

Undergraduate Views of Capital Punishment: Are Social Work Students Different from Other Students?

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The authors thank Brooke Stagner for entering the data and Janet Lambert for proofreading and editing the paper. Additionally, the authors thank the anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions.

Abstract

The death penalty is a controversial social issue in our society. Few other issues engender such debate or stir such emotions. Although the percentage of people who support capital punishment has decreased in recent decades, the majority of Americans still support it. The National Association of Social Workers, however, staunchly opposes the death penalty. This study examined the differences in death penalty attitudes between social work and non- social work undergraduate majors at a large public university. Far fewer social work students supported capital punishment as compared to students in other majors. Additionally, the results indicated that social work majors significantly differ from other students in the reasons for supporting/opposing capital punishment.

Keyterms: Social Work Students, Attitudes of Social Work Students, Death Penalty Views, and Reasons for Supporting Capital Punishment

Introduction

The United States is one of the few industrialized nations that still imposes capital punishment for some criminal offenses (The Death Penalty Information Center, 2004a). The use of capital punishment has a long history in the United States, beginning in colonial times. More than 20,000 people are estimated to have been executed (Durham, Elrod, & Kinkade, 1996; Lilly, 2002). Today, 38 states and the federal government have death penalty statutes (The Death Penalty Information Center, 2004b). In 2002, 71 individuals were put to death in the U.S. and in 2003, 65 people were executed (The Death Penalty Information Center, 2004c). Recent polls indicate that between 60% and 70% of people in the U.S. support capital punishment in some manner (Pollingreport.com, 2004; The Death Penalty Information Center, 2004d). Although the majority

Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics, Fall, 2005, Volume 2, Number 2 -page 3

of U.S. citizens appear to support capital punishment to some degree, there are varying degrees of support for capital punishment among the American populace. The degree of support for the death penalty has also dropped from the high of 80% support in the early 1990s (Soss, Langbein, & Metelko, 2003; Pollingreport.com, 2004; The Death Penalty Information Center, 2004d). Furthermore, support for the death penalty varies across different segments of the U.S. population, such as between men and women, along racial lines, and so forth (Arthur, 1998; Ellsworth & Gross, 1994; Erikson & Tedin, 2003; Murray, 2003; Niven, 2002; Soss, Langbein, & Metelko, 2003; Whitehead & Blankenship, 2000). Finally, 12 states do not have the death penalty, and even within the 39 jurisdictions with capital punishment, both public support and the number of executions vary greatly. In sum, support for the death penalty is not unanimous or without debate.

There are also different reasons for supporting or opposing the death penalty. There is no universal agreement among proponents of why they support the death penalty, nor is there agreement among abolitionists on why the death penalty should be opposed. Because the death penalty is the ultimate punishment, there is need for extensive research. As Whitehead, Blankenship, and Wright (1999) point out, "Given the literal life and death nature of capital punishment, it is important to continue research on this topic" (p. 250).

The death penalty is a controversial subject. It stirs passionate arguments between proponents of capital punishment and abolitionists and often leads to vocal and spirited debates in college courses that cover the subject. Sometimes, the debate divides organizations, civil groups, and professional groups. The debate has led to an official stand on the issue of capital punishment by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) who, as a professional community, has issued a policy statement opposing capital punishment (NASW, 1997, 2000). NASW's position is that social workers should not engage in or condone any actions or policies in which a client or former client could be harmed. Because the death penalty generally involves offenders with many problems and involves the greatest harm to a person, NASW decided to issue a policy statement opposing the death penalty (NASW, 2003). NASW's death penalty position is part of an overall concern by the organization toward the criminal justice system and the erosion of rights for citizens, particularly those who have been disenfranchised by society. It is those with the least power and those who have been disenfranchised who are at the greatest risk of being sentenced to death (NASW, 2003). The policy against capital punishment also illustrates the foundation upon

which social work is built, individual liberties and social justice. By taking a position opposing the death penalty, NASW reaffirmed the role of social work as an agent of change (NASW, 2003). "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). The opposition to capital punishment was reaffirmed by NASW Delegate Assembly in August 1999 (NASW, 2003).

The opposition position by NASW towards the death penalty has led to changes in the field. For example, 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, etc.) for why a defendant should not be sentenced to death (Guin, Noble, & Merrill, 2003; Reed & Rohrer, 2000; Schroeder, 2003).

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. These beliefs are why NASW opposes capital punishment. While NASW has issued a policy statement against capital punishment, it is unknown whether social work students share a similar stance on the death penalty. This exploratory study examined the level of death penalty support among social work majors at a large, public Midwestern university in the United States as compared to students majoring in other disciplines. In addition, this study sought to determine whether there are significant differences in reasons for supporting or opposing capital punishment between social work students and students in other majors.

Literature Review

There is a growing body of literature that has focused upon the attitudes of social work students across a wide array of topics, such as homosexuality (Lim & Johnson, 2001), older adults (Tan, Hawkins, & Ryan, 2001), spirituality and religion (Kaplan & Dziegielewski, 1999), social justice (Moran, 1989), poverty (Macarov, 1981), and academic preparation for group work (Knight, 1999). For example, Fabianic (1979) found criminal justice majors had higher libertarianism scores than social work majors. There has been virtually no research on social work majors' level of support for the death penalty and their reasons for supporting or opposing capital punishment. When social work students were included in a study on the attitudes of the death

penalty, they were mixed in with other majors and no detailed information was given about social work students as a group (e.g., Maxwell & Rivera-Vazquez, 1998). No study examining the degree of support for capital punishment and the reasons for this support among social work majors could be located in the literature.

