

PERCEPTIONS OF PROFESSIONAL AND FINANCIAL WORTH
AMONG MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS

by

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Dedicated to social workers everywhere- may you be the writers of your own story.

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Abstract

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The purpose of this study is to explore professional perceptions (intraprofessional, interprofessional, and societal) among UT Arlington (UTA) second-year and advanced-standing master of social work (MSW) students and investigate the connections of these perceptions to financial worth. Three focus groups were conducted with UTA MSW students (n=31) to explore this topic. The findings from this research suggest that the link between professional perceptions and financial worth is salient. Internal and external devaluation may contribute to a continued acceptance and expectation of low financial earnings. Implications for social work education policy and professional advocacy are addressed. This researcher hopes that the present study will start a dialogue among social workers, and eventually helping professionals in general, to identify and clarify their professional perceptions and consider how those beliefs impact their earning power.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

It is often stated that individuals do not go into the field of social work for the money (Barth, 2003; Cress, n.d.; Freeman, 1991; Newman, 2013). This attitude seems pervasive and may contribute to a learned expectation of low earnings within the profession. While there are some very real factors that have created a low-wage earning capacity for female-dominated professions (Epstein, 1992; Freeman, 1991; Gibelman & Schervish, 1995), social workers may add to the problem by continuing to embody and reinforce these negative messages. Even within the helping professions, broadly accepted as social work, nursing, and education (Gibelman & Schervish, 1993), social workers reportedly have the lowest rates of pay (Jones, 2005). While social workers acknowledge that the rate of pay is substandard, the fact that they like what they do enough to do it anyway may allow them to be exploited (Barth, 2003). It may be worth investigating whether the high value they place on the work they do serves to rationalize this exploitation. The often-heard assertion from social workers that “it’s not about the money” may operate as a justification for the acceptance of social work’s systemically subordinated place in society while simultaneously reinforcing and confirming it.

There are several factors to consider in evaluating reasons for continued inadequate financial rewards in the social work profession, other than by the act of reiterating that message. Gender and historical devaluation must be considered as well as the ways in which external influences of subordination come to be accepted by the subordinated. These influences may also be said to have power over others’ perception of social work (Gibelman, 1999; Lecroy & Stinson, 2004), adding to its role-clarity problem and creating a world where social workers are unsure about how much they are worth as professionals.

Gibelman (2003) explained that the profession of social work has suffered financially due to the large proportion of women in the field. She found that the more female-dominated a profession was, the lower the salary. Salary inequality based on gender is a long-standing practice in the United States. It is well-researched and recognized that women still remain underpaid by almost 20% for performing comparable work with similar skills and education as compared to their male counterparts (National Committee on Pay Equity, 2013). Additionally, social work and other helping professions have a tendency to be grouped into a category of “women’s work,” which includes tasks more synonymous with empathy, caretaking, and nurturing (Dick & Nadin, 2006; Freeman, 1991). Similar to the role of motherhood, this type of labor has traditionally been viewed as something women should do without compensation (Freeman, 1991). Further, even though social work is a women-centric profession, Gibelman & Schervish (1993) found that men tend to be promoted to managerial and administrative roles more rapidly and frequently, and also tend to earn higher incomes than female social workers when controlling for education and experience. These factors indicate an externally dictated power ideal where women’s work and skills are devalued based solely on gender.

Some scholars have suggested that social work has had a difficult time defining and distinguishing its professionalism (Austin, 1983; Epstein, 1992; Gibelman, 1999; Morris, 2008). Since Abraham Flexner’s infamous rejection of social work as a profession in 1915, the discipline has taken a reactive stance in an attempt to justify its existence and differentiate itself from other professions, (Morris, 2008; Wells, 1982). Flexner posited that social work could never hope to achieve status and prestige as true professionals without a firm theoretical knowledge base and professional autonomy (Syers, 1995). Other researchers have asserted that the field has developed a fixation

with defining itself by his both prescriptive and pseudoscientific criteria for becoming a profession, enabling his speech to take on a myth-like quality (Austin, 1983; Morris, 2008). Austin (1983) went on to say that this is a prime example of how an idea “becomes endowed with the weight and authority of scientific truth” (p. 357). A hundred years later, social work students continue to be taught about Flexner’s disavowing speech as though there were still a need to defend social work’s unique place as a profession.

In an effort to prove their worth, social workers aligned themselves with the profession of psychiatry during this time period (Specht & Courtney, 1994). Through this union, social workers gained the theoretical base Flexner asserted was missing. Additionally, social workers gained some semblance of professional autonomy as they began to carve out their own unique path as professional psychotherapists. However, since social work began as a reform-minded profession with goals set on the solving of community problems, some believe this alliance may have resulted in an abandonment of their primary mission of social justice (Epstein, 1992; Specht & Courtney, 1994).

A shift in professional focus partly for the sake of professionalization is sometimes necessary and is not an uncommon occurrence in the life of any profession (Gibelman, 1999). For social work, however, it seems to have played a profound role in the profession’s historic difficulty in establishing its own distinctive identity. Social work’s concession of many of its roles as social activists and agitators may have demonstrated that it could be shamed into fitting into more concrete, and arguably, male-controlled roles (Epstein, 1992; Specht & Courtney, 1994). In moving into the field of psychiatry, social workers took on (or were allowed) the role of para-professionals, thus confirming Flexner’s argument (Specht & Courtney, 1994).

Lack of role clarity has been an undeniable issue within the context of the social work profession (Gibelman, 1999; Lecroy & Stinson, 2004; National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2004). This is a factor in social work's all-around public image problem as well. Researchers have suggested that social workers are treated like "second-class citizens" (Alperin, 1977, p. 150) in part because the profession has not asserted itself or taken control of its professional image (often leaving this to the media and conventional stereotypes). External forces of devaluation, along with an ambiguous professional focus, have created a negative image of the social worker for the general public (Gibelman, 1999; Lecroy & Stinson, 2004). Researchers have argued that social workers have internalized this poor self-image and then subtly communicated it back to each other and to others (Alperin, 1977; Lecroy & Stinson, 2004). When they receive external negative feedback, their feelings of worthlessness are reconfirmed (Alperin, 1977). Clearfield (1977) explained that the accuracy of the feedback is unimportant; "the perception of a negative self-image is real in its consequences" (p.29).

The image problem has also been reinforced by capitalistic assertions that money is a measure of worth (Epstein, 1992; Specht & Courtney, 1994). Researchers have asserted that income can create an artificially low or high sense of self-worth in a money-oriented society (Esterchild & McDaniel, 1998). As mentioned earlier, many social workers seemingly disregard this idea by placing their value of worth in their work instead of their income. While noble, it is possible that this appropriation is actually due to their historic and systemic disempowerment as well as a continued acceptance of an out-of-date construct that social workers will never be paid adequately for their work. It may be out of necessity and the maintenance of dignity that they argue that the work is not about the money while at the same time keeping the stereotype alive and well.

Current Study

The purpose of this paper is to explore the perceptions second-year and advanced-standing master social work (MSW) students in the UT Arlington School of Social Work (SSW) and others have about the social work profession and the impact those views may have on beliefs about financial worth. This research question developed out of the researcher's personal frustration with the constant discussion observed among social work students about social work stereotypes, low pay across the profession, and an expectation that these were inevitable truths. It occurred to this researcher that by reinforcing these stereotypes social workers may be contributing to their continued existence.

As MSW students prepare to enter, re-enter, or continue along their professional career paths, it is important for them to consider the values and conscious or unconscious beliefs they carry about their profession and their worth. This researcher plans to use the data collected to explore emerging patterns about professional and financial perceptions among social work students' belief systems.

Chapter 2

Theoretical Perspectives

Professional perceptions and their varying consequences theoretically become realities in several ways. Here it is useful to provide contextual information about the various theoretical frameworks that will be used to frame the data that emerges from this study. The author will make use of a conflict, feminist and social constructionist frame in understanding and synthesizing experimental findings.

Conflict Perspective

The conflict perspective was originally introduced by Marx as a sociological perspective for explaining the economic and power-related struggles between societal classes (Robbins, Chatterjee & Canda, 2012). While it is considered to be more appropriately used as an explanation rather than a prediction (Robbins, Chatterjee & Canda, 2012), it plays a valuable role in social scientific analysis (Johnson & Rhodes, 2015). Its first central tenet is that conflict is a necessary and fundamental as well as positive feature of society. Conflict receives its positive connotation because it is believed to be a driving force for change. Thus, the benefit of struggles for power far outweighs the costs. Conflict theorists describe inequality and disharmony as representative of the societal experience (Royster, 2013) and propose that times of peace and consensus are fleeting and counterintuitive.

Conflict is said to exist because of a continuous struggle over scarce resources (Royster, 2013). Theorists also posit that human beings are survivalists by nature, thus driven to compete for them. This struggle is also assumed to be representative of humanity's innate and limitless desire for power and prestige. It necessitates the building of relationships for competition and subordination (Smith, Hamon, Ingoldsby, & Miller, 2012), or the oppressors' ability to shape the beliefs of the oppressed into acceptance of

their minority status. These relationships occur in myriad ways within society and again, are not inherently negative. Rather, humans and groups have conflicting goals and use a variety of means (exploitation, coercion, oppression) to achieve their goals. In the context of societal conflict, theorists believe that these struggles for power must be solved collectively rather than by individual change, and that the aim in problem-solving is to eliminate subordination (Johnson & Rhodes, 2015).

Power is a notion of conflict, and is manifested in the ability to maintain and control resources at the expense of another. Inequality keeps groups from realizing their full potential (Robbins, Chatterjee & Canda, 2012). This is actualized by stratification which is considered to be a central concept of power (Scott & Marshall, 2009). Essentially groups are categorized into different strata based on socioeconomic factors among other things and then valued based on their association with a certain category.

The inherent struggle between the powered and the disempowered affects both groups since power only occurs in its relation to something else. Thus while one group may attempt to gain power the other must fight to keep it. However, power is about maintenance and control. One of the ways in which these are achieved is through subordination. The struggle to gain or regain power is not as simple as acknowledging it and retaliating. When an oppressed group recognizes and challenges their role and their oppressors, resistance can actually result in anxiety, feelings of worthlessness, and guilt (Bjornberg, 2004; Epstein, 1992). As the profession of social work has always found itself in a struggle for power in terms of autonomy, recognition, professionalization and financial compensation, the group may experience this discomfort in consideration of challenging features of their disempowered professional role. The effect here is the result of institutional subordination; the anxiety experienced in resistance may be enough to keep groups from fighting back, thus maintaining their place in the power structure.

A conflict perspective is an appropriate theoretical frame for the present study due to the cultural and societal constructs that exist in a conversation about gender, economic earning power, and societal perception. A critique of conflict theory is its ability to overemphasize dualities as irreconcilable differences, thus creating a polarization of groups as victims or oppressors (Johnson & Rhodes, 2015). However, it is important to see these concepts as part of an ever-changing social landscape rather than objects of permanence for the purposes of this paper. This idea will be explained further in the discussion on social constructionism. The ideas presented here provide a contextual frame for some of the inherent difficulties experienced by the social work field and its members. Thus, there are historical and societal power structures at work in social work's societal makeup, but this is not to imply that social work is rendered powerless. They are simply part of the larger picture in understanding social work's place in society.

Feminist Perspective

The social work profession is made up of over 80% women (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). Thus, it is important to make a connection to the overarching topic of professional perception with a feminist critique. Baretta (2011) said that "social work has historically resisted and marginalized feminism," (p. 264-265). Therefore, social and economic empowerment issues have been purported as individual problems. Perhaps in an attempt to minimize the fact that the profession is women-centric due to the lack of power implied by that concept, women's issues have thus been deemed an unsatisfactory answer to questions about power and prestige among social workers. Baretta (2011) went on to say that the language used in social work literature implies, "a marginal status for women's issues and a tenuous relationship with feminism," (p. 265). In the present study, a feminist perspective is useful in contextualizing the relationship between power and gender.

Social Constructionist Perspective

Another useful lens through which to analyze this research has its roots in critical theory. Social constructionism posits that consciousness is determined by social being (Shotter, 2014). Realities about the world, society, and culture are constructed through language and interaction (Johnson & Rhodes, 2015) to explain and make sense of them. In fact, social constructionists believe that there are myriad “realities” because reality itself is a construction.

Constructions of reality allow for social order to prevail by power of habituation which leads to institutionalization (Shotter, 2014). As it is assumed we are born into a previously constructed world, much of those beliefs and habitual behaviors are accepted as permanent and may be taken for granted as “truths.” This is a danger noted by the perspective and its critics because it can lead to reification and nominalism of those beliefs, along with the exclusion of human agency (Shotter, 2014). In terms of social work professional self-image and financial worth, it makes sense that individuals find it easy to identify with a low-status, low-paying profession without much question. All available information confirms it and challenge to this construct is minimal. However, it is important to remember this theory posits that since truths are simply beliefs treated as realities, they are subject to change.

