



Influential Social Workers: A Preliminary Exploration of Social Work Faculty

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Social work educators have been influenced and are being influenced by a wide-range of advocates, politicians, educators, and practitioners. In its 1998 Centennial year, the National Association of Social Workers selected six people as centennial leaders: Jane Addams, Edward Devine, Harry Hopkins, Jeanette Rankin, Leah Katharine Hicks Manning, and Whitney Young. No criteria were given for their selection. NASW also has named approximately 600 social work Pioneers. These are people who have been nominated, usually by other social workers, and whose credentials are reviewed by the Pioneer membership committee, which recommends them to the Steering Committee for a final vote. They are people who the Committee decides have “made significant contributions to the (history of the profession)” (www.nasw-dc.org). The *Encyclopedia of Social Work* (Mizrahi & Davis 2008) uses its editorial board to select outstanding contributors to the profession. Its selection criteria are the person must be deceased, have contributed significantly to social welfare in the United States, and have made a lasting contribution in practice, theory, programs, or advancing special populations (p. 317). Their list includes 196 names. These approaches use those who are known to NASW or the editors of the *Encyclopedia* to identify leaders. This article is based on a survey of social work educators selected at random from across the United States. They were asked who they viewed as the most influential social workers, their reasons for selecting them, and what they believe will be the next trend in social work knowledge.

2 Review of the Literature

Other professions have systematically identified their outstanding contributors utilizing a variety of operational definitions. In psychology, for example, this identification includes gathering ratings from psychology department chairpersons, faculty, and students (Davis, Thomas & Weaver 1982; Duncan 1976). Coleman (1991) counted textbook space dedicated to eminent figures and Roecklin (1996) counted the frequency of the use of eponyms, a word derived from the eminent person’s name, such as Rogerian or Freudian. Haggbloom et al. (2002) combined methodologies in their identification of the 100 most eminent psychologists of the 20th century. They explored frequency of citation in psychology journals and textbooks and email surveyed members of the American Psychological Society. Tumasjan et al. (2008) used three different internet searches to replicate Haggbloom et al’s work. They concluded that all methods showed high agreement as to the most eminent psychologists.

In social work, the focus has been on ranking programs, determining scholarly production, and on highlighting influential individuals. About every five years, *U.S. News & World Report* asks administrators to assist in ranking other schools of social work. Program rankings are also common in social work based on acceptance rates of MSW and PhD students (Kirk et al. 2009) as well as the number of faculty publications (e.g. Green & Baskin 2007; Ligon & Thyer 2001). Rankings of social work scholars have also been attempted. Rothman et al. (2003) used journal editors, research textbook authors, and research directors to nominate noted scholars. To highlight individuals' influences, some journals invite specific profiles of leaders in the field (e.g., Kubickova 2001) or publish articles featuring eminent social workers who have contributed to the profession (e.g. Hegar 2008; Hiersteiner & Peterson 1999). Billups (2002) edited a book for NASW derived from interviews with notable international social workers. Those writing on specific leaders in the field did so based on their personal interest in the leader or on the leader's thematic contributions, not on an independent assessment of his or her reputation, influence, or eminence. While social work has been concerned with individuals' eminence, its efforts have been less systematic than in psychology.

3 Methods

The Council on Social Work Education (Lennon 2004) publishes a list of all accredited U.S. schools and departments of social work that confer a master's degree. We randomly selected four faculty members from each school's or department's website. To do this we counted the number of tenure track faculty (when that information was available), divided that number into four groups, and varied picking faculty from the beginning, middle, or end of each group. CSWE listed 151 programs so 604 surveys were emailed using Survey Monkey. The survey was a 10 item questionnaire that had three open-ended and seven close-ended demographic items. The first question asked, "In your opinion, who were/are the five most influential social workers in this country's history? It is okay if you do not name five." Rothman et al. (2003) reach a conclusion that helped us understand the complexity of trying to define who is influential in the profession. "The very notion of reputation/prestige may be conceptually multifaceted by nature and difficult to pin down" (p. 115). In our survey, we chose to leave the definition of "influential" to the perception of the faculty member. The faculty respondents could type in five names. Faculty were then asked to provide their age, race, sex, highest social work degree, years of teaching experience, area of teaching, and area of expertise. To conclude, they were asked, "Social workers have many influences on their thinking about great social workers. Who or what was the most influential in your selecting the first person in #1?" and "What do you believe will be the next trend in the development of social work knowledge?" These two questions were intended to help us understand how someone came to select the influential person and to ascertain, having identified leaders, where they thought the profession was heading in the future.

