

UNDERGRADUATES' KNOWLEDGE AND PERCEPTION OF SOCIAL WORK COURSE PROGRAMME AT BABCOCK UNIVERSITY IN OGUN STATE

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Abstract

Currently, the National Association of Social Work (NASW) is in the midst of an education campaign with the primary goal of increasing the public awareness about the roles and profession of social work. In Nigeria, the awareness about the social work as a field of study is very low. This is not helpful if the profession is to be fully known. Students' perceptions of social work influence their career choices. Exposure to adequate information about social work broadens knowledge about the field. The study examined the knowledge and perception of social work among Babcock University undergraduates. The study made use of descriptive survey research design. A sample size of 406 students that cuts across the nine faculties in Babcock University was used. The instrument used was "Undergraduates' knowledge and perception of Social Work Scale" (UKPSW) = 0.81. Four research questions were raised and tested. The data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics of frequency counts, percentage and T-test Analysis. Findings from the study indicated that the undergraduates' knowledge of social work with mean score of 43.03% is not satisfactory. Reveal of information on social work as a course of study by the undergraduate students sources that 191 (47%) got their information from friends or peers and 53 (13.1%) got their information from magazines. No significant difference was noted between male and female undergraduates in their perception of social work as a course of study in the university (t-cal

$= 1.731 < t\text{-crit} = 1.960$ @ .05 alpha level). Also, a significant difference was noted between science-oriented and non-science oriented undergraduates in their perception of social work as a course of study ($t\text{-cal} = 2.352 > t\text{-crit} = 1.960$ @ .05 alpha level). It was recommended that Babcock University should work together with the Social Work Unit of the University to celebrate the Social Work World Day which holds March 18th of every year. This will attract importance and awareness to the course. Social work students also have a part to play. They can help to publicise the profession of Social work by putting into practice the core value of social work, roles of social workers and the Babcock University social work values which is service with a HEART (Human Centered, Empathy/Empowerment, Affirmation, Relationship, Trust and Truth).

Key words: knowledge, perception, social work course programme, undergraduates

Introduction

The contemporary or modern society has become so complex with lots of social problems as a result of rapid social and technological changes. Nigeria is confronted with numerous social problems including crime and delinquency, family disintegration, unplanned parenthood, child abuse, alcohol, drug abuse, stress and the like. Social workers have a vital role to play in alleviating these problems. Social work as a field of study and practice is not well understood in Africa, especially in Nigeria. This is largely due to the fact that social work as a profession is still in its infancy. In other words, compared to other related professions like medicine, psychiatry and nursing, social work is a relatively young profession. The emergence of social work as a field of study is relative younger to Europe and North America which had a head start in the discipline in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries respectively.

Despite its recent development in Africa, social work is a rapidly growing field. The profession's phenomenal growth and development throughout the world is a clear indication of its contribution to the alleviation of social problems (Appollo & Logong 1996). Lack of professionally-trained social workers is, however, a major

constraint in the practice of social work not only in Africa but also in Nigeria. As the demand for social workers grows larger, particularly, with the aging population (Pasztor, Saint German, & DeCrescenzo, 2002), schools of social work continue to struggle with recruitment. In an effort to increase the number of students choosing social work as a major, it is essential to begin the understanding of how students view the profession. Students' perceptions of social work influence their career choices. Exposure to accurate information about social work broadens knowledge about the field, even if other career choices are made. Biggerstaff (2000) noted that it is essential for the profession of social work to continue to attract new professionals into the field so that professionally educated social workers can occupy current and expanding social work positions.

Knowledge and perception of social work is an issue that is of great concern to social workers and social work students all over the world. Presently, the National Association of Social Work (NASW) is in the midst of an education campaign with the primary goal of increasing the public awareness of social work roles and the social work profession. This campaign is in direct

response to concerns about the image of social work which continues to be haunted by the specter of the friendly visitor or the one who takes away children (NASW, 2005).

The social work profession has long been concerned with how it is portrayed in the media (Frariklin & Farton, 1991; McGowan & Walsh, 2000; Zugazaga, 2005; Scott, 2013). Research studies in the United Kingdom (UK) reveal that the constant criticism and misrepresentation of social services demoralises social workers. In a survey of 3,000 social work professionals in the United Kingdom, 92% thought that staff morale was damaged by the way the media reports on social care (Social Workers Wary, 2005). In addition, media representation of the social work profession has an impact on the conduct and professional practice of social work and influences the public perception of social workers. Of particular concern to social work educators is the media's influence on recruitment of social work students. Jennifer Bernard of the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work attributes the fall in number of social work students in the United Kingdom in part to social work's poor image (As Drop in Social Work Students Accelerates, 1998). Since 1999 the number of both BSW and MSW students has been steadily declining (Joyner, 2005).

