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Social Attitudes of Field Instructors

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Abstract:

In both the classroom setting and field practicum, social work students begin to develop competence in practice with diverse populations. Field instructors play a critical role in educating students on diversity issues and preparing students to practice without bias. A cross-sectional study was conducted to better understand social attitudes of field instructors participating in a Seminar in Field Instructor (SIFI) training (*N*=88). The field instructors had generally positive attitudes. Results indicated that field instructors' comfort level and demographic variables were predictors of social attitudes. Implications for social work field instruction are discussed.

Introduction

As practitioners, social workers need to develop strong practice skills and be culturally competent to work effectively in cross-cultural settings. The Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2008) emphasizes that social workers should "understand the forms and mechanisms of oppression and discrimination; advocate for human rights and social and economic justice and engage in practices that advance social and economic justice" (p. 5). The National Association of Social Workers (National Association of Social Workers, 2001, 2007a, 2007b) provides standards and guidance to deliver culturally competent social work services. However, despite the social work professional standards for cultural competence, information and strategies to guide educators are often limited (Colvin-Burque, Davis-Maye, & Zugazaga, 2007).

Both practicing social workers and students need to be aware of the different forms of oppression and their own social attitudes that may influence their work with clients (Cross-Denny & Heyman, 2011). The field placement is a unique and critical component of social work education and facilitates students' development of competency in practice with diverse populations (Kadushin, 1991; Litvack, Mishna, & Bogo, 2010). Field instructors play a crucial role in educating social work students in the field setting by preparing them to practice without discrimination. Therefore, field instructors

must also have self-awareness of their own social attitudes. The purpose of this study is to examine attitudes of field instructors in training with respect to racial and women's equality, as well as their preparedness, experience, and education.

Literature Review

The EPAS (CSWE, 2008) focus on competency-based development for professional social work through 10 competencies with 41 corresponding practice behaviors. In accordance with the Educational Policy 2.1.4 (CSWE, 2008) of "engaging diversity and difference in practice," the educational process for students incorporates the understanding of difference and the intersectionality of varying social identities that impacts a client's life experiences (Murphy, Hunt, Zajicek, Norris, & Hamilton, 2009). The NASW (2001) defines cultural competence as "the integration and transformation of knowledge about individuals and groups of people into specific standards, policies, practices, and attitudes used in appropriate cultural settings to increase the quality of services, thereby producing better outcomes" (pp. 11-12). Through social work education, not only do students learn about and understand difference and develop cultural competency, but they also gain a deeper sense of their own worldviews and how their socialization process has impacted them.

As the signature pedagogy of social work education, the field setting provides social work students with socialization to the profession (Holden, Barker, Rosenberg, Kuppens, & Ferrell, 2011; Homonoff, 2008; Lyter, 2012; Miller, 2010, 2013; Shulman, 2005; Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2010). The field instructor serves to model for students effective practice skills and behaviors and to instill the values and attitudes of the profession, including content on diversity and social justice (Barretti, 2007; CSWE, 2008; Mumm, 2006; Murdock, Ward, Ligon, & Jindani, 2006).

According to Weiten (2001), attitudes can be defined as "positive or negative evaluations of objects of thought" (p. 670). The link between attitudes and behavior has been underscored in earlier studies (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Allport, 1935; LaPiere, 1934; Rosenberg & Hovland, 1960). Ponterotto, Potere, and Johansen (2002) describe social attitudes and discrimination in terms of negative behaviors towards certain social groups with underlying attitudes driving discriminatory behaviors. To assess social attitudes, Ponterrotto et al. (1995) developed the Quick Discrimination Index (QDI) as a tool to help understand racial attitudes, both cognitive and affective, as well as attitudes toward women's equity. Cognitive attitudes represent one's beliefs or how one thinks about a social group, and affective attitudes refer to one's personal feelings towards a social group. Behavior towards a social group may then be based upon cognitive and affective attitudes, and this correlation has been supported in the literature (Snyder, Peeler, & May, 2008; Sue, Zane, Nagayama Hall, & Berger, 2009).

