

A Part Versus Apart: The Relationship Between Social Workers' Political Ideology and Their Professional Affiliation

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship between social workers' political ideologies and their sense of professional affiliation. Using a randomly distributed mailed survey, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected from 294 licensed social workers. Study findings are mixed on this relationship. Implications for the profession are also forwarded.

Keyterms: Political ideology; values; professional affiliation; diversity; social workers

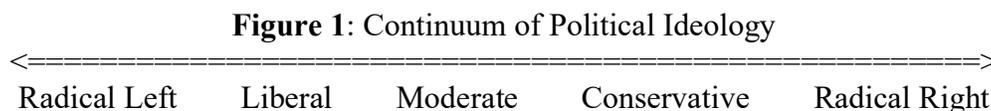
Introduction

The social work profession includes social workers that subscribe to a variety and range of political values. Studies of social workers' political ideologies, whether examined as political party affiliation or political philosophy, are mixed in their findings. Overall, social workers tend to be liberal and Democrats (Abbott, 1988, 1999; Koeske & Crouse, 1981; Reeser & Epstein, 1990; Rosenwald, 2004). These beliefs reflect the "liberal" policy statements in *Social Work Speaks* that are the profession's official policy statements (National Association of Social Workers, 2000); they are liberal because the content of these statements correspond to values inherent in liberal political ideology including support for a welfare state, support for civil rights, and pro-choice regarding abortion) (Brint, 1994; Lowi & Ginsberg, 1994; McKenna, 1998). The few other studies relating to political beliefs in the literature, several quite dated, found more support for social workers identifying as moderate more than liberal (Varley, 1968) or moderately liberal (Henry, Sims, & Spray, 1971, Hodge, 2003). Conservative social workers comprised from under ten to a quarter of the sample in some studies (Henry et al., 1971; Hodge, 2003; Rosenwald, 2004).

This diversity in social workers' political views is to be respected according to National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics (1999) and, therefore, room for all “voices” should be allowed. Yet how do social workers who subscribe to different, and often competing, political ideologies, feel about affiliating with a profession that through its largest membership organization (NASW) officially reflects liberal political ideology (NASW, 2000; O’Neill, 2003)? A discrepancy, then, may exist between the NASW’s respect for political diversity in its *Code of Ethics* (NASW, 1999) and its liberal policies as espoused by its policy statements. This discrepancy may even affect social workers’ sense of affiliation with the profession, and social workers who are more liberal might feel more professional affiliation than those who are not. Because the existing literature did not examine this aspect, this article expands on the literature by exploring: “How do social workers’ political ideologies affect their professional affiliation?” It is important to note that NASW policy statements represent social work policy within the United States and may have limited application for social work policy in other countries where other issues may take precedence (NASW, 2000).

Political Ideology and Professional Affiliation

Political ideology refers to a group’s views on how policy decisions ought to be made in response to the economic, moral, and social concerns of society and can be conceptualized among a complex, multi-layered continuum from “radical left” and “liberal” to “moderate,” “conservative,” and “radical right” (Brint, 1994; Knight, 1999; Lowi & Ginsberg, 1994; O’Connors & Sabato, 2000). This continuum is depicted in Figure 1.



“Radical left” political ideology emphasizes that the solution for social problems, such as class and other conflicts, lies in some form of societal conversion to socialism (Longres, 1996; Wagner, 1990). The “liberal” perspective emphasizes governmental protection of the disenfranchised, separation of church and state, and institutionally based change (Brint, 1994; Dolgoff & Feldstein, 2003; Lowi & Ginsberg, 1994; McKenna, 1998). “Moderate” political ideology combines conservative and liberal ideologies depending on the particular issue and emphasizes planned incremental change (Berman & Murphy, 1999; McKenna, 1998).

“Conservative” ideology stresses for-profit and voluntary sectors’ abilities to address social problems, maintenance of the status quo, and typical favoring of socially traditional values (e.g., pro-life stance, anti-gay rights) (Dolgoff & Feldstein, 2003; Lowi & Ginsberg, 1994). Finally, “radical right” political ideology draws on biblical literalism, the moral defense of capitalism, and the “pro-family” movement (Diamond, 1989; Hyde, 1991).