While there has been little research on death penalty support and views of social work majors, there has been considerable research on the general public's views of capital punishment. Recent polls have indicated that between 60% and 70% of the U.S. public supports capital punishment (Pollingreport.com, 2004; The Death Penalty Information Center, 2004d). Nonetheless, the death penalty literature indicates that the degree of support varies considerably. Some people very strongly favor capital punishment, while others only somewhat support it. Similar findings are observed among those who oppose the death penalty. In addition, the reasons why people support or oppose capital punishment vary.

The four major ideologies provided for supporting the death penalty are deterrence, retribution, incapacitation, and law and order. Many people, particularly politicians, indicate that the death penalty is an effective deterrent for the crime of murder (Ellsworth & Ross, 1983; Lynch, 2002; Whitehead & Blankenship, 2000; Zeisel & Gallup, 1989). Supporters of this position advocate that executing convicted murderers is a far more effective deterrent than life imprisonment (Steele & Wilcox, 2003). It should be noted that the literature strongly suggests that capital punishment has little, or no, deterrent effect on the crime of murder (Bailey, 1990, 1991; Bailey & Peterson, 1989; Decker & Kohfeld, 1990; Paternoster, 1991). Nevertheless, among some proponents, there is a view that the death penalty can and does deter others from murder.

Retribution is also a reason provided for supporting the death penalty (Ellsworth & Gross, 1994; Firment & Geiselman, 1997; Lynch, 2002). In the last 20 years, there has been a hardening of society's view of crime and the punishment of criminal offenders (Durham et al., 1996). Many people feel that murderers deserve the death penalty since they took a life (Bohm, 1987, 2003; Ellsworth & Gross, 1994; Steele & Wilcox, 2003). In addition, retribution is an emotional response for many to the horrific and shocking crime of murder (Ellsworth & Gross, 1994; Ellsworth & Ross, 1983; Geraghty, 2003; Lynch, 2002; Zimring, 2003). Anger can lead to a demand that murderers be put to death (Lynch, 2002; Vandiver, Giacomassi, & Gathje, 2002; Zimring, 2003).

Many retributionists argue that sentencing the murderer to death helps relieve the anger and hurt caused by the murder for both the victim's family and society in general.

Incapacitation is another reason to justify support for the death penalty (Ellsworth & Gross, 1994; Firment & Geiselman, 1997; Zeisel & Gallup, 1989). There is a view that many murderers will murder again if given a chance. Proponents for capital punishment who believe in the incapacitation ideology argue that executing dangerous, violent offenders allows society to ensure that they will not harm others in the future. Related to incapacitation is the view that it costs too much to keep a convicted murderer in prison for life (Bohm, 1987, 2003; Ellsworth & Gross, 1994). It is often believed, erroneously, that it is cheaper to execute a person than to keep that person in prison for natural life (Acker, 1996; Brooks & Erickson, 1996).

The last major reason provided for the need for the death penalty is that it is needed to maintain law and order in society. This reason represents the willingness to use state violence and punishment for social control (Beckett & Sasson, 2000; Cochran, Boots, & Heide, 2003; Rankin, 1979; Steele & Wilcox, 2003). The idea that capital punishment brings order to society is rooted in the instrumentalist perspective (Arthur, 1998; Baumer, Messner, & Rosenfeld, 2003; Maxwell & Rivera-Vazquez, 1998; Tyler & Weber, 1982). "The instrumentalist perspective holds that peoples' attitudes toward the death penalty are driven primarily by their desires to reduce crime and protect society, and that the death penalty is a means to achieve this end" (Maxwell & Rivera-Vazquez, 1998, p. 337). The instrumental perspective is indirectly tied to the belief that deterrence through punitive, harsh sentences, like the death penalty, will ultimately lead to law and order in society by instilling fear into current and future criminals (Baumer et al., 2003; Garland, 2000).

As with proponents, abolitionists provide a variety of reasons for opposing the death penalty. The literature indicates there are five commonly provided reasons for opposing capital punishment: morality, innocence, emotional, mercy, and the brutalization effect. The morality rationale argues that the death penalty is immoral, uncivilized, and cruel (Ellsworth & Gross, 1994; Firment & Geiselman, 1997; Hood, 2001; Reese, 2002; Zimring, 2003). "Abolitionists will, rightly, continue to argue that in executing murders, the state and its citizens lower themselves to the same moral level as the murderers" (Lilly, 2002, p. 331). Capital punishment sends a moral message that killing is acceptable. Capital punishment "legitimizes the very behavior - killing -

which the law seeks to repress.... It undermines the legitimacy and moral authority of the whole legal system" (Hood, 2001, p. 332).

Administrative concerns are frequently provided as a reason for opposing capital punishment (Lilly, 2002). The greatest administrative concern is the risk of executing an innocent person. There is strong evidence supporting the fact a sizable number of innocent individuals have been sentenced to death (Huff, 2002, 2004; Liebman, 2002; Radelet, Lofquist, & Bedau, 1996). Over the past several decades, more than 110 individuals have been exonerated and released from death row (The Death Penalty Information Center, 2004e). Many of these wrongful convictions were overturned due to DNA evidence (Clarke, Lambert, & Whitt, 2001; Huff, 2004)¹. The introduction of DNA testing has helped reshape the debate on capital punishment by adding validity to the argument that many innocent persons have been sentenced to death. DNA exonerations have raised important legal and ethical questions about the death penalty because of the very real chance of not only sentencing an innocent person to death but actually executing him/her (Whitt, Clarke, & Lambert, 2002). The issue of innocence adds to the critical debate on the appropriateness of the death penalty. Thus, many abolitionists use the risk of executing innocent persons to explain their opposition to capital punishment (Ellsworth & Gross, 1994).