There has been a growing collection of research on the social attitudes of professionals, including social workers, psychologists, and educators (Browne & Mokuau, 2008; Chae, Foley, & Chae, 2006; Reynolds & Rivera, 2012; Snyder et al., 2008; Sue et al., 2009). However, findings from these studies

have mixed results. In a study conducted by Green, Hamlin, Ogden, and Walters (2004), social attitudes for both psychologists and social workers were found to be similar in terms of racial and gender attitudes. In contrast, another study conducted by Green, Kiernan-Stern, & Baskind (2005) found that social workers tend to have more positive attitudes than those in the general public and have similar or more favorable attitudes than other helping professionals (e.g., counseling psychologist, human service workers). However, social attitudes can be influenced through training and the educational process for students, field instructors, and mental health professionals in general (Armour, Bain, & Rubio, 2004; Bain & Garcia, 1999; Cross-Denny & Heyman, 2011; Johnson, Antle, & Barbee, 2009; Reynolds & Rivera, 2012).

In terms of the field instructor's social attitudes, the literature is limited in regards to either their continued growth in diversity or cultural competency or to how field instructors develop in their post-masters experience. Discomfort in discussing sensitive issues of race, privilege, and power has been recognized in the profession (Goggins & Dowcett, 2011; Meyer-Adams, Potts, Koob, Dorsey, & Rosales, 2011). Although field instructors have reported difficulty in including diversity into learning opportunities (Murdock et al., 2006), social work students have been found to have more awareness of white privilege than psychology students (Mindrup, Spray, & Lamberghini-West, 2011). Such awareness may be indicative of the success of the social work educational process.

To further understand field instructors' attitudes, this study examines the social attitudes of social workers in Seminar in Field Instructor (SIFI) training and what variables are associated with social attitudes, in this case cognitive and affective racial attitudes and attitudes towards women's equity. The hypotheses were as follows:

1. Social attitudes (affective racial, cognitive racial, and women's equity) will differ with respect to gender, age, race, and years of experience in the field.
2. MSW preparedness will be positively correlated to social attitudes (affective racial, cognitive racial, and women's equity).
3. Field instructors who received post-MSW diversity training will have more positive social attitudes (affective racial, cognitive racial, and women's equity) compared to those who did not receive post-MSW diversity training.
4. Methods

Design and Procedures

A cross-sectional design was used to understand the factors associated with social attitudes. The authors received university Institutional Review Board approval prior to conducting the study. The research was conducted at a large university where field instructors were currently enrolled in the Master of Social Work (MSW) SIFI training were invited to participate. Participation was voluntary and responses were anonymous. Field instructors received a cover letter and were told if they decided to participate they could complete the attached questionnaire and leave it in an envelope

at the end of the seminar session. The field seminar instructor was not in the room during the time allotted for administration of the survey.

Measures

Social attitudes. Ponterotto et al. (1995) developed the Quick Discrimination Index (QDI) in order to assess attitudes toward racial diversity and women's equity. The QDI is a 30-item instrument with responses ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The QDI instrument has been assessed with different racial groups and is "best conceptualized as a tridimensional measure of attitudes" (Ponterotto et al., 1995, p. 1016). The three-subscales are: 1) cognitive racial attitudes (9-items); 2) affective racial attitudes (7-items); and 3) attitudes towards women's equity (7-items). The cognitive racial subscale measures cognitive thinking on racial attitudes. The affective racial subscale measures more personal feelings regarding closeness and contact with people of different racial back-grounds. The women's equity subscale measures attitudes toward women's equity. Higher scores in all three subscales represent more positive attitudes. This study used Ponterotto's et al. recom-mended coding to construct the sums of the subscales, with negatively worded items reverse–scored so that higher scores indicated nonracist and nonsexist attitudes. Ponterotto et al. (2002) reported good internal consistency alphas from a number of studies using the QDI: cognitive racial subscale (a = .85), affective racial subscale (a = .77), and the women's equity subscale (a = .71).

MSW preparedness. Field instructors were asked the following two preparedness questions, "How well do you think your MSW education prepared you to work with clients with diverse cultural background?" and "How well do you think your MSW education prepared you for addressing social justice issues in your practice?" For these questions, a rating scale of 0 (not at all) to 5 (extremely well) was used.

Post-MSW training. Social workers were asked if they received diversity training after their MSW education. The possible responses were yes (received training) or no (did not receive training).

Comfort level with diverse clients. Participants were asked "How would you rate your personal comfort in working with clients from diverse backgrounds?" A rating scale of 0 (not at all) to 5 (extremely well) was used. Although this concept was rated on a scale, it was left to the respondent to interpret the meaning of "diverse clients."

Demographics. Demographic information was collected by asking questions regarding age, gender (1= female), race (1= White/Caucasian/non-Hispanic), marital status, and religious affiliation. Questions regarding respondents' work environment included length of time in the social work field and primary work environment.

