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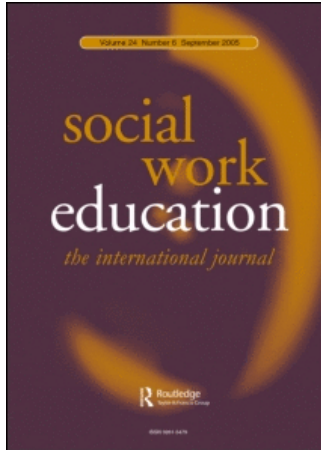
On: 3 April 2007

Access Details: [subscription number 770885180]

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954

Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Social Work Education The International Journal

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t713447070>

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To cite this Article: Alastair Christie and Edward Kruk , 'Choosing to become a social worker: motives, incentives, concerns and disincentives', *Social Work Education*, 17:1, 21 - 34

To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/02615479811220031

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02615479811220031>

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# Choosing to become a social worker: motives, incentives, concerns and disincentives

ALASTAIR CHRISTIE & EDWARD KRUK

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**Abstract** *This article compares factors affecting the choice(s) to become social workers made by students on two qualifying social work programmes in Canada and the UK. Quantitative data from an ongoing international research project provide an overview of students' choices in relation to their gender, age and ethnicity, while qualitative data from the same project illuminate the complexity of the decision making process. Our findings challenge some commonplace assumptions about the social work profession and the motivations and dilemmas that social work students encounter prior to and during their training. The implications for social work educating and training are potentially far-reaching.*

## Introduction

The decision to apply to a professional school of social work toward obtaining a professional qualification in social work, and becoming socialized into the profession, is in most cases a highly complex yet little understood process. In social work programmes throughout Britain and North America, students rarely have the opportunity to explore this dimension at any point during their training. In addition, rarely have the motives of students (the factors influencing their decision to apply to a school of social work, including what they perceive to be incentives and disincentives, and any concerns they might have in this regard) been systematically examined in research studies. This gap is surprising, given that students' motives to enter social work as a profession have a profound impact on their subsequent professional development and assimilation into the profession. An understanding of the reasons why social work students choose to become social workers is critical for those concerned with the training and employment of social workers and the development of social work as a profession. The motives of social work students have important repercussions on the learning and application of professional knowledge, values and skills: students' motives for undertaking social work training are likely to provide specific opportunities for, as well as barriers to, their learning. Their motives can either help to sustain them through the professional and academic demands of the courses, or contribute to a sense of disillusion and discontent, as they struggle with the challenge of integrating the 'professional' with the 'personal', and developing a 'professional identity'. Knowledge of the motives of social work students can also aid employers in predicting the career patterns and training needs of social workers and in planning recruitment strategies for diverse fields of practice.

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In this article, we report and discuss new data on the motives of two groups of students, from the UK and Canada, who have just started programmes to qualify as social workers. We first outline some of the findings from previous research in this field, much of which has tended to treat students as a homogenous group, and which has not taken into account the significance of students' diverse social characteristics. In our research we not only compared two groups of students in different programmes in two countries, but also assessed the impact of gender, age and ethnicity on students' motives. Following a broad overview of students' motives through quantitative analysis of questionnaires completed by the two groups, we problematize our own findings by discussing some of the contradictions, tensions and ambivalences in the students' responses to the quantitative items in our questionnaire. We draw on the qualitative aspects of the study to provide a fuller and more complex picture of what motivates students to become social workers. In the final section we discuss some of the implications for social work education in working with students who have complex and sometimes ambivalent reasons for wanting to become social workers.

### Review of previous research

Since the early 1970s debates on students' motives for becoming social workers have focused on whether choosing to become a social worker is seen to be a politically deviant act or whether students are seeking personal or professional fulfilment in their future careers. This research agenda was initiated by Pearson (1973) who, from his empirical research in the UK, argued that the choice to become a social worker was "an explicit rejection of the 'normal' values of everyday life" (p. 223), which "represents some form of primitive political rebellion" (p. 209). Pearson went on to suggest that social work educators have failed to grasp the potential of this 'rebellion' and that social work students' own rejection of 'normal values' is not transferred to their work with client systems:

unwilling or unable to extend the diagnosis of his ills and their prescribed remedy to his clients, and searching on his professional life for the differences between himself and clients rather than the shared features of their lives, the social worker's solution remains privatized. (p. 219)