In addition, the number of DNA exonerations has led to calls for a moratorium on capital punishment until the system for imposing death sentences can be reformed (Huff, 2002, 2004). While not necessary opposed to capital punishment, those pushing for reforms and/or a moratorium are concerned about how the death penalty is imposed and the length of the appeals process to address errors which may have been made. After 13 inmates had been exonerated, Illinois Governor George Ryan imposed a statewide moratorium on capital punishment in January 2000 because of his concern that the system had too many errors and needed time to be corrected (Geraghty, 2003; Huff, 2002; Lilly, 2002). Later, Governor Ryan commuted the death sentences of 167 inmates to life in prison because of his concerns over the quality of the legal process leading to death sentences (BBC News, 2003; Schepers, 2003). In addition, at the same time, several other state legislatures (e.g., Indiana, Illinois, Maryland, and Nebraska) called for studies of administrative problems, particularly the issue of innocence, associated with the death penalty

¹ We thank the anonymous reviewer who suggested that we should widen our scope of the discuss of innocence to include the issue of DNA testing and the push by reformers to address with the problems frequently found in death penalty cases.

(Lilly, 2002). While Governor Ryan and others were demonized by proponents, abolitionists saw him and the other politicians calling a moratorium on capital punishment as reformers. Finally, it is interesting to note that the recent call to reform and lengthen the appeal process is the opposite which occurred in the middle 1990s when the appeal process was significantly shortened to prevent prolonged litigation of death sentences (Geraghty, 2003; Zimring, 2003).

As with support for the death penalty, opposition can also be based on emotion. Abolitionists are often emotionally moved and saddened by executions (Vandiver et al., 2002). The opposite of the desire for retribution is the desire for mercy. Some abolitionists feel that it is important to advocate mercy rather than seek revenge. They feel that capital punishment violates basic human rights. According to the United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights, two fundamental rights are 1) the right not to be tortured, and 2) the right not to be executed (Prejean, 2000). Further, the U.S. Catholic Bishops in the 1980s "strongly condemned the death penalty for its disregard for human dignity" (Prejean, 2000, p. 183). Thus, like those who support the death penalty, abolitionists are also emotional in their opposition.

The last major explanation for opposing capital punishment is that it causes violence. Rather than deter people from committing crimes, some abolitionists argue that the death penalty actually leads to increased future violence (Thomson 1997, 1999). Increased violence due to capital punishment is referred to as the brutalization effect (Bowers, 1984; Bowers & Pierce, 1980; Thomson 1997, 1999; Vandiver et al., 2002). The brutalization effect is diametrically opposed to deterrence argument. The deterrence position argues that capital punishment reduces violence while the brutalization position argues that it actually causes more violence in society.

Research Questions

It is predicted that social students will be much lower in their support for capital punishment as compared to students in other majors. Social workers view human behavior as learned behavior, influenced by the dynamics of environmental forces. Social workers generally adopt a rehabilitative approach to crime and criminal behavior. Although they consider an individual to be responsible for her/his behavior, they also consider circumstances and personality factors as having an impact on an individual's behavior. Hollis, who originally coined the phrase "the person-in-situation", suggested both the individual and the environment are inseparable parts (Grinnell, 1973). Social workers believe that since people learn behavior, both good and bad, those

people who commit crimes can change, including those sentenced to life/death. Social work students generally come with a different set of characteristics that favor progressive attitudes towards social issues and help further understanding people from different vantage points. Social work classrooms are generally diverse, with higher representation of minority, female, and non-traditional students as compared to other disciplines. Further, there is a growing trend among students taking social work for religious beliefs because of an increasing recognition of religion in peoples' lives (Poppo & Leighninger, 2002). This trend is further reinforced by the initiation of undergraduate programs with a religious focus in programs accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) (CSWE, 1999, p. 190). These characteristics in social work students predispose them to favorable opinions on human issues.

A second major assumption behind social work students' opposition to the death penalty comes from the professional orientation characterized by humanistic and liberal values. The liberal perspective which dominates social work philosophy and values is based upon the conviction that rehabilitation and social reform are better approaches to crime prevention than incarceration or death (Poppo & Leighninger, 2002). This view is in line with the general principles found in most higher education social work programs which generally stress the client's ability to change, understanding, and helping as part of the core principles of social work. Social workers try to improve the quality of life for their clients by intervening in the environment to make it better (Huneter & Saleeby, 1977). Social workers adopt a rehabilitative approach to change people for the better. The discipline of social work is not built upon the principles of punishment and retribution but helping people to correct their lives (DuBois & Miley, 1999).

The third assumption comes from the social work emphasis on an ecosystems approach that recognizes the dynamic interaction between micro and macro systems. This approach helps to understand crime as a social problem rooted in the conditions in society. Criminal behavior can be seen as an expression of unfair macro systems, the insensitivity of the system, or the development of behavioral problems in response to deficient or problem-ridden family and community environments (Schwendinger & Schwendinger, 1970; Spitzer, 1975). Some social workers support the theory of Quinney (1974) who argued that advanced capitalist societies may use criminal law as an instrument of the state and ruling class to maintain and perpetuate the existing social and economic order (Sarri, 1995).

In this context, it was hypothesized that social work students would generally oppose the death penalty as compared students in other majors. It is important to point out that there has been little, if any, research on the degree of support and views on the death penalty among social work students. In this exploratory study, the degree of support for the death penalty among social work majors was contrasted with the degree of support among non- social work majors. In addition, it was theorized that social work students would significantly differ from non-social work majors in the major reasons for support and opposition of the death penalty found in the literature.