Gergen (2009) posited that the language we use to describe things is not actually required or demanded by the things we describe; thus everything we learn and explain can be something else. How we describe things is a factor in shaping our future. (Shotter, 2014). Though evolution of social constructs is possible and probable in many cases, change is said to be slow, incremental, and controversial (Freud, 1994). Challenging social order occurs when concepts are in need of deconstruction because they no longer serve the reality in which they exist. Feminist theory would argue that the essence of

power is one's ability to maintain a certain view of reality whether it still applicable or not; they assert that the construct of white male privilege in the Western world fits this claim (Freud, 1994).

As made clear by the previous example, some groups are led to power while others are subjugated in the constructionist perspective. Another factor related to power is the acceptance of limited aspirations and a subsequent over-satisfaction with them as truths are reified and accepted without question (Marcuse, 1964). Foucault added the concept of relations of power, whereby truth is an effect of power relations; thus it does not take "explicit consent or violent coercion" (Robbins, Chatterjee & Canda, 2012) to dominate groups. People are often constrained by arbitrary systems of power masquerading as truth. Constructions are seldom neutral; they are products of societal power relations (Dick & Nadin 2006).

The reification of some perceptions of professional self-image and their consequent beliefs about the financial and societal status of social workers can be explained by examining another feature of subordination, internalization. This concept works by taking the messages routinely heard or said to the self, consciously or unconsciously and turning them into truths. Researchers have asserted that stigmatized individuals ultimately internalize the stereotypes that allege their inferiority (Bonnot & Croizet, 2007). Routinely normalized messages of discrimination or devaluation can prevent or undermine resistance from a dominated group (Jackman, 1994; Jost, 1995; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). They also shape collective social identities (Bonnot & Croizet, 2007). The authors define stereotype internalization as "the incorporation of negative societal views in the self-concept," (p. 858). The messages social work has received throughout its history have often been critical and subtly discriminatory. It is no wonder that one hundred years into the profession, social work is still attempting to answer

questions about its professionalization and has not deeply questioned the connection of these internalized beliefs and their effects on financial worth.

Language's effect cannot be understated in the social construction of reality. Language is "a major variable in the societal distribution of power and opportunities" (Wigboldus, Spears & Semin, 2005, p. 118). The authors went on to say language encodes discriminatory stereotypes and scripts. They argued that when biased language becomes normalized, "discrimination is routinized and [becomes] less visible" (p. 107). In addition to this argument, the theory of linguistic social constructionism's central focus is that the ways we describe things forms our realities. Theorists have asserted that alternatives should always be considered and sought out in order to assess their continued meaningfulness and acceptability within the current socially constructed reality (Shotter, 2014). A social constructionist frame is helpful in the present study when considering how social workers internalize messages of powerlessness and devaluation and turn them into truths.

Chapter 3

Definition

Financial Worth

The researcher found it necessary to identify a comprehensive term to account for factors likely to impact social work's earning power before examining issues and challenges related to the topic. The literature in the following section demonstrates that social worker earning capacity may be impacted by perceived societal value and perceived earning power. The combination of these factors may have the capacity to diminish or limit social worker beliefs about their financial earning capacity. The researcher considered terms closely related to the concept in attempt to account for these factors: earning power, pay, compensation, value, and worth. The term "worth" was found to be most applicable because its definition encompasses a financial component as well as a societal valuation ("Worth," n.d.).

For the purpose of this study, the researcher developed a working definition for the term, "financial worth," to account for this experience since no applicable term could be found in the literature. Synthesized, the term "financial worth" means, "the perceived earning power plus the perceived rate of usefulness or importance to an individual, a purpose, or society a person believes they possess." Financial worth, though monetized in a paycheck, is about more than just a salary; it also expresses an inherent value judgment and arguably demonstrates a person's perceived societal worth.

Chapter 4

Literature Review

Introduction

The literature review search was conducted largely around three key terms: 1) financial worth, 2), “professional self-image” of social workers, and 3) “public perception” in social work literature. The researcher also reviewed the knowledge base to gain a historical perspective of the social work profession as well as to examine factors of powerlessness. The researcher discovered sizeable gaps in the literature in and around all three central topics. There were only a handful of articles pertaining to societal or social worker perceptions and an even smaller collection of articles discussing the topics of money and income disparity in the social work profession in any way. Additionally, some data were used that may seem out-of-date; these were only utilized after completing an exhaustive and thorough search of relevant literature. The researcher updated and confirmed any data with more relevant statistics wherever possible and made every effort to balance older literature with more contemporary findings.

Financial Worth

Financial earning power among social workers has not been distinctly linked to professional perceptions among social workers themselves or others. However, reasons for depressed wages among social workers other than perception have been hypothesized. Barth (2003) states some of these reasons may be: 1) a market that is highly segmented by education, 2) individuals without social work degrees performing (at least lower-level) social work jobs, 3) employers willing to hire non-social workers to perform social work jobs, and 4) a high commitment to practice social work in spite of substandard wages. Further, Barth (2003) believes that social workers also struggle to

gain economic power because they work in highly dispersed units in the community, often under a variety of titles.

Another confounder of financial gains in the social work profession is the issue of a “highly elastic supply” of labor (Barth, 2003). This term means that since there are a lot of people of different professional backgrounds that can obtain social work positions, raising the wages even a small amount creates an exponential increase in the number of people in the field (Jones, 2005). Because alternative professionals are accepted into social work roles, a shortage of social workers does not create the economic demand it should. Some efforts have been made to safeguard the positions considered “social work” for people with social work-specific training and education by creating title protection regulations to ensure no one uses the title “social worker” without proper training.

According to a variety of sources¹, licensed social workers can expect to earn an average of anywhere from \$35,000 to \$59,000 annually (NASW, 2006; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). In slight contrast, the NASW Compensation & Benefits Study (2010) reported average social worker earnings were \$55,000. The same study suggested that 43% of its respondents earned more than \$60,000 per year (NASW, 2010). There were also a very small number of practitioners and senior administrators reporting earnings of more than \$100,000 per year (NASW, 2010). Based again on the NASW (2010) report’s findings, a bachelor-level social worker can expect average pay of about \$40,000. Additionally, a licensed clinical social worker (LCSW) may make an average of \$51,000 a year (“Licensed Clinical Social Worker Salary,” 2015), and a doctor

¹ Some of the sources used in this section are nontraditional, though to the researcher’s best knowledge, they were often the only references available on the subject. The researcher attempted to balance this limitation with the inclusion of scholarly references wherever possible and acknowledges the fact that the other sources may not meet typical scholarly expectations.

of social work (DSW or PhD) can expect about \$72,000 (NASW, 2010). Social workers without caseloads have the highest salaries, and those with caseloads over 26 clients have the lowest salaries (NASW, 2006).

While these figures may not seem all that drastic at first glance, there are several valuable differences that make these low wages more poignant. First, the top salaries for social workers with a bachelor's degree are perhaps satisfactory as an introductory earning though there is not much room to grow financially. Thus, many social workers find themselves in need of a master's or doctoral degree to earn more than \$40,000 (NASW, 2010). In doing so, they often incur large amounts of debt and may only raise their potential earnings by \$15,000 (NASW, 2010).

Increases in social work salaries have been slow and inconsistent in comparison to inflation and cost of living adjustments over the years (Barth, 2003; Linsley, 2003; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014), so while the \$15,000 increase listed above may be enticing, many find that these numbers are inadequate to keep up with the cost of living. The study conducted by NASW (2010) did not provide information explicitly detailing yearly salary increases. However, NASW did collect data on salary by years of experience. The report detailed that salaries for current social worker respondents with less than five years' experience made average salaries of \$43,700. Averages for those who currently had more than 30 years' experience in the field received average pay of about \$63,000, with a minimal decline in pay occurring for those with 40 plus years (\$60,000). While actual cost of living and inflation rates cannot be surmised from this data, the fact that there is only a \$20,000 wage gap between persons with less than five years and those with more than 30 years is evidence of a slow and inadequate salary progression.

There are some other factors to consider in examining the above NASW reports as well as the financial findings in general. First, the studies represent career information presented by members of professional social work organizations or licensed social workers only. These findings cannot be said to be representative of all practicing social workers. These reports, along with other findings presented in this section, are more reminiscent of patchwork than a cohesive narrative about averages or trends in social work salaries. The findings herein do not present a very hopeful picture for social work earning capacity. Furthermore, they also demonstrate significant gaps in the literature on the subject.

An added component to the discussion of average social worker salaries is the extent of training and expertise needed to obtain professional status as a licensed master social worker. For social work students to attain an upper level degree, they are required to complete over 60 credit hours of graduate course work along with two highly intensive community-based internships where they must demonstrate their expertise and skills training (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE] Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS), 2015). Upon completion, students are expected to sit for and pass a demanding licensure exam.

Licensures and certifications are one way by which an occupation achieves professional status. Licensing exams and standards were introduced in the social work profession in 1971 (Swager, 1977) in order to meet several goals. First, licensing standards set a precedent of basic competencies and professionalism required to hold a profession's title. Joyner (2007) has explained that earning a license or certification demonstrates to society a professional's designation at a higher level of expertise and knowledge than that of their counterparts who do not have the same credentials. This is an important function in protecting the public as it guarantees a certain level of service to

its recipients and also protects both patron and professional in the event of misconduct or dispute.

A second goal of formal licensing is the fact that professional licenses are expected to enhance professionalization by distinguishing a profession from other occupations (Joyner, 2007; Wilensky, 1964). Professionalization has several expected outcomes including higher social status and income (Joyner, 2007). Obviously, this has not been the case for the profession of social work. Licensure serves to enrich a profession while increasing the standard level of competence of its members. While the field has gone to great lengths to professionalize and standardize its unique expertise, it still remains a largely undervalued and underpaid profession (Freeman, 1991).

In fact, social work can be found on at least two similar listings created by U.S. News and World Report under headings for the most underpaid jobs (Graves, 2012; Newman, 2013). In each listing, social worker rate of job satisfaction is ranked “high,” though both reports make mention of difficult and stressful working conditions for inadequate financial compensation. The 2013 listing noted social work as being “famous” for the value people get from doing the work at the expense of being able to pay their own bills (Newman, 2013).

The NASW champions for the needs of social workers every day and has done so for the last sixty years, but the road has been long and arduous. Advocating for a low-status profession makes for difficult work. Their legislative agenda includes a raise in financial status for social workers and more forgiving loan repayment plans for costly educational debt. The Social Work Reinvestment Act (SWRA) was introduced in 2008 by Congressman Edolphus Towns (D-NY) and Senator Barbara Mikulski (D-MD). Its goals include fair market compensation, debt forgiveness and repayment options, social worker safety and interstate licensure (NASW, n.d.-a; n.d.-b). This act would improve some of

the core concerns among social workers as well as promote the dignity and worth of the profession itself. The act has been presented to Congress in eight different sessions; it has never made it past the introductory phase. This is a fairly telling example of the socio-political status of the social work profession.

When comparing earnings across helping professions, it is clear financial struggles are not a specifically “social work” problem. For example, a teacher may start their career earning an average of about \$45,000 annually (“Teacher Salaries,” 2015). An online report stated that school, child, and family social workers who are employed by a school district may earn \$54,000, while those with the same specialization working in individual children and family services make about \$35,000 (“How much does a social worker make?”, 2014). Registered nurses’ average salaries range anywhere from \$57,000 to \$65,000 (“Registered Nurse (RN) Salary,” 2015; “Registered Nurse Salaries,” 2015). Nurse case managers, often sharing the same caseloads and similar work responsibilities as healthcare social workers, (Lippman, 2004) also make an average of \$65,000 a year (“Nurse Case Manager Salary,” 2015). Their counterparts, healthcare social workers, can expect an average of \$50,000 to \$56,000 annually (“Medical Social Worker Salary,” 2015; NASW, 2010).

The relatively similar and low average earnings across women-centric professions lead to the topic of women and financial worth. Some literature suggests women simply have a tendency to monetarily value themselves less. A study performed by Callahan-Levy and Messe (1979) noted that elementary school children were asked to pay themselves an amount they believed was fair for a task performed. Girls paid themselves 30 to 78% less than the boys. A study by Babcock and Laschever (2003) examined what happened when men and women were given certain sums of money and asked if the amount was sufficient. The study reported that eight times more men than

women asked for more money. Those who negotiated for a larger sum got 7.4% more money on average. In another study by Bowles, Babcock, & Lai (2007), researchers found that men and women tended to get different responses when they negotiated; men are expected to haggle, while women were subtly penalized and perceived as “less nice” for doing so. Other studies reviewed by Bowles et al. (2007) found that men were less willing to work with a woman who attempted to negotiate than with one who did not. It seems women may be less likely to negotiate for very legitimate reasons. While this is not meant to discourage women from negotiating, it is clear that gender differences play a role in financial worth regardless of the profession.

