

## PUNISHMENT AND REHABILITATION VIEWS OF SOCIAL WORK MAJORS AND NON-SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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### ABSTRACT

Although the treatment of criminal offenders attracts divergent views, all advocate some form of rehabilitation or punishment. A convenience sample of 172 social work majors and 234 non-social work majors from a large public Midwestern University were surveyed. The results revealed that the social work majors were significantly more likely to support rehabilitation and significantly less likely to support punitive punishments, even after controlling for gender, race, age, academic level, political party affiliation, importance of religion in the person's life, and fear of victimization. Additionally, junior and senior social work majors were even more supportive of rehabilitation than lower level students; there were no significant differences in punitiveness between upper and lower level students of other majors. The results indicate that the social work curriculum either influences students to change their value orientation or that students with more punitive attitudes do not seek or do not continue in the major.

### INTRODUCTION

More than 30 million criminal acts are reported annually in the U.S.; most are nonviolent property and alcohol/drug offenses (Schmallegger, 2005). The vast majority of U.S. citizens agree that the crime problem needs to be addressed; however, there is much disagreement on how to address it. Many ideologies purport to know how to deal with criminal offenders most successfully; essentially, all support varying degrees of punishment and rehabilitation. Some feel the more punitive the punishment, the more effective it is; others argue that offenders can and should be changed into productive members of society. Views toward punishment and rehabilitation arise due to a multitude of factors, including socialization (Chung and Bagozzi, 1997). One area that may have an effect on these views is the type of major a person pursues while in college.

Students who major in social work are presented a curriculum that advocates rehabilitation rather than punishment of offenders. The support for rehabilitation illustrates the foundation upon which social work is built, improving human life and social justice. The core values of social work are the dignity and worth of individuals and unconditional positive regard for people, regardless of life situations. Social work believes that people have ability to change, because an individual's behavior affects and is affected by his or her social environment.

This position is illustrated by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), which has taken an active position against punitive punishment of offenders (NASW, 2003). NASW's position is that social workers (and social work majors) should not engage in or condone any actions or policies in which a client or former client could be harmed. "NASW considers the protection of individual rights and the promotion of social justice essential to the preservation of our collective well-being as a society" (NASW, 2003, p. 37). In addition, many social workers work to help change the behaviors of criminal offenders. There has been a growing trend for social work practitioners to work with defense attorneys to help build a case of mitigating factors (e.g., abuse, discrimination, disability, deprivation) for criminal defendants, especially those facing a possible death sentence.

While social work curricula and NASW advocate a treatment approach to criminal offenders rather than a punitive punishment approach, it is unknown whether social work students share similar views. Ben-Ari (1998) argued that the time to intervene with social workers to change their attitudes is before they receive their degree. It is important to examine the views of social work majors, since these future social work professionals might not only work with criminal offenders but also might be in a position to educate the public. Therefore, this exploratory study examined the punishment and rehabilitation views of social work majors as compared to students majoring in other disciplines at a large, public Midwestern university in the United States.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

There is a growing body of literature that has focused on the attitudes and views of social work students across a wide array of topics, such as homosexuality (Lim and Johnson, 2001), people with disabilities (Hayashi and Kimura, 2003), older adults (Tan et al., 2001), community mental health services (Penn et al., 1979), spirituality and religion (Kaplan and Dziegielewski, 1999), social justice (Moran, 1989), poverty (Macarov, 1981), libertarian views (Fabianic, 1979), and academic preparation for group work (Knight, 1999). While there is a growing body of literature on the attitudes of social work students on a wide array of social concerns, no published research on the punishment and rehabilitation views of social work majors could be found.

While there is little or no published literature on the punishment and rehabilitation views of social work majors, there is a larger body of literature that has explored views on punishment and rehabilitation among the general population. One area that has been found to be a significant predictor of punishment and rehabilitation views is gender. Men tend to be much more supportive of punishment of criminals, while women are more supportive of rehabilitation efforts. Gilligan (1982) argued that women and men have different moral reasoning and views of justice. Specifically, men emphasize punitive punishment and individual rights, while women advocate compassion, rehabilitation, and sensitivity to others. The empirical literature provides support for this postulation. Studies have found that women tend to be more supportive of rehabilitation (Applegate et al., 2002; Cullen et al., 1985) and tend to be less punitive than men (Applegate et al., 2002; MacDonald and Erickson, 1999).