How, then, might the range of social workers’ political ideologies correlate with their feelings about the profession? Differences in political ideology manifest in all professions. Although professions attempt to create a “seeming unity” to the public (Bucher & Strauss, 1966), such unity is “not necessarily evidence of internal homogeneity and consensus but rather of the power of certain groups: established associations become battlegrounds as different emerging segments compete for control” (Greenwood, 1966, p.192). These segments, represented by different professional associations with different political ideologies, compete with each other. These differences also have implications; for example, the professional association that holds the most power (NASW) emerges as the dominant “expert” professional voice (Derber, Schwartz & Magrass, 1990) and can restrict alternative political ideologies from gaining power.

Therefore, examining professional affiliation can be helpful in understanding their perspectives. On the mezzo level, professional affiliation is the degree to which professions are successful in maintaining commitment among their members; on the micro level, it is the degree to which a professional feels a sense of belonging to her or his profession. One way to explore this relationship between political diversity and professional affiliation is by examining the role of professional membership associations (Vollmer & Mills, 1966). Considering the professional affiliation of its members is important to a profession because a profession’s legitimacy and strength critically depend on the support (through continued membership and pride) of its members via formal membership organizations (Greenwood, 1966; Dolgoff & Feldstein, 2003).

For social work, NASW is the largest professional organization; aspects of its liberal policy statements may strongly resonate with some members yet may be construed as too conservative or too liberal by others. Examples of these policy statements include support for a minimum wage, support for pro-choice options regarding abortion, opposition to the death penalty, and reluctance to report “welfare fraud” (Abbott, 1988). For those expressing a radical left critique of liberalism, their subscription to an alternative *Code of Ethics*, challenge to the capitalist system, and

deconstruction of the hierarchical power arrangement in the client/social worker relationship, are reasons they may feel excluded from the liberal social work mainstream as represented by NASW (Longres, 1996; Wagner, 1990). Parallel and yet in contrast, social workers who espouse a more conservative or radical right political ideology may also not feel aligned with NASW based on political differences. For example, addressing the moral context of conservative political ideology, Hodge (2002, p. 406) argues that traditional religious values' importance to social work are compromised and even superseded by the profession's "ideologically inspired drive to control the parameters of the debate by excluding divergent voices." Additionally, Rubin (1999) discourages the profession's pervasive liberal political ideology when it is not supported by research. In summary, the degree of social workers' professional affiliation may depend on their particular political views.

Method

The study's guiding research question is: "How do social workers' political ideologies affect their professional affiliation?" This question, part of a larger study conducted by the author, was explored quantitatively with supplemental qualitative analysis.

Measures

The exploratory variable of professional affiliation was partially derived from Epstein (1969), Evans and Jarvis (1986), and Keyton's (1991) scales on, respectively, professional participation, group membership, and group satisfaction. The four questions that address professional affiliation are: 1) How strongly do you feel a part of the profession? 2) How strongly do you feel that the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) represents you? 3) How strongly do you believe in the National Association of Social Workers' (NASW) *Code of Ethics*? and 4) How strongly do you believe that the social work profession should only accept social workers with a liberal political ideology? Questions one and two directly relate to the mezzo-operational definition of professional affiliation. Questions three and four assess professional affiliation by the micro-operational definition of professional affiliation provided with respect to commitment to NASW's Code of Ethics and political ideology. The response categories are four-point Likert scale items with "1" being "Very Strong," "2" being "Somewhat Strong," "3" being "A Little Strong," and "4" being "Not Strong at All." Each question also provided a section for participants to write comments, which served as the basis for a qualitative data analysis.

The independent variable of political ideology was principally measured by the 40-item *Professional Opinion Scale (POS)* (Abbott, 1988, 1999, 2003) which is a comprehensive and reliable scale that examines social workers' values. It is divided into four value dimension subscales: *Respect for Basic Rights (BRSS)*, *Commitment to Individual Freedom (IFSS)*, *Sense of Social Responsibility (SRSS)*, and *Support of Self-Determination (SDSS)* (Abbott, 1988). These subscales reflect both economic and social components of political ideology (Abbott, 2003; Brint, 1994; Lowi & Ginsberg, 1994). Specifically, Abbott's four *POS* subscales reflect the following:

Basic rights encompass the concepts of equality and respect for individual rights...Social responsibility incorporates the concept that society has a responsibility to develop legislation, funding and programs which promote and improve the well-being of its members...Individual freedom includes a measure of approval (or disapproval) of the use of punishment or rules as a means for promoting desired behavior.... Self-determination refers to respect for individuals' abilities to make their own decisions regarding life's alternatives. (1999, p. 457-8).