Methods

Respondents

The data for this study came from a survey of college students at a public four-year, nationally ranked Midwestern university with an enrollment of slightly more than 20,000. A non-random, systematic convenience sampling design involving about 20 academic courses in the Spring of 2002 was used. 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 upon 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. Of the college courses selected for the administration of the survey, there were an average of 15 to 30 students in the class on the day of the survey. 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. 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. More than 96% of the students present filled out the survey.

Since the purpose of the study was to compare and contrast social work majors to students majoring in other areas, it was necessary to select courses which were generally only taken by undergraduate social work majors, and in order to survey non-social work students, the survey was administered to a variety of general education classes required of all students. 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 survey contained several questions about demographic characteristics. About 61% of the full sample were women and 39% were men. For the sub-sample of non-social work students, about 42% were women and 58% were men. For the social work subsample, approximately 86% were women and 14% were men. In other words, the social work subsample was much higher in the proportion female respondents than was the non-social work subsample. This was expected since social work, as a discipline, mainly attracts women.

In terms of race, the entire sample was 71% White, 18% Black, 3% Hispanic, and 8% other. For the non-social work group of students, approximately 76% were White, 13% Black, 2% Hispanic, and 9% other. For the social work group, about 66% were White, 24% Black, 4% Hispanic, and 6% other. The social work subsample had a higher proportion of Black and Hispanic respondents than the non-major subsample. Again, this was expected since social work tends to attract more minority students than do many other majors.

The median age for the entire sample of students was 21, with a range from 18 to 69 years old. The mean age was 22.99, with a standard deviation of 7.57. For the non-social work majors, the median age was 20, with a range from 18 to 69 years old. The mean age was 20.77, with a standard deviation of 4.62. For the social work majors, the median age was 22, with range of 18 to 59. The mean age was 26.00, with a standard deviation of 9.52. In general, the two groups of students were somewhat similar in their ages, with social worker students being, on average, slightly older than non-social work majors.

For the entire group of students, there was a nearly equal breakdown of the students in terms of their academic standing. Specifically, about 26% were freshman, 24% were sophomores, 26% were juniors, and 24% were seniors. For the non-social work group, approximately 35% were freshman, 30% were sophomores, 18% were juniors, and 17% were seniors. This breakdown was not surprising since most students take general education courses during their first two years at the university. For the social work group, about 14% were freshmen, 16% were sophomores, 37% were juniors, and 33% were seniors. This breakdown is in accordance with how the social work major is constructed at the survey university. Social work majors generally take most of their discipline courses during their junior and senior years.

Measures

Death Penalty Support. The students were asked their degree of support for capital punishment using a seven-item close-ended response category which was created for this survey. Specifically, students were asked to "Check one of the below statements that best reflects your attitude towards the death penalty: 1 = I am very strongly opposed to the death penalty; 2 = I am strongly opposed to the death penalty; 3 = I am somewhat opposed to the death penalty; 4 = I am uncertain about the death penalty; 5 = I am somewhat in favor of the death penalty; 6 = I am strongly in favor of the death penalty; 7 = I am very strongly in favor of the death penalty." While some death penalty attitudinal research has collapsed the measure of support for capital punishment into a dichotomous variable representing support or opposition, we feel this fails to capture the subtle but important differences in support for and opposition to the death penalty. There is a meaningful difference between supporting somewhat and very strongly supporting the death penalty. The seven-point response category for the death penalty support measure used in this study allowed for a greater variance in students' views towards capital punishment than a measure with fewer response options, particularly a dichotomous one with only the responses categories of support or oppose.

Reasons for Supporting or Opposing Capital Punishment. A total of 14 items representing the major reasons for supporting or opposing capital punishment were selected (and are presented in Table 2). Specifically, for death penalty support there were two measures for deterrence, four measures for retribution, one measure for law and order, and two measures for incapacitation. Additionally, for death penalty opposition, there was a single measure each for the morality, mercy, emotional, innocence, and brutalization reasons. All 14 items were answered with a 5-point Likert-type agreement response scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. While the 14 items were worded for this study, most are based upon ideas and/or questions presented in past studies on the death penalty (Bohm, 1992; Ellsworth & Ross, 1983; Ellsworth & Gross, 1994; Zeisel & Gallup, 1989).

Results

Among the entire sample of students, less than half supported capital punishment in any manner. About 8% very strongly favored the death penalty, 14% strongly favored, 26% somewhat favored, 13% were uncertain, 11% were somewhat opposed, 12% were strongly opposed, and 16%

were very strongly opposed to the death penalty. In other words, 48% supported capital punishment to some degree and 39% were opposed in some manner. Among non-social work majors, 12% were very strongly in favor of the death penalty, 19% were strongly in favor, 26% were somewhat in favor, 12% were uncertain, 9% were opposed, 9% were strongly opposed, and 12% were very strongly opposed. Hence, 58% of the non-social work majors favored to some degree capital punishment. This percentage is slightly lower than the degree of capital punishment support found in recent national polls of Americans in which between 60% and 70% of the U.S. population supports the death penalty to some degree (Pollingreport.com, 2004; The Death Penalty Information Center, 2004d). It appears that students at the large Midwestern, public university are slightly less supportive than the general public. This is not surprising since education has been inversely linked to support for the death penalty among U.S. citizens (Borg, 1997). Among social work majors, 3% indicated that they were strongly in favor of the death penalty, 6% were strongly in favor, 26% were somewhat in favor, 14% were uncertain, 14% were somewhat opposed, 15% were strongly opposed, and 21% were very strongly opposed. Thus, 36% of social work students favored capital punishment to some degree, with most of those only having somewhat support. Approximately 50% of the social work majors were opposed in some fashion to the death penalty, with the most common response being very strongly opposed. It appears that the 172 social work students are generally opposed to capital punishment, and, as such, reduced overall support among the entire sample of college students.