Gibelman & Schervish (1993, 1995) added another factor to this discussion. Women appear to be valued less within the social work field as well as outside of the profession. Their research found that men disproportionately held upper level administrative and managerial positions in the social work field. Additionally they found that men made higher salaries than women in social work positions when qualifications and responsibilities were controlled for. The researchers used the feminist and sociological construct of the “glass ceiling” to describe the problem. This concept posits that there is an invisible barrier that keeps women from obtaining an equal number of the highest level of leadership positions across all occupations when all other factors are controlled (Daniels, 2013).

Freeman (1991) discussed the lack of pay equity in social work and asserted that another part of the reason for low wages in the social work profession had to do with the feminization of poverty. This term is used to describe the fact that women and their dependent children make up the majority of the world’s poor (Purdy, 2011). While this occurs for a variety of reasons, it is intensified by the fact that women tend to gravitate toward low-status, low paying female-dominated professions. The feminization of poverty

is also likely to affect women of color more than white women (Freeman, 1991; Purdy, 2011). The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' (2014) most current report of social work gender and race statistics affirmed that 37% of social workers are racial minorities. This point in particular speaks to the multiple levels of oppression that occur in financial earning disparity. There are clearly a multitude of factors to consider in a discussion about social work and financial worth.

Professional Self-image of Social Work

Clearfield (1977) wrote one of the few articles available on professional self-image in social work. The author provided a definition of the term, explaining it as an evaluative function carried out by members of the group itself. It includes valuations of the groups' prestige, worth, characteristics of its members and its occupational opportunities, and perceptions of success in professionalization. Clearfield (1977) continued that professional self-image plus the self-concept of its members shapes a professions' identity. Thus, professional self-image affects the behavior and beliefs of group members which also influences the beliefs others have with respect to the group (Clearfield, 1977). Clearfield's review of social work literature found an "essentially negative" professional self-image.

Since, in the case of social work, this image has persisted throughout the life of the profession, it makes sense that a strong professional self-image has yet to be fully developed. Instead, negative professional perception has been expressed in the profession in the form of professional self-abuse and self-criticism as well as competition and derision between micro and macro social work practitioners (Alperin, 1977; Epple, 2007; Specht & Courtney, 1994). This internal devaluation can also be witnessed in conversations among social workers who make jokes about the low-status and low-pay of the profession. Besides informal discussion overheard by this researcher, stereotype

perpetuation can also be found online and on social media. A picture of a name badge that reads, “Hi, my name is . . . Underpaid” pops up on a blog post written by a new social work student (“Stereotypes in Social Work,” blog, 2012). An Instagram domain called “Sally Social Worker” bears the description: “Chaos, drama, crises, stress . . . but at least we get respect and high pay . . . oh wait- we’re SWs [social workers]!” (Sally Social Worker, Instagram profile; n.d.). The web page also boasts 85 posts, many of which perpetuate negative social work stereotypes. There is a clear lack of positively defined professional self-worth among social workers.

Public Perception of Social Work

Another factor that should be considered on the topic of social worker professional self-perception is what others think of the profession. Used here, “others” means the general public, other professions, and the media. Clearfield (1977) stated that professional self-image begins with a profession’s public image. Social work’s claim at professionalization has been questioned since its humble beginnings. Reasons cited for these claims of a lack of professionalism include an early practice based on skills rather than practice (Leung, 2010), an insecure knowledge claim (Beddoe, 2013), its degree of professional autonomy, lack of monopoly over a service area, and its identification as a female profession (Clearfield, 1977; Gibelman, 1999). Since professionalism is almost always portrayed as requiring some sort of control over the access to a certain field of knowledge, (Freidson, 2001; Payne, 2001), social work has had a difficult time grasping and securing its professional claim. Though the profession has been striving hard to increase its level of professionalization through claims to scientific bases, the advent of licensure and by the institutionalization and control of knowledge through education and training (Fook, 2000; Hugman, 1991), the journey has been slow and fraught with difficulty.

Sirotkina and van Ewijk (2010) wrote that social workers have been recognized for “doing good” but not as distinctly skilled professionals. As compared to other helping professions like education and nursing, social work is distinguished in its work in the societal margins (Webb, 2006). This identification with marginalization may impact a deep-seated belief in the lack of professional prestige social work has become synonymous with.

In healthcare settings, Beddoe (2013) suggested that social work has been a “guest under the benign control of the medical and nursing professions” (p. 26). These perceptions have led to a desire to obtain and legitimize credentials within the social work profession. Beddoe (2013) added that many social workers believe they have an insecure knowledge claim and feel the need to justify their contribution. The researcher also noted that social workers are acutely aware of the professional hierarchy and that they are near the bottom of it. It has further been argued that social work professionals feel they need credentials in order to prove the field has something to offer (Beddoe, 2013).

In the aforementioned Clearfield (1977) study researching perceptions of professional self-image among social workers, 85% of respondents agreed that the profession of social work was not highly regarded by the public. The study went on to mention that this perception has become a “learned expectation” (p. 26) among social workers and the general public alike. An article from the *Columbia Social Work Review* by Olin (2013) asserted that the public has come to associate social work with negative portrayals by the media. Olin (2013) also shared findings from a study commissioned by the NASW written by Zugazaga, Surette, Mendez, and Otto (2006). Their study demonstrated that most social workers believe the media casts a negative image on their profession.

Olin (2013) also reviewed two large-scale surveys conducted among the general public about their perceptions of social workers. The first study was carried out by Condie, Hanson, Lang, Moss, and Kane (1978), followed by an updated and similarly conducted study by Lecroy and Stinson (2004). Both surveys, conducted almost thirty years apart, found that perceptions of social workers remained highly shaped by the media, citing the public's connection of social workers to "children being taken away from their parents," (Olin, 2013). Interestingly, the second study found that a fifth of respondents also felt social workers took advantage of the government (Lecroy and Stinson, 2004). The studies had more than just negative findings to report. Zugazaga et al. (2006) found that even though the general public was aware of negatively portrayed child welfare cases, there was an altogether positive regard for the social work profession.

Social workers have also been portrayed in a stereotypical way in the movie industry. Freeman and Valentine (2004) examined 44 movies with a social work character between 1938 and 1998. They found that the characters largely reinforced social work stereotypes rather than challenging them. More than two-thirds of the portrayals were child welfare workers, and that most of the actors were white women depicted as middle-class and incompetent. Their positions were always subordinated and many of the characters had sexual relationships with a client. It is no wonder that the profession and the general public remain deeply attached to tired and stereotypical perceptions.

Another part of the public perception problem involves the fact that according to Gibelman (2000), the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics affirmed that over 70% of persons who self-identified as social workers either had no college degree or a degree in a field other than social work. This type of data is representative of the social work perception

problem. It allows the public to view all social workers, credentialed or not, in the same light. Hodge (2004), reinforced this point, asserting that if the public had only a hazy view of what social workers did in the first place, this all-inclusive association of all professionals practicing social work only perpetuates misinformation.

The NASW has long recognized the social work professions' need for role clarity in the eyes of the public. In fact, Lecroy and Stinson (2004) noted that professional role clarity was a necessity in social works' ability to effectively fulfill its mission of serving those in need. In 2004, NASW teamed up with a professional marketing firm to create the National Social Work Public Education Campaign (NASW, 2004). The Campaign's multiyear goal was to change the way the nation viewed social workers. They compiled focus group research on the general public's perceptions of social work, and then set out to promote the profession through a multimedia marketing campaign. Unfortunately, this researcher was unable to find updated reports for the Campaign after 2008 and could not find information on current progress or public feedback. All the same, it is surely a hopeful step towards a clearer and more positive public image for the social work profession.

Some argue that these difficulties with perception have pushed the profession out of its roots of social change and inward into psychotherapy (Epstein, 1992; Good, 1987; O'Brien, 2005; Specht & Courtney, 1994). Additionally, Baines (2010) stated this shift has included "the severing or weakening of ties with social movements, unions and activist communities," (p. 930). More current figures could not be located, but Barth (2003) noted that only 24% of social workers belonged to unions at that time. Due to a retreat from advocacy the profession has often allowed policy development and restructuring to rest in the hands of others. Kirkpatrick and Ackroyd (2003) stated this led to a perception among social workers of professional changes being "done to" them

instead of “with” them. Again, this depicts the concept of the marginalization of the profession itself. Frans (1993) reemphasized this point with the paradox that “social workers have historically reflected perceptions of powerlessness as professionals but have endeavored to empower others,” (p. 312).

This is not to say that there is nothing positive to be taken from the professional perceptions of social workers. Despite the negative professional self-image social workers may consciously or unconsciously have of themselves or their profession, several researchers reminded us that social workers seem to be proud of their work in spite of a negative public image (Clearfield, 1977; Gibelman, 1999; Lecroy & Stinson, 2004). Other authors expressed pride and respect for the profession as well. Parton (2003) reaffirmed social works’ unique place in society. The author argued that “social workers are legitimate and righteous agents” of social service provision. Additionally, Payne (2001) reminded social workers that the field has persisted despite its struggles for more than a century. In spite of a lack of professional recognition and a vague understanding of the profession from the public and other professionals, most people in the profession are proud of their work and what they do; they like to call themselves social workers (Ginsberg, 2001).

In summary, the literature paints a precarious picture of the image problem within social work. It is no secret that “social work has an identity crisis with its self-perception,” (McMichael, 2000, p. 177). It is clear the professional self-image is poorly defined and often impacted by the perceptions of in-group and out-group members. Throughout a history of low professional status and subtle discrimination, social workers have internalized an expectation confirming their place. In fact, social workers have often reinforced rather than challenged these stereotypes by accepting them as truths, participating in them, and allowing them to continue. Due to the effect language and

internalization can have on belief systems, the messages transmitted by social workers themselves must be more thoughtfully chosen to enhance and direct the way they wish to be treated by others.

Chapter 5

Methods

Rationale

The purpose of this study is to explore and uncover professional perceptions among UT Arlington second-year or advanced-standing MSW students and investigate the connections of these perceptions to financial worth. Thus, an exploratory and emergent qualitative design seemed the most appropriate. Qualitative analysis is “intended more to determine what things exist than to determine how many such things there are,” (Walker, 1985 p. 3). Qualitative analysis is also the most useful in understanding the human experience. Focus groups, or semi-structured interviews, were chosen as the data collection method because “the ‘most common purpose’ of focus groups is for exploring a topic about which little is known” (Morgan, 1988 p. 24). The focus group is ideal here since no research currently exists on the topic of this paper.

Research Design

The research design consisted of three focus group interviews and a demographic questionnaire (Appendix A) to obtain data. Three focus groups were planned in order to achieve data saturation which is consistent with focus group design research (Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, & Zoran, 2009). The author received approval for the study by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Texas at Arlington. The researcher recruited participants from UT Arlington’s SSW second-year and advanced-standing MSW student population. Focus group interviews were scheduled for 1.5 hours each. Snacks were provided at each session as compensation for participants’ time. All three focus groups took place at the UT Arlington SSW in April, 2015. Groups were scheduled during the week and in the evening when participants were most likely to be available.

The principal investigator also acted as the focus group moderator. Upon arrival, the principal investigator welcomed all participants and provided an overview of the experiment and its purpose as well as the focus group procedure. The researcher provided participants with an informed consent (Appendix B) and reviewed it with them. Students were reminded that the interview was being recorded for the purposes of clarity and subsequent transcription and that their names would not appear in the final transcript. Students were also informed that audio recordings would be deleted after they were transcribed. The researcher explained that hand-written notes may be taken during the interviews, but names of students would not be included. The researcher reaffirmed that students could refuse or terminate their participation at any time with no consequence. Further, students were informed that while the researcher would make every effort to maintain participant confidentiality by following IRB guidelines, it could not be guaranteed due to the group interview design. The researcher instructed participants to ask for clarity on any part of the informed consent before signing.

After completing the informed consent participants were provided with a demographic survey and asked to complete it before the interview began. The survey collected descriptive information about the participants along with information about their educational specialization and professional affiliations. Additionally, students were asked some questions about their expected starting salary and expectations for maximum earnings in the social work field. Students were encouraged to ask questions as needed when completing the survey as well. At the conclusion of each focus group, students were reminded that other focus groups would be occurring after theirs; in attempt to control for bias, the researcher asked participants to keep thoughts and feedback to themselves as much as possible in order to preserve the integrity of the focus group content presented in later groups.

Data Collection

Data was collected through focus group data and a demographic survey. The researcher collected focus group data by audio-recording and transcribing content as well as by taking hand-written notes. Participants were asked a series of semi-structured and open-ended questions as presented in the focus group format (Appendix C). Groups were asked the same basic questions, though additional questions arose as a result of participant remarks. The researcher provided probative prompts where appropriate. All of the questions were opinion or experience-based and were intended to elicit opinions, ideas, and experiences from participants. All questions related to the overarching topics of professional and financial worth.