Based on a five-point Likert scale with '1' corresponding with more conservative views and '5' reflecting more liberal views, the *POS*'s higher scores correspond with greater liberalness (Abbott, 1988, 1999). To compensate for three contemporary policies not addressed in the *POS* (Abbott), the author created a *Professional Opinion Scale Plus Three (POS+3)* with the addition of the following three items: 1) "Faith-based delivery of social service is an effective method of helping people in need," 2) "Special laws for the protection of lesbians' and gay men's equal rights are not necessary," and 3) "Social services should be provided to illegal immigrants." These three items used the same five-point response categories and increased the *POS*' Cronbach's alpha of 0.85 from this study to 0.86, suggesting continued good internal consistency reliability.

A second single-item measure of political ideology, commonly used in the literature (Knight, 1999), asked participants to identify their political ideology (*Self-Ranked Political Ideology [SRPI]*) on a seven-point Likert scale: Radical left (1); Very liberal (2); Liberal (3); Moderate (4); Conservative (5); Very conservative (6); Radical right (7). Participants were also surveyed on demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, age) and professional characteristics (e.g., primary work setting, primary social work function).

Data Collection and Analysis

A pilot test completed by ten practicing social workers revealed no substantive problems (Dillman, 2000). The sample was collected from the 2003 membership list of one mid-Atlantic

state's social work licensing board. Proportional random sampling was employed to ensure licensed social workers from all four licensure levels were represented (Rubin & Babbie, 2001). Five hundred and fifty-eight participants received a cover letter, questionnaire, self-addressed stamped envelope, and a dollar bill as an incentive. They also received a follow-up reminder postcard a short time later (Dillman, 2000). Data from 294 questionnaires was analyzed; this resulted in a 52.6% response rate, which is considered a fairly good response rate for mailed questionnaires (Rubin & Babbie, 2001).

The four professional affiliation items were independently analyzed with descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages) and the Spearman correlation statistic. These four items had a low Cronbach's alpha, which precluded their combined use as a scale (Rubin & Babbie, 2001). The participants' written comments were analyzed using "analytic induction" (Huberman & Miles, 1994). This method incorporates an iterative process by which themes from the data are inductively and repeatedly identified and verified (Huberman & Miles, 1994). Additionally, themes were identified if at least twenty percent of participants addressed each theme. This author analyzed the data with the assistance of the co-chair of his dissertation committee.

Quantitative Results

The sample was largely white (80.1%), female (85.6%), 35-46 years old ($M = 45$), Protestant (36.1%), and somewhat to strongly religious/ spiritually affiliated (72.2%). In addition, participants averaged an income range between \$40,000 and \$49,999; were mostly Democrats (78.1%) and heterosexual (93.7%). The majority of participants possessed master's degrees in social work (83.6%), worked full time (72.9%), and held their state's advanced clinical social work license (59.8%). Participants tended to work in public settings (36.6%), as well as non-profit settings (35.5%). They had about 13 years of licensed experience and a slight majority (52.6%) worked in clinical/direct social work practice. Finally, with respect to political ideology, the participants self-identified as (in descending percent): liberal (40.6%), moderate (34.4%), very liberal (12.5%), conservative (9.7%), radical left (2.1%), very conservative (0.7%), and radical right (0.0%).

Range of Professional Affiliation

The distribution for professional affiliation is presented in Table 1. Many participants felt somewhat strongly (38.1%) or very strongly (35.7%) about being a part of the profession. Participants felt differently about NASW's representation; their responses tended to fall into approximate thirds-- 33.7% felt somewhat strong, 31.5% felt a little strong, and 30.0% felt not strong at all. The vast majority of participants (91.9%) believed in the NASW *Code of Ethics*, with over two-thirds (65.0%) stating they strongly believed in the *Code*. Finally, a majority of participants (82.3%) did not think that the profession should limit entrance based on a social worker's liberal political ideology. However, a minority (17.7%) felt at least a little supportive that the social work profession should exclude those with non-liberal political ideologies.