Freeman and Valentine (2004) examined American movies from 1938 to 1998 with a social work character. Twenty-nine of the forty-four (44) movies focused on child welfare. Most of the social workers were white middle-class women who were incompetent. They were caretakers in a subordinate position and served as a buffer between oppressed groups and their oppressors. Many characters had sexual relationships with a client. Overall, the

characters reinforced rather than challenged the status quo (Freeman & Valentine, 2004). With this, there have been negative portrayal of social workers and this has negative impact on prospective students.

The public perception of social work has influenced and shaped social workers, clients and professional recruitment over a long period of time. A negative public perception of social work can lead to many harmful and serious consequences including damaging the credibility of the social work profession, negative stigma attached to those who seek services from social workers, declining recruitment of those entering the profession and a diminished number of services being provided to those in need (Zugazaga, Surette, Mendez & Otto, 2006). The current literature on the public's perception of social work suggests that the public generally possesses a negative perception of the social work profession. Studies on the public's perception document this negative perception and point to multiple possibilities including stereotypes as misconceptions. Lack of knowledge about the social work profession; the array of services it provides and its varied roles contributes to the misunderstanding and often negative perceptions of the profession. Additionally, misinterpretation of social work with other disciplines adds to the poor public perception (Kaufman & Raymond, 1996; Agresta, 2004; Gibelman, 2004; Zugazaga et al., 2006).

Lecroy & Stinson (2004) conducted a study that measured the public's perception of social work. The findings of the study demonstrated that the public is generally confused as to some of the roles and functions of social workers; they were able to identify the stereotypical role of social workers as child protector. In the most recent study examining perceptions of the social

work profession, Dennison, Poole, and Qaqish (2007) studied the perception and knowledge about the profession of social work by measuring the student's knowledge of the profession, knowledge of practice settings, areas of practice and interest in the social work profession. Their study concluded that only 15% of the respondents had a perceived high level of knowledge about social work and that interaction or exposure to a social worker increased the participant's perception of their knowledge about the profession of social work and their knowledge of the variety of jobs available to social workers.

Two common stereotypes permeate the social work profession. Social work is viewed as a female profession and that social workers' primary role is to protect children (Dennison et al, 2007). Thus, those with little power dominate the ranks of the profession and the profession serves those with little power. The fact that women dominate the social work profession appears to contribute to its low pay and low status. In addition, the fact that social work is perceived as primarily serving children who have low status also contributes to its low status perception. There is a wide public perception that women undertake a majority of the social work services and agencies (McPhail, 2004). This is, in fact, contrary to the reality of the situation. Social work is a predominantly female profession that is dominated by men, McPhail (2004) reports that while a majority of practitioners are female, the majority of the administrators and policy makers are male. If these stereotypes prevail, social work and social workers will continue to be viewed with less regard than their professional counterparts.

A positive image is important to the survival and effectiveness of the social work profession (Reid & Misener, 2001), This is

against the background of studies which have shown that most people do not engage in personal contact with professional social workers. Social work students have often expressed concern about poor professional image of social workers, especially, as portrayed by the media, via television, film, and print. The prevailing view frequently voiced by students as well as educators and practitioners, is that social workers are typically featured in unflattering negative terms such as child snatchers, ineffective do-gooders, Fuzzy-thinking liberals, parasites on the public purse and self-serving bureaucrats.

Dennison, et al (2007) explored what incoming college students from various courses of study thought about social work. The authors were curious to learn that the students, though smaller in number and younger than those previously surveyed, reflected more on current perception of the profession. Significantly, students do not completely understand the range of social work activities or the levels of training needed. If perception does not match the profession's stated mission, social workers must learn how to influence public understanding. Social workers themselves are best suited to enhance the public knowledge and opinions about the profession because no one else is likely to step forward to do so.

Tower (2000) provided the clearest mandate for action: "Social workers are responsible for debunking myths when the public is misinformed about the profession and the people served by it" (p. 575). She helped create a Social Work and the Media course at the University of Nevada. She taught students about the film production process; students eventually developed documentaries to air on local television and public broadcasting stations. She argued that

social work students and professionals need to learn how to shape the public image of social work through effective use of popular media.

Although several studies have been conducted overseas on the perception and knowledge of social work as a course of study in the universities, there is dearth of such studies in Nigeria probably owing to the newness of the profession in the country. Presently, Babcock University is experiencing low students enrollment in the programme. The researchers thus engaged in this study, not only to assess the knowledge and perception of social work course programme among undergraduates in Babcock University but to create more awareness on their knowledge and perception of the course. This may go a long way in increasing the number of students choosing social work as a course of study, not only in Babcock University but also in other universities in Nigeria.

Research questions

- a) What are undergraduates' knowledge and perception of social work?
- b) What are the sources of information about social work?
- c) To what extent will gender difference influence perception of social work among Babcock University students?
- d) To what extent will science and non-science oriented courses influence the perception of social work among Babcock University students?