Race is other factor that has been linked to punishment and rehabilitation views. Research has found that Whites and minorities vary in their views of the criminal justice system. Black citizens generally have a less favorable view of police and how they treat people than Whites (Tuch and Weitzer, 1997; Webb and Marshall, 1995). Additionally, minorities tend

to have a greater support for rehabilitation than Whites (McCorkle, 1993). Finally, research strongly suggests that Whites are much higher in support for the death penalty, the most punitive punishment available (Britt, 1998; Durham et al., 1996).

There appears to be a relationship between political affiliation and punishment and rehabilitation views as well. Those who indicate an affiliation with the Republican party and self-identified conservatives have been found to be higher in their support for punitive punishment of offenders (Britt, 1998; Lambert, 2004; Sandys and McGarrell, 1995).

As people age, they often change their views concerning crime and punishment issues; however, the type of relationship is unclear. Tyler and Boeckmann (1997) found that the young were more punitive, while McCorkle (1993) observed that younger individuals were more supportive of rehabilitation.

Fear of crime is a powerful force that generally helps shape people's crime and punishment views (Chevigny, 2003; Weinrath and Gartell, 1996). Those who fear being victims of crime, especially violent crimes, tend to be more punitive in their punishment views as compared to those who are not afraid of being victimized (Arthur, 1998; Sims, 2003). Those who are less afraid of becoming crime victims tend to be more supportive of treatment efforts for criminal offenders.

Religion is also important in helping shape people's punishment and rehabilitation views. Religion has been tied to more punitive punishment views (Britt, 1998; Greenberg and West, 2001; Young and Thompson, 1995).

Finally, education has been found to have a liberalizing effect on views toward crime and punishment. Those with higher education level being less punitive and more supportive of treatment efforts (McCorkle, 1993; Tyler and Boeckmann, 1997).

While there is a growing body of research that has examined the impact of personal characteristics on views toward punishment and rehabilitation, as previously indicated there have been no published studies on the views of social work majors on these areas as compared to students majoring in other areas. Therefore, this study was undertaken.

## METHODS

**Respondents.** In the Spring of 2002, a systematic convenience sample of 20 general education courses and six social work classes were selected to be surveyed from a list of all classes offered at a public, four-year Midwestern university with an enrollment of about 20,000. A convenience sample is where the researcher selects subjects who are available and willing to be part of the study (Hagan, 1997). Because it is not a random sample (i.e., based on a mathematical probability of selection), the results from this study cannot be generalized to the larger population. This, however, is not crucial because this study was exploratory in nature.

The nature of the survey was explained to the students, and it was emphasized that the completion of the survey was voluntary. Very few students declined to participate in the survey. It was estimated that more than 95% of the students present took the survey. Students completed the survey during class time. To prevent multiple participation, students were told not to complete the survey if they had previously completed one in another course.

A total of 406 useable surveys were collected. Students were asked to identify their major. Approximately 42% ( $n = 172$ ) of those surveyed were social work majors, and 58% ( $n = 234$ ) indicated that they were from majors other than social work. Because all majors at

the university are required to take general education courses, the respondents represented a wide array of majors, with no one particular major dominating the group of non-social work students. The demographics of the respondents are presented in Table 1. The typical respondent was a White woman who was in her early twenties. There was an even spread across the four academic levels of freshman, sophomore, junior and senior. About 21% of the students indicated that they were affiliated with the Republican party. The vast majority of students felt that religion had played either a great deal or a fair amount of significance in their lives. Very few of the students indicated that religion had no impact in their lives.