Relationship between Political Ideology and Professional Affiliation

Table 2 provides the correlation of professional affiliation with the seven measures of political ideology. Aside from self-ranked political ideology, participants' feeling part of the social work profession was significantly correlated with every political ideology measure, suggesting that being more liberal leads to feeling more a part of the profession, whereas being more conservative

Table 1: Distribution for Professional Affiliation

Item	n	Percent
Feel part of the profession		
Very strong	104	35.7%
Somewhat strong	111	38.1%
A little strong	55	18.9%
Not strong at all	21	7.2%
Feel represented by NASW		
Very strong	13	4.8%
Somewhat strong	91	33.7%
A little strong	85	31.5%
Not strong at all	81	30.0%
Believe in the NASW Code of Ethics		
Very strong	184	65.0%
Somewhat strong	76	26.9%
A little strong	19	6.7%
Not strong at all	4	1.4%
Believe in liberal political ideology req.		
Very strong	4	1.4%
Somewhat strong	15	5.3%
A little strong	31	11.0%
Not strong at all	233	82.3%

corresponds to feeling slightly marginalized from the profession. Participants' sense of feeling represented by NASW was related to Self-Ranked Political Ideology ($r_s = .208, p = .001$) and the Commitment to Individual Freedom ($r_s = -.146, p = .024$). More conservative thought was slightly associated with feeling less represented by NASW. Participants' belief in the NASW *Code of Ethics* was significantly correlated with every political ideology measure except Commitment to

Individual Freedom. More conservative political ideologies were associated with a weaker belief in the code. Finally, participants' belief in requiring a liberal ideology for social workers to be accepted into the profession was significantly correlated with the Professional Opinion Scale, Professional Opinion Scale+3, Support of Self-Determination, Sense of Social Responsibility and Self-Ranked Political Ideology. The results suggest that those with a more conservative political ideology did not favor such a requirement.

Table 2: Spearman Correlations of Professional Affiliation and Political Ideology

Item	SRPI	BRSS	IFSS	SRSS	POS	POS+3
Part of Profession n	.122 (287)	-.178 ^b (275)	-.169 ^b (255)	-.204 ^b (266)	-.178 ^b (260)	.279 (225)
Represented by NASW n	.208 ^b (266)	.017 (255)	-.146 ^a (239)	-.056 (248)	-.083 245	-.087 (211)
Believe in Code of Ethics n	.151 ^a (279)	-.258 ^c (266)	-.110 (248)	-.184 ^b (253)	-.197 ^b (219)	.204 ^b (217)
Believe in Liberal Requirement n	.215 ^c (278)	-.008 (269)	-.109 (251)	-.139 ^a (259)	-.177 ^b (222)	-.183 ^b (220)
^a p < .05 (2-tailed); ^b p < .01 (2-tailed); ^c p < .001 (2-tailed)						

Qualitative Results

The four questions used in the quantitative data analysis were also used in the qualitative data analysis by asking participants to “please comment on your answer.” The variation in the quantitative findings echoed within the themes from the qualitative data. The themes of diversity and representation emerged from the professional affiliation items. Participants' self-ranked political ideology and their corresponding questionnaire numbers are incorporated into their comments.

Diversity

The majority of participants who responded believed that a broad range of political ideologies should be reflected in social work. With respect to diversity, one participant [moderate, 103] stated, “I believe there is room in the profession for people of various ideologies – [it] keeps us all on our toes” and another [liberal, 148] felt, “There should be no ideological litmus test.” Anchored in the ethical standards, one participant [liberal, 111] reported, “As long as *Code of Ethics* are followed, political ideology shouldn't matter.” Within this theme of diversity, some participants believed that identifying with more moderate and conservative political ideologies

was still compatible within social work's political ideological range. One participant [moderate, 119] stated, "We need diversity of opinions. I find it highly objectionable when the profession asserts, we should all be liberal thinkers!" Recognizing her own ideological shift, another [moderate, 84] said, "With age, I have moved from liberal bleeding heart to moderate. I still serve our profession well," whereas a third [liberal, 82], reflected "I find myself leaning more to the right (becoming somewhat more conservative) as time passes."