Not only did Pearson set the research agenda in the realm of student motivation but he established a trend in research methods in this realm of inquiry. His use of sentence completion has been repeated in a number of studies on the motives of social work students (Holme & Maizels, 1978; O'Connor *et al.*, 1984; Solas, 1994; Uttley, 1981). Pearson had 'informal discussions' with a sample of 73 students, and then gave 36 of them a written exercise in which they were asked to respond to the following: "Through entering social work, I hope to achieve \_\_\_\_\_;" and "Through social work I hope to avoid \_\_\_\_\_". Students were asked to complete these sentences in as many different ways as they felt were appropriate. In regard to the first sentence, Pearson found that 13% of students wanted to achieve career advancement, 27% wanted to change society in some way and 80% were seeking personal fulfilment through their work. With respect to the second, 67% of students hope to avoid 'the rat race and formal, routinized work' (p. 214); and 80% say that they hope to avoid specific features of society that Pearson describes as " 'materialism', 'prejudice', 'narrowness', 'self-centredness' and 'complacency' " (p. 214). He suggests that the majority of social work students are politically deviant, rejecting 'the "normal" values of everyday life' (p. 215).

Holme and Maizels (1978) used Pearson's sentence completion research method with 1423 social workers employed by local authority social service departments and probation

services in England. Their findings supported Pearson's view that social workers are seeking some form of self-realization through their work and rejected certain aspects of social work practice, those seen as 'boring and routine'. Holme and Maizels found that younger students and workers were more likely to question the 'ethos of materialism' and the 'values of a competitive society' (p. 50). They did not find, however, that the rejection of societal values marked out social workers as politically deviant as suggested by Pearson.

Uttley (1981) compared Pearson's and Holme and Maizels' findings with his own survey of 191 social work students in New Zealand. He found similarities between the responses of students in New Zealand and the UK, with the largest percentage of both sets of students registering their disaffection with 'normal' social values. Uttley reported that this response did not appear to be influenced by the age, sex, socio-economic background, education or employment record of the student. However, unlike Pearson, Uttley did not find evidence that social work students were rebelling against society, but that they were attracted to social work by professional and economic rewards, as well as being able to work with colleagues holding similar values. The New Zealand students identified more closely with micro rather than macro concepts of social change, with practice with individuals, families and small groups rather than community-based approaches. Even when students supported the use of macro solutions, they often qualified their responses by questioning whether social change on a macro level was possible.

These results contrast with the research undertaken by O'Connor *et al.* (1984) who administered Pearson's sentence completion exercise to 54 first year and 49 third year undergraduate social work students, and 110 first year undergraduate psychology students, at the University of Queensland. O'Connor *et al.* found that both groups were motivated by wanting to help others; social work students, however, were more likely to want to achieve personal growth and societal change. Contrary to Pearson's findings, O'Connor *et al.* discovered that social work students became more interested in social change and social action during the course and as a direct result of their social work training. Like Holme and Maizels (1978), O'Connor *et al.* found that age was the most significant factor in determining students' level of rejection of 'normal' values: younger students reported higher levels of disaffection than any of the other age groups. The rejection of 'normal' values, however, was not seen to be the most significant factor in students' motivation. Students were more motivated by individual benefits, for example financial rewards.

More recently, Solas (1994) used Pearson's sentence completion exercise to examine social work students' motives, administering the exercise to 10 graduate students at the University of Queensland, at the beginning of their two year social work programme and at the end of each semester. Solas found that the students were largely motivated by the desire for personal and professional fulfilment. As opposed to Pearson's characterization of social work students as 'politically deviant,' Solas saw them as 'neutral technocrats': at no stage during their training did students identify that they might have a future role to play in broader social change, and there appeared to be an absence of any moral stance in the accounts of students' motives to become social workers. Solas suggests that this reflected the general shift to the right in the politics of students.