Analysis

Univariate analyses were conducted, and each subscale of the QDI was examined (affective racial, cognitive racial, and women's equity) for item consensus, a procedure used by Green, et al. (2005), to assess agreement or disagreement with specific items. Bivariate and multivariate analyses were conducted for hypothesis testing. Dichotomous nominal-level variables [gender (1= female), race (1= White/Caucasian/non-Hispanic), and post-MSW diversity coursework (1= took course)] were dummy coded prior to producing the correlation matrix and performing the multiple regression.

Results

Field instructors (*N*=88) were predominately female (80.5%). Respondents' identified their race as: Caucasian/White (54.8%), Hispanic/Latino (17.9%), African American/Black (14.3%), Asian (2.4%), and other races (10.7%). Religious affiliations included Catholic (28.7%), Protestant (9.2%), Jewish (20.7%), no affiliation (23.0%) and other affiliations (18.4%). Respondents were married (50.0%), never married (26.7%) and divorced (18.6%). The age of field instructors ranged from 26 to 67, with a mean age of 43.2 (*SD* = 10.53). The mean number of years in the field was 11.52 (*SD* = 7.65).

The QDI subscales and items specific to the subscale were first examined. Each item was rank ordered for item consensus. The items specific to the cognitive racial subscale had general agreement on five out of the nine cognitive items. The top two consensus items were as follows: 1) over 90% felt that the "school system, from elementary through college, should promote values representative of diverse cultures"; and 2) 81.6% of the field instructors agreed that "white people's racism toward racial minority groups still constitutes a major problem in America."

The items specific to the affective racial subscale showed consistent results for five out of the seven items. The top consensus items were as follows: 1) over 95% agreed with the statement that "it is important for my children to attend schools that are racially mixed"; and 2) almost 90% agreed that they would "feel OK about my son or daughter dating someone from a different race."

For women's equity, there was general consensus on four of the six items. The top two consensus items were as follows: 1) 94.3% disagreed that "generally speaking, men work harder than women"; and 2) 88.5% disagreed that "women make too big a deal out of sexual harassment issues in the workplace."

With respect to the QDI subscales, the results of the scores were as follows: affective racial subscale (*M* = 26.75, *SD* = 4.13); cognitive racial subscale (*M* = 34.56, *SD* = 5.44), and women's equity subscale (*M* = 28.14, *SD* = 3.81).

Reliability analysis was conducted on the three subscales. The cognitive racial scale showed the highest reliability (*a* = .817) and was close to that found by its authors (*a* = .85) (Ponterotto et al.,

2002). The affective racial scale and the women's equity scale were both lower (a = .69 and a = .65 respectively) than what would be expected (a = .77, a = .71).

For the first hypothesis, bivariate analysis showed no significant differences by gender for affective racial attitudes, cognitive racial attitudes, or women's equity attitudes (t = 1.95, p > .05; t = 0.89, p > .05; t = -1.30 p > .05). Years of experience in the social work field showed no statistically significant correlation on the three scales (r = -.011, p > .05; r = -.040, p > .05; r = -.078, p > .05). Correlation was not significant between age and the affective and cognitive racial attitudes (r = -.061, p > .05; r = -.069, p > .05). Age and women's equity had a weak to moderate statistically significant negative correlation (r = -.223, p < .05).

The researchers wanted to explore the relationship of race to affective and cognitive attitudes about race and attitudes regarding women's equity. Prior to analysis due to small sample size, the racial categories were collapsed into two groups: White and Non-White. Findings indicated there was a statistical difference for both affective and cognitive racial attitudes, with those identifying as White-Caucasian having lower scores (t = 2.193, p < .05; t = 2.326, p < .05).

With respect to the second hypothesis, there was no statistically significant correlation between MSW preparedness for work with clients who have diverse cultural background and affective, cognitive racial discrimination and attitudes regarding women's equity. There was a weak to moderate positive correlation between MSW preparedness for addressing social justice issues in practice and affective racial discrimination (r = .229, p < .05) and women's equity (r = .239, p < .05). Higher scores for MSW preparedness for addressing social justice resulted in higher racial and women's equity attitude scores. There was no statistical correlation between MSW preparedness for addressing social justice issues and cognitive racial discrimination. The third hypothesis stated that field instructors who received post-MSW diversity training would have more positive attitudes (cognitive racial, affective racial and women's equity) compared to those who did not have diversity training. Results indicated that there were no statistical differences in social attitudes based on post-MSW training (t = -.444, p > .05; t = .771, p > .05; t = -.886, p > .05).