Methodology

Research Design

The survey research design was adopted for this study.

Population of the Study

Method of Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics of frequency counts and percentage were used to analyse the

The population of the study includes all the undergraduate students of Babcock University as at the time of this study. In all, a total number of 8,100 undergraduate students were used for the study.

Sampling Technique

A stratified random sampling technique was used to select the sample size for the study. The participants were stratified into the nine Undergraduate schools in Babcock University which are: Science oriented (School of Public and Allied Health, School of Nursing, College of Health and Medical sciences, School of Basic and Applied Sciences, School of Computing and Engineering Sciences; School of Agriculture and Industrial Technology) and non-science oriented (School of Law and Security studies, School of Education and Humanities, Babcock Business School). After stratification, a proportional simple random sample was obtained by selecting participants randomly from the sample frame until the sample size was obtained. The sample included a total of 405 participants, 45 participants from each stratum.

Instrument

A 26 item self-developed questionnaire tagged; "Undergraduates' knowledge and Perception of Social Work" (UKPSW) was used to gather information. To establish the reliability of the instrument, a test-re-test was conducted using a group of 50 students in another university that did not form part of the sample. The Cronbach alpha was computed and this yielded reliability coefficient of 0.85. The instrument was, therefore, deemed highly reliable and good enough for use for the present study.

demographic data and research questions one and two, while inferential statistics of T-test was used to analyse research questions three and four.

Results

Table 1: Participants' demographic data

S/N	Variable	Frequency	%
1.	Gender		
	Female	203	50.0
	Male	203	50.0
2.	Age		
	15-23	340	85.7
	24 above	57	14.3
3.	Religion		
	Christianity	329	81.0
	Islam	67	16.5
	Others	10	2.5
4.	Discipline		
	Science	329	83.1
	Non-science	77	16.9

Table 1 above shows the frequency distribution of the respondents based on sex. 203 (50.0%) of the respondents are male while 203 (50.0%) are female. In terms of age, 340 (85.7%) of respondents are within the ages of 15-23 years, while 57(14.3%) of them are 24years and above. Also, 329(81.0%) of the respondents are

Christians, 67(16.5%) are Muslims, while 10 (2.5%) belong to other religions. In area of discipline, 320 (83.1%) are science based while 77 (16.9%) are non-science based. The implication of this is the fact that Babcock University tend to have more science based students than non-science.

Research question 1

What is undergraduates' knowledge level of social work as a course programme of study?

Table 2: Table Showing Knowledge of Social Work

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Dev
Knowledge Level	406	33.00	132.00	56.805	9.137

Table 2 reveals the mean score 56.805 (43.03%), of undergraduates' knowledge of social work as not satisfactory.

Research Question 2

What are the sources of undergraduates' information on social work as a course programme of study?

Table 3: Table showing Sources of Information N = 406

SN	Sources	Frequency	Percentage
1	Newspaper	69	17.0
2	Movies	116	28.6
3	Magazines	53	13.1
4	Friends	191	47.0
5	Parents/relations	79	19.5
6	Internet	67	16.5
7	Radio	98	24.1
8	Television	121	29.8

The results on the sources of information on social work as a course of study by the undergraduate students revealed that majority of the respondents, representing 47% of the sampled population received

their information from friends or peers. The implication of this is that they may be misinformed and this can affect the enrollment rate in the social work programme, thus, the need for this research.

Research Question 3

Is there any significant gender difference in undergraduates' perception of social work as a course programme of study?

Table 4: Table showing Gender Difference in Perception of Social Work

Sex	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	S.E Mean	Df	Mean diff,	t-cal.	t-crit.	Decision
male	403	55.778	6.349	.3009	404	.432	1.731	1.960	Not Significant
female	403	56.210	6.191	.3123					

Table 4 above shows that there is no significant difference between male and female undergraduates in their perception of social work as a course of study in the university (t-cal = 1.731 < t-crit = 1.960 @ .05 alpha level). This shows that gender does not have either a positive or negative influence on the perception of social work course programme.

Research Question 4

Is there any significant difference between science-oriented and non-science oriented undergraduates in their perception of social work as a course programme of study?

Table 5: Table showing Science Oriented and Non- Science Oriented Perception of Social Work

Sex	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	S.E Mean	Df	Mean diff,	t-cal.	t-crit.	Decision
Science	185	53.009	9.555	.5422	395	2.772	2.352	1.960	Significant
Non-Sc	212	55.731	7.137	.4768					

Table 5 shows that there is a significant difference between science-oriented and non-science oriented undergraduates in their perception of social work as a course of study ($t\text{-cal} = 2.352 > t\text{-crit} = 1.960$ @ .05 alpha level). The implication is that science oriented students have a better perception about social work than their non-science.