Sample

Participants (n=31) were recruited using a purposive, non-probability and convenience sampling method. The principal investigator recruited those students she knew or had class with face to face by explaining the research question, methods, voluntary participant expectations, and date and time of the focus groups. The researcher invited all students she came in contact with who met participant criteria to attend.

The researcher also posted IRB and UT Arlington-approved flyers (Appendix D) throughout the SSW to recruit students. Additionally, the researcher received approval to have this flyer along with a recruitment message (Appendix E) emailed to all social work graduate students (N=1014) through the SSW. The investigator sent emails to ten graduate-level professors teaching courses either directly before or after the proposed focus group times to ask for five minutes of class time in which to recruit participants. Eight professors granted approval for in-class recruitment. The researcher recruited students in ten of 36 upper-level classes offered during the Spring 2015 semester. The researcher selected classes that covered a variety of specializations in order to create a

diverse sample. The classes chosen were: Direct Practice in Mental Health, two sections of Direct Practice with Children and Families, Research and Evaluation Methods in Social Work, Advanced Micro Practice, Community and Administrative Practice, Human Behavior in Macro Environments, Clinical Assessment of Child Maltreatment, and two sections of Integrative Seminar. In each class, the investigator read a brief script (Appendix F) and passed around the flyer noted above along with a voluntary email collection form (Appendix G). Students were informed about the research question, methods, voluntary participant expectations, date and time of the focus groups and that they would receive a follow-up email (Appendix H) reminding them of these facts if they listed their email on the collection form.

The target number of participants for each group was between six and ten students so that each student would have an opportunity to share their opinions while still allowing for diversity in content (Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, & Zoran, 2009). Thirty-one students participated (n=31) in the focus groups, out of a total MSW student population of 1,014 students. The researcher was unable to calculate a response rate from this figure, however. The number (N=1,014) accounts for the total MSW population rather than the percentage of students who specifically met study criteria (second-year and advanced-standing); more detailed information was unavailable. Women comprised 77% (n=24) of the sample. This appeared to be fairly representative of the overall U.S. social work population with regard to the category of gender (77% vs. 82%, respectively). Fifty-eight percent (n=18) of participants were members of racial minority groups (compared to 37% nationally), and the average age among the sample was 31.5 years. Sixty-five percent (n=20) of participants held a BSW and over 50% (n=16) of students were members of NASW. Almost 60% (n=18) of the sample reported a concentration in

mental health, 30% (n=9) community and administrative practice, and 10% (n=4) children and families. Please refer to Appendix I for full description of the sample.

Data Analysis

Focus group interview data was digitally recorded then manually transcribed by the researcher. The researcher performed a systematic qualitative analysis of the collected data utilizing Glaser and Strauss' (1967) method of constant comparison. This method was originally developed to be used in conjunction to grounded theory. Since then, other researchers have suggested constant comparison to be highly effective in analyzing many types of data including focus groups (Leech & Onwuegbuzie 2007, 2008). The process involves three key phases (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Phase one is called open coding; here data was chunked together and linked to codes as they emerge from the data. In phase two, axial coding, the preliminary codes were put together into larger groupings, bringing the researcher a step closer to understanding larger, overarching themes. In the third phase, selective coding, themes became clear based on the open and axial codes and are developed to express the group content.

Before beginning the thematic coding process, the researcher initially read through each transcript and developed an initial classification system based on major topics and ideas. From here, the researcher began open and axial coding by hand at the line by line level. As codes emerged, they were mapped onto axial codes and grouped together by color or symbol. At this point the codes were placed in an Excel spreadsheet for ease of access. Here, they were arranged by their larger thematic grouping. Additionally, the researcher defined each theme and its corresponding codes here as well as noted the location of each and their frequency of occurrence. Final themes developed from this iterative and dynamic process.

Several rigor criteria were introduced to minimize bias. The researcher completed the process of peer debriefing with thesis committee members to measure the accuracy and clarity of themes developed. Once themes were developed, the researcher performed member checking with one student from each group to confirm that the themes matched the students' recollections of their focus group.

With regard to the demographic survey the researcher analyzed information using an Excel spreadsheet which was then compiled into a table (Appendix I as previously referenced). The researcher carried out descriptive calculations on the items of gender, race and age. The principal investigator also examined data as it related to participants' responses on several questions about perceived earning power in the social work field. Please see the results section for a full explanation of these details.

Trustworthiness and Replication

Patton (1990) provided three elements for increasing the credibility of qualitative research. First, the researcher must use rigorous techniques and methods for data collection. In this study, the researcher conducted three identically structured focus groups to ensure integrity and validity. Though the data collected in each group led to new prompts and ideas, the overall interview structure remained consistent allowing the researcher to minimize the threat of instrumentation. The data was also transcribed exactly as it was recorded to ensure accuracy. While manual transcription of data is the most time-intensive mode of qualitative data analysis, it is also considered to be the most rigorous (Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, & Zoran, 2009). Finally, the researcher utilized triangulation of theory to integrate and examine data from multiple theoretical perspectives.

Second, the researcher must be credible to perform the experiment. The principal investigator is a second-year UT Arlington MSW student specializing in

community and administrative practice. The literature review performed on this topic was thorough and complete. While the researcher did not claim to be an expert, she remained confident that she possessed some knowledge on all aspects of this research study. It was not possible to remove all traces of bias from the researcher; however, the researcher was aware of her own opinions and biases on the research topics and refrained from sharing those with participants as much as possible to minimize interviewer and response bias. Though the researcher actively engaged with participants during the focus groups, she minimized the possible threat of instrumentation by operating in a mediating capacity, limiting interaction to asking questions, keeping discussion on topic, and repeating responses for clarity. Finally, the researcher had not ever led focus groups before, though she did have experience leading group discussions in work and school-related activities.

Patton's third element stressed the importance of a fundamental appreciation of the qualitative approach. The assumptions this research was based on were themes developed through an exhaustive review of relevant literature then systematically explored by the researcher using means-tested methods. While the research question evolved for the researcher out of a personal desire to uncover connections between professional perceptions and financial worth among social workers, all constructs were verified and then rigorously explained through the literature review.

Chapter 6

Results

Introduction

The data compiled from each focus group can be largely categorized into six thematic groupings: financial orientation, perceptions about social work pay, value and respect, professional role clarity, internal professional conflict, and efficacy. Almost all student comments were able to be grouped within these overarching themes and will be detailed here to present a composition of the messages provided.

Financial Orientation

Financial orientation encompasses the ideas students had about whether their earning power was dependent on factors they controlled or factors outside of themselves. The messages presented could be further broken down into two primary orientations: internal and external. The researcher reviewed literature on perceived individual control in attempt to locate a term that accounted for the factors students seemed to feel controlled their financial earning power. A related term, "locus of control," was reviewed but found to be inadequate in describing student perceptions. While the term depicted factors related to perceptions of control, its internal and external components were largely tied to positive or negative outcomes (Reevy, 2010). In this case, internal and external representations presented by students could not be labeled expressly positive or negative. The findings will demonstrate that internal and external factors comprised both positive and negative components. Thus an alternative term was needed. The term, "orientation" was found to be most appropriate because it could describe the direction of student interests or attitudes in relation to perceived factors controlling their earning power without adding an inherent value judgment to it.

Internal Financial Orientation

Internal financial orientation refers to a person's sense that their earning power is based on factors they can control, or have perceived control over. Several people suggested they believed they were worth a specific dollar amount: "I see a number." Internal financial orientation was also deemed by many to be contingent on expertise, education, and credentials.

A few students stated their financial worth was equal to a dollar value plus what they actually got out of, or put into, their job. These ideas expressed the belief that a person has control over whether they feel they are making a difference or not; the feeling of making a positive difference is factored into the value they place on their role. From here, this sense of self-created value served to enhance the intangible value of what one is actually paid (without increasing the dollar value) or is a factor in one's determination of what they believe they should be paid. These representations of internal control over financial worth appeared with a mostly positive connotation. However, one student believed her financial worth was dependent on what she accepted:

So say you take a job for . . . \$30,000 a year. At that point, because you need the job, is that what your financial worth is? That's what I was thinking . . . at that point it kinda is, because you accepted a job for that amount of money.

External Financial Orientation

External financial orientation included comments where students suggested factors outside of themselves determined their earning power. Some common sentiments were: 'it depends on what I do' or 'it depends on who you ask.' One student asserted that financial worth was contingent on having professional respect: "I think at first you have to have respect from other people, to tell them how much you [are] worth as a person, as a social worker and how much should be get paid for what you do." Some students agreed

with this comment, further asserting that financial worth depended on what other people think of the social work profession.

One student suggested that a profession's financial orientation (or expected earnings within a profession) actually served to validate the profession itself. "It kind of puts us up there, like, 'oh, this is a real professional person.'" When probed further, she explained that a profession's earning power was a sign of their professionalization. In addition to her comment, another student presented the following statement:

Well, I think part of . . . financial worth- for better or worse tends to correlate with the value of –what's the perceived value of what you're adding to the situation. And so, if social workers are not perceived to add a lot to the situation, that's probably matched by low financial rewards . . . society must first dictate what the social benefit is, or how much social benefit you provide.

Both messages typified a sense that an externally dictated societal valuation impacted a profession's financial earning capacity. Several other students reaffirmed that they desired social work's earning power to be proportional to its social benefit, though they were not hopeful this was possible because society did not value social work.

Perceptions of Social Work Pay

Several additional factors developed in relation to perceptions social workers and others held about how much money social workers make or should make. One of these was the feeling of unacceptability in terms of current social work earning power. This aspect included messages about feelings of entitlement as well as objection to current rates of social worker pay. These comments were presented with varying levels of frustration and anger. Some students addressed concerns about not being able to effectively do their jobs if they were worried about how their own financial needs were going to be met. Further, several students expressed frustration about social workers being able to qualify for the social service programs they work for:

I do personally have a problem when there's a social worker that works twelve hours a day and [they] are making just above the poverty line, and could be a client in the agency that I work for. So, at what level are you- is your worth not valued enough to say . . . this is not okay?

All students within that group appeared to be in agreement that this was a problematic and unacceptable scenario. Across all three focus groups, several students made comments that it would be unacceptable to be paid such a low amount that they might have to rely on government programs themselves in order to pay their bills. There was an expressed desire to "live an average lifestyle . . . and still be able to pay our debt for the education that we're getting."

Another student's contribution relayed information she received while on a job interview earlier that day. She told the group she had been offered what the interviewer deemed a standard salary for a master's level social worker. While she refused to tell the group what the number was, she demonstrated that she was furious about it. She stated,

My boyfriend has- not even a high school diploma- and he would make probably twice as much as that and it's insulting to me . . . I put in so much energy . . . I'm a single mom and I'm taking time away from my kids . . . I work a job that I hate now, and it's like, I did all of this- and this is what you're gonna pay me? That's unacceptable. I feel like I am worth much more than that.

Her words appeared to touch on the construct of gender and its implications in the income and earnings discussion. This topic will be detailed in the following section.

A common perception discussed was the acceptance among social workers and others that social workers are poor or not worth much money. This came up in comments students made about themselves, messages they received from others as well as a recurring reinforcement of this message to each other during the focus group interviews. While the feeling of unacceptability remained in many of the comments, the added element of acceptance of this idea made many of the messages in this category sound hopeless about change. One student put it best:

I think it's also . . . when you first enter the social work field or even classes, the first thing everybody says is, 'oh, you're not gonna make any money'- so . . . you're just started off with that in your mind! . . . so it's easier for you to accept it when you make no money . . . It's . . . discouraging to hear that.

When asked what the general population thought about social workers, some of the answers were things like, "they don't pay a lot of money so you must be really passionate about it." Several students across all three focus groups described hearing comments like these. A student who reported she was graduating at the end of the semester told the group about an encounter with her family. She explained that they told her it would be acceptable to make a low sum of money after completing her graduate degree and she felt they even expected it of her. She ended her story with a second to the notion that this was a discouraging message.

Many students proposed that the value of social work is greater than the value of money or monetary worth. A student explained how focusing on the successes she had in her work with others made up for the fact that she might not get paid like she felt she should. She asserted social workers might say:

Well okay- we weren't able to get all of this done but we did get this one thing done, so- I think that kinda makes up for- well, I'm not making \$60,000- I'm not making \$70,000- but I was able to help this lady get off of drugs. I was able to help this family get housing.

A heated discussion arose in one of the focus groups around someone's comment that social workers "don't care about money." All students in that group expressed disagreement with this outlier message. While the students all agreed they cared about making money, there was also an agreement that it was not their top priority in becoming or desiring to be social workers. The consensus was that there is more value in helping others.

