REASONS FOR CHOOSING SOCIAL WORK AS PROFESSION: A CASE STUDY OF PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LIMPOPO

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ABSTRACT

The current number of social workers in South Africa is worryingly low. Whereas the motives for pursuing social work as a career have been documented, over the course of time things change and it is not possible to know or assume what motivated the current cohort of students. Thus, ongoing research is vital. A document analysis research that was qualitative in nature was undertaken at the University of Limpopo, where a selection test questionnaire in the form of open-ended questions was administered to 141 prospective students. The findings of a thematic analysis indicate that aspirations to pursue social work are influenced by family, school teachers, social workers in the field and a desire for self-healing.

Keywords: career paths, prospective social work students, social work profession, University of Limpopo.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Research indicates that social work is a calling (Ebimgbo, Agwu & Okoye, 2017; Gustafson, 1982; Hugen, 1996). At the *University of Limpopo (UL)* Department of Social Work, entry into the Social Work course is not automatic, which means that not everyone can become a student in social work. The UL programme selects prospective social work students through a questionnaire or selection test. In the questionnaire candidates are asked several questions regarding their interest in the profession and their overall understanding or knowledge of it. However, what sparked the author's interest was the responses from the questionnaires that candidates gave when they were asked the question: "Who motivated you to study social work?" Quite worrisome and fascinating responses emerged, hence the title and goal of this article.

As a matter of fact, the administering of the social work selection test at UL dates back to 1992. It is nearly three decades since the department started selecting prospective social work

students through selection tests or questionnaires; yet no research was ever conducted to investigate some of the factors informing students' choices to study social work. As Christie and Kruk (1998:11) warn: "social work educators may need to rethink their assumptions that all students who enrol on social work programmes want to practise as social workers per se".

Observations by the author on a yearly basis reveal that not all candidates who passed the social work selection test complete the Bachelor of Social Work programme. They deregister and switch to other programmes like Bachelor of Psychology, Bachelor of Law, etc. Other students with scholarships also drop out. These are problems for the department. A partial explanation for this problem may be found in the social cognitive career theory (Lent, Brown & Hackett, 2002), which states that job trainees (students) whose self-efficacy drastically exceeds their current skills are likely to set unrealistically high goals and to take on job tasks that are beyond their current grasp, which may lead to failure and discouragement in undertaking those activities further.

The author was disturbed to note that some social work graduates change careers immediately after gaining their qualifications (Christie & Kruk, 1998; Khunou, Pillay & Nethenonda, 2012). In other words, some social work graduates used their qualifications as stepping stones to other disciplines. This naturally reduces the number of 68,498 social workers necessary for the welfare of the country as part of the 2010-2030 National Development Plan (National Planning Commission, 2011; Waters, 2013). The *South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP)* in 2019 in its 55th meeting, also noted a decline in the enrolment of the Bachelor of Social Work students from 18, 308 in 2016 to 15, 053 in 2017. Despite these low figures, the SACSSP reports that in 2019 South Africa had 32 344 registered social workers.

Given this background to the study, the author posed a research question to focus on "what motivates prospective students to pursue social work?" The author will undertake a review of the relevant literature and then analyse the available empirical data in search of answers to this research question. The purpose of this study is to investigate the reasons for the choice of social work amongst prospective students.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study applied the *social cognitive career theory (SCCT)*, developed by Lent, Brown and Hackett (1994). The SCCT attempts to demystify an individual's journey towards making a career choice. Influenced by Albert Bandura's 1986 social cognitive theory, the SCCT hinges on the following related variables to understand individuals' career choices: self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations and personal goals. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's personal beliefs about his or her capabilities to perform particular behaviours or undertake certain courses of action. The implication is that one has to have certain capabilities to pursue a specific career such as social work. The SCCT assumes that:

> *people are likely to become interested in, choose to pursue, and perform better at activities at which they have strong self-efficacy beliefs, as long as they also have the necessary skills and environmental support (like family and friends) to pursue these activities* (Lent *et al.,* 2002:751).