Table 1 presents a summary of the scores of the affective and cognitive racial attitudes and attitudes regarding women's equity. Table 2 presents a summary of the correlations of variables with affective and cognitive racial attitudes and women's equity.

A forward multiple regression was conducted on the three subscales to determine if any of the in-dependent variables were predictors of social attitudes. Data were screened for missing data and outliers. Less than 5% of the data were missing; therefore, listwise deletion was used (Mertler & Vannatta, 2013). One case was eliminated as a result of the examination of Mahalanobis distance to determine univariate outliers. Univariate normality, multivariate normality, linearity, and homosce-

dasticity assumptions were met.

For the affective subscale, regression results indicated an overall model showing comfort level and race significantly predicted affective racial attitudes ($R2 = .173$, $R2adj = .151$, F(2, 74) = 7.67, $p <$ .01). This model accounted for 17.3% of variance for affective racial attitudes. The women's equity subscale also had two predictors (comfort level and age) in the overall model ($R2 = .162$, $R2adj = .140$, F(2, 77) = 7.45, $p < .01$), accounting for 16.2% of the variance for attitudes regarding women's equity. The cognitive subscale had only one significant predictor (race), as indicated by the overall model ($R2 = .075$, $R2adj = .063$, F(1, 77) = 6.211, $p < .05$). This model accounted for 7.5% of the variance for cognitive racial attitudes. The regression model summaries are presented in Table 3, and bivariate and partial correlation coefficients are presented in Table 4.

Limitations

Although attitudes can be based upon a variety of factors, this study was limited by examining only the following: gender, race, age, years of experience, MSW preparedness in working with diverse clients, MSW preparedness in addressing social justice, post-MSW training, and comfort with diversity. In our study, we measured field instructors' perceived comfort with diversity. This was a self-reported measure, and there were not specific definitions given to the respondents regarding the meaning of "diverse backgrounds." Further research is needed to include a more precise measure of comfort in working with diverse populations.

Reliability of the affective racial and women's equity subscales was lower than expected based on previous studies; therefore, caution should be exercised in interpreting the findings. It is possible that the other questions contained in the survey interfered with the scale reliability. The subscales were mixed with questions regarding other areas of diversity with permission from the QDI author (Ponterotto et al., 2002).

It may have been beneficial to have a comparison group of other helping professionals to understand comfort, education, and differences in social attitudes. It should be noted that post-MSW trainings and continuing education vary widely. Social attitudes can be impacted by a number of factors not included in this study at both the personal and professional levels, such as practice setting, client contact and practice experience, and collegial support and supervision. This study is limited in its ability to tease out other variables that might affect social attitudes. Finally, the data in this study are based on self-report of the participants. Due to the sensitive nature of attitudes regarding race and women's equity, participants may have given more socially acceptable responses.

Discussion and Implications for Field Education

The study examined factors that might predict racial attitudes and attitudes towards women. Race was a predictor for racial attitudes, and age was a predictor for attitudes towards women. However,

both racial attitudes and attitudes towards women were shown to be predicted by comfort in working with diverse clients.

When comparing the possible and actual scores for the cognitive and affective racial scales and those for women's equity, social workers in the SIFI training had actual scores in the upper range for each scale. These scores were also in line with what has been found in previous studies of mental health professionals or graduate students in one of the helping disciplines (Green et al., 2005; Reynolds & Rivera, 2012).

Overall, participants in the study had positive attitudes consistent with the principles and values of the profession. Findings revealed several significant associations between affective racial attitudes, women's equity and other study variables. For instance, social workers reporting that their MSW prepared them for addressing social justice issues also appeared to have more positive feelings regarding people from different racial backgrounds. Social workers who reported that their MSW training prepared them for addressing social justice issues also had more positive attitudes toward women's equity. These findings are consistent with the social justice mission of the profession.

Social workers with post-MSW diversity training showed similar racial and women's equity attitudes as did those with no post-MSW training. Several explanations may exist for these findings, including the belief that racism is no longer a problem in the United States (Green et al., 2005) or the possible increase in conservative attitudes among social workers (Bullock, 2004).

The Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) developed by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) (2008) requires that academic programs provide a competency-based education for students to demonstrate competence in diversity and difference in practice. Advancing human rights, social and economic justice, and the delivery of effective services is central to the curriculum and integrated throughout all courses, including field instruction. Like students, field instructors require ongoing professional development to enhance sensitivity to the influences of oppression and inequity.