Value and Respect

Factors included in this section referred to the perceptions of value and respect (and lack thereof) others had towards the social work profession. More specifically, these ideas typified the different ways social workers felt they were received in the world around them, both interprofessionally and societally.

Most social work students perceived that other professionals and the general public did not value and respect social work. One student presented this comparison: “okay, a garbage man is needed. He provides an excellent service, but he’s not as respected as he could be because of the type of work that he does.” Other students added they felt social work was not professionally respected as a standalone career and was often viewed as a para-profession. Another student stated, “It’s like . . . you’re needed, but at the same time, they wouldn’t come to you first.”

The perception that social workers are thought of as a last resort or on a purely reactionary basis came up several times across focus groups. Many participants believed that others undervalued the work they did because people associate social work with crisis situations, “when people are at their worst.” This played into another factor largely discussed: social workers were negatively associated with the clients they served. “Maybe it’s because society views. . .the clients that we help as less than them.” Since the marginalized and disempowered populations social workers serve were societally devalued, social workers were devalued by association.

Numerous ideas were presented which compared and contrasted social work to other professions. Many of the comments reflected a level of tension or competition between professions, often resulting in a notion of “better than” or “less than.” All students agreed that if there were a ranking system of helping professionals, social workers would be at the bottom. There was also an agreement that teachers were in a comparable

position, but still received more respect. Some students commented that people have the perception that anyone can do the job of a social worker. Students adamantly argued the lack of truth of this statement, noting the necessary education, credentials, and continual training required to remain a licensed social work professional.

An outlier perspective offered by one student was that social workers actually ranked higher than licensed professional counselors (LPCs) in terms of money and respect. Other students expressed surprise and doubt at this fact, though the student replied she heard the message from an LPC. To counter this point, another student asserted that while this may be true for some, she felt that counselors in general had a fundamentally different perspective of their worth. She noted that they believed they were worth more [than social workers], and that they intended to be paid more by going into private practice: "it's a counseling professional worth thing . . . that's how they view their profession."

There was also broad agreement that nurses were respected much more than social workers in medical settings and that they made more money. Several students in each group made comments that this should not be the case since both professions required similar amounts of education and training. Another point made was that nurses met a more immediate (short-term) need, while the treatment social workers provided occurs over time (long-term). Many students agreed this played a part in the reason nurses were more highly valued than social workers due to the general population's desire for instant gratification. Further, some students asserted that nursing's association with "hard science" and the medical profession increased their value and prestige. Finally, one student emphasized that nurses' professional respect was a direct result of their own self-promotion. This student also added that this was something social workers lacked.

Several students also asserted that while the general population devalued the work they did, the students themselves felt it was the most necessary type of work to be done. They maintained that social workers' propensity for empathy put them in a unique position to serve those that others do not want to work with or pretend do not exist. Further, several said that another unique trait among social workers was their willingness to go above and beyond to make sure clients got their needs met- sometimes at the expense of pay. They clarified that social workers, being what they referred to as someone people see as a last possible option in many cases, will work with a client until all their needs are met; social workers do not say a client concern is "not their problem." Another student affirmed that, "if all social workers just said, "I'm not doing this for a day . . . the world would be over." This comment was met with laughter and overwhelming support.

Professional Role Clarity

Professional role clarity encompassed one of the main reasons social work students felt they continued to be undervalued and underpaid. There was resounding agreement that people, in general, were unclear on what social workers do:

Yeah, I think that kind of the bottom line of it is that people have no idea what social workers actually do. And that's why . . . we have very little value as far as money, because they don't, you know- cause we are just those CPS workers that are just going in and taking those kids away- they have no idea, no clue, all the things that you can do as a social worker and that we do.

Another student made an interesting association of social workers being, "the moms" of the professional world. Her point was that just as the role of a mother is all-encompassing and historically devalued in many ways, the role of the social worker is quite similar. Both roles are so broad and varied leading to role confusion and difficulty in quantification of outcomes and cost. As mentioned earlier, social workers seemed to feel a sense of responsibility to 'leave no problem unturned.' The student described her own mother in a

similar light, asserting also that since much of their work happens behind the scenes it goes unrecognized.

An additional reason social workers felt people were unclear of their role was due to the idea that people who do not have social work backgrounds were often found performing lower-level social work roles. Many students asserted that both professional and societal “others” were confused about who was actually a social worker and who was not. There was also a feeling that having non-social workers perform social work roles was problematic because those persons lacked social work’s extensive values and code of ethics. This was believed to create a negative image for the whole profession.

Some students readdressed messages about interprofessional competition and conflict in regard to role clarity. They contended that LPCs and nurses believed that they were “better than” social workers, and also capable of doing their jobs. While students making these points agreed there were some aspects of their jobs one of these providers might be able to do, they argued that this was specific to that person and not based on their training and education. One student retorted that nurses would be unable to perform patient care duties without the help of a social worker. Several students believed role confusion was also amplified because of an additional factor. They stated that often positions looked to hire either a nurse or a social worker. This lack of role clarity is indicative of the tug of war the students depicted.

Based on some of the comments, it appeared that this confusion about role clarity filtered into the profession itself. This materialized in comments students made devaluing their own skills and abilities and assertions that their job duties were less valuable or meaningful than other professions. Some students reaffirmed the disheartening feeling experienced in having to compete with professionals from other backgrounds for “social work” jobs. Finally, some students appeared to have difficulty

articulating what they felt they uniquely brought to the table insofar as skills and expertise.

Multiple students asserted that this societally unclear and negative view of social workers drove them to want to demonstrate that social workers were well-educated, well-trained, and able to speak with authority on current research and evidence-based practices. Others said they felt it necessary to participate in professional advocacy and research and data-tracking. One student related the necessity of role clarity back to financial worth:

I'm a social worker, you know, and this is what I do- and I guess it comes down to that succinct two minute elevator speech to know what a social worker is- what you do and- because I do this, this is what I should be paid. This is what I'm worth. And my worth is equal to a certain amount of pay.

Internal Professional Conflict

The theme of internal professional conflict contained a large number of messages related to conflict apparent within the social work profession itself. There appeared to be a prevalent implication of devaluation, tension, and judgment of each other in varying ways underlying the content presented in all three focus groups.

Gender

The subtheme of gender contained factors related to gender conflict within and outside of the field. The most important messages related to competition and struggles for power inherent between males and females in the realm of professionalism and income.

Male students' perspectives provided a unique minority view to counter (and sometimes reinforce) the comments made by other participants. When asked how he felt about being male in the field of social work, one participant replied, "Honestly? I'm older, I'm a male, in a female-dominated field-and it won't be that hard to get a job." Several

other men in the group verbalized their agreement with this summation. While there were no verbal remarks made against this statement, the body language of several participants appeared to tense in the moment.

All three groups shared a couple of key views in common in regard to gender differences within social work. These messages were that males made more money than women within the profession, men were more likely to be promoted to higher level and administrative positions than their female counterparts, and that they were often enticed financially to remain in the helping professions because of their minority status within them. There was agreement about these opinions from both male and female group members. Many participants shared the belief that since social work is a female-centric profession it would never be taken as seriously as a male-dominated profession, thus perpetuating its status as underpaid and undervalued.

Several explanations were provided as to why women were underpaid and undervalued professionally. They included that women tend not to negotiate when it came to money (and that they do not know how to), that they were thankful and happy to get a job and that this was an appropriate societal response, women had a desire to be available and helpful- to “tread lightly,” and that there was a historical precedence of professional and financial devaluation of women:

I think it goes back historically though, how social work started out as a profession, and then thinking about the mass number of women that are social workers in comparison to men, and the income gap- and so, when you think about- we make less on the dollar than men, we don't advocate for ourselves . . . women are not valued, and the majority of the time, it's women in social work professions doing the work, and it's like, oh they're a woman and they care about people, so it's okay.

Many participants commented on the frequency of single female heads of household and named this as one of the factors responsible in women's willingness to settle for inadequate pay. A few participants even shared that this was their personal experience.

Another participant went on to speak to the idea of women being paid less than men due to the belief that a man is the head of household and is a family's breadwinner. She stated there was an assumption, "that the significant other- imaginary or not- is going to make more money and is going to support you, ideally- and so, as a woman, 'oh they can make less'- but there isn't an imaginary person over here." Group members expressed frustration, anger, and hopelessness in regard to these ideas, also affirming that this notion was out-of-date and inaccurate.

Devaluation

Another set of factors that emerged during the focus groups were devaluing messages received in a variety of ways. Social workers reported experiences that made them feel devalued as professionals; some students even seemed to participate in spreading those messages to each other. Several students spoke of the devaluation they witnessed between master social workers (MSW) and bachelor social workers (BSW). There was an impression that MSWs felt superior to BSWs and showed it by expecting that a BSW would perform the "grimy," less clinically-driven work. One student explained that this might reinforce the lack of professional respect social workers experienced from others since there is a lack of respect of each other.

As mentioned earlier, many social work students described receiving negative or devaluing messages about low social work earning power from each other, from their families and others around them. Additionally, they shared comments about their doubt and disappointment in their education and training, specifically their frustration with the lack of rigorous educational standards. There were remarks suggesting that they did not feel their social work program challenged them academically, their internships had not been fulfilling and provided inadequate training, and that they received discouraging feedback from professors. One student asserted that the educational devaluation taking

place might play a role in the continued external devaluation of social work. In speaking hypothetically about what someone might say in reference to social work she stated, “well we can keep devaluing these people because you know their program- it’s crap . . . it’s not as strenuous as going to medical school, or a nurse or whatever- so we can just pay them \$30,000 a year [and] that’s fine.”

This theme also appeared to involve a lot of guilt and blame. Students expressed discomfort in talking about their financial worth, even going so far as to describe it as an unacceptable topic for social workers to discuss. A student stated, “we’re not supposed to care about that.” in reference to financial earnings. Another student commented that she found it difficult to think about her own financial value when the clients she served had so little: “it almost makes me feel guilty . . . I wanna be paid better? . . . at least I have a roof over my head, you know? At least I can feed myself.” Though not all students shared these sentiments, there seemed to be an understanding that these factors added to the challenge of discussing worth within social work. Students also expressed guilt about drawing energy away from client needs to focus on self or professional advocacy issues because “it’s drilled into our heads that we need to help our clientele.”

The blame element could be detected in comments students made about their level of participation in professional groups, messages that they or others “should” be doing something they are not (like policy work, professional advocacy, research and data-tracking), and that social work professional groups (NASW, CSWE) and the SSW were unsupportive and unhelpful. One group member asked, “If you can advocate for your client, why can’t you advocate for yourself?” This message placed blame on the other group members for not participating in professional advocacy, though there was a resounding opinion that no one else was doing it either.

Efficacy

An additional theme that arose from focus group data were ideas students held in regard to their beliefs about collective efficacy as social workers. Many social work students expressed a desire and sense of responsibility for taking part in their own advocacy, fighting for better financial outcomes for themselves, and for the social work profession. Some students' messages here were coupled with guilt and blame about their lack of participation in these activities. A couple of students expressed this notion in a description of Social Work Advocacy Day. They asked their fellow students if they believed social workers made it a priority to spend time at the Capital [Austin] advocating for their profession more than that one day each year. One student reiterated that she believed other professions were far more active in professional advocacy and that this made a positive difference in their professional and financial value. She continued, "that's something we [social workers] have to start doing for ourselves- and really, it's just not gonna change until we change it." Another student added that it was not the fact that these things were impossible; it was simply that social workers were not doing them.

While most participants appeared to believe they were responsible for making a change, they expressed that they were overwhelmed by the prospect of doing so. Some students commented that they did not like policy work and that professional advocacy was macro level social work. Several students expressed criticism for micro practitioners and asserted that things would never change for social workers until they were willing to get involved in the advocacy process. Some who reported participating in some way in professional advocacy over the life of their student or professional careers seemed critical of other students or social workers in general for not doing more. One student even contradicted herself while expressing this internal criticism. She added that while she held this standard for others, she did not take much time to participate herself.

Demographic Results

Demographic data was collected to gain insight into participant expectations of financial earnings in their social work careers. Students were asked to choose their expected starting salary and their overall expected maximum salary from a range of options (refer to Appendix I). Fifty-five percent (n=17) of student participants reported they expect to make between \$40,000 and \$59,000 upon entering the social work field post-graduate school. More specifically, \$40,000-\$49,000 was the most common answer for expected starting salary across all three focus groups (n=12). Almost a quarter (n=7) of the sample expected to start their careers making under \$40,000. One student reported an expected starting salary under \$30,000 and another reported an expected starting salary of \$70,000-\$79,000.

Sixty-five percent (n=20) of students responded they expected to make between \$60,000 and \$79,000 at the peak of their social work careers. Just over a quarter (n=7) expected to make between \$40,000 and \$59,000, and 13% (n=4) expected to exceed \$80,000 over the life of their careers. None of the participants expected their maximum salary to be less than \$40,000.