The frequency results suggest that there is a significant difference in death penalty support between social work and non-social work majors. Both the Independent t-test and Chi Square Test of Independence were used to test this assertion. The t-test results confirmed that there was a large, significant difference between the two groups, with social work students being lower in their support for the death penalty ($t\text{-value} = -5.42$, $df = 404$, $p .001$) ($\chi^2 = 33.76$, $df = 6$, $p .001$).² Moreover, there appears to be a relationship between the amount of social work education and opposition to capital punishment. Based upon the t- test among the social work majors, there was

² In addition to the t-test, the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) test was done using the four academic levels of freshman, sophomore, junior and senior rather than the coding scheme of lower and upper level. There was a significant difference at $p .05$ in death penalty views between the different academic levels of social work students. Seniors and Juniors were less supportive of capital punishment. This relationship using ANOVA was not found among non- social work students.

a significant degree of greater opposition to the death penalty among upper-level students (i.e., juniors and seniors) as compared to 2 lower-level students (i.e., freshmen and sophomores) (t value = -2.42, df = 170, p .05). This was not found among non-social work students. There was no statistically significant degree of difference in capital punishment support between lower and upper-level students majoring in other disciplines (t value = 0.64, df = 232, p = .52).

As previously indicated, White persons generally have higher degree of support for the death penalty than minorities (Arthur, 1998; Ellsworth & Gross, 1994; Murray, 2003; Niven, 2002; Soss et al., 2003). It has also been observed that men have higher levels of support for capital punishment than women (Ellsworth & Gross, 1994; Erikson & Tedin, 2003; Niven, 2002; Whitehead & Blankenship, 2000). Age has also been occasionally linked to death penalty support (Bohm, 1987; Borg, 1997). In a study of students at four Texas universities, Farnworth, Longmire, and West (1998) found that there was less support for capital punishment among seniors as compared to freshman. They attribute the difference to the "liberalizing" effect of higher education. Since the two groups of students were different in terms of gender, race, academic level, and, to a lesser degree, age, there is a question whether the difference is due to these personal characteristics or other forces. To see what association majoring in social work had on support for capital punishment independent of the effects gender, race, age, and academic standing, 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 to be estimated on the dependent variable while statistically controlling for the shared effects of other independent variables.

Except for age and gender, all the measures were recoded for the OLS regression analysis. *Age* was left as a continuous variable measured in years. *Gender* was coded with males coded as 1 and females coded as 0. The new race variable, called *White*, was collapsed into a dichotomous variable with White respondents being coded as 1 and Nonwhite respondents coded as 0. Academic standing was collapsed into a dichotomous variable called *Upper Level*, where freshmen and sophomores were coded as 0, and juniors and seniors were coded as 1. A dichotomous variable called *Social Work Major* was created where social work majors were coded as 1 and non-social work majors were coded as 0. Finally, the dependent variable, support for the death penalty, was reverse coded so that an increase in the variable meant greater support for capital punishment. The independent variables were entered into an OLS equation with death penalty support as the

dependent variable. The results are reported in Table 1. Even after controlling for the other variables, *Social Work Major* had a significant negative impact on death penalty support. In other words, social workers, in general, were less supportive of capital punishment than students in other majors, even after controlling for gender, race, age, and academic standing. Nevertheless, it is clear from the low value for R-Squared that there are other factors that account for the variance observed in the death penalty support measure. Reasons for supporting or opposing the death penalty could be some of these factors.

Table 1. *OLS Regression Results for Support for the Death Penalty*³

Variable	B	SE B	β
Male	0.91	.20	.24**
White	0.67	.20	.16**
Upper Level	-0.16	.20	-.04
Age	0.10	.01	.03
Social Work Major	-0.52	.21	-.14*
R ²		.14**	

* p .01. ** p .001.

The reasons for supporting or opposing the death penalty were examined to see whether there was a difference between social work students and students in other disciplines. The percentage responses for the 14 items representing reasons for supporting or opposing the death penalty for the entire sample, the subsample of social work majors, and the subsample for non-social work majors are presented in Table 2. In general, social work students were lower in their support for reasons supporting the death penalty than were students in other majors. Only for the second deterrence measure and the two incapacitation measures did there appear to be little difference between the two groups of students. For four of the five reasons for opposing capital punishment, social worker majors were more likely to agree with the statements than were non-

³ *Note.* B represents the unstandardized regression coefficient. SE standard for standard error. β represents the standardized regression coefficient. Male was coded as 0 = female and 1 = male. White was coded as 0 = nonwhite and 1 = White. Upper level was coded as freshman and sophomores = 0 and juniors and seniors = 1. Age was measured in continuous years. Social Work Major was coded as 0 = non-social work major and 1 = social work major. The dependent variable was coded as 1 = very strongly oppose the death penalty, 2 = strongly oppose, 3 = somewhat oppose, 4 = uncertain, 5 = somewhat support, 6 = strongly support, and 7 = very strongly support.

social work majors. Both groups agreed that there is a good possibility that an innocent person will be wrongly executed.