Outcome expectations refer to beliefs in the outcomes of carrying out certain behaviours. In other words, after one has decided on pursuing a specific career on the basis of one's perceived capabilities, that should bear fruit as contemplated. Failure to achieve expected outcomes may lead to regret at the career choice made, or even thoughts of complete withdrawal. A goal may be simply explained as an intention to undertake a specific activity in mind, like pursuing social work as a profession.

BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW OF FACTORS INFLUENCING CAREER CHOICE
A review of studies relating to the subject under scrutiny is vital in contextualising the discussion of this study, and also to understand and build on the work of previous scholars.

Family influence
According to scholars (Lent *et al.,* 2002), family influence is the source of vicarious experiences and social persuasion. Thus, family remains a decisive factor in choosing career paths for many individuals heading for tertiary education (Fareo & Garkuwa, 2018; Kazi & Akhlaq, 2017; Mtemeri, 2017; Mutekwe, Modiba & Maphosa, 2011; Sharif, Ahmed & Sarwar, 2019). Family in this case refers to both nuclear and extended families. The idea is that families have different beliefs in certain careers and thus have the potential to persuade one to follow a particular career path. Again, some cultural beliefs explain why certain families pursue certain careers in large numbers (Holland, 1973; Lent *et al.,* 2002; Oliveira, Porfeli, Céu Taveira & Lee, 2020), thus influencing subsequent generations.

Schools and their geographical location
The environment or geographical location in which an individual finds him/herself is said to be an important vehicle for socialisation, thus likely to influence one in deciding which profession to pursue (Dorsey, 1996). A large number of researchers have corroborated the finding that (high) schools are environments that have the potential to shape specific career paths for leaners (Edwards & Quinter, 2011; Kazi & Akhlaq, 2017; Mtemeri, 2017; Nyarko-Sampson, 2013). Educators in particular are said time and again to be instilling the prospect of specific careers on learners whom they have been teaching (Abe & Chikoko, 2020; Fabea, 2014; Farmer, 2001; Johnson, 2004). Thus, learners are influenced by their teachers.

Career guidance and peer influence
A plethora of researchers have noted that career guidance counsellors play a huge role in shaping the nature of a career an individual is likely to follow (Amoah, Kwofie & Kwofie, 2015; Hansen, 2006; Liliana-Camelia, 2015; Mtemeri, 2017). In other words, when one approaches the counsellors for guidance, chances are that one will leave the guidance session with an idea of which profession to pursue. Often career guidance counsellors are invited during the year in secondary schools to help learners learn about the admission requirements of various careers (Amoah, *et al.,* 2015; Farmer, 2001). The author notes that clients (learners) would come to social workers to enquire about social work or other professions. Such moments may be regarded as some form of career guidance, especially when the enquiry pertains to the social work profession per se. Of course, it must be pointed out that for other professions the social workers would refer the clients to the relevant professionals. Nevertheless, the types of peers that one associates with are also found to be influential in the type of career one is to

pursue (Kazi & Akhlaq, 2017; Mtemeri, 2017). As Mtemeri (2017:43) says, "in the absence of proper career guidance and teacher mentorship, students resort to peer mentorship". Thus, the types of friends one interacts with have the potential of helping one to decide on a career path.

Bursaries and individual finances

Social work has been identified as one of the scarce professions (Earle, 2008; Govline, 2021; National Planning Commission, 2011; Sithole, 2010; Skhosana, 2020). Accordingly, in 2007 the Department of Social Development began recruiting more social workers by making funds available to sponsor social work students at various government institutions in South Africa (Govline, 2021; Khunou *et al.,* 2012). Despite the soundness of this recruitment move by the Department of Social Development, research reveals that persons who do not have a passion to pursue the profession are also attracted by this funding (Bukuluki, Höjer & Jansson, 2017; Khunou *et al.,* 2012). An implication is that students cannot always study what they want because of a lack of finances (Kazi & Akhlaq, 2017; Papadaki, 2001), and therefore their career options may be limited to registering for courses that are funded externally and that are often not their first preferences. In a worst-case scenario, applicants and registered students may use social work as a stepping stone to other desired careers (Christie & Kruk, 1998; Khunou *et al.,* 2012). Thus, certain career choices are informed by the availability of scholarships rather than passion or other attributes. Social work programme developers are therefore to safeguard against persons taking advantage of scholarships availability, but are not passionate about the profession.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The study set out to explore and describe the reasons for choosing the social work profession amongst prospective students at the University of Limpopo.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study pursued the following objectives:

- To determine the motives for applying to study social work by prospective students;

- To generate recommendations for the selection of social work students.