Three students reported they did not expect their earnings to change over the life of their careers and seven students said they expected their salary to increase by \$10,000. Seventeen students believed their salaries would increase \$20,000-\$30,000. Sixty percent (n=11) of the students in the mental health concentration believed they would reach maximum salaries of \$70,000 or above; these percentages were 33% (n=3) and 25% (n=1) for community and administrative practice and children and families students respectively.

Chapter 7

Discussion

The research presented herein introduces some novel elements to the social work knowledge base. No other literature could be found that examined the construct of “financial worth” or attempted to link social worker professional perception to financial earning power. Thus, the investigator operationalized this financially-oriented term to provide a conceptual starting point for research. The working definition of “financial worth” includes internal and external perceptions of earning power as well as the perceived value of one’s societal contribution. To reiterate, this conception is relevant because it demonstrates how external beliefs about social work’s professional worth and earning power can impact internal perceptions social workers hold about their earning capacity. The findings and literature demonstrate that a result of this impact is a low expectation about earning power among social workers. A term that speaks to the external and internal processes affecting beliefs about earning power offers a unique interpretation of the way social workers come to expect and accept low wages.

This study also provides a graphic representation (Figure 1, detailed later in this section) that can be utilized in assessing where powerlessness in the profession originated and what its results look like. The provision of a visual aid may assist readers in identifying the effects of powerlessness and internalized powerlessness within the context of the social work profession. The most significant benefit of this research project is that it suggests a perspective where social workers can be empowered to make an actual change in terms of the retelling of their own story of worth and value. Social workers themselves might be partly responsible for the perpetuation of some hurtful, self-propagated stereotypes; thus, they may also have the power to change or discontinue

them. The depiction of this implication could lead to a shift in the way social workers talk to themselves about themselves.

Some key ideas emerged from the analysis of focus group interviews and demographic data. All student participants held these beliefs in common:

- Students felt frustrated and discouraged by the average rates of pay in the social work profession, and by messages reinforcing this belief from others and each other.
- While participants placed a high value on the work they do, social work students perceived that others did not respect or value their work.
- People (including some participants) were unclear about the definition of a social worker's professional role.
- There was an internal conflict present within the social work profession due to gender disparity and devaluation of each other and of their skills and education.
- Participants expressed a sense of low collective efficacy toward professional advocacy coupled with high instances of guilt and blame.

There are some considerations to discuss in relation to these main ideas. On the topic of collective efficacy, student messages were riddled with "should," implying to some extent that they blamed themselves for their lack of professional advocacy and expressed guilt about it. In a variety of ways detailed in the results, students seemed to be critical of themselves for not solving the problem of 100 plus years of external devaluation and doubts of professionalization. Bandura (1997) defined efficacy as a person's belief that their capacity to take action would positively impact their environment. Bandura (1986, 1997) also stated that people had little motivation to take on activities or to persevere when faced with resistance unless they believed they could successfully attain the results they wanted. If social workers are found to have little belief that they could make valuable differences for themselves in terms of their professional or financial worth, self-efficacy theory explains why there might be little motivation to try. It may also produce limited resistance to existing constructs which speaks to the inherent power dynamic present in groups with low efficacy. Perhaps low self-efficacy is another part of the reason the profession has largely shifted away from its roots as activists and political reform

advocates. When expectation of ability is found to be low, it might be an overwhelming proposition to consider affecting change to professional and financial perceptions through professional advocacy or other means.

Messages with underlying feelings of guilt and blame were present throughout all focus group interviews and typified conflicting internal struggles among students and within the profession. Guilt and blame are also prevalent characteristics of oppressed groups (Lazar, 2000). Students' expressions were reminiscent of the subtle effects of the internal struggle that may be found when oppressed groups even consider challenging oppressive forces. As conflict and feminist theorists would posit, this resistance is necessary and positive. Yet, it can also produce negative side effects as well as a desire to align with alternative constructs to justify and accept their status (Dick & Nadin, 2006). Here we see how widely normalized comments that social workers "don't work for the money" are more than simply a sign that the work is of utmost value; rather, they are clearly also a result of long-term patterns of external oppression and the reification of those messages as truths. Instead of contesting the beliefs, which might produce controversy and discomfort, it may be easier for some to accept things the way they are and make peace with a message that allows for the preservation of some self-respect. While these ideas may seem to imply a hopeless concession, students' actual language often appeared to state otherwise. This seemed like a contradiction to the researcher, albeit a positive one.

Although, some students' language could also occasionally be seen as overcompensation for the negative feedback the field has become accustomed. Several students' positions that social work was the "most" important work to be done can be described as somewhat reactionary and indicative of a disempowered group working hard to defend its place. Another point to reaffirm here details a few students' sentiments

that social workers are undervalued due to the fact that they serve marginalized populations. This is a profound observation and demonstrates that social work's respect problem is complex and impacted by numerous factors.

Many students said they had a great desire for things to be different in spite of the fact that many of their comments also expressed frustration, anger, and hopelessness. All students agreed that professional advocacy (and their participation in it) was a necessity if the profession had any hopes of positive change. Other than the aforementioned messages of blame and guilt that comments about advocacy tended to accompany, there was also a sense of desire to "exploit" social works' professional strengths in order to become empowered. This depiction was particularly poignant because it seemed encouraging for students to hear and also spoke to the social worker's place in the power structure. As mentioned earlier, some beliefs related to a lack of power may remain unconscious due to their culturally constructed reality; this comment typified the conscious level of understanding students had about social works' second-class status. The myriad other comments related to the need for marketing strategies and professional advocacy within the profession made it clear that participants thought this was a part of the solution to create positive change for the profession's image and financial status.

The example provided earlier of the student who placed blame on her peers for a lack of advocacy while simultaneously reporting her own lack of contribution is indicative of the internal conflict presented in focus group data. Many students devalued themselves and their peers in countless ways. They downplayed their skills and abilities and posited that CSWE and their SSW devalued their education due to a lack of rigorous standards. Further, several students argued that their professors reinforced, rather than challenged, this devaluation with negative messages concerning earning power and

macro social work. Most students also expressed a feeling that NASW was unsupportive and did not advocate strongly enough for them. There was a lack of hope expressed that either of these concerns could be resolved.

On the matter of gender, male and female participants alike agreed that this issue continued to play a role in social works' external devaluation. It has already been discussed at length that the large number of women present in the social work field negatively affects its professional prestige as well as its earning power. Student responses and social work literature (Gibelman & Schervish, 1993, 1995) confirmed that within the profession, men still seem to have an "upper hand". It is also interesting that almost all male participants in the present study defined their financial orientation as something they could control while the majority of female participants appeared to exhibit externally oriented ideals. This speaks once again to socially constructed beliefs that women "should" be helpful and passive, and that they should wait for someone else to dictate their financial value rather than asserting control. It is noteworthy that participants often unconsciously reinforced these gender-based constructs by asserting that their earning power was dependent on what others told them it should be, while simultaneously verbalizing objections to them. Clearly, social constructions are deeply ingrained. Perhaps as women become more conscious of their financial orientation they will begin to believe in the internal control they can possess in regard to earning power.

While it was not explicitly stated, comments from a few of the male participants implied a sense of entitlement. Some disagreed with this idea, however. One participant stated he did not believe the attainment of a degree entitled him to anything. He asserted that it was still up to him to put in the work and earn a salary. His remarks provided an interesting juxtaposition to the gender argument and demonstrated that while power and gender roles still exist, there is room for alternative perspectives and construct evolution.

As previously mentioned, most female participants expressed frustration at societal messages that women were supposed to “tread lightly” in order to be helpful in all aspects of their lives. Additionally, repeated messages that women did not negotiate or know how to, coupled with a lack of training on this skill, contributed to their feelings of frustration. The remarks also seemed to confirm the difficulty that students had in articulating their financial worth. Furthermore, these comments suggested that some students were not fully convinced that they would be able to obtain an income representative of their perceived worth. One student even joked that female social workers should have men come in to teach them how to negotiate. Many students agreed with this notion, reinforcing their desire to have better professional preparedness training within their SSW program.

Internal conflict and devaluation fall neatly into a social construct of powerlessness that social workers may have come to accept. Historical, systemic, and cultural forms of powerlessness played a part in the creation of this construct. However, it is maintained at least in some part by social works’ continued acceptance of it. The researcher has developed a graphic to illustrate the devaluation of social work (Figure 1) described in this paper. The image depicts the process by which social workers continue to experience the subtle effects of powerlessness. Its subsequent results, one of which is continued acceptance of low financial earning power demonstrate how complex and pervasive powerlessness can be.

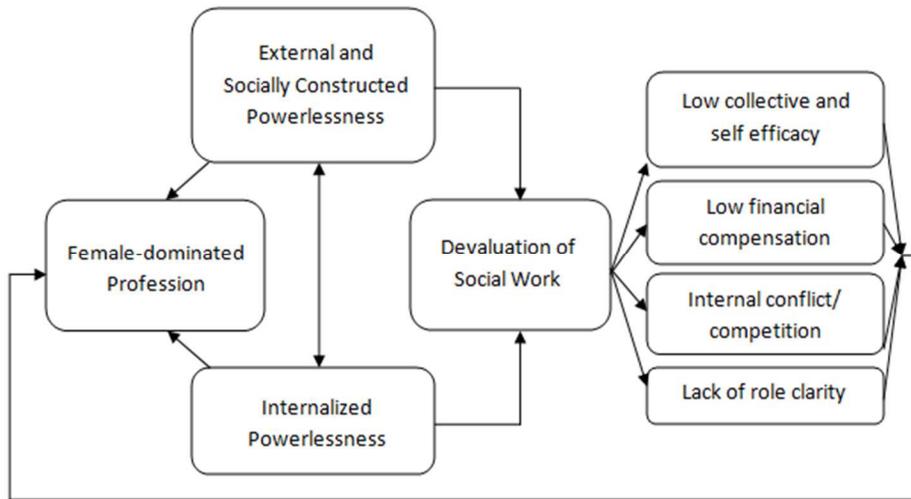


Figure 1 Process and Results of Social Work Devaluation

The flowchart depicts the narrative of this project. Both internal and externally-experienced forms of powerlessness act on the social work profession and lead to its devaluation. It is helpful to recognize how powerlessness is formed in challenging and deconstructing it (Freire, 1970; Freud, 1994; Gergen, 2009; Shotter, 2014). Some of the results of devaluation are expressed on the right side of the graphic. There are surely more, though these listed are explicitly described within this paper. The effects of social work's devaluation are far-reaching and actually represent a cyclical process. Social work, as a female-based profession, is devalued largely by external factors which become internalized; devaluation and its subsequent results occur and then reinforce feelings of powerlessness experienced by the profession. Thus, the impacts of devaluation are simultaneously the results and the reinforcers of social work's place as an undervalued profession.

The information provided by the demographic surveys also served to fortify some of the arguments made during the focus groups. First, the majority of participants' starting salary expectations were consistent with the data presented in the literature. As stated

earlier, NASW (2010) reported that MSWs with less than five years' experience could expect to make about \$43,000 annually. Fifty-five percent (n=17) students posited they would start their careers making between \$40,000 and \$59,000, which encompasses this average as well as the overall average salary for respondents listed in same report (\$55,000). The fact that a quarter of participants (n=7) believed they would begin their post-graduate school careers making less than \$40,000 was disheartening as these earnings were more indicative of bachelor or entry level salaries, as noted earlier. Sixty-five percent of students (n=20) believed their maximum salary earnings would range between \$60,000 and \$79,000. NASW (2010) illustrated that these earnings are only representative of about 40% of social workers, so unfortunately, participant response rates were a little high.

Despite the fact that student projections may be more or less in line with available averages, students did not seem to have a high perception of their financial earning power, in general. Though the survey provided ranges as high as "\$100,000-above," no student chose this as a possibility for their maximum possible career earnings, and only four students asserted their maximum salary capacity would reach \$80,000 or above. All students appeared to have relatively low expectations of their lifetime earning power.

As mentioned, seventeen students expected salary increases of \$20,000 to \$30,000 over the life of their social work careers. Compared again to the only available data on the subject, this did not seem to be inaccurate. There was an approximately \$20,000 salary increase in NASW (2010) response data for social workers with less than five years of experience, and those with more than twenty years. However, salary increase over career lifetime was not expressly studied in the report, and no other available literature could be found on the topic. To reiterate, respondents to the NASW

(2010) report with less than five years' field experience stated they earned about \$43,000 a year, while respondents with twenty years or more experience averaged \$60,000 annually. From one number to the other, this represents annually compounded growth of about 1.7%. Of course, this percentage only truly shows that there appears to be a slow and low capacity for income growth over the years. The report did not explicitly measure inflation or yearly cost of living adjustments, so it is impossible to speculate about the salary progression of those practitioners with twenty plus years of work experience. However, it does not depict very promising ideas about salary increases for social workers.