These five studies provide widely contrasting conclusions on what motivates students to become social workers. Pearson's (1973) view of social workers and social work students as politically rebellious is not supported by the findings of Holme and Maizels (1978), who emphasized students' desire for self-actualization; Uttley (1981) highlights the significance of professional and economic motives of students and the desire to work with colleagues who hold similar values; O'Connor *et al.* (1984) suggest that social work students are primarily motivated by rewards for the self; and Solas (1994) suggests that personal and professional

fulfilment are the main factors in the motivation of students to become social workers. Only O'Connor *et al.* (1984) give limited support to Pearson's conclusions; unlike Pearson, however, O'Connor *et al.* suggest that students' interest in societal change grows and develops during the course of the social work programme. Most of the studies do not identify relationships between the motive of students and their other social characteristics; however, Holme and Maizels and O'Connor *et al.* suggest that age is a significant factor, with younger students tending to reject 'normal' social values more strongly.

The shift in perception from the social work student as 'political deviant' to 'neutral technocrat' may be explained by the general political shift to the right (Solas, 1994). However, a change to the right in the general political climate could also have encouraged social work students to develop more radical views. While the motive of social work students is likely to have been influenced by general political trends, other factors may have been of equal or more significance. For example, the growing critique within left wing politics of the role of the state in promoting social change may have discouraged more 'radical' students from the pursuit of training in social work. The choice to become a social worker may be related to other available alternative expressions of 'radicalism'. Students who reject 'dominant' social values may currently choose from a variety of new social movements, such as Green politics, rather than training to become social workers. The decision to become a social worker may also be related to the more general availability of meaningful employment. While a social work qualification does not guarantee a job, until the 1990s in Canada and the UK, social workers continued to be in demand in the work place.

Social work has changed since the 1970s so that the jobs students are choosing to train for in the 1990s are significantly different. Partly in response to these changes, social work education has also changed. For example, it is now common practice for qualified social workers to work alongside social work academics in selecting candidates for admission onto social work programmes. The selection of students onto social work programmes is perhaps the single most significant factor in determining who becomes a social worker (Shaw, 1985). While access onto social work programmes has increased for some groups of students as the result of equal opportunities policies, there has been a reduction in overall levels of sponsorship of individual candidates by social work agencies and the state in the UK. In Canada, schools of social work have made active efforts to recruit targeted minority students, with mixed results.

As well as these organisational and professional changes, social workers are being represented in more negative terms in the British and Canadian media. Social workers are often criticized in the popular press as representing the worst failings of the state provision of welfare (Franklin & Parton, 1991). It is in this context that students are making their choices to become social workers.

The above changes make it difficult to compare the motives of students in the 1970s with those of students in the 1980s and 1990s. These changes also suggest that the decision to become a social worker can only be understood within a particular social context.

Even if it were easy to compare findings from the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, further difficulties arise in relation to Pearson's research methods. Pearson assumes that categories such as 'political deviance', 'personal' and 'professional' are distinct alternatives. Solas (1994) suggests that students' motives can be categorized in terms of orientation towards 'self' or 'other'. Perhaps these are modern versions of the debate on whether social work is a profession or a vocation. As we will attempt to demonstrate, students' motives are more complex than is suggested by a choice between simple unified categories. Such false dichotomies polarize the views of students and fail to recognize that, at best, analyses and descriptions of motives can only be understood as temporary and partial.

### **“Becoming a Social Worker” research study**

The data discussed below are drawn from a larger longitudinal research project which has followed one year’s intake of social work students through five universities’ full-time, two year, undergraduate or postgraduate, professionally qualifying social work programmes.<sup>1</sup> Students started their social work programmes in the academic years beginning October 1994 or January 1995. They were asked to complete written questionnaires at the beginning, middle and end of their social work programmes. The data used here are from the first questionnaires completed by students on social work programmes at the University of British Columbia (52 respondents, 98% response rate), and at Lancaster University (43 respondents, 93% response rate).

Students were asked: ‘What most attracted you to social work?’, ‘Have you any concerns about becoming a social worker?’, and ‘Is there anything you will not like about social work?’ From these three questions we were able to elicit a range of motivational responses from students, including those that help to explain why students want to become social workers (incentives), factors that may or may not influence students’ motives to become social workers (concerns), and factors that discourage students from becoming social workers but do not appear to stop them choosing to do social work training (disincentives). Responses to each of these three questions were post-coded, using a grounded theory method of analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), under the following headings:

**Organizational**—Responses that stressed organizational issues included working in a welfare organization and working in an organisation in which colleagues hold similar views of the social world.