**Table 1.** Demographics of the Entire Group of Students, Social Work Students, and Non-Social Work Students

Demographic	Entire Group	Social Work (N = 406)	Non-Social Work (n = 172)	Diff. (n = 234)
<b>Gender</b>				$\chi^2 = 77.33^{**}$
Female	61%	86%	42%	
Male	39%	14%	58%	
<b>Race</b>				$\chi^2 = 11.14^*$
Black	18%	24%	13%	
Hispanic	3%	4%	2%	
White	72%	66%	76%	
Other	8%	6%	9%	
<b>College Level</b>				
Freshman	26%	14%	35%	$\chi^2 = 45.52^{**}$
Sophomore	24%	16%	30%	
Junior	26%	37%	18%	
Senior	24%	33%	17%	
<b>Age in Years</b>	Mn = 22.99 Sd = 7.57	Mn = 26.00 Sd = 9.52	Mn = 20.77 Sd = 4.62	t = -7.31 <sup>**</sup>
<b>Political Party</b>				$\chi^2 = 19.01^{**}$
Democrat	42%	54%	33%	
Republican	21%	14%	26%	
Independent/Other	38%	32%	41%	
<b>Importance of Religion</b>				$\chi^2 = 5.56$
A Great Deal	30%	32%	28%	
A Fair Amount	45%	49%	43%	
Not Much	21%	16%	45%	
Not at All	4%	4%	4%	

*Note.* Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding. Mn stands for mean, and Sd. stands for standard deviation. Diff. is for the difference between social work and non-social work students on the demographic measures and is based on the Chi-Square ( $\chi^2$ ) test, except for age, which is based on the t-test. For purposes of analysis, race was collapsed into White and Nonwhite.

\* p d" .05.

\*\* p d" .01.

As shown in Table 1, there were statistically significant differences on most of the demographic variables between the two groups of students. Social work majors were much more likely to be minorities, women, and Democrats, than were students majoring in other disciplines. Social work majors were also more likely to be of upper level status. This was expected because most of the required social work courses are at the junior and senior levels. Social work students were, on average, older than students in other disciplines. Conversely, there was no significant difference between the two groups of students in the importance of religion played in their lives.

**Measures. Punishment.** Because punishment and rehabilitation views are not opposite ends of the same concept but rather are distinct concepts in which people may vary on their views, Mackey and Courtright (2000) recommended that separate scales measuring attitudes towards punishment and rehabilitation be used. A total of eleven questions (presented in the appendix) dealing with punishment were selected to create an index of support for punitive punishment. The questions were answered with a five-point Likert type of response scale of strongly disagree (coded 1), disagree (2), uncertain (3), agree (4), and strongly agree (5), and the responses were summed to create a punishment index. The index had a median value of 32, ranged from 12 to 54, and had a mean of 32.96, with a standard deviation of 8.41. The punishment index had a Cronbach's alpha of .89, which indicates a high degree of internal consistency reliability.

**Rehabilitation.** A total of eight questions (presented in the appendix) dealing with support for treatment of offenders were selected to form an index of support for rehabilitation. The eight questions were answered with a five-point Likert type of response scale of strongly disagree to strongly agree, and the responses summed to form a support for rehabilitation index. The index had a median value of 27, ranged from 8 to 32, and had a mean of 26.69, with a standard deviation of 5.71. The rehabilitation index had a Cronbach's alpha of .86.

**Social Work Major.** A dichotomous variable was created to measure whether a respondent was a social work major (coded 1) or not (coded 0).

**Control Variables.** Because there were significant differences between the two groups of students in terms of demographics and these demographics have been found to be significant predictors of punishment and rehabilitation views, control variables were created for use in multi-variate analyses. Gender was measured as a dichotomous variable with women coded as 0 and men coded as 1. Race was also measured as a dichotomous variable with 0 = Nonwhite and 1 = White. Age was measured in continuous years. Academic level was measured as a dichotomous variable with lower level (i.e., freshman and sophomore) measured as 0 and upper level (i.e., junior and senior) measured as 1. Affiliation with the Republican party was also measured as a dichotomous variable with 1 = Republican and 0 = not Republican. The importance of religion in a person's life was measured as an ordinal variable with 1 = a great deal, 2 = a fair amount, 3 = not much, and 4 = not at all. Finally, a measure of fear of crime was included. Respondents were asked if they were afraid of becoming a victim of violent crime. The question was measured using a five-point Likert type of scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

## RESULTS

The independent *t*-test was used to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference between social work students and non-social students in their punishment and rehabilitation views. The independent *t*-test examines the difference between the means on the dependent variable of two groups to determine whether the difference is statistically significant (Green et al., 1997), and it is frequently used for analyses such as those in this study. The results of the independent *t*-test are presented in Table 2. There was a statistically significant difference between the two groups of students on the two indexes. Social work students were more supportive of rehabilitation than were non-social work students. Conversely, non-social work students were more supportive of punishment of offenders than were social work majors.