Some participants appeared to favor one ideology over another within this goal of diversity. A number of participants were comfortable with social workers subscribing to a liberal political ideology. For example, one [moderate, 39] suggested that, "Based on the tradition of social work, I am more comfortable with the idea of more liberal thinking people in the profession..." A second [very liberal, 290] participant believed, "By learning about social policy and inequalities that exist in society, an intelligent person may find it difficult to avoid becoming liberal." Finally, one [liberal, 165] wrote, "I think liberals are sufficiently unselfish to be social workers."

Paralleling this favoring of liberal political ideology by some within the profession was skepticism of the compatibility between conservative political ideology and the social work profession. Specifically, some participants questioned the match between the inclusion of conservative ideology and the profession's demand to exhibit empathy and respect. One participant [moderate, 82] stated, "It helps to have empathy [working in social work]. If one is too far to the right, there goes the empathy." A second participant [liberal, 156] believed, "If a social worker has a conservative ideology, he or she needs to be sensitive to and respectful of – and even value the differences of others so that they do not wrongly impose their beliefs on others." Another [very liberal, 132] explicitly remarked, "I don't think conservatives have social work values." Finally, with slightly more subtlety, one participant [moderate, 237] believed that although "even conservative people may have something beneficial to contribute to the profession...It doesn't mean that a conservative person has to inflict his values on the client."

A few participants disagreed with this liberal critique of conservatives and professionalism. One participant [moderate, 16] believed aspects of liberal ideology may have dire consequences in practice, stating, "Many 'liberal' views work against client empowerment and personal responsibility. Certain views assist clients to remain dependent and weak." A second participant [moderate, 114] stated, "The assumption is that a 'good' social worker holds to/ supports the

‘liberal’ ideology,” whereas a third [moderate, 227] said, “I am disappointed in most social workers and agencies. Social workers tend to reject anyone not ultra-liberal.” Finally, a fourth [conservative, 280] succinctly opined, “You don’t have to be liberal to care.”

Representation

Beyond diversity, the importance of representation was important to participants. This theme examined social workers’ feelings of being personally represented by their profession with respect to their political ideologies.

Participants held mixed views about the congruence between their own political ideologies and NASW’s. One participant [very liberal, 107] responded, “I am pleased with the NASW’s efforts to strengthen the profession and advocate for legislation that supports social work values.” A second participant [moderate, 84] depended “on it to represent our basic core values and ethics” and a third [liberal, 152] believed that “NASW does fairly well in matching [my] political agenda.” Other participants questioned NASW’s careful representation of its members’ political ideologies and referenced general disaffection with the organization’s overall political stance, as well as disagreement with specific policies. For example, for some, NASW’s bias was seen as problematic. One [moderate, 227] stated, NASW is “too liberal and political – excludes moderate views and conservative views.” Another [moderate, 100] reported, “I am a moderate in my opinion and NASW in my mind is more liberal, politically motivated.” Interestingly, coming from two opposing political ideologies, which recalls this study’s guiding research question, two participants shared their extreme dissatisfaction with NASW. One [very conservative, 57] wrote, “I dropped my membership [in] NASW due to lack of variety of members and agenda – seems to be far left,” whereas the other [very liberal, 239] said, “I dropped my membership last year. [NASW] needs to be a more radical [left] organization [and] inspire more activism among its members.”

Participants, particularly from more moderate and conservative perspectives, also disagreed with NASW’s specific policy positions, with respect to both economic and social issues. One participant [conservative, 281] stated NASW is “not an effective organization – politically liberal and advocates for the government to provide more and more – what about personal responsibility? No room for discussion/differing views.” Another participant [moderate, 168] stated, “NASW’s political agenda is much too liberal and has shifted away from the original mission to represent the poor and disenfranchised.” With respect to moral issues, one participant

[conservative, 6] felt, “NASW is very liberal in its platform ideology (e.g., abortion, women’s right to choose); my religious convictions are counter to the spirit of NASW...I don’t believe any discrimination is right; however, I see homosexuality as a choice – which is a sin in God’s eyes. NASW seems to validate a homosexual lifestyle as okay, one not to be discriminated against – I have a problem with this.”