METHODOLOGY

Research approach and design

The author adopted a qualitative research paradigm that is descriptive in nature. The descriptive design was selected because of its advantage in allowing the investigator to explore and describe an area of investigation in depth, in terms of who, how, where and why events or experiences occur, for example, in case of this research, why candidates want to pursue social work as a career (Bradshaw, Atkinson & Doody, 2017). Qualitative methods are designed to help the researcher get a better understanding through first-hand experience, truthful reporting and quotations from actual conversations (Myers, 2013).

Study population

The study was conducted at the Department of Social Work among prospective students who had applied for the Social Work course, and had therefore been invited to undertake a selection

test on a specified date. The department receives over 1,200 applications annually from which candidates are screened to ascertain whether they meet the minimum university admission requirements in terms of the high school results (grades) and then invited for a selection test.

Sampling procedure

The Department receives applications from the University's Central Admission Section, which then dispatches applications to relevant departments, in this case the Department of Social Work. For the academic year 2020, the department received 141 applications and all candidates were given the opportunity to sit for a selection test. Thus, this group formed a sample for this study. Noteworthy is the fact that most of the applications received are from learners who are completing their high school education at the time of tendering their applications to the university. Applications are open to all genders.

Data collection

Data were primarily gathered via document analysis from 141 questionnaires that prospective social work students completed at the beginning of the year. Simply put, the prospective students were given questionnaires to answer as a form of selection test. As Corbin and Strauss (2008) say, document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents in various forms (handwritten, printed or electronic). This requires that data be examined and interpreted to elicit meaning, gain understanding and develop empirical knowledge. The studying of extracts or data from the questionnaires or other documents (even quantitative ones) for the purposes of thematic analysis or meaningful insights shows the qualitative nature of this research. And this aligns well with definition of document analysis by Corbin and Strauss (2008).

Data Analysis

Data were thematically analysed according to the Braun and Clarke (2006) guidelines. Data were studied and then coded; the codes were combined to create new themes. It is worth noting that only 70 of the 141 questionnaires were analysed in accordance with the principle of data saturation.

Data verification

In qualitative research "verification refers to the mechanisms used during the process of research to incrementally contribute to ensuring reliability and validity and, thus, the rigor of a study" (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson & Spiers, 2002: 6). These authors further state that to achieve the foregoing, the researcher should consider ensuring methodological coherence, sampling sufficiency, and developing a dynamic relationship between sampling, data collection and analysis. The author ensured from the conceptualisation stage of the research that there is coherence in terms of the research focus, methodology and other components, as this study was not undertaken in a linear fashion; there were amendments and adjustments as the study progressed. Because the study relied primarily on (questionnaire) documents, the sampling included only data from prospective students who took the selection test as a targeted sample. The analysis of the data was informed by that available data sampled, until data saturation was reached. As new data or themes emerged, they were analysed in comparison with the literature review, since the study was based on document analysis. And lastly, the entire methodology of

the research has been outlined to allow any researcher to replicate the study (or for an audit trail).

Ethical considerations

The University of Limpopo provided institutional permission for this research on 13/02/2020. Confidentiality and anonymity were ethical considerations respected in this research, since the documents (questionnaires) analysed had the names and responses of the prospective students on them. But to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, there was no mention of participants' names in this scientific report, but only pseudonyms were used to avoid any potential harm.

Description of sample

A multiracial sample of South Africans and non-South Africans formed part of the social work selection test at the Department of Social Work. The age range was between 19 and 25 years of age. The selection test was open to all genders.

KEY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study arrived at the themes pertaining individuals' choices to pursue social work as a profession. As a reminder, the participants were asked a specific question on 'Who motivated them to study social work':

- Family influence

- Influence of school teachers

- Social workers in the field

- Self-healing desire.