**Personal**—Responses that stressed personal issues included personal development and making a personal contribution to the work.

**Profession/career**—Responses that stressed profession/career included economic reward, career flexibility and joining a profession.

**Clients**—Responses that stressed work with clients included helping people, working with particular client groups and working with a variety of clients.

**Societal**—Responses that stressed societal change included promoting social change through social work.

### **Findings and discussion**

#### *Comparison between student profiles at UBC and Lancaster<sup>2</sup>*

(See Appendix I)

There are similar percentages of women and men students on the UBC and Lancaster programmes; approximately 80% of students were women and approximately 20% men. UBC students tended to be younger than Lancaster students. The median age of UBC students was 25 years and Lancaster students 31 years. Approximately three-quarters of UBC students were in their 20s, whereas just less than half of Lancaster were in their 20s. About a third of Lancaster students were in their 30s. The students were asked to self identify their ethnicity. While Lancaster students identified themselves as either white/British or in one case Irish, UBC students identified their ethnicity in a wide variety of ways, providing information on nationality, skin colour, ethnicity/nationality of parent(s), place of birth, cultural background and religion. The data provided by the UBC students have been coded under the following headings: Canadian/European, Caucasian/white, Canadian/other, Chinese, Canadian/Asian, First Nations, Hispanic and no response. The responses of UBC students reflect

the cultural diversity of the group and the differing understanding of 'ethnicity' in the Canadian national context. UBC's admission policy encourages ethnic diversity in the student group by allocating an additional five percentage points to academic grades of applicants from the First Nations or a visible minority. For the purposes of analysis UBC students were recoded as "visible minority ethnic group", i.e. Canadian/Asian, Canadian/other, native Canadian, Hispanic and Chinese; "majority ethnic group", i.e. Canadian/European, Canadian/other and Caucasian/white; and no response group. These categories are appropriate within the Canadian context. The stated ethnic homogeneity of students on the Lancaster programme precludes comparison between different ethnic groups at Lancaster. The different national demographic profiles, as well as differing approaches to ethnic identification and multiculturalism would make national comparisons very difficult. Indeed the decision to include an open self-identification question in relation to ethnicity has thrown up considerable debate between the authors about representations of ethnic groups in the analysis and discussion of the data. Interestingly, "visibility" became a basis for grouping disparate ethnic groups within the Canadian sample, as the "visible" black/white dichotomy has come to dominate debates about race and ethnicity in Britain.<sup>3</sup>

*Incentives: what attracts students to become social workers?*

(See Appendix II)

UBC and Lancaster students indicate similar reasons for being attracted to social work: both groups of students place working with clients and having a career/being part of a profession as the main attractions to training as a social worker. These attractions were placed well above personal, societal or organizational attractions. The major difference between UBC and Lancaster students was that UBC students emphasized work with clients whereas Lancaster students are more attracted by having a career/ joining a profession.

There appears to be little difference in what attracted women and men respondents. There was a slight difference between men and women at UBC, with men identifying only working with clients and career/ professional attractions, whereas women students at UBC also identified personal, societal and organizational reasons for wanting to become social workers. This may in part be explained by the much larger number of women than men students.

Age does not appear to be a significant factor in what attracts students to become social workers, apart from the youngest age group (20–29 years), for whom working with clients was the most significant reason for wanting to become a social worker.

On the UBC programme the majority ethnic group students tended to follow the general trend, picking out professional/career, and working with clients as the most significant reasons for wanting to become social workers. Visible minority ethnic group students placed more emphasis on working with clients than did the majority ethnicity group students.

*Concerns: what worries do students have about becoming social workers?*

(Data provided in Appendix III)

UBC students' major concerns were primarily personal, focused on their ability to do the job and handle the stress of the work, whereas Lancaster students were more concerned about organizational factors such as workload, level of responsibility and bureaucracy. They were also concerned about their own abilities, the levels of stress and their personal safety.

Women students at both UBC and Lancaster described a wide range of concerns about becoming social workers: organizational, personal, work with clients, profession/career and societal. Men tended not to mention personal issues or working with clients as areas of concern, identifying more strongly organizational or career and professional concerns.