Other participants did not feel represented by NASW because the organization was too conservative in its ideologies and believed it needed to play a larger role in addressing inequality and correcting economic and social injustices. One participant [moderate, 178] stated that "NASW is too conservative in its focus. It does not promote [the] plight [of] the disenfranchised within the USA." A second [radical left, 86] said, “My beliefs, particularly around economic justice/ the need for redistribution of wealth, ‘narrowing the gap’ aren’t addressed in the more radical manner I hold them.” Echoing this sentiment, a third participant [moderate, 16] believed, “Social work needs to focus more on income inequality stemming from government bail-outs; estate, capital gains, and other benefits that protect the wealthy; and subsidies to farmers and others to not produce. Too much emphasis is placed on the poor without getting at the root causes of poverty and income disparities.”

Discussion

From an organizational perspective, as the social work profession continues “to rise within the professional hierarchy, so that it, too, might enjoy maximum prestige, authority, and monopoly” (Greenwood, 1966, p. 19), NASW provides a prevailing political ideology that attempts to unify and rally the professional workers. This seeming united front, espoused by NASW in its policy statements and legislative agenda (National Association of Social Workers, 2000; O’Neill, 2003), directs the profession in terms of practice, education, policy, and research. Yet, as Bucher and Strauss (1966) observe, this unity is “spurious” and, therefore, does not reflect the complexity of social workers’ political ideologies that can affect their sense of professional affiliation. Social workers who embrace different political ideologies may experience varying levels of professional affiliation based on the degree to which their respective political ideologies resonate with the official liberal ideology of the profession.

This exploratory study’s findings showcase the complexity of political ideology’s relationship to professional affiliation. On one hand, the descriptive statistics and some of the

participants' comments suggest that political diversity is welcomed. Indeed, incorporating political diversity reflects the natural growth of a profession as competing ideological fragments (competing political ideologies) are created (Bucher & Strauss, 1966; Greenwood, 1966). Many social workers agree with the liberal components of social work's policy statements (National Association of Social Workers, 2000) and tend to support the profession's stances on welfare state, basic system commitments, civil rights, civil liberties, and moral issues (Brint, 1994). For them, their private political ideology mirrors NASW's political ideology. Additionally, most believe that incorporating political diversity strengthens the profession. On the other hand, the Spearman correlations and other participants' comments indicate that more liberal social workers have somewhat greater political affiliation. Further, the findings suggest that participants, who are more liberal with respect to social policies, are slightly more connected to the profession, to NASW and its *Code of Ethics*, and slightly favor a liberal political ideology requirement for social workers.

The finding that 17.7% of participants believed that social workers should be excluded, to some extent, from the profession if they subscribe to a non-liberal political ideology is interesting. Although these sentiments were not strongly held beliefs, their mere existence suggests that despite the inclusion of diversity of political beliefs in the NASW *Code of Ethics* (National Association of Social Workers, 1999), a significant minority of the participants were reluctant to embrace social workers of a larger range of political beliefs. This leads to the question: Is prejudice against non-liberal social workers an acceptable prejudice for social workers to hold? This is a significant question when considering that hardly any social worker would admit that the profession should only admit women or individuals who are white. This prejudice, by some, was particularly directed toward social workers with conservative political ideology. This attitude may be somewhat attributable to the skepticism about whether more conservative social workers are able to truly care and empathize with their clients. Thinking specifically of the extreme conservatism ("radical right") of social workers who espouse fundamentalism, Dinerman (2003) asks social workers, "Can truly fundamentalist social workers maintain the needed separation between their own beliefs, strongly held, that they know what is true and right yet respect and accept a client with sharply different beliefs to help the client to find his or her own goals and beliefs?" (p. 250).

Some of the more moderate and conservative social workers refuted that sentiment, based on the qualitative data, stating that they subscribed to professional standards and ethics, and were skilled in professional caring and empathy. In addition, these social workers believed liberal social workers disservice their clients because their ideologies promote financial dependency instead of empowerment, and immorality on some social issues. This critique reflects disagreement with NASW's position on welfare state, as well as its stances on civil rights (i.e., pro-lesbian and gay rights) and moral issues (i.e., pro-choice).

Conversely, a few social workers who subscribed to more liberal and radical left political ideologies found the profession's "liberal" yet status quo views on basic system commitments and the welfare state reducing their professional affiliation. This split in political ideology is understood as social workers balance their stated mission of helping clients, organizations and communities with working within the capitalist structure (Ehrenreich & Ehrenreich, 1977) and pursuing professional prestige (Greenwood, 1966).