Family influence

When raising children, one of the skills parents attempt to impart to their children is listening skills. Stated simply, children are taught to listen to their parents when they speak to them, including giving general advice. It seems the same skill is applied by children (learners) when having to choose between various careers to pursue in their lives (Fareo & Garkuwa, 2018). They take into account which career their parents or family thinks suits them (Fareo & Garkuwa, 2018; Liliana-Camelia, 2015; Liu, McMahon & Watson, 2015; Peila-Shuster, 2018; Rani, 2014; Sharif *et al.,* 2019). Again, as the idiom says, he who pays the piper calls the tune. This means that financially, parents may use their financial muscle to influence their children's study direction. According to participants, the family played a significant role in their decision to pursue a career in social work. Gottfredson (1981) and the SCCT performance model maintain that those from a culture characterised by collective decision making were more inclined to choose a career path that was consistent with the preferences of their family members and with their self-efficacy beliefs, rather than one that necessarily fit their personal interests. Some of the participants' sentiments included:

> *My mother has encouraged me to study social work as she has seen my determination to helping the helpless. She always tells me that I am a social worker in the making and that really touched me… hence I want to become a social worker.* (Participant 1)

My mom is a professional nurse, and she always tells me about how teenage mothers struggle and get stressed after giving birth because there is no one to help them. And with that she encouraged me to study social work to help teenagers. (Participant 3)

My uncle motivated me to study social work… he saw that I love to help people in my community a lot… when he is happy, he calls me his social worker. (Participant 6)

It may not be surprising that uncles, mothers or the family at large have an influence on the career paths of students, as a family is known to be the main agent of socialisation in individuals. This finding is consistent with the literature which indicates that a family plays a significant role in influencing the career paths of its members (Fareo & Garkuwa, 2018; Mtemeri, 2017; Mutekwe *et al.,* 2011; Oliveira *et al.,* 2020; Rani, 2014; Sharif *et al.,* 2019). As Giddens (2009) indicates from a sociological perspective, family represents an established institution that is expected to maintain a particular structure and satisfy its desires, which may be those of its own family members. Liliana-Camelia (2015) noted that sometimes children inherit their parents' occupations, for example, if the father is a farmer, the (male) children are likely to 'inherit' that occupation.

The theory of functionalism posited by Macionis and Plummer (2008) argues that an individual is part and parcel of a functional community. The community per se has the potential to shape or reshape an individual's behaviour or desires. This implies that family members who form part of the community will influence career paths that are important and will be functional to the community they live in (Holland, 1973; Matee, 2014). However, one problem with parents having an influence on students' career paths is that the students may not be competent in this field (Lent *et al.,* 2002), or at a later stage not like the profession they are in, and hence could engage in unethical practices (Ahmed, Sharif & Ahmad, 2017). This is a problem that the SACSSP regularly picks up through complaints. A worst-case scenario at institutional level is that students may drop out or deregister from the social work programme. On the other side, the literature indicates that career guidance counsellors and peers are also influential in choosing career paths (Hansen, 2006; Mtemeri, 2017). However, in this study that was not found to be an influencing factor.

Influence of school teachers

A school is an environment where learners spend most of their time during the day, away from parents. For this reason, teachers at schools assume a parental role; legally they are said to be *in loco parentis.* Thus, learners (or children) observe and take instructions from teachers (Hooley, 2015). In essence, teachers become role models to some learners and this could influence learners in choosing their career paths (Abe & Chikoko, 2020; Fabea, 2014; Liliana-Camelia, 2015). As regards role modelling, Ndambuki and Mutie (1999) warn that poor modelling may lead to bad decisions for one's career. This notwithstanding, the author found that candidates who wrote the selection test were influenced by their school teachers to pursue the social work profession. The following quotations provide some evidence:

My class teacher told me that am polite… not judging them… and I should become a social worker… she told me that I got strengths to listen and encourage others. I communicate well with people. (Participant 2)

> *My educator told me that I am a good leaner and I always help other learners at schools. I am patient with people.... with that type of character, she believed I would make a very good social worker. And that made me want to become a social worker.* (Participant 8)

In support of this finding, the author noted that at public schools one of the common learning subjects, namely Life Orientation*,* has career choice sections, which reveals and reinforces the teachers' influence on learners' future career paths (Amato, 2013; Hooley, 2015). Teachers often let learners perform career role plays (e.g. wearing specific professional uniforms and badges). In the role play a learner chooses a desired profession such as being a social worker, nurse, medical doctor, lawyer and so forth. It is important to note that the learners' roles are sometimes influenced by teachers based on their knowledge of learners' capabilities, or what a learner prefers him/herself, which suggests an element of self-efficacy (Lent *et al.,* 2002) and also a positive reinforcement of outcome expectation (Skinner, 1938).