Faculty received a total of three emails requesting their participation. Not all emails were delivered; a few faculty were on sabbatical and problems with delivery may have reduced the sample. We estimate at the most, 590 emails were delivered; 147 surveys were completed, a 25% return rate. One non-respondent emailed us that she had many personal influences on her own social work practice and realized those people would not appear among better known names and thus was not responding to the survey. One respondent had no degrees in social work and was excluded when no names were provided in response to the first question. Haggbloom et al. (2002) reported a lower return rate for their survey of psychologists, 5.6%, yet consider this return rate to have high face validity when it is compared with other data

they gathered. Given the size of the sample, we consider these data preliminary and suggestive of possible trends.

Sample description

The sample is described in Table 1.

TABLE 1 Sample Characteristics (n=147)

Gender	Race	Age	Years Teaching	Highest SW Degree	Area of Teaching	Area of SW Expertise
F=63%	White=81%	30-40= 13%	1-5yrs= 16.3	DSW/Phd= 83%	Research=19%	Mental health=32%
	Bl/African-Am=7%	41-50= 24%	6-10yrs= 23.1		Policy=19%	Child welfare=19%
M=37%	Asian/Pacific Islander=5%	51-59= 34%	11-20yrs= 32	MSW=17%	FoundPrac=18%	Other=14%
	Hispanic/Latin=3%	60-72= 28%	21yrs+= 26.5		AdvClinPrac=17%	Aging=9%
	Native American/Alaskan=3%				HumanBehav=11%	Comm devel= 8%*
	Other=1%	MEAN=5 5 yrs	MEAN= 17yrs		Comm Org=8%	
					Admin/Manage=6%	

*addictions, adolescents, criminal justice, higher ed., homeless, income assistance, medical health, occupational, and school social work each mentioned by <3%.

The sample is primarily female and white. The median age is 54 years old (the mean age is 55) and the median years of teaching is 17 years, the same as the mean. Most have a terminal PhD or DSW. Teaching is carried out in all parts of the curriculum. Mental health and child welfare account for slightly more than half of the faculty's areas of expertise. According to Sakamoto et al. (2008), 63% of graduate social work faculty are female. Also, according to

Sakamoto et al. (2008), of graduate *and* undergraduate faculty combined, the average age is 52 years old, 70% are white, and 68% have a doctorate or similar degree with close to 10 years of full-time teaching. Our sample of faculty at graduate schools is similar to the national averages in gender and is more apt to be white, older, to have been teaching longer, and to have a doctorate.

4 Findings

The 147 faculty respondents, each of whom could give up to five names, provided a total of 609 responses (an average of 4.14 per faculty respondent), resulting in 151 separate names. Table 2 shows the 34 most frequently mentioned names, how often they were mentioned, and the percent of respondents who named them.

Table 2: Responses to question, “Who were/are the five most influential social workers in this country’s history?” (n=147)

	Number of respondents naming this person	Percent of respondents naming this person
Addams, Jane	127	86%
Richmond, Mary	74	50%
Hopkins, Harry	36	24%
Young, Whitney	28	19%
Perkins, Frances	26	18%
Reynolds, Bertha Capen	22	15%
Dix, Dorothea	12	8%
Harris-Perlman, Helen	12	8%
Mikulski, Barbara	10	7%
Satir, Virginia	10	7%
Height, Dorothy	8	5%
Saleeby, Dennis	8	5%
Cohen, Wilbur	6	4%
Kendall, Katherine	6	4%
Reid, William	6	4%
Abbott, Edith	5	3%

Abbott, Grace	5	3%
Alinsky, Saul	4	3%
Cloward, Richard	4	3%
Fischer, Joel	4	3%
Fraiberg, Selma	4	3%
Hartman, Ann	4	3%
Kelly, Florence	4	3%
Rankin, Jeanette	4	3%
Specht, Harry	4	3%
Taft, Jessie	4	3%
Wells-Barnett, Ida B.	4	3%
Berg, Insoo Kim	3	2%
Canon, Ida	3	2%
Germain, Carel	3	2%
Gitterman, Alex	3	2%
Hollis, Florence	3	2%
Meyer, Carol	3	2%
Robinson, Virginia	3	2%

Of the other 117 names, 25 were mentioned twice and 92 were mentioned once.