Age does not appear to be a major factor influencing students' concerns. The only group that does stand out is the youngest age group of UBC students who indicated a high level of personal issues which included their ability to do the job. There does not appear to be any strong relationship between the ethnicity of UBC students and the types of concerns they have about becoming social workers.

*Disincentives: what do students expect not to like about being social workers?*

(Data provided in Appendix IV)

Both UBC and Lancaster students expected that organizational factors, including levels of bureaucracy, stress, professional responsibility, workloads, institutionalization and the competing demands of social welfare organizations and service users' needs would make social work a difficult career. Gender and ethnicity do not appear to be significant in the responses to this question.

On the basis of the relatively small sample there does not appear to be any support for Pearson's claim that social work students are politically deviant. There is considerable consensus between UBC and Lancaster students on the incentives and disincentives towards, and concerns about, their becoming social workers. Rather than wanting to promote social change, students are attracted by working with clients and joining a career/profession. Both sets of students are concerned by personal and organizational aspects of the job and expect to dislike organizational features of the work. Although no strong patterns arise in relation to gender and ethnicity, it appears that younger students tend to be more attracted by the opportunities to work with clients and most concerned by their personal ability to do the work. Visible minority ethnic group students also appear to be more strongly attracted by the possibility of work with clients.

While this quantitative research provides a broad but sketchy analysis of the motives of social work students, in the next section we look at some of the individual responses of social work students to qualitative questions, which support the view that choosing to become a social worker is a complex process.

The qualitative research introduces more uncertainty about career choice and challenges the assumption that by choosing to enrol on a social work programme, social work students are choosing to become social workers. Although the two are far from mutually exclusive, for many students there are tensions and uncertainties about the relationship between the choices. By asking students at the beginning of their course what motivates them to become social workers, their responses may reflect more on their choice to become social work students rather than social workers.

### **Qualitative data**

Four main themes emerged from the qualitative responses of the students. These suggest that what motivates students to become social workers is perhaps a much more complex issue than has been suggested by previous research.



*Uncertainties and ambiguities in the choice to become a social worker*

At the point when students apply for social work training, many of them are not sure what social work is. Some students have had no contact with social workers prior to entering the programme and have read little about social work:

To be honest I wasn't exactly sure what being a social worker entailed as to the day to day working. I now know being a social worker is many things and is not easily described. (UBC 15)

Students who have had little contact with social workers draw on media representations of social work to help them to make the choice to enrol on a social work programme. These representations are often misleading. Social workers are often caricatured as 'saints, simpletons, scapegoats and scoundrels' (Golding, 1991, p. 88). The social work profession has not been very proactive in representing itself within the media, leaving social work to define itself in response to 'front page scandals'. While students are exposed to negative, or at best ambivalent, representations of social workers in the media, there remains a high level of public ignorance as to what the profession actually involves.

Pearson (1973) suggested that the motivational accounts of new students are particularly revealing as they have not been socialized into professional understandings and routines. This may have been true in the 1970s; in the interim, however, more social work programmes have required some experience in the field of social welfare or a related area as a criterion for selection onto the programme. This means that more social work students will have had some exposure to this field of work before embarking on social work programmes.

Even though students in the 1990s are likely to have had more contact with social workers before the start of their professional training, they still bring with them many concerns about whether they want to be a social worker and/or whether they think they are suited for the job.

I have many concerns: am I capable? is it the right thing for me? will I get too involved? will I always be in safe situations? (Lancs 10)

I don't know whether I am motivated enough for this profession. (UBC 41)

I hope I have chosen the right career path. (UBC 45)

Students often questioned whether they had the personal qualities to become social workers.

What concerns me is whether I am strong enough or tough enough to handle certain cases. I hope I will come through this. (Lancs 36)

My shy personality trait may make it difficult to be a social worker. (UBC 40)

I have some personality deficiencies which I believe are very harmful, e.g. I like to be alone and I am too shy and afraid of strangers. (UBC 13)

I look too young and I don't think people will believe in my advice. (27 year old student) (UBC 13)

Students' descriptions of their concerns suggest images of what social workers should be like: extrovert, emotionally tough, able to assess levels of personal risk, and middle-aged. These images of social workers discourage some students, but attract other students who seek the opportunity to work with a wide variety of people and to be challenged by the 'action' and 'excitement' of the work.