Therefore, these findings provide a beginning framework to discuss how agreement with the different components of the profession's political ideology affects social workers' professional affiliation. This discussion also highlights the need to move beyond the "conservative-liberal" debate and provide attention to what a "moderate" social worker is. Those with moderate ideologies, who represented over a third of the sample, aligned at times with both conservative and liberal political ideologies.

Study Limitations

Several study limitations exist. The limit to external validity prevents generalizability beyond licensed social workers in one particular state (Rubin & Babbie, 2001). Although these participants' reflections on the profession and NASW are important, it is equally important to understand this key limitation. Additionally, an overrepresentation of social workers who are interested in the topic of political ideology may have responded to the questionnaire and biased the results (Dillman, 2000). Social desirability may have existed in situations in which participants wanted to appear more "open" to political diversity than they really were (Rubin & Babbie). An additional question addressing the exclusion of non-conservative social workers would have balanced the professional affiliation question asking about excluding non-liberal social workers.

Finally, the low internal reliability of the professional affiliation “scale” suggests a need for further scale development, which would include a confirmatory factor analysis.

Implications

This study suggests that, whereas many supports the profession and NASW, those who are more moderate, and conservative may feel more marginalized from the profession, because they feel that NASW does not represent them. Similarly, a few of the participants’ comments suggest that those “left” of liberal might also feel marginalized based on a parallel reasoning of feeling excluded when participant political ideology does not fully match NASW’s policy statements. In addition, some stereotypes of what it means to be “conservative” or “liberal,” for example, shape social workers’ view of their own efficacy and the professionalism of their peers. Therefore, creating a discussion around the diversity of social workers’ political ideology would perhaps assist the state chapter of NASW, in this particular state, in more fully meeting the needs of its members (The author did write a column on key findings from the larger study for this state’s NASW newsletter.)

Specifically, the NASW chapter could sponsor a forum on political ideology that explicitly addresses the relationship between social workers’ political ideology and their perceptions of how different policies and laws should be. Finally, this discussion can extend into political ideology’s impact on practice (Rosenwald & Hyde, 2006).

Although immediate implications are confined to the particular state of focus, this study provides food for thought on what implications might occur for NASW and the profession at large. A national forum on political ideology, at a conference for example, along with editorials on the diversity of social workers’ political ideology, might be useful to explicate the debate that occurs every three years within the Delegate Assembly as *Social Work Speaks* policy statements are established and modified. The creation of such a forum honors the spirit of the respect for diversity of colleagues’ political belief in the NASW Code of Ethics (1999) and might result in moving beyond superficial sound bites of the “other” to greater understanding of those along the political spectrum without fear of instant dismissal or reprisal.

This inclusion of voices, representing the full range of political views, could increase NASW’s membership. As more social workers feel increasingly a part of both the profession and NASW, they may be more inclined to support the profession’s mission and ethics. Consequently,

the profession's occupational legitimacy, as measured by member support, could be strengthened (Vollmer & Mills, 1966).

Conclusion

It turns out that the stereotypes of social workers, as identified by Dolgoff & Feldstein (2003, p. 301), as “‘bleeding hearts,’ radicals, captives of and apologists for ‘the establishment,’ organizers of the poor, and servers of the middle class” are held not only by the public but by social workers about each other. These stereotypes originate, in part, from the varied political ideologies held by social workers, as detailed in the data, and their conceptions of what a social worker should be. They also provide a foundation upon which social workers make judgments about themselves and one another regarding the degree of fit between political ideology and the profession.

This study expands on others (Abbott, 1988, 1999; Koeske & Crouse, 1981; Reeser & Epstein, 1990) that examined political ideology by exploring the relationship of political ideology with professional affiliation in social work. Understanding the economic, social, and moral dimensions of political ideology (Brint 1994; Lowi & Ginsberg, 1994) provides insight into how some members' political ideologies are accorded dominant status in the profession, whereas other members might feel their ideologies are a basis upon which they are excluded.

Professional affiliation depends, in part, on the congruence of social work's espoused political ideology with the political views of the profession's members. But this political ideology is not monolithic; put more succinctly, does political diversity “threaten” the profession in terms of its cohesion? It is within this context that the social work profession and NASW need to weigh the alleged benefits and risks of incorporating political diversity and to decide how explicitly supportive a climate for such diversity it desires to create. This article is an initial step in that conversation.

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