Both the Independent t-test and the Chi-Square test of independence were used to see whether social worker students differed significantly from non-social work students for the 14 items for supporting or opposing capital punishment⁴. The results for both tests are presented in Table 3. There was a significant difference between the two groups of students on all the measures except for one deterrence measure and the two incapacitation measures. While social work students were less likely to agree that the death penalty is a more effective deterrent than life imprisonment, they were unsure whether capital punishment really failed to deter. On all four

Table 2. *Frequency Responses for Reasons for Supporting or Opposing Capital Punishment for Entire Group, Social Work Majors, and Other Majors*

Statement	Entire Group (N=406)					Social Work (n=172)					Other Majors (n=234)				
	SD %	D %	U %	A %	SA %	SD %	D %	U %	A %	SA %	SD %	D %	U %	A %	SA %
Deterrence															
The death penalty is a more effective deterrent than life imprisonment	21	29	22	20	9	23	36	24	14	3	19	24	20	24	13
After the execution, violent crime in that state declines for several weeks	11	27	54	8	0	14	27	54	5	0	9	27	54	9	0
Retribution															
Murders deserve the death penalty since they took a life	16	22	22	29	11	22	29	24	19	6	12	16	20	36	15
I become angry when a convicted murder does not receive the death penalty	23	27	21	11	7	31	44	17	6	1	18	31	25	15	12
16-year-old convicted of first-degree murder deserve the death penalty	31	26	26	11	6	39	30	22	6	3	25	23	29	14	8
I believe in the idea of an "eye for an eye, a life for a life."	21	27	20	21	11	26	38	19	12	5	17	18	21	28	16
Law and Order															
The death penalty is necessary to maintain law and order	22	28	22	22	6	30	34	21	13	2	16	24	23	28	9
Incapacitation and Cost															
It costs more money to incarcerate someone for life without parole than it does to execute that person	16	15	25	30	14	19	14	26	26	15	14	15	25	33	14
Most convicted murders would kill again if given the opportunity	4	21	40	25	10	4	21	46	22	7	4	22	35	27	12
Reasons to Oppose															
The death penalty serves little purpose other than to demonstrate society's cruelty	17	40	14	23	7	9	34	17	29	12	23	45	11	18	3
Showing mercy is more important than seeking revenge	7	14	34	36	10	2	8	30	45	14	10	18	36	29	6
It saddens me when a person is executed, regardless of the crime they committed	15	25	17	29	14	6	19	19	41	15	22	30	15	20	13
There is a good possibility that an innocent person will be wrongly executed	3	11	16	43	27	4	5	10	45	36	2	15	20	42	21
Executions set violent example leading to future violence															

retribution measures, social worker students were far less likely to agree than were students majoring in other areas. Social work students were much less likely to view that the death penalty as necessary to provide law and order. For both incapacitation measures, there was no statistically

⁴ In addition to the Independent t-test, two nonparametric tests were used. Specifically, the Kruskal-Wallis H test and the Mann-Whitney U test were utilized. Results similar to the t-test were observed.

significant difference between the two groups. Finally, social work majors were much higher in all five reasons for opposing capital punishment than were students majoring in other areas. The greatest differences were for the measures of morality, mercy, and emotional opposition. It is not known whether the differences observed were due to personal characteristics or to majoring in social work.

Note. SD=Strongly Agree, D=Disagree, U=Uncertain, A=Agree, SA=Strongly Agree. Percentage totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.

Table 3. Differences Between Social Work Majors and Non-Social Work Majors on Reasons for

Statement	Social Work Majors (172)		Non-Social Work Major (234)		Differences	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Deterrence						
The death penalty is a more effective deterrent than life imprisonment	2.40	1.08	2.63	1.32	3.80**	20.97**
After the execution, violent crime in that state declines for several weeks	2.50	0.80	2.65	0.79	1.88	5.21
Retribution						
Murders deserve the death penalty since they took a life	2.57	1.19	3.26	1.25	5.66**	32.86**
I become angry when a convicted murder does not receive the death penalty	2.02	0.92	2.72	1.24	6.23**	36.97**
16-year-old convicted of first-degree murder deserve the death penalty	2.04	1.06	2.58	1.25	4.59**	20.98**
I believe in the idea of an "eye for an eye, a life for a life."	2.33	1.14	3.08	1.33	5.91**	40.90**
Law & Order						
The death penalty is necessary to maintain law and order	2.25	1.09	2.91	1.24	5.57**	29.69**
Incapacitation & Costs						
It costs more money to incarcerate someone for life without parole than it does to execute that person	3.05	1.33	3.17	1.25	0.93	2.76
Most convicted murders would kill again if given the opportunity	3.06	0.93	3.21	1.05	1.40	7.00
Reasons to Oppose						
The death penalty serves little purpose other than to demonstrate society's cruelty	3.01	1.20	2.35	1.12	-5.81**	32.07**
Showing mercy is more important than seeking revenge	3.62	0.91	3.04	1.06	-5.82**	31.85**
It saddens me when a person is executed, regardless of the crime they committed	3.40	1.13	2.72	1.35	-5.36**	37.18**
There is a good possibility that an innocent person will be wrongly executed	4.02	1.02	3.65	1.03	-3.58**	24.45**
Executions set violent example leading to future violence	2.91	1.17	2.60	1.04	-2.86*	19.86**

SD = standard deviation. χ^2 df for entire column is equal to 4. The degrees of freedom for t = 404. * p .01 ** p .001

Because there was a difference between the two groups in several areas of personal characteristics, OLS regression was conducted with *Male*, *White*, *Upper Level*, *Age*, and *Social Work Major* as the independent variables. Each of the 14 reasons for supporting or opposing capital punishment were dependent variables (i.e., 14 separate OLS regression equations were computed). The results are reported in Table 4. The independent variables of *Male*, *White*, *Upper Level*, *Age*, and *Social Work Major* are reported in the columns. Due to space limitations, only the standardized regression coefficient is reported. The 14 reasons for supporting or opposing the death penalty (i.e., dependent variables) are reported in the rows. After controlling for gender, race, academic

standing, and age, the measure representing whether majoring in social work had a statistically significant effect on 7 of the 14 items.