Even if a student has worked with or as a social worker, there are still uncertainties about whether the social work role will have significantly changed by the time they graduate and

apply for a job, and how far social work will change during their working life. The students often recognized that the shape of social work is heavily reliant on the attitudes of local and central governments. The continued existence of social work was questioned by some students.

I'm concerned that social work will not exist given the attitude and opinions of the present government. (Lancs 24)

Students were also concerned that even if social work did exist, it would not provide a route through which to achieve their goals such as the desire to promote social change.

I don't know yet if I want to help by acting as an agent for social change, but wonder whether my role as a social worker is really not just the opposite. I hope not. (UBC 29)

Will it provide me with the outlet that will satisfy my ideological concerns? Time will tell! (UBC 17)

It is likely that social work students have always questioned whether they want to become social workers. While social work programmes have traditionally engaged with the changing nature of social work and the skills and values involved in the work, the increased pressures on student numbers and more unpredictable changes in government policies with regard to social work and service provision in both Canada and the UK may cause greater uncertainty amongst students and teaching staff in the 1990s.

#### *Choice made within particular material constraints*

The choice to train as a social worker is not without financial consequences in view of the increasing financial pressures on students in both Canada and the UK.

I had previously wanted to work in social work—helping people—but financial reasons prevented me from taking up the course. The advice offered made me realise that I would have to sacrifice things if I wanted to achieve being a social worker and this was the decision I made eventually. (Lancs 19)

Students may be motivated to become social workers but be unable to gain access to a course for a variety of material reasons. The continuing reduction in the numbers of social workers required in the UK means that newly qualified social workers are finding it increasingly difficult to gain employment. Students are increasingly aware that at the end of their training they may be left with a massive student loan debt, and limited opportunities for employment. This may influence both the choice to train to become a social worker and the attitudes of students while they are training. While employment opportunities are declining in the 1990s, social work training still provides a relatively direct route to employment. Nonprofit/voluntary agencies and government social welfare agencies still provide relatively secure employment, particularly in areas of high unemployment. The choice for some students was made on the basis that social work provides the best chance of employment in their local area. As one UK student suggested, 'there's no alternative employment available around here'.

#### *Choice made in relation to other options*

Social work students do not make the choice to train as social workers in an educational vacuum. Other educational options are either available or unavailable to them. For example,

for some students at UBC, the choice to train as a social worker was made as an alternative to enrolling on a programme in psychology.

At first I wanted to be a psychologist, but after realising how much schooling was involved I decided to choose a different profession. (UBC 21)

I have a BA in psychology, but decided that (apart from the difficulties in entering graduate school in that department) I feel social work will give me a greater opportunity to deal with people on a daily basis in a constructive manner to help them solve their problems. (UBC 33)

I want counselling skills but the psychology is largely too Freudian and too individualistic. (UBC 48)

Students' choices and motives to train as social workers will depend to some extent on the type and nature of alternative vocations and the entrance requirements onto different programmes.

*A choice 'not' to become a social worker*

Perhaps the most unexpected reasons given for enrolling on a social work programme were given by students who did not want to practise as social workers. The social work qualification was considered a route towards another career or further training:

I had been working in education welfare—I never wanted to be a social worker. I do want to see social change. I want to lecture on social work related courses. (Lancs 3)

For another student, gaining a social work qualification was a way of obtaining a place on a Master's Degree course in Counselling Psychology:

I wanted to be a counsellor. I wanted to take a BA in psychology, but I figured that at least with a BSW I'd be able to get a job! I'm headed for a Master's in Counselling Psychology. (UBC 12)

In Canada a social work qualification may be a requirement for employment as an administrator in social welfare policy, planning and administration. Although these are clearly social work fields of practice, students interested in such positions were not always intending to practise as 'social workers'.