Given that comfort with diversity was found to be a predictor of more positive social attitudes in this study, perhaps both social work education and post-MSW continuing education could emphasize ways to increase comfort. The findings regarding comfort with diversity yield important implications for field directors, coordinators, liaisons, and staff.

One suggestion for the field is to provide students with diverse experiences with different population groups. This may include providing students with opportunities to study abroad, as well as offering students with international placements. In addition, service-learning opportunities are another way students can be exposed to working with different population groups and gain a wealth of experi-

ence.

Another way that field directors can help increase field instructors' comfort in working with diverse populations is to provide educational venues for field instructors. This could include opportunities for continuing education, both through webinars and onsite educational workshops. These trainings could use case scenarios as a tool to help expose field instructors to a variety of issues with which they may be confronted. In addition, the training could also incorporate self-reflection regarding diversity on the case to promote the development of personal and professional awareness as called for by Educational Policy 2.1.4 (Colvin, 2013; CSWE, 2008)

Another possible consideration is that field directors could expand the different types of field settings that they use for student internships. Expanding new field settings can help to bring in new agencies servicing diverse communities and may help to increase educational opportunities for students. When considering new agencies, field directors may conduct an assessment of the new agencies to understand how students will be exposed to working with the different populations and the resources within the agency to enhance this knowledge base (Colvin, 2013).

Field instruction is a vital and integral component of social work education. It is essential that field instructors are mindful of their own attitudes and actively engage students around issues of self-awareness, personal biases, respect for differences, and the mechanisms of oppression and discrimination. Their attitudes and actions have a profound influence on students as they model the ethical standards of the profession, and they are charged with continued self-reflection and self-correction through career-long learning (CSWE, 2008). Field instructors set the stage for future social work professionals to address their own biases and to continue their development to best serve diverse populations.

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Table 1. Social Attitude Possible Scores, Actual Scores, and Means

	Possible Scores	Actual Scores	*M*	*SD*
Affective Racial	7-35	18-35	26.75	4.13
Cognitive Racial	9-45	21-45	34.56	5.44
Women's Equity	7-35	20-35	28.14	3.81

Table 2. Social Attitudes Correlations

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1.	Gender (1=Female)	1.00	-.02	-.23	.04	-.20	-.20	-.21*	-.06	-.21	-.10	.14
2.	Race (1=White non-Hispanic		1.00	.06	-.18	.15	.10	.00	-.07	-.22	-.24*	.06
3.	Age			1.00	.41**	.17	.15	.02	.15	-.06	-.07	-.22
4.	Years of experience				1.00	-.08	-.05	-.06	-.04	-.13	-.10	-.16
5.	MSW prepared - diverse clients					1.00	.71**	.02	.38**	.20	-.05	.11
6.	MSW prepared - addressing social justice						1.00	.02	.42**	.23*	-.03	.24*
7.	Post MSW training							1.00	-.04	.01	-.12	.01
8.	Comfort with diversity								1.00	.35**	.22*	.29**
9.	Affective subscale									1.00	.35**	.31**
1.	Cognitive subscale										1.00	.38**
11.	Women's Equity subscale											1.00

Note. *p<.05, **p<.01

Table 3. Model Summary

Model	R	R^2	R^2_{adj}	ΔR^2	F_{chg}	p	df_1	df_2
Affective Racial Attitudes								
1	.351	.123	.111	.123	10.526	.002	1	75
2	.417	.173	.151	.050	4.514	.037	1	74
Cognitive Racial Attitudes								
1	.273	.075	.063	.075	6.211	.015	1	77
Women's Equity Attitudes								
1	.292	.085	.074	.085	7.268	.009	1	78
2	.403	.162	.140	.077	7.067	.010	2	77

Note. *p<.05, **p<.01

Table 4. Coefficients for Final Model

Variable	B	β	t	Bivariate r	Partial r
Affective Subscale					
Comfort	2.279	.332	3.126**	.351	.342
Race	-1.904	-.225	-2.125*	-.254	-.240
Cognitive Subscale					
Race	-2.899	-.273	-2.492*	-.273	-.273
Women's Equity Subscale					
Comfort	2.105	.334	3.162**	.292	.339
Age	-.102	-.280	-2.658*	-.231	-.290

Note. *p<.05, **p<.01