**Table 2.** The Differences Between Social Work and Non-Social Work Majors on Punishment and Rehabilitation Views Using the Independent *t*-test.

Major	Punishment Index			Rehabilitation Index		
	Mean	Sdev	t-value	Mean	Sdev	t-value
Social Work Majors	30.56	7.06	5.07**	28.49	4.63	-5.68**
Non-Social Work Majors	34.72	8.89		25.36	6.06	

Note. Sdev stands for standard deviation. For social work majors, *n* = 172. For non-social work majors, *n* = 234. Degrees of freedom were 404.

\* *p* < .05.

\*\* *p* < .01.

To see whether the two groups of students were significantly different in their punishment and rehabilitation views, independent of the effects of gender, race, age, academic level, importance of religion, fear of being victimized, and Republican party affiliation, Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression was utilized. A major advantage of using OLS regression is that it allows for the effects of an independent variable on the dependent variable to be estimated while statistically controlling for the shared effects of other independent variables. The punishment and rehabilitation indexes were entered into OLS regression models as the dependent variables, and gender, race, age, academic level, importance of religion, fear of victimization, Republican party affiliation, and social work major were entered as the independent variables. The results are reported in Table 3.

After controlling for gender, race, age, academic level, importance of religion, fear of victimization, and Republican party affiliation, there was a statistically significant difference between social work and non-social work students on the punishment and rehabilitation indexes. Social work students were lower in their punishment views as compared to students majoring in other disciplines. Additionally, social work majors were higher in their rehabilitation views as compared to non-social work students. As observed in other studies, there was a gender gap. Women were more supportive of rehabilitation for offenders, while men were more punishment oriented. Whites were more punitive in their punishment views than were Nonwhites. There was, however, no difference in terms of race on rehabilitation views. Those students who identified with the Republican party were more supportive of



**Table 3.** OLS Regression Results for Punishment and Rehabilitation Views

Variable	Punishment Index			Rehabilitation Index		
	b	SE (b)	B	b	SE (b)	B
Gender	3.75	.88	.22**	-2.64	.61	-.23**
Race	2.68	.88	.14**	-.71	.60	-.06
Age	.02	.06	.02	.06	.04	.08
Academic Level	-1.41	.87	-.08	.48	.60	.04
Importance of Religion	-.36	.50	-.03	.15	.35	.02
Fear of Victimization	1.30	.35	.17**	-.31	.25	-.06
Republican	3.67	1.01	.18**	-2.53	.69	-.18**
Social Work Major	-1.96	.93	-.12*	1.25	.64	.11*
R-Squared			.19**			.17**

*Note.* b represents the unstandardized OLS regression coefficient. SE (b) represents the estimated standard error of the slope, and B represents the standardized OLS regression coefficient.

Gender was coded as 0 = women and 1 = men. Race was coded as 0 = Nonwhite and 1 = White. Age was measured in continuous years. Academic level was measured as 0 = lower level (i.e., freshman and sophomore) and 1 = upper level (i.e., junior and senior). Importance of religion in the person's life was coded as 1 = a great deal, 2 = a fair amount, 3 = not much, and 4 = not at all. Fear of victimization was measured using the statement, "I am afraid of becoming a victim of a violent crime" and was coded as 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = uncertain, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree. Republican was measured as 0 = not affiliated with Republican party and 1 = affiliated with Republican party. Finally, social work major was measured as 0 = not a social work major and 1 = a social work major. \* p < .05. \*\* p < .01.

punishment of offenders and were more likely to be opposed to the rehabilitation of offenders. Fear of victimization generally led to more support for punishment but had no significant effect on rehabilitation views. Age, academic level, and importance of religion had no significant impacts on either of the indexes. Finally, the R-squared values for both OLS regression equations were low. Being a social work student and the control variables accounted for less than 20% of the variance in the punishment and rehabilitation indexes. This means there are other variables that also help shape the punishment and rehabilitation views of the respondents.