All students were clear that they thought more of themselves than the dollar amounts that represented their field. Despite the projection of low earnings, many group members proudly described their work or the work they planned to do once in the field of social work. Students entering the professional workforce for the first time were proud. Seasoned professionals spoke of coming into the profession of social work as a second or third career specifically because they wanted a job they liked and valued. "I had to decide did I want to make a lot of money, or did I want a job I liked?"

A large number of students commonly described following their desire to help people at the expense of a large paycheck because they believed it was important work. Some members also referred to being a social worker as "a calling," and that this took precedent over the fact that they might not be paid well. Some described this passion to serve as something they were almost compelled to do. Another student affirmed this idea and added a comparison between being called to serve as a social worker versus other professions: "we're empathetic . . . so we're gonna do it because we have to help these people . . . you know, if you can't pay a doctor, you're not gonna get that service. We're not like that . . . we're gonna figure out a way for you to get our services, even if that

means taking a cut in pay . . .” Whether or not this is a result of power and social construction, it still seemed to have a positive effect of motivating participants to continue to practice social work and to feel good about doing it.

Limitations

Some potential challenges to the validity of this project may be readily evident. First, it was sensitive to inclusion and self-selection bias as it was only open to participation from a small and highly specific population at one SSW, and only students who had an interest in the study chose to participate. Along the same lines, an omission bias occurred since such a small percentage of the SSW population was able to participate; there were undoubtedly groups that were not represented by the study due to this fact. Students were only eligible if they were in their second year of the program or if they were students with advanced-standing. An additional omission may have occurred in regard to courses selected for in-class recruitment. The selection of classes based on specialization and proximity to focus group times may have negatively impacted the sample by unintentionally excluding some students.

The focus groups and recruitment strategies were originally planned with the intention of holding groups by program concentration. This detail did not end up being a necessity to the research question and was dropped before the focus groups were held. However, groups were initially marketed to target specific concentrations on specific dates. Courses for in-class recruitment were also chosen based on this strategy. This surely had an impact on who was able to attend. Two concentrations were left out of the research plan due to an oversight on the part of the researcher. The specializations of health care and direct practice in aging are relatively new to the program, thus were mistakenly overlooked. However, after it was agreed that focus groups not be held by concentration, this author made every effort to include students from all concentrations.

Unfortunately however, these two groups did not end up having representation in the focus groups.

Further, only those students who were available during the times the focus groups were scheduled were able to participate, thus the sample was one of convenience. Another factor to consider is that the researcher was only able to make face-to-face appeals for student participation in a handful of classes and to students the researcher personally knew. While the researcher made efforts to reach out to all eligible students in the UTA SSW graduate program via email and flyers, direct contact appeals were more effective and accounted for most (estimated around 70%) of participation. Moreover, two professors offered their students extra credit points for attending a focus group which also affected the integrity of the sample.

The research and experimentation were largely conducted by a single analyst. Though the researcher obtained feedback through several rigor criteria as well as kept record of detailed notes and experimental methods, the use of one analyst was most certainly a limitation. A research team would be helpful and is considered ideal in making sure results remain as objective as possible (Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, & Zoran, 2009). Another side-effect of the use of a single analyst is the potential for researcher bias. The researcher is an MSW student and drew the sample population from her own SSW. Every effort was made to minimize this bias by identifying personal opinions and feelings related to the topic of this paper as well as taking extra care to verify findings and information in the literature. However, it is impossible to remove all bias. The researcher acknowledges that this is a limiting factor and utilized measures to enhance rigor and integrity wherever possible.

While the researcher gathered information on race through the collection of demographic data, this was not an issue that was specifically discussed among any of

the focus groups. In the future, it would be beneficial to include prompts about race along with the discussion of perceptions about financial worth. As mentioned before, a third of social work professionals are members of minority groups (U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). Along with the feminization of poverty (Freeman, 1991), there is an added level of struggle for women of color that should be explored in future discussions about social work financial worth.

Implications and Recommendations for Social Work Education Policy

This project provides many implications for the field of social work. A large majority of them relate to future directions for social work education. The researcher recommends that CSWE take note of the opinions and concerns noted in this study. Students in all three focus groups repeatedly expressed a desire to have their training and education taken more seriously by the UTA School of Social Work and CSWE. Many students expressed concern that the educational standards were too low. It would be beneficial to collect student feedback on the nature of educational standards in SSWs. It is of utmost necessity to actively include students in the change process. Additionally, this author recommends CSWE and SSWs consider the implications that reductions in educational standards have on the public's perception of social work as well as on the internal conflict and devaluation present within the discipline itself. Like one student was quoted earlier, if social workers are not perceived to place a high value on their education and training, it is easy to see why others may not either.

Some students asserted that there was a lack of crossover training for micro practice social workers in areas of professional advocacy and activism. Though not explicitly stated, comments made by some students suggested that micro practice students felt underprepared to participate in the professional advocacy of social work. All students expressed a desire to be involved in advocacy but felt unsure of how to actually

do so. CSWE should consider implementing new EPAS that include the topics of social work professional advocacy, self-care, marketing and promotion as well as negotiation and other job preparedness strategies as part of the social work curricula.

Finally, the writer recommends CSWE, NASW, and SSWs begin to promote the discussion of financial worth to students from the beginning of their social work education. Additionally, students should be introduced to the concept of financial orientation so that they can consider where their beliefs about earning power come from and who they believe is in control of them. These organizations should also consider whether it is still necessary to teach students about Flexner's rejection of the profession, as the field has long since surpassed several different sets of technical qualifications specified in achieving the status of "profession" (Austin, 1983; Morris, 2008; Wilensky, 1964). That said, there are countless ideas about what actually constitutes a profession (Austin, 1983; Morris; 2008), and none are to be considered definitive. If it is still found to be necessary, it should be coupled with the fact that Flexner analyzed and deconstructed the professionalization of several professions, not just social work (Austin, 1983; Hafferty & Castellani, 2010; Ludmerer, 2011). It could also be added that deconstruction of professionalization is a common and healthy occurrence in the life of many professions and is not unique to the social work profession (Gibelman, 1999).

Students requested that their professors provide them with more balanced and proactive messages related to social work's professional and financial worth. The researcher recommends professors help students identify the socio-cultural factors that impact social work's place in society as well as equip them with tools to affect change. It is of note that students in each group shared experiences of negative messages received from professors without prompting. Several students detailed accounts where their professors intimated that students would not make much money and also discouraged

them from research, policy, and community and administrative practice. Students seemed quick to share their frustrations and how these devaluing messages factored into a discussion about worth and perception.

It is important for social workers and social work organizations to collectively begin the work of reconstruction of messages about social work pay. The researcher proposes that social workers need to become more self-aware of the language they use to describe their professional and financial worth. They should examine the implications evident in perpetuating messages like, "it's not about the money," and "social workers will never make any money." Further, social workers may want to consider removing self-defeating or devaluing language from their informal professional vocabulary. Some examples of this devaluation are messages that pit one type of social worker over another (MSW vs. BSW), discouraging speech that minimizes the significance of social work's unique skills, and language that places blame on each other for lack of participation in professional advocacy and policy development. Instead of wasting energy on blame and criticism, this researcher encourages social workers to use their words to empower each other. Social work students and professionals alike should take responsibility for the cessation of these hurtful messages and discourage their peers from participating in them.

Areas for Future Research

Additional research on the topic of professional perceptions and the implications they have on financial worth would be beneficial to the social work knowledge base. As mentioned earlier, no other research could be found on this topic. Continued research on financial earning data would also be useful. The literature available was minimal and only accounted for social workers who were members of professional organizations or held licenses. This does not provide a comprehensive picture of all social workers, thus

additional research is necessary. Further, research that discusses issues of inflation and cost of living increases in regard to social work salaries would be helpful in creating a clearer picture of other wage struggles social workers may experience. Updated research on social work public perception and professional self-image would also be advantageous. The fact that so little research has been done on these two topics is concerning in its implications about the value social workers place on their professional worth.

In undertaking future research similar to the present study, it would be necessary to expand the sample to include students from other schools of social work. Further, future research on this topic should include participants from the newer social work specializations, direct practice in aging and direct practice in health care. It may even be useful to gather additional data from students who are unable to attend focus groups but wish to participate. A discussion of race should absolutely be added to future research designs as well as noted earlier.

All three groups reinforced the importance of professionally marketing the brand of social work. It may be valuable to assess the perceived benefits of a campaign that actively includes social work student participation. It would also be important to measure their perceived level of willingness to participate. On that note, research on within-group community organizing and consciousness-raising may help researchers design studies and campaigns that would maximize social work student participation.

Another area that may prove beneficial to continued discussion on topics presented herein (as well as for the social work profession) would be to consider commonalities between female helping professions and those helping professions that may be more commonly assumed to be male-dominated (police officers, firefighters, emergency medical technicians, to name a few). Unfortunately, this list of male helping

professions is more anecdotal than research or literature driven because the researcher was unable to find literature regarding this grouping as a category. A feminist critique might assert that literature on this topic is unavailable because “male-based” professions are essentially just “professions.” Alternatively, literature on “female-dominated” professions is plentiful and necessary to categorize because it exists in contradiction to the dominant power paradigm. However, it would be interesting to consider topics of professional and financial worth between the two groups and to assess the differences and similarities in how they are approached. This type of research may have powerful implications for women-centric professions.

Conclusion

The message that social workers are “not in it for the money” comes at great cost. This justification and acceptance of the current power structure perpetuates and reinforces the construct of low earnings in the social work field. The findings from this research suggest that the link between professional perceptions and financial worth is salient. Social workers may fulfill their own destiny for low earnings as long as they allow these messages to bear weight. The effects of power on this argument were explained, and while it is important to take note of historical factors, there must come a point when the profession drops the old story and begins to tell a new one.

This leads us back to the social construction of language. Its inherent strength is demonstrated in the power that words have to give life to ideas and beliefs about the professional and financial worth of social work while simultaneously removing human agency from the maintenance or control of them. Social constructionist Paulo Freire conceptualized conscientizacao or “new consciousness” (1970). He described this idea as awareness of a conflict or struggle coupled with action. It is not enough to say these messages are problematic; they must be systematically and definitively changed.

By identifying the implications professional perceptions have on financial worth, the researcher hopes to encourage social workers to clarify their own beliefs about their financial worth and make certain that they have thoughtfully chosen them rather than simply accepting the status quo. This researcher hopes that the present study will start a dialogue among social workers, and eventually helping professionals in general, to identify and clarify their professional perceptions and consider how those beliefs impact their earning power.

Appendix A
Demographic Questionnaire

Demographics

Please answer all questions. If you are uncomfortable with any question you may leave it blank.

1. Gender: (circle, specify)

M F Other _____

2. Race: (circle one)

White Hispanic or Latino Black or African American
Native American or American Indian Asian or Pacific Islander Other

3. Age:

4. How many years have you practiced social work with a social work degree or license?

5. Did you have social work employment experience before beginning your MSW? (circle one)

Y N

6. Do you hold a BSW? (circle one)

Y N

Do you have a social work license? (circle one)

Y N

If not, what is your undergraduate degree in?

7. Concentration in MSW program: (circle one)

Mental Health Practice Children and Families Community and Administrative

Aging Healthcare

8. Do you have a desire to pursue a PhD in social work or a DSW? (circle one)

Y N

9. Are you a member of: (circle all that apply)

NASW Phi Alpha Social Work Constituency Council

10. What type of social work do you plan to practice with your social work degree? (circle one, specify)

Administrative Aging	School Social Work	Medical/Healthcare
Children and Family Policy	Mental Health	Community Organizing
Research/Evaluation	Other _____	

11. What do you expect your starting salary as an MSW social worker to be? (circle one)

\$20,000-\$29,000	\$30,000-\$39,000	\$40,000-\$49,000	\$50,000-\$59,000
\$60,000-\$69,000	\$70,000-above	\$80,000-89,000	\$90,000-\$99-000
\$100,000- above			

12. If you are currently working as a social worker with a social work degree or license, what is your salary range?

\$20,000-\$29,000	\$30,000-\$39,000	\$40,000-\$49,000	\$50,000-\$59,000
\$60,000-\$69,000	\$70,000-above	\$80,000-89,000	\$90,000-\$99-000
\$100,000- above			

13. What do you realistically hope to make at the most as a social worker? (circle one)

\$20,000-\$29,000	\$30,000-\$39,000	\$40,000-\$49,000	\$50,000-\$59,000
\$60,000-\$69,000	\$70,000-above	\$80,000-89,000	\$90,000-\$99-000
\$100,000- above			

Thank you for your participation!