While faculty were not told that the order of preference mattered, we looked at the reason for the first choice, believing what came first to a person's mind had some primacy. We coded the responses independently and then met to resolve differences. The following three codes were agreed upon:

1. He or she contributed to the profession (35%). For this code, the profession of social work was specifically referenced. Examples given for this code are "social work would not exist as a profession if not for her" and "her efforts on behalf of NASW (caused me to select her);"
2. She or he contributed to the improvement of society (34%). The well-being of society was referenced in the responses. Examples given for this code are "she

focused on community based work” and “his commitment to building social movements;” and

3. My education contributed to my learning about this person (30%). Whereas the first two categories are tied to what influenced the respondent in naming someone as influential, here reasons are linked to “who” and/or “what.” Examples given for this code are “he was my professor,” “my MSW program at x university,” and “what I learned through my education.”

The responses provided for this question were also coded independently and then agreed upon. They are grouped into five categories with the first two accounting for the majority:

1. The profession of social work will change (40%). Faculty in this category described social work as contracting or taking on a new identity. Examples in this category are “the profession will return to more social action (its roots),” “it will combine with other professions,” and “it will become more focused on specialized practice;”
2. The relationship between research and the profession will change (31%). Two-thirds of the faculty in this category believe research will play a more central role and one-third believe it will play a less central role. Examples in this category are “evidenced-based practice and evaluation research will play an increasingly central role” and “the profession will move away from research;”
3. Global issues will become the focus as we live in an increasingly interconnected world (6%);
4. Technology will gain ascendancy in social work (6%); and
5. Special populations will become the focus as we reach out to, e.g. trauma victims, those with health issues, or aging populations (6%). Ten percent of the faculty cited a range of other trends.

5 Comparisons

In order to gain a better understanding of who was chosen as the most influential and the variables related to those choices, we looked at Jane Addams who was picked far more frequently than any of the others. We explored whether the faculty who chose her first (n=90) were different from those who chose someone else first. With the exception of race, there were no significant differences on the basis of age, gender, highest social work degree, years taught, area of expertise, reasons for selecting her, and area of teaching (we combined the areas of teaching into practice courses – administration, community organizing, direct practice, and advanced practice in one group – and other courses, those teaching human behavior, research, and policy into separate areas). Whites were more likely to pick Addams first than other racial designations ($\chi^2=8.74$; $df=1$; $p<.01$).

When asked what influenced their choice of the first person, faculty’s answers varied based on gender ($\chi^2=10.48$; $df=2$; $p<.01$). Men were more apt to say that the influence of the person on the profession and their educational experience led them to pick who was the most influential person, and women were more apt to say the person’s contribution to society was

the reason they picked the first person. Among responses regarding future trends, we found no significant associations except for one obvious one. People who teach research are more apt to mention research as a future trend ($\chi^2=4.55$; $df=1$; $p<.05$).

Comparisons with the Encyclopedia and Pioneers

To gain further understanding of how the choices in this sample related to the profession, we compared the names picked in this study with those who are Pioneers or in the *Encyclopedia of Social Work*. We can derive from this a rough measure of whether these choices reflect any relationship to what the profession values. Of the 609 choices made, 407 (67%) were Pioneers. This high agreement is influenced by the frequency with which Addams and Richmond are chosen. A more precise picture of agreement is shown in looking at the ratio of Pioneers to the number of different names chosen. Of 151 different names chosen, 55 (36%) are Pioneers.

The selections that this group of faculty made indicate that they go beyond the Pioneer list in identifying influential professionals. Eleven (32%) of the top 34 named are not Pioneers, including two of the top eight. These eleven are Hopkins, Dix, Saleeby, Specht, Alinsky, Fraiberg, Gitterman, Berg, Kelly, Wells, and Fischer. Devine and Manning, cited by NASW as two of the six centennial leaders, were not selected by any faculty member and are not Pioneers. They do appear in the *Encyclopedia*. One hundred four faculty gave at least one non-Pioneer in their responses and four faculty did not cite any Pioneers. As a group, these faculty members tend to agree with the Pioneers on the top choices but after that is a great deal of divergence.