It is possible social work majors have views different from other students due to intrinsic differences in the type of person drawn to the major. It is also possible that views of social work majors become less punitive and more rehabilitative due to the influence of the social work curriculum. In order to determine whether level of education had an impact on punishment views between the two groups of students, the data on social work majors and non-majors were further divided into lower academic level (i.e., freshman and sophomore) and upper level (i.e., junior and senior). The independent *t*-test was used to determine whether there was a difference, and the results are reported in Table 4. There appears to be a relationship between the amount of social work education and punishment and rehabilitation views.

**Table 4.** Independent t-test Results of Level of Education and Punishment and Rehabilitation Views among Social Work Students and Non-Social Work Students.

Academic Level	Social Work Majors (n = 172)			Non-Social Work Majors (n = 234)		
	Mean	Sdev	t-value	Mean	Sdev	t-value
Lower Level -Punishment	33.62	7.63	3.89**	34.89	9.11	0.41
Upper Level - Punishment	29.23	6.40		34.39	8.52	
Lower Level - Rehabilitation	26.90	5.31	-3.04**	25.20	6.26	-0.53
Upper Level -Rehabilitation	29.18	4.14		25.65	5.70	

Note. Sdev stands for standard deviation. The degrees of freedom were 170 for social work majors and 232 for non-social work majors.

\* p d" .05.      \*\* p d" .01.

Upper level social work students were higher in their rehabilitation views and lower in their punishment views as compared to lower level social work majors. Thus, the amount of social work education appears to have an impact on both punishment and rehabilitation views. This was not found among non-social work students. There was no statistically significant degree of difference in punishment or rehabilitation views between lower and upper level students majoring in other disciplines.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Social work majors were significantly different from non-social work students in their punishment and rehabilitation views in this study. Social work students were much more supportive of rehabilitation of criminal offenders than were students majoring in other areas. Additionally, social work majors were less supportive of punitive punishments for violators of the law as compared to students in other disciplines. The difference between the two groups of students continued in multi-variate analysis, even after controlling for other factors linked with support for punishment or rehabilitation, specifically gender, race, age, educational/academic level, importance of religion, political affiliation, and fear of victimization. The multi-variate findings suggest that there is a real difference between social work and non-social work students in their punishment and rehabilitation views. It would appear that the majority of social work students in this study would agree with the position on treatment rather than punishment of criminal offenders expressed by the National Association of Social Workers.

There are three primary explanations for the findings. The first explanation is based upon who pursues social work education. Self-selection of major may be an issue. Women, people of color, non-traditional students, and those affiliated with the Democratic party, are more likely to pursue a social work degree. It is clear that some support for rehabilitation and opposition to punitive punishment was due to the fact that most of the social work majors in this study were women and/or minorities, with a sizeable number who were nontraditional students. As previously indicated, both women and members of minority



groups are generally more supportive of treatment for offenders and less supportive of punishment. However, even when personal characteristics were taken into account in multi-variate analysis, social work majors were clearly lower in their support for punitive punishments and higher in their support of rehabilitation than were other majors. Thus, the findings are due to other factors than personal characteristics

The second explanation is that social work students are more supportive of rehabilitation and more opposed to punishment than non-social work students due to their educational foundations and experiences both inside and outside the classroom. In other words, the philosophical foundations of social work practice are based upon the interdependency between the individual and society. The punishment ideology stresses individual responsibility, while the rehabilitation approach recognizes the dynamic interaction between the individual and society. Black et al. (1996, p. 32) similarly concluded, “the attitudes of students may change in a direction which is consistent with social work values” when they discussed their findings of social work students’ attitudes toward gay and lesbian persons. This was also evident in this study. There appears to be an impact of social work education on the students in this study that was not observed with non-social work majors. Upper level social work students were more supportive of rehabilitation and were more opposed to punitive punishments as compared to lower level social work students. This difference was not observed among students majoring in other areas. There was no sign that their educational experiences had changed their punishment or rehabilitation views, unlike the case for social work majors. Social work programs, including the one at the survey university, are based on certain fundamental beliefs about human beings – that people are capable of change and have inherent worth and dignity and that people are responsible for their actions but environment has an equal role in shaping human behavior. Additionally, students are required to complete a rigorous internship under a licensed social worker. These types of real world experiences probably led many social work students to encounter people who needed help and were victims of forces beyond their control. This may have led social work students to develop a more integrated view of the world where people affect and are affected by the social environment (i.e., forces beyond individual control impact and affect people) rather than a free-will view of the world (i.e., people freely choose their behaviors).