Appendix B
Informed Consent

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

Rebecca Allison Peeler, School of Social Work.

Rebecca.peeler@mavs.uta.edu

214-620-3584

FACULTY ADVISOR

Dr. Elissa Madden, PhD, School of Social Work

elissamadden@uta.edu

TITLE OF PROJECT

Perceptions of Professional and Financial Worth among Master of Social Work Students

INTRODUCTION

You are being asked to participate in a research study about professional perceptions among social workers and their impact on financial worth. Your participation is voluntary. Refusal to participate or discontinuing your participation at any time will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Please ask questions if there is anything you do not understand.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to uncover the conscious and unconscious beliefs held among social workers about their profession and to explore how those beliefs correspond with ideas of financial worth.

DURATION

Participation in this study will last approximately 1 to 1.5 hours.

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS

The number of anticipated participants in this research study is 60.

PROCEDURES

The procedures which will involve you as a research participant include:

1. Read and sign informed consent.
2. Complete brief demographic survey at the beginning of focus group session.
3. Participate in one 1.5 hour focus group session.
4. Please note that the session is being audio-recorded. This is strictly for use of transcription by the researcher. The transcription will be typed exactly as it is recorded, word-for-word, by the researcher. Audio-recording will be deleted after transcription.
5. Provide answers to focus group question as honestly as possible.
6. As these are group sessions, please be respectful of other participants' opinions and experiences during and upon completion of sessions.

7. Participate in a one hour, one-on-one member-checking session to review thematic codes developed by researcher and confirm their accuracy.

POSSIBLE BENEFITS

Possible benefits to participants may include feelings of connectedness to other social workers in the graduate program and area of interest. Further, understanding ideas of worth among social workers may provide insight for a healthier and clearer sense of professional worth for social workers and helping professionals in general.

POSSIBLE RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

The topic of professional and financial worth among social workers and questions asked throughout this interview are unlikely to cause psychological harm or distress.

However, you have the right to quit any study procedures at any time at no consequence and may do so by informing the researcher.

COMPENSATION

No compensation will be provided. However, dinner will be provided at each of the focus groups.

ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES

There are no alternative procedures offered for this study. However, you can elect not to participate in the study or quit at any time at no consequence.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Participation in this research study is voluntary. You have the right to decline participation in any or all study procedures or quit at any time at no consequence. Should you choose not to complete all study procedures, you will still receive dinner for attending the focus group.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Every attempt will be made to see that your study results are kept confidential. Since the interviews will take place in a group setting, confidentiality among participants is requested, though not guaranteed. A copy of this signed consent form and all data collected including transcriptions and demographic surveys from this study will be stored in Dr. Elissa Madden's office under lock and key for at least three (3) years after the end of this research. Focus group sessions will be audio-recorded by researcher to allow for transcription upon completion of focus groups. These recordings will be deleted after they are transcribed. The results of this study may be published and/or presented at meetings without naming you as a participant. Additional research studies could evolve from the information you have provided, but your information will not be linked to you in anyway; it will be anonymous. Although your rights and privacy will be maintained, the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, the UTA Institutional Review Board (IRB), and personnel particular to this research have

access to the study records. Your records will be kept completely confidential according to current legal requirements. They will not be revealed unless required by law, or as noted above. The IRB at UTA has reviewed and approved this study and the information within this consent form. If in the unlikely event it becomes necessary for the Institutional Review Board to review your research records, the University of Texas at Arlington will protect the confidentiality of those records to the extent permitted by law.

CONTACT FOR QUESTIONS

Questions about this research study may be directed to Rebecca Allison Peeler by email: Rebecca.peeler@uta.mavs.edu. Additionally, please contact Dr. Elissa Madden, PhD, faculty advisor at elissamadden@uta.edu. Any questions you may have about your rights as a research participant or a research-related injury may be directed to the Office of Research Administration; Regulatory Services at 817-272-2105 or regulatoryservices@uta.edu.

As a representative of this study, I have explained the purpose, the procedures, the benefits, and the risks that are involved in this research study:

Signature and printed name of principal investigator or person obtaining consent

Date

CONSENT

By signing below, you confirm that you are 18 years of age or older and have read or had this document read to you. You have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of this form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time.

You voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits, to which you are otherwise entitled.

SIGNATURE OF VOLUNTEER

DATE

Appendix C
Focus Group Questioning Route

Opening:

What is the general public's view of social workers?

Key:

When I say, "financial worth," what does that mean to you?

Probe: what you get in a paycheck, what you think the services you provide are worth to

society

Tell me how you think social work salaries should compare to those of other helping professionals.

Probe: teachers, nurses, counselors, psychologists, psychiatrists

Tell me about your perception of your role in society.

Probe: to your clients, community, each other, politically, socially

Has your view changed about what you are worth since starting graduate school?

Closing:

Was anything missed? Do you have any feedback for how to improve the next group?

Appendix D
Recruitment Flyer



Calling all Second Year and Advanced Standing



MSW students:

You are invited to participate in a one-time small group discussion (including brief demographic survey) on the topic of professional perception and financial worth among social workers.

There will be snacks!

3 sessions offered by concentration:

Mental Health: Tuesday April 14, 5:30P-7:00P, GACB 118
Children and Family: Tuesday April 21, 5:30P-7:00P, GACB 118
CAP: Wednesday April 22, 5:30P-7:00P, GACB 118

This is a research study conducted by Rebecca Allison Peeler, Principal Investigator and UTA MSW student. Please contact Ms. Peeler by phone or email if you are interested. Please mention your program concentration in the message.

Rebecca.peeler@mavs.uta.edu
214-620-3584

Thanks!

Appendix E

Student Recruitment Email and Follow-up Email Script

[Script to be disseminated through the Graduate School of Social Work]

Subject Line: Research participation opportunity for second-year and advanced-standing MSW students

Calling all 2nd Year and Advanced-standing MSW students:

You are invited to participate in a one-time small group discussion on the topic of professional perception and financial worth among social workers. You will also be asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire, which will be provided at the time of discussion.

There will be snacks!

Time/Date/ Location by concentration:

Mental health: date, time, Social Work Complex

Children and Family: date, time, Social Work Complex

Community and Administrative Practice: date, time, Social Work complex

This is a research study conducted by Rebecca Allison Peeler, Principal Investigator and UTA MSW student. Only second-year and advanced-standing MSW students are eligible to participate.

Please contact Ms. Peeler by phone or email if you are interested in participating. Please mention your program concentration in the message.

Rebecca.peeler@mavs.uta.edu

214-620-3584

Thanks!

Research title: "Perceptions of Professional and Financial Worth among Master of Social Work Students"

Protocol # 2015-0506

[Email response to any replies from above email:]

Subject Line: Follow up on your interest in MSW research study

Hello,

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research study. My name is Rebecca Allison Peeler and I am a second-year UTA MSW student. The topic of this study is on professional perception and financial worth among social workers. If you choose to attend one of the focus groups listed below, you will be asked to participate in a 1.5 hour semi-structured small group interview and complete a brief demographic survey. You will also be asked to sign an informed consent before participating.

Dinner will also be provided at each session.

Focus Group Sessions by concentration:

Mental Health: date, time, Social Work Complex

Community and Administrative Practice: date, time, Social Work Complex

Children and Family: date, time, Social Work Complex

Please reply with your name and concentration to confirm. Only second-year and advanced-standing MSW students are eligible to participate. All participation is voluntary.

Thank you very much for your time.

Best,

Rebecca Allison Peeler, Principal Investigator

Rebecca.peeler@mavs.uta.edu

214-620-3584

Research Title: "Perceptions of Professional and Financial Worth among Master of Social Work Students"

Protocol #2015-0506

Appendix F
In-class Recruitment Script

Hi, my name is Rebecca Allison Peeler and I am a second-year UTA MSW student. I am currently conducting a research study on the topic of professional perception and financial worth among social workers. I will be holding three focus groups to explore these issues, one for each concentration. I am inviting second-year and advanced-standing MSW students only to participate. Each session will consist of a semi-structured small group interview (6-10 participants each) and a brief demographic survey. The sessions will last about an hour and a half, so I will feed you for your time!

The sessions will be held:

Mental Health: **Tuesday April 14**, 5:30P-7:00P, GACB 118

Children and Family: **Monday April 20**, 5:30P-7:00P, GACB 118

Community and Administrative Practice: **Wednesday April 22**, 5:30P-7:00P, GACB 118

If you are interested in participating in this study, please put your name, email, and concentration on the list going around. I will email you with further details about the project. There is no penalty for not participating- this is “volunteer only!” Also, putting your information down is not an obligation to participate.

Thanks!

Appendix G
Voluntary Email Collection Form

Email Collection for Voluntary Participation in Research Study

“Perceptions of Professional and Financial Worth among Master of Social Work Students”

Research Study by Rebecca Allison Peeler, Principal Investigator and 2nd year UTA MSW student (Protocol #2015-0506)

You are being asked to participate in a 1.5 hour small group interview and complete a brief demographic survey on the topic of professional and financial worth among social workers. You will also be asked to sign an informed consent before participating.

Dinner will be provided at each session.

Focus Group Sessions by concentration:

Mental Health: **Tuesday April 14**, 5:30P-7:00P, GACB 118

Children and Family: **Tuesday April 21**, 5:30P-7:00P, GACB 118

Community and Administrative Practice: **Wednesday April 22**, 5:30P-7:00P, GACB 118

If you are interested in participating in this study, please put your name, email, and concentration on this list. I will email you with further details about the project. There is no penalty for not participating- this is “volunteer only!” Also, putting your information down is not an obligation to participate.

Thanks!

NAME:	EMAIL:	CONCENTRATION:

Appendix H

In-Class Recruitment Follow-up Email

Follow up response email for those who give their information on the email collection list:

Subject Line: Follow up from in-class recruitment for MSW research study

Hello,

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research study. As I mentioned in your class, my name is Rebecca Allison Peeler and I am a second-year UTA MSW student. The topic of this study is on professional perception and financial worth among social workers. If you choose to attend one of the focus groups listed below, you will be asked to participate in a 1.5 hour semi-structured small group interview and complete a brief demographic survey. You will also be asked to sign an informed consent before participating.

Dinner will also be provided at each session.

Focus Group Sessions by concentration:

Mental Health: date, time, Social Work Complex

Community and Administrative Practice: date, time, Social Work Complex

Children and Family: date, time, Social Work Complex

Please reply with your name and concentration to confirm. Only second-year and advanced-standing MSW students are eligible to participate. All participation is voluntary.

Thank you very much for your time.

Best,

Rebecca Allison Peeler, Principal Investigator

Rebecca.peeler@mavs.uta.edu

214-620-3584

Research Title: "Perceptions of Professional and Financial Worth among Master of Social Work Students"

Protocol #2015-0506

Appendix I
Focus Group Sample Characteristics

Focus Group Sample Characteristics

	%(n=31)
Personal Characteristics	
Female	79 (24)
Race/Ethnicity	
African American	32 (10)
Caucasian	42 (13)
Hispanic	16 (5)
Asian	7 (2)
Mixed	3 (1)
Mean Age (21-55)	31.5 Years
Percent (%) Participants with BSW degree	65 (20)
Percent (%) by Concentration	
Mental Health	58 (18)
Children and Families	13 (4)
Community and Administrative Practice	29 (9)
Percent (%) NASW members	52 (16)
Expected Starting Salary (by range)²	
\$20,000-\$39,000	23 (7)
\$40,000-\$59,000	55 (17)
\$60,000-\$79,000	19 (6)
\$80,000- above	0
Expected Top Salary (by range)³	
\$20,000-\$39,000	0
\$40,000-\$59,000	26 (8)
\$60,000-\$79,000	61 (19)
\$80,000- above	13 (4)

² Some Ns may vary due to missing data.

³ One participant listed two expected top salaries, varying by state; another participant did not answer.

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Biographical Information

Rebecca Allison Peeler earned her Master of Social Work (MSW) degree with a specialization in Community and Administrative Practice. Her passion for social work began over ten years ago with a post in Rochester AmeriCorps in Rochester, NY. She spent time in several fields in addition to social work before returning to school to finish her undergraduate degree. She earned her Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from the University of North Texas in 2011 and spent time in the social work field before again returning to school in 2013 to earn her MSW. She started out as a direct practice student concentrating on mental health but became passionate about professional social work advocacy and community organizing during her first semester of graduate school. Ms. Peeler had the opportunity to implement a financial literacy program as well as develop and direct a marketing and fundraising campaign during her graduate internships, thus enabling her to put her advocacy and organizing skills to practice. These experiences solidified Ms. Peeler's desire to use these skills for the benefit of the social work profession itself. She is interested in continuing research on professional and financial worth and examining the impact perceptions have on them. She is also interested in pursuing a career in social work advocacy and hopes to continue promoting the empowerment of social workers to redefine the way they view themselves and their earning capabilities.