, please call (909) 537-5040.

Thank you for your participation and for not discussing the contents of the study with other students. If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact Gabriela M. Cantu-Reyna (005534317@coyote.csusb.edu), Cindy Avelar (004508815@coyote.csusb.edu), or Dr. Armando Barragán at (909) 537-3501. If you would like to obtain a copy of the group results of this study, please contact Dr. Armando Barragán at (909) 537-3501 at the end of Spring Quarter of 2018.

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## ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES

This research project to meet partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Social Work in the School of Social Work was completed as a joint project by Cindy Avelar and Gabriela Maria Cantu-Reyna. Chapters 1 and 2 were created by Cantu-Reyna prior to Avelar joining the research project. Avelar contributed significant editing and revising to Chapters 1 and 2. Additional sections were added by both researchers in the last sections of Chapter 1. Chapter 3 was divided in half and completed by both researchers: the first half of Chapter 3 was completed by Avelar and the second half was completed by Cantu-Reyna. The survey used for this study was created with collaborative efforts by both researchers. Collection of data, data analysis, Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 were completed jointly by both researchers. Responsibilities for formatting the proposal were also shared between the two researchers. The researchers joined together various times to collaborate for revisions and final submission.