

ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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INFLUENCE OF EARLY-LIFE PSYCHOSOCIAL TRAUMA, FAMILY ADVERSITY, AND SELECTED OTHER VARIABLES IN THE CAREER CHOICE OF SOCIAL WORKERS

Several empirical investigations of the antecedents to social work career choice have identified an association between early-life psychosocial trauma and subsequent selection of a social work degree program among students. The question of whether these comparatively high incidences of early-life trauma among students also exist within the professional community has not been answered. Furthermore, little is known about the roles that early-life adversity, subsequent adult well-being, and empathy with others' distress play in influencing social work career choice. The purpose of this study is to assess the extent of early-life psychosocial trauma among social work professionals and the influence of early-life adversity and selected other variables in social work career choice.

A review of the literature provided empirical data from which to glean predictor variables for this study. The variables proposed were: (a) childhood maltreatment; (b) adverse childhood experiences; (c) premature responsibility; (d) dispositional empathy, measured within cognitive and affective domains, (e) adult well-being, and (f) selected other experiential and interpersonal influences.

The study sample consisted of a random sample of professional social workers and a convenience sample of college-educated adults representing various non-social work professions (N = 319). Little difference was found between groups on variables concerning early-life adversity. Item-by-item analyses revealed that social workers reported greater sexual

and emotional abuse and more familial mental illness. The groups did not differ in reports of subjective well-being. Social workers demonstrated greater cognitive empathy than non-social workers.

Variables demonstrating a significant relationship to career choice were selected to comprise a logistic regression model for purposes of predicting social work versus non-social work career choice. Early-life psychosocial trauma, well-being, and empathy were not found to predict social work career choice. Only the desire to work with people and the experience of being a confidant to others during youth were significant predictors.

The results of this study do not support the influence of early-life psychosocial trauma or diminished well-being in social work career choice as hypothesized. Cognitive empathy, the desire to work with people, and youthful experience with being a confidant to others appear to distinguish social workers from other professionals and perhaps play influential roles in social work career choice.