Discussion

The research reveals that the undergraduates' knowledge of social work with a mean score 56.805 (43.03%) is not satisfactory. This is because it is less than 50%, though higher than the minimum score of 33 which is 25%. It can then be deduced generally that undergraduates' knowledge of social work as a course of study Babcock University is not encouraging and satisfactory. This by implication can impede entry into studying social work as a course since in Babcock University, they have little or no knowledge to pass to others concerning social work as a course of study in the university. This result supports the findings of Lecroy and Stinson (2004) and NASW (2005) in the assertion that the public does not fully understand the range of social work roles and levels of training. Certainly, social workers must advocate for and educate others about the profession they practice. College and university settings offer an opportunity to better inform the public about social work (Comley, 1985). Thus, social workers should ensure that they promote the profession so that people do not only understand but also be interested in the programme.

The research also showed that under the sources of information on social work as a course of study by the undergraduates reveals that 191 respondents representing 47% of the sampled population which was

the highest, received their information from friends or peers and 53 (13.1%) which has the lowest percentage got their information from magazines. The implication of this finding is that there is much to be done on the promotion of social work as a course of study and also through the right medium since it has been noticed that news formats (e.g. newspapers, magazines and the like) portray social work rightly. This is in agreement with a research on the media's portrayal of social workers which suggested that news formats present the most realistic and more favourable image of social workers than entertainment formats (Reid and Meisner, 2001; Freeman and Valentine, 2004; Gibelman, 2004; Zugazaga et al., 2006). The entertainment media treats social work much differently than news media. Social workers are often depicted in the entertainment media, television and movies, as being unethical, uneducated, sexualized and incompetent (Tower, 2000; Freeman & Valentine, 2004; Gibelman 2004; Zugazaga et al., 2006).

The research further reveals that there is no significant difference between male and female undergraduates in their perception of social work as a course of study in the university ($t\text{-cal} = 1.731 < t\text{-crit} = 1.960$ @ .05 alpha level). This means that gender is not a prerequisite for having either a positive or negative perception about social work course. This tallies with (Zugazaga et al, 2006) who said that both male and female social workers surveyed perceived the only place where news and entertainment media presented a positive view of social work was in the category of caring.

Finally, the research reveals that there is a significant difference between science-oriented and non-science oriented undergraduates in their perception of social

work as a course of study ($t\text{-cal} = 2.352 > t\text{-crit} = 1.960$ @ .05 alpha level). This shows that students who are science oriented are more favourably disposed to social work as a course of study at Babcock University than their counterparts in non-science oriented courses. This may have stemmed from the fact that in Babcock University, Social Work is in the Department of Public Health, which is a science oriented course and so most students in sciences through interacting with social work students are privileged to be better informed about social work as a course of study at Babcock University than their counterparts in non-science oriented courses.

Conclusion

Based on the results obtained from the analysis of the data, it was concluded that the knowledge level of the social work course in Babcock University is low. The public perception of social work is generally negative and the media is a major source of negative perception because many people who do not have contact with a social worker or get to know about social work from the right source eventually get their information and perception from the media (especially movies and television) which portray social work as unethical and unprofessional. Stereotypes of the social work course/profession being viewed as a course for female only, is also associated with the negative perception of social work by the public. Thus, social workers/social work students need to promote the profession by identifying effective strategies for changing wrong perceptions of the profession. This will improve the attitude of people towards the profession and encourage students to choose it as a course of study not only in Babcock University, but other universities.

Recommendations

To enhance positive public perception of social work and the professionals of the discipline and increase students' choice for social work in the University, the following recommendations are necessary.

- 1) Seminars and programmes that will enlighten students and even staff (teaching and non-teaching) in Babcock University should be organised periodically to increase the undergraduate's knowledge and perception of social work.
- 2) Babcock University should work together with the Social Work Unit to celebrate "The World Social Work Day" that holds on March 18th of every year. By so doing, more importance will be attached to the course and students will want to know about the course and this can increase students' enrollment.
- 3) Social work students also have a part to play in the enlightenment of other of students about their profession by putting into practice the general core values of social work and the core values of Babcock University social work: Human Centered, Empathy-/Empowerment, Affirmation, Relationship, Trust and Truth (HEART).
- 4) Policies that guide the media on what they present to the public about the profession should be created and implemented so as to reduce poor imaging tarnishing the perception of the profession.
- 5) Nigeria government should elevate social work to the role of a dynamic agent and manager of change by constructively engaging social work

in development, by so doing, significant structural change and socio-economic improvements can be achieved.

- 6) Finally, there is the need for social workers to take active approach in defining their role than allowing others to speak for them. As one of the taglines from the NASW 2004 campaign proclaimed, "Social workers: If you don't tell your story, who will?"

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