The same pattern holds when we compared the study choices to those chosen in the *Encyclopedia of Social Work*. Of 609 choices made, 247 (41%) are in the *Encyclopedia*. (In order to be listed there one has to be dead.) Once again, a large percent of the correspondence is accounted for by the frequency of choosing Addams and Richmond. This, too, can be made more precise by looking at the ratio of those in the *Encyclopedia* to the total number of different names in our study. Of 151 chosen, 45 (30%) are in the *Encyclopedia*. Here, too, there are notable omissions: Alinsky, Hollis, and Fraiberg (Berg died near press time). Fraiberg is not a Pioneer either. The ratio of agreement for being picked in all three sources (this survey, the Pioneers, and the *Encyclopedia*) is 28 out of 151 (19%).

6 Discussion

Jane Addams (cited by 86% of the faculty) and, to a lesser extent, Mary Richmond (cited by 50%) stand out as towering figures in the profession. Either Addams or Richmond were picked first by sixty percent of the faculty. With the data available in this study, we could not discern the implications of these choices. Despite this veritable unanimity about the contributions of these women, one a community organizer and one a caseworker, and both spanning macro and micro practice (Epple, 2007), there is little agreement about the other eminent contributors in our profession. After them, eight people were picked from 10 to 36 times. These include Harry Hopkins, named by 24%, and Frances Perkins, named by 18%. While they had many social work-related positions, they had no professional social work education. Whitney Young (19%) and Bertha Reynolds (15%) had social work degrees and are well-known but were named by less than 20% of the faculty.

After that, the percentages fall more precipitously: Perlman and Dix were named by 8%. Dix was born a half century before the other top 33 and almost 100 years before the first

professional training in social work began. Four of the next five named (Mikulski, Saleeby, Height, and Kendall), were living at the time of the survey. (Height died in April, 2010.) Among this group is the only elected politician in the top 34, Mikulski. Of the remaining names, no one was mentioned by more than 4% of the respondents and, with a few exceptions, they are largely known for their academic writing. They hail from a time when the profession was established and fewer people were without a professional education. Beyond that, there were 25 people mentioned twice and 92 mentioned once (names are available from the authors upon request).

This analysis can be made sharper by focusing on the first 10 names picked in order of frequency.

Name	Frequency	Percent	Pioneer	Encyclopedia
Jane Addams	127	86	Yes	Yes
Mary Richmond	74	50	Yes	Yes
Harry Hopkins	35	24	No	Yes
Whitney Young	28	19	Yes	Yes
Frances Perkins	26	18	Yes	Yes
Bertha Reynolds	22	15	Yes	Yes
Dorothea Dix	12	8	No	Yes
Helen Harris Perlman	12	8	Yes	Yes
Virginia Satir	10	7	Yes	Yes
Barbara Mikulski	10	7	Yes	No

The rapid drop in choices shows up after Addams and Richmond and, again, after Reynolds. Seven out of ten are both Pioneers and in the *Encyclopedia*. Given that Mikulski is still alive, the only discrepancy from perfect agreement is that Hopkins and Dix are not Pioneers. That is something that, given these findings, should be rectified.

By way of comparison, Haggblom et al.'s (2002) survey, which used a similar methodology, had the following rates: Skinner (58%), Piaget (33%), Freud (28%), Watson (24%), Bandura (23%), James (21%), and Pavlov (21%). Their 26th most frequently named psychologists (there were five of them) were named by 7% of the faculty.

Our 26th ranked was in a group of 10 contributors to the field and mentioned by 4% of the faculty. The psychologists are more densely populated after Skinner, who, while the only one named by a majority, comes nowhere near the frequency with which Addams was chosen. We cannot determine here whether this is because Addams is the dominant figure in the profession or if she is the first person that comes to mind among people who may not be often

asked to consider what great people and ideas influenced the profession's practice and educational development.