Table 4. *Standardized OLS Regression Results for Each of the 14 Reasons for Supporting or Opposing the Death Penalty as a Dependent Variable*

Statement	Male	White	Upper Level	Age	SWK Major	R ²
Deterrence						
<i>β</i> 's						
The death penalty is a more effective deterrent than life imprisonment	.12*	.12*	-.06	.00	-.10	.07***
After the execution, violent crime in that state declines for several weeks	.03	.12*	-.11	.07	-.06	.03*
Retribution						
Murders deserve the death penalty since they took a life	.12*	.14**	-.08	-.00	-.18**	-.11***
I become angry when a convicted murder does not receive the death penalty	.19***	-.11	-.08	-.02	.17**	.13***
16-year-old convicted of first-degree murder deserve the death penalty	.13*	.14**	-.02	-.05	-.13*	.08***
I believe in the idea of an "eye for an eye, a life for a life."	.10	.07	-.06	-.01	.01	.02
Law & Order						
The death penalty is necessary to maintain law and order	.17***	.17***	-.09	.01	-.14**	.14***
Incapacitation & Costs						
It costs more money to incarcerate someone for life without parole than it does to execute that person	.13*	.15**	-.09	.01	.05	.04**
Most convicted murders would kill again if given the opportunity	.10	.07	-.06	-.01	.01	.02
Reasons to Oppose						
The death penalty serves little purpose other than to demonstrate society's cruelty	-.21***	-.14**	.05	.05	.13*	.14***
Showing mercy is more important than seeking revenge	-.11*	-.02	.05	.06	.19***	.10***
It saddens me when a person is executed, regardless of the crime they committed	-.21***	-.12**	.05	.10*	.10	.13***
There is a good possibility that an innocent person will be wrongly executed	-.11	-.08	-.01	.10	.08	.06***
Executions set violent example leading to future violence	-.22***	-.09	.06	-.01	.02	.07***

Note. For description of the variables, please see the note for Table 1. β represents the standardized OLS regression coefficient. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; $p < .001$

Even after controlling for the aforementioned personal characteristics, there was a statistically significant difference between social work majors and non-social work majors for all four of the retribution measures and the single law and order measure. Social work students were less likely to agree with these statements than students majoring in other areas. Additionally, there was a significant difference between the two groups of students for two of the opposition reasons. Specifically, social work majors were more likely to agree with the statement of morality/cruelty and mercy than were majors in other disciplines. Conversely, in the OLS regression analyses, there was no significant difference between social work students and non-social work students for the two deterrence measures, the two incapacitation measures, and three of the opposition measures. It was not surprising that there was no difference between the two groups of students on the incapacitation and deterrence measures, since there was no difference reported in Table 3 for

several of the measures. It was surprising that there was no difference between social work students and other students on the emotional opposition, innocence, and brutalization statements.

Discussion

The results generally support the position that social worker students are less likely to support capital punishment than other students, especially among upper-level social work majors. It would appear that the majority of social work students in this study agree with the view of the death penalty expressed by the National Association of Social Workers. Social worker students' opposition to the death penalty probably can be attributed to three factors: personal characteristics, their professional orientation and training, and their approach to individual and society. It is clear that some opposition to the death penalty is due to the fact that most of the social work majors in this study were women and/or minorities, with a sizable number who were nontraditional students. Both women and members of minority groups generally have less support for the death penalty (Arthur, 1998; Ellsworth & Gross, 1994; Whitehead & Blankenship, 2000). However, even when personal characteristics were taken into account, social work majors were clearly lower in their support for capital punishment than other majors. Moreover, it was found that upper-level social work students were more opposed to capital punishment than were lower-level social work majors, suggesting that social work education has a liberalizing effect on the students.

Not only are social workers less likely to support capital punishment, they differ from students in other majors on many of the reasons for supporting or opposing the death penalty. Social work students were more likely to agree that the death penalty is the most extreme, brutal punishment. Their opposition was less likely to be influenced by morality, mercy, emotional positions against the death penalty. Moral judgment is more likely to be influenced by religious beliefs. Professional ethics restrict social workers from being influenced by such beliefs. Social work students are advised to refrain from emotional involvement; therefore, it is not surprising that emotional opposition is not the basis for their opposition to the death penalty. Social work majors are also taught to be open-minded and nonjudgmental in their dealings with clients. The major highlights individual worth despite problem behaviors, commits to improving people's lives regardless of circumstances, emphasizes strong ethics to treat people in humane and fair manner, and helps people to change in order to live in an interdependent society. Social work students are entering a field that believes that it can treat and rehabilitate criminals, regardless of the crime and

individual circumstances. As a group, they do not feel that it is necessary to inflict death as a punishment wherein societal resources are wasted, and humans are denied opportunity to lead changed/dignified lives.