The third explanation is the results are due to the research design that was used. In this study, a cross-sectional design was used (i.e., students were surveyed at the same point in time). Students were not followed in a longitudinal design to see what the impact of a social work and non-social work education was on punishment and rehabilitation views of students. It is possible that other forces than social work education led to the findings in this study. It is possible that social work students with a more liberal value orientation were more likely to enter the program or less likely to drop out of the major than those students who have more punitive attitudes. In other words, social work may be a more liberal major that attracts and keeps those students with more positive views towards treatment. These hypotheses need to be tested with a longitudinal design.

More research is needed. The data in this study were from one university. It is unclear whether similar results would be found with social work students at other universities. There is also a need to examine other factors that help explain the differing views towards punishment and rehabilitation. Other measures, such as frequency of attendance of religious services and religious denomination, should be included in future studies. In this study, the

R-squared for the punishment and rehabilitation indexes was less than .20 (see Table 3). This means that less than 20% of the variance for each index was explained by gender, race, age, academic level, being affiliated with the Republican party, importance of religion played in a person's life, fear of victimization, and being a social work major. Thus, other factors account for the other 80% of the observed variance. These factors need to be identified and understood. Clearly, more research is needed.

In closing, while there is a small body of literature on the views of social work students, still little is known. This study adds to what is known about the views of social work students toward punishment and rehabilitation for criminal offenders. Social work as a profession recognizes every person's worth and ability to change. It strives to improve the lives of human beings. Social work students are in a major that emphasizes compassion, helpfulness, and a desire to help those in need, regardless of who they are or what they have done. Social work majors are taught to be open-minded and nonjudgmental in their dealings with clients. Social work education advocates the need to treat and change people, including criminal offenders. This exploratory study supports the position that social work students are different from other students in their punishment and rehabilitation views, and this difference may be the result of social work education. The results also stress the need for further research. Many questions remain as to whether it is the social work curriculum that provides a basis for positive attitudes toward rehabilitation, or whether, in fact, students already holding these attitudes are drawn to the major. It is important to realize that the attitudes of today's social work majors may be reflected in the actions of tomorrow's social work professionals. Thus, knowing whether they differ from other students in their views on critical social issues and why they differ is paramount.

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## APPENDIX

### **Punishment Items**

1. Courts generally are not harsh enough with criminals.
2. We should stop viewing criminals as victims of society who deserve to be rehabilitated and start paying more attention to the victims of these criminals.
3. Torturing violent criminals to obtain a confession should be allowed.
4. Criminals need to be punished, not coddled.
5. A criminal will only go straight if the punishment is harsh.
6. The only way to reduce crime in our society is to severely punish criminals.
7. Society has a right to seek revenge on murderers.
8. The United States should use corporal punishment, such as caning or whipping, on convicted criminals to prevent crime.
9. Criminals need to be taught respect for the law.
10. I would be willing to pull the lever that results in the death of a person sentenced to death for first degree murder.
11. We need to make criminals pay for their crimes.

### **Rehabilitation Items**

1. We need more educational and vocational programs to effectively deal with crime and offenders.
2. Showing mercy is more important than seeking revenge.
3. The rehabilitation of criminals has been a failure (reverse coded).
4. The main goals for dealing with criminals should be to treat and rehabilitate them.
5. I support expanding rehabilitation programs for those convicted of crimes.
6. One reason that rehabilitation programs often fail is because they are underfunded; if enough money was provided, they would work.
7. The way to get criminal offenders to be willing to change is to take an interest in them.
8. I believe putting nonviolent offenders in prisons is cruel.