Realising the limitations of career choice without a university degree, I looked through the newspaper, and jobs which interest me, mostly administration in the nonprofit sector, mostly required a social work degree BSW or MSW. So what attracted me to social work was the ability to work where I wanted. (UBC 14)

The four themes above indicate that the motives of social work students cannot be understood simply in terms of a debate about whether social work students are 'political deviants' or 'neutral technocrats', and that we get only a partial view of students' motives from the use of quantitative research methods. Our research provides a snapshot of the motives of students at the start of their social work training. As part of the larger longitudinal research, we will focus on how students' motives change throughout their training. The research so far, however, has illuminated the complex and varied nature of students' motives to enrol on social work programmes and to become social workers.

### **Implications for social work education**

If the motives of social work students are complex, varied, and constantly changing, what implications does this have for the education of social workers? First, social work educators may need to rethink their assumptions that all students who enrol on social work programmes want to practise as social workers *per se*. By making this assumption, social work educators may alienate many students whose interests in the qualification lie elsewhere. Options that allow students to move from social work into other programmes and fields may not be welcomed by all social work educators; however, the choice not to become a social worker but to use social work knowledge, values and skills in other fields may be of benefit to the individual student and to future service users.

Second, social work educators are likely to want to draw on the motives of students to enter social work programmes to promote their learning. To allow for this, social work programmes should include a varied curriculum, a wide range of learning methods and the opportunity for students to develop their own interests within the general framework of a social work qualification. An important starting point for social work training would be to allow for a detailed exploration of students' motives for entering social work, and examining the repercussions of these for subsequent training. This could form part of the longer term aim of promoting social workers' critical reflection on their social work practice.

Solas (1994) points out that social work students are frequently encouraged to think about the motivation of service users and that students might develop skills in this area by focusing on their own motives. Open discussion of students' motives, which explores tensions and ambiguities, might also encourage the development of less simplistic and 'moralistic' explanations of service user behaviour.

Third, an exploration of the differences and similarities in the motives of students may have particular benefits for the training in anti-discriminatory practice where there is constant tension between individual differences and collective interests based on a wide variety of social characteristics. Simple categorization in terms of social characteristics such as gender, race, and culture supports a rigid structural account of the social world. Such an account of difference and inequality does not always help to explain how power relations intersect and the contradictions and tensions that exist within and between different individuals and groups. Interestingly, our quantitative analysis across structural categories of age, gender and race revealed no significant variables. Rather, individual qualitative accounts of motives and concerns revealed some of the more unorthodox reasons for undertaking social work training. Attending to the 'illegitimate' knowledge of oppressed individuals and groups is one of the central features of anti-discriminatory practice (Hartman, 1992). In the same manner, social work students should be encouraged to explore their own 'illegitimate' reasons for wanting to become social workers, the myriad reasons that fall outside, across and within wanting to be a 'political deviant' or 'neutral technocrat'.

One of the 'illegitimate' reasons that is not often accepted by social work educators is that some students do not want to be students, they just want to be social workers. Being a student is viewed as an obstacle that has to be overcome in order to gain work as a social worker or to gain promotion within social work. Social work educators have to develop strategies to engage such 'reluctant' students in the learning process if those students are to assimilate the foundation knowledge, values and skills of the profession.

In this comparative study, students in Canada and in the UK expressed similar incentives for choosing social work as a career, relating mainly to working with clients and to joining a profession. The UBC students were most concerned about their ability to do the work and about potential stress, while Lancaster students, in a political context of cutbacks and change,

as well as scandals about professional practice, articulated concerns about workload, level of responsibility and bureaucracy. UBC students defined workloads, bureaucracy and responsibility more in terms of aspects of the job that they would not like; as inevitable and unpleasant aspects of the work rather than a central concern. These findings suggest that students make pragmatic and often ambivalent decisions about career in the context of their political and social locations.

### Acknowledgements

This research has been funded by The Nuffield Foundation. The authors would also like to acknowledge the support of other members of the Becoming A Social Worker research project: Anne Blanchard and Richard Hugman (Curtin University, Australia); Heather D'Cruz (University of South Australia, Australia); Edward Kruk (University of British Columbia, Canada); Rae Lindsay (University of Western Australia, Australia); Emilia Martinez-Brawley and Paz Zorita (Arizona State University, USA) and Keith Soothill (Lancaster University, UK).

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The participating universities were: Arizona State University, University of British Columbia, Curtin University, Lancaster University and University of Western Australia.