Further, the goal of social justice requires that social work students not only acquire knowledge about the existence of injustice in society, but also acquire professional competence to change the conditions in the environment while working for rehabilitation of individuals (NASW, 1996, 2000). The preponderance on law enforcement and punishment, rather on deplorable social conditions, is considered to be main reason for the failure of criminal justice system to reduce crime (Sarri, 1995). Social work philosophy fits into multiple causation theory of crime (Johnson & Schwartz, 1991). Social work programs (including the one studied) have rigorous training for their social work majors through supervised field experience. Since they are provided the opportunities to apply the classroom learning in the real world, social work students are further required to internalize the endorsed professional values and positions of their discipline (CSWE, 2001; Kirst- Ashman & Hull, 2002). For this reason, professional orientation could be a major contributor for the different position that social work majors take on the death penalty, and perhaps on many similar controversial topics.

The lack of difference between social work and other students for the deterrence and incapacitation measures could be due to several factors. One reason for this might be social workers' dual emphasis on the person and his/her environment. This emphasis originates from ecosystems approach and psycho-dynamic theories (Preston-Shoot & Agass, 1990). Social workers generally pursue the goals of prevention of crime, as well as providing rehabilitative opportunities for offenders. Social workers probably oppose the death penalty based on their professional value orientation that individuals can be changed if provided an opportunity. At the same time, they want society to be protected from the risks of repetitive crimes through law enforcement, deterrence, and incapacitation while supporting certain cases for probation and others for incarceration. Social workers are for an individualized approach in the treatment of crime. Hence, the responses of social workers are guided by the goals of social work practice in that it values clients' rights and societal interests as professional commitments on equal footing (Karger & Stoesz, 2003). In the event of competing values between individual privileges and rights and societal well-being, a social worker's judgment is guided by the larger interests of society (Reamer,

1995). Social workers are exempted from maintaining the ethical practice of confidentiality and self-determination when a client presents a greater risk for society as defined by the criminal justice system (Miller, 1995). For example, a person's intention to kill someone is not treated as individual right. Hence social workers, while opposing retribution, support deterrence, law and order, and incapacitation in the interest of society. Social workers likely support deterrence, because they emphasize intervening in the environment to minimize and eliminate environmental factors associated with crime and criminal behavior. This focus suggests crime prevention. Social work ethics support this practice. Second, the composition of social work student body is different in terms of higher percentages of female, minority, and non-traditional students. These characteristics do associate with liberal values and unconventional approaches to social issues (CSWE, 2001).

The lack of a difference between social work majors and non-social work majors in the OLS results for the emotional opposition, innocence, and brutalization arguments against the death penalty are both interesting and surprising. Emotional opposition is not supported by social workers because their opposition to the death penalty is not based on mercy or human sympathy; rather, it is based on a professional value framework and a belief in a correct approach to the treatment of crime. Social workers tend to adopt a psycho-social interpretation of social problems including crime. Problems need to be addressed in a different way - a rehabilitative approach based on human responsibility and ability to change (Iglehart, 1995). Emotional opposition is the opposite of emotional retribution in which a difference was observed. Again, majoring in social work had no significant effect for this measure. Social workers are expected to work within the framework of a system.

However, if an innocent person is punished, social workers will try to help the client through advocacy groups that work on behalf of the client, but they may not accept arguments of innocence or brutalization based on personal beliefs. Social workers are advised to desist from the influence of personal values/beliefs. Social workers are expected to respect other systems while working for a change in society as per the professional code. This emanates from the value that systems are interdependent (NASW, 1997, 2000).

Students who tend to have liberal values, a desire to help others, and believe in rehabilitation are probably more attracted to social work than students who are lower in these areas.

Students who are high these areas are more likely to be opposed to the death penalty. Therefore, students who generally oppose capital punishment are more likely to major in social work than students who are highly supportive. Under this explanation, the impact of social work education needs to be further determined because the values stressed in the major already exist in the students.

A longitudinal study would be able to detect whether death penalty views change during the course of majoring in social work or whether they are constant. Future research needs to use better measures that go into more depth than the measures of why individuals support or oppose capital punishment than those typically found in the literature. Furthermore, the death penalty views of professional social workers in field need to be explored. Finally, based upon the R-squared obtained in the OLS regression analyses, there are other factors besides personal characteristics and social work major that account for the variance in the death penalty supported observed in this study. These forces need to be identified and understood both for theoretical and practical reasons.

Conclusion

While both groups were found to have a lower support rate for the death penalty than the rate found in the general population, findings of this study indicate a difference in support of the death penalty between social work majors and other majors. Specifically, social work majors were found to have a lower support rate than other majors. Moreover, upper-level social work students, who have had more social work courses, were far more opposed to the death penalty than were lower-level social work students. Further analysis indicates that the social work students in the sample were much less likely to support the death penalty for the reason of retribution. Although both social work majors and non-social work majors appeared to agree that innocent people are executed, social work students were more likely to agree with the emotional opposition and brutalization arguments. Their agreement is explained based on value framework for professional practice.

In a very general sense, social work as a profession recognizes every individual's worth and ability to change and improve her/his life situation. Hence, social workers believe rehabilitation strategies need to be applied which are consistent with NASW's long-standing policy statement regarding the death penalty, "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 urges social workers and other policy makers to focus on the following areas: . . . Abolition of the death penalty" (NASW, 2000, p. 37).

While this exploratory study supports the contention that social work students are generally in agreement with this statement, it points to the need for further research. Many questions remain about whether students entering social work already have attitudes against the death penalty or whether social work education shaped their values and attitudes. Other variables also need further study, such as the impact of gender and race versus the impact of social work as a major on attitudes toward the death penalty. The death penalty is a permanent sanction and the debate over capital punishment literally represents life or death. There is a need to study capital punishment attitudes, including those among social workers and social worker students.

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