The above verbatim accounts of participants may be rooted in such school role plays driven by teachers. Apart from role plays in schools and certain learning subjects, a substantial body of research indicates that teachers are persuasive in learners' selection of career paths (Abe & Chikoko, 2020; Edwards & Quinter, 2011; Fabea, 2014; Farmer, 2001; Hooley, Matheson & Watts, 2014; Johnson, 2004; Liliana-Camelia, 2015; Mtemeri, 2017).

As in the preceding theme, teachers are not expected to be career guidance professionals as they are not trained for that (Hooley, 2015), but they are allowed to make referrals. As Hooley (2015) cautions:

> *teachers have had careers of their own. They have made decisions about whether to go to university, what subjects to study and what jobs to do … what worked for the teacher may not work for the students.*

In some cases it has been shown that at a later stage students had been fed wrong information and that led to "demotivation, lack of productivity, leading to increased dropouts and career failure" (Ahmed *et al.,* 2017:1).

Social workers in the field
Social workers assist individuals in the field. In doing so they become role models to their service users. Thus, the hard and positive efforts of social workers in the field, amongst other professionals, could motivate service users to pursue social work (Ajzen, 2006; Hugen, 1996; Liliana-Camelia, 2015), or even to recommend it to others (e.g. family members). Interestingly, this also includes people who are not practising in the field, but through their deeds or job titles they become known social workers, for example, politicians. Quite a number of responses from participants support this observation:

> *A social worker from my community came to our school while I was in Grade 10… she spoke to us and I started to understand what social workers do in the offices, and from that day I started to have an interest in studying social work.* (Participant 4)

> *My neighbour… she is a social worker and looking at her, and I started liking the field of social work… also hearing people talking about the good things she does for*

people in my community…I started talking to her about her job and I wanted to be like her. (Participant 10)

Lindiwe Zulu… the minister of social development motivated me to become a social work … to help the vulnerable people in our community. (Participant 7)

Hugen (1996:31), in trying to understand why people chose to enter the field of social work, found that "past experiences with social work services or role models who were social workers" influenced the choice. This is consistent with what the participants said in this study, for example that a social worker cousin and neighbour influenced their aspiration to follow a social work career. Lent *et al.* (2002), speak of the self-efficacy principle, as discussed in the theoretical framework section. They maintain that:

through continued activity exposure, practice, and feedback, people (learners) refine their skills, develop personal performance standards, form a sense of their efficacy in particular tasks, and acquire certain expectations about the outcomes of activity engagement (Lent *et al.,* 2002:57).

This implies that through observing social workers' duties, students get motivated and judge their own capabilities against those demonstrated by social workers. They then make a determination to pursue social work.

Self-healing desire

The prospective students also choose to be trained as social workers because they want to heal themselves, as they had experienced difficult or traumatic (family) situations in the past (Gio lacono, 2017; Hugen, 1996; Moriarty & Murray, 2007; Rompf & Royse, 1994; Toros & Medar, 2015). This implies that social work interventions are trusted to bring stability amongst service users. Stated simply, clients or prospective students who have witnessed successful social work interventions believe in the value of the profession. The participants shared the following accounts to justify their motivation to study social work:

As a young girl growing up, I faced challenges every day. And I could not get much help from people. Studying social work will transform me to be a better person and help me solve my own problems in life… I don't think I will suffer as a social worker. (Participant 5)

Going to school every day and leaving my mother ill, lying in bed helpless, waiting for me to come back and help her… just makes me want to be a social worker. (Participant 11)

The granny that lived next to my house had no one to help her take her pills after meals until she died… No one was helping her and her families abandoned her. I feel I will be able to avoid situations like this if I become a social worker, there are still others like her out there. (Participant 13)

The above quotations show that students have faced crises or had past experiences that swayed their career paths towards social work (Rompf & Royse, 1994; Toros & Medar, 2015). As a result, social work applicants have developed an interest in entering the profession with the hope to use their professional training for self-healing. In other words, the professional training

is viewed as a way of dealing with their own predicaments. Yet, the author remains sceptical of this motive and cautions that it is no exaggeration to state that a doctor cannot necessarily cure himself.