Of further comparison (and telling of the differences between social work and psychology), in Haggblom et al.'s survey at most only two of the top 26 were alive at the time of the survey (we say "at most" because, of these two, one died in 2001 and one in 2002, the year the study was published). In our survey six of the top 27 were alive, indicating social work draws more on its current leadership. Mary Ainsworth is the only woman psychologist named in the top 26 compared to our sample naming 18 women out of the top 27. Clearly women play a much more important role in the history of social work than in the history of psychology.

When we explore what is related to an educator choosing who is influential, some interesting findings emerge. Age, years teaching, and level of education are not related to the selection of names. Whether someone has taught a few years or many or has a higher degree, the influences remain the same. We are a profession that has adhered to its view of our history consistently and continues to believe in the importance of our early founders.

These faculty respondents may be influenced in their selection by race and gender. African-Americans and other minority groups tend to name people of color more often than whites. Seven of the nine African-American faculty named at least one African-American. One-third of the total sample identified at least one person of color in their selections. This could indicate an acceptance of the importance of minorities in the profession.

Women in this survey tend to favor reasons for selecting people that have to do with society while men tend to mention the contribution to the profession as the reason for their selection. In a recent NASW Workforce Study (Whitaker 2008), women declared an interest in social work earlier in their life than men, indicating perhaps that they are more apt to be driven by idealistic motives.

People become eminent because of their contributions to society and to the profession. Educational institutions are often the venues where learning about leaders in the profession occurs. Faculty in our survey mention reading on their own as an influence on their selections of influential people, though it is hard to separate this from learning that may have occurred while in school.

Future trends focus primarily on the direction of the profession and the impact of research. Some faculty describe a profession that is losing its uniqueness and others a profession that will return to its roots in order to maintain its niche. Evidence-based research is seen by some faculty as the path toward further professionalization (Thyer 2008) and by others as the downfall of the profession as it loses its appreciation for the individual. Not surprisingly, the researchers are considering the positive benefits of research. Regardless of the views of research, only two influential researchers, Reid (tied at 13th) and Fischer (tied at 18th) are cited as influential in the top 34. The global and technological directions suggested by faculty could describe any profession and both were cited in a recent editorial as future trends (Pomeroy 2010).

7 Conclusion

Our conclusion from this preliminary survey is that the group of 147 educators in our sample is connected to the profession but they look beyond NASW for inspiration and intellectual stimulation. We believe that we are a profession that is unified around Jane Addams, which

may reflect, as Murdach (2010) suggests, our progressive ideals. Across ages, gender, years of teaching, and areas of teaching, she, for the most part, is considered the most influential. These significant characteristics are not major dividers between us or predictors of who we view as influential. Even with this convergence around Addams (and with significant recognition of Richmond), there are no eponyms that recognize her work (see e.g. Roecklin 1996). We have Freudian, Rogerian, and Skinnerian clinical approaches, but no Addamsian approach to social work. And despite our near unanimity about Addams's importance, these faculty seem to be deeply divided about the direction of the profession and are influenced by their own areas of teaching and expertise. It is probable that if there were more discussion in the field about who eminent social workers are there would be more convergence in the lists.

Our survey has shown that there is a wide agreement on only a handful of professionals being identified as eminent and there is a broad range of selections that cover a variety of people. Coleman (1992) comments on the difficulty about making global judgments of eminence. Haggblom et al. (2002) purposefully were vague in their survey in their use of the word "greatest" and believed that such vagueness was a positive in getting useful responses. Getting more precision on eminence in social work with a larger and more representative sample awaits future research.

Many pathways exist for how social workers become influential – social action, practice, education, and political reform. A rich profession has a diversity of contributions from many areas. In this initial survey we found an essentially bi-modal pattern of eminence. A few people were highly selected. After that, many individuals were identified as influential. We interpret this to mean that social work today in the U.S. is characterized by many schools of thought without any one showing signs of becoming dominant. Of the six most frequently chosen names, only Perkins and Reynolds, at fifth and sixth, had a university appointment. Those considered most influential tended to be involved in social action. They were known by their deeds and values and not the ideas they produced.

The future of our profession may lie primarily in three directions – defining who we are as a profession, rethinking our relationship to research, and better serving emerging populations with enhanced technologies. But until we understand what we consider our roots, we cannot know where we are going as a profession.

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