<sup>2</sup>CCETSW publish reports on the admission of students onto social work programmes in the UK. No such national statistics are available in Canada. In 1994 in the UK 70% of students admitted onto social work programmes were women, 30% were men; 24% of students were aged 20–25 years, 29% were 25–35 years and 26% were 35–45 years; 27% of students identified themselves as white, 24% as black/ethnic minority, 24% as other and there was no information on 15% of students.

<sup>3</sup>We are aware that this simple black/white dichotomy has been contested and is a matter of ongoing debate (see Brah, 1994; Modood, 1994).

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**Appendix I**

**Comparison between student respondents at UBC and Lancaster**

	UBC	Lancaster
Total number of students	53	46
Total number of respondents	52 (98%)	43 (93%)
Gender		
Women	42 (81%)	34 (79%)
Men	10 (19%)	9 (21%)
Age		
20-29 yrs	38 (73.1%)	20 (46.5%)
30-39 yrs	7 (13.5%)	16 (37.2%)
40-49 yrs	6 (11.5%)	7 (16.3%)
50 yrs plus	1 (1.9%)	0
Median age	25 yrs	31 yrs
Ethnicity (self-identified)		
White/British		37 (86.0%)
Irish		1 (2.3%)
Canadian/European	18 (34.6%)	
Caucasian/white	4 (7.7%)	
Canadian/other	9 (17.3%)	
Majority ethnic group	31 (59.9%)	
Chinese	8 (15.4%)	
Canadian/Asian	8 (15.4%)	
First Nations	1 (1.9%)	
Hispanic	1 (1.9%)	
Visible minority ethnic group	18 (34.6%)	
No response	3 (5.8%)	5 (11.6%)

**Appendix II**

**What attracts students to become social workers?**

	Organization		Personal		Prof/career		Clients		Societal	
	UBC	Lancs	UBC	Lancs	UBC	Lancs	UBC	Lancs	UBC	Lancs
Women	1	0	5	4	11	15	22	13	3	2
Men	0	0	0	2	6	4	4	2	0	1
20-29 yrs	1	0	4	3	11	6	19	10	3	1
30-39 yrs			0	2	3	9	4	3	0	2
40-49 yrs			1	1	2	4	3	2		
50 yrs plus					1	0				
Majority ethnic group	0	*	2		16		11		2	
Visible minority ethnic group	1		3		1		13		0	
Ethnicity not identified	0		0		0		2		1	

**Appendix III****What concerns do students have about becoming a social worker?**

	No concerns		Organization		Personal		Prof/career		Clients		Societal	
	UBC	Lancs	UBC	Lancs	UBC	Lancs	UBC	Lancs	UBC	Lancs	UBC	Lancs
Women	6	4	6	11	23	11	5	5	2	1	0	2
Men	0	3	1	3	3	0	6	2	0	0	0	1
20-29 yrs	5	2	4	5	21	6	7	3	1	1		
30-39 yrs	0	4	2	7	2	3	2	2	1	0		
40-49 yrs	0	1	1	2	3	2	2	2				
50 yrs plus	1	0										
Majority ethnic group	3		4		17		6		1			
Visible minority ethnic group	3		3		7		4		1			
Ethnicity not identified	0		0		2		1		0			

**Appendix IV****What students dislike about becoming a social worker?\*\*\***

	No dislikes		Organization		Personal		Prof/career		Clients		Societal	
	UBC	Lancs	UBC	Lancs	UBC	Lancs	UBC	Lancs	UBC	Lancs	UBC	Lancs
Women	2	0	20	16	5	1	4	2	3	3	3	2
Men	2	1	3	2	1	1	2	1	1	1	0	1
20-29 yrs	3	0	16	8	5	2	4	1	3	1	1	2
30-39 yrs	1	1	3	8	1	0	1	2	0	1	1	1
40-49 yrs			3	2			1	0	1	2	1	0
50 yrs plus			1	0								
Majority ethnic group	2		14		3		6		2			
Visible minority ethnic group	2		7		2		0		2			
Ethnicity not identified	0		2		1		0		0			

\*Ethnicity is not a variable at Lancaster due to the ethnic homogeneity of the students.

\*\*6 UBC and 12 Lancaster did not answer this question.