CONCLUSION

The study has arrived at the finding that the interest in the social work profession of most prospective social work students – and probably those already enrolled –was driven by social environment or social influences. According to Liliana-Camelia (2015), social influence refers to a change in the individual's thinking, attitudes, experiences or behaviour as a consequence of interaction with another individuals, groups or their living environment. Thus, the decision to pursue social work was not decided upon autonomously by the (prospective) students. Stakeholders such as family, school teachers and practising social workers had a great influence on the aspiration to pursue a career in social work. Given this, one should caution that if the determination to pursue social work is highly influenced by others, and the candidate had not introspected for passion or other attributes linked to the profession, the chances are that burnout and withdrawal symptoms may be the order of the day. The study also found that individual past experiences had a push effect on the desire to gain entry into social work. This often had to do with individual recovery or a need for self-healing sparked by traumatic past situations. But more research is needed in this regard.

Amongst other factors discussed in the literature review, this study did not find bursaries and finances to be significantly influencing the choice to pursue the Social Work course at the University of Limpopo, South Africa. However, some scholars are adamant that this is a reality that one must not ignore. Put another way, social work applicants in the selection test undertaken may not have explicitly indicated the abundance of social work bursaries as a motivation to study social work, but to some extent it is an existing fact. And lastly, the study shows great positivity in the answers to the research question of the study that sought to investigate the motives for prospective students at the University of Limpopo to pursue a career in social work.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This research focused only on the 2020 prospective social work students but no study had ever conducted at the institution in the past in this regard. As such, this research cannot corroborate any earlier findings at the University of Limpopo, and so its findings cannot be representative of the qualities and motives of previous prospective social work students and graduates. As the selection test was a semi-structured questionnaire, the students were not available for interviews to explain certain responses and this possibly limited the richness of some information. Collaboration with other universities for a more diverse sample was not possible at the time to make the article more persuasive.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH

The fundamental purpose of this research is to increase knowledge and understanding of the factors that lead individuals to pursue a career in social work, in particular those who had recently completed high school and were heading for tertiary education. This research will sharpen the tools and strategies for selecting students by programme developers at various

institutions of higher learning, since there is no uniformity to date. Furthermore, this will shed light on the training and employment of social workers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the findings of this study, the author wishes to offer a number of recommendations.

- The selection process of prospective students needs to be improved in a two-fold manner. Firstly, with (fluctuating) university admission capacity in mind, allow a large number of prospective students (qualifying) to undertake the selection test questionnaires (semi-structured), and those questionnaires be marked with reference to a guide to the department's selection criteria for students. Secondly, the target pool of prospective students who made it through the selection test (questionnaires) be invited for a final round of face-to-face (or virtual) interviews by a designated committee or staff members at the social work department(s). These designated committee or staff members will then conduct interviews to strengthen the process of identifying and selecting the best candidates according to the specific selection criteria of the department of social work.

- Social work selection tools must be constantly improved in line with data generated by recent research on the motives behind the expressed interest in pursuing social work and beyond. This implies that studies focusing on career paths in social work need to be reviewed time and again to improve selection test questionnaires or tools in general.

- In the future, South African universities should strive for some uniformity in the way that prospective social work students could be selected to enter social work programmes across the country. The South African Council for Social Service Professions may be the right body to spearhead this process as a designated accrediting body for the Bachelor of Social Work in South Africa.

- The study should be replicated in other provinces and universities, and the findings be used to revisit the learning and teaching practices that include students' real-life experiences.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

There is no conflict of interests to report and the research was not funded by any organisation.

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