

Faculty Perceptions of Service User Empowerment and Consumerism, A Quantitative Study



Nafees Alam*

Researcher, Yeshiva University, USA

Submission: August 08, 2019; **Published:** September 05, 2019

***Corresponding author:** Nafees Alam, Professor, Researcher, Yeshiva University, USA

Abstract

Background: The purpose of this exploratory study was to establish the state of US social work faculty perceptions on service user empowerment and consumerism. Despite the trademark of the profession being service user-oriented, United States' social work curricula lacks service user inclusion in the education of social workers.

Methods: This was a cross-sectional exploratory study involving 404 social work faculty across the United States. In addition to demographic variables, the instrument used consisted of a questionnaire informed by existing literature.

Results: The maximum possible composite score for this study was 50. The mean composite score was 41.977 (SD = 3.647), with the median score of 42 and the mode being 45 (N = 53 or 13.766% of participants). The lowest recorded score was 22 and the highest recorded score was 50, setting the range at 28.

Conclusion: Overall, findings show that sampled social work faculty are mostly in favor of service user empowerment and consumerism (mean composite score percentage of 76.322%). More research is needed in the topic area, beginning with faculty perceptions of service user inclusion in social work organizations and social work education, thereafter, expanding the scope of study to include sampled service users, students and carers.

Keywords: Social work education; Empowerment; Consumer movement

Social Work Education in the United States

Social work curricula across the United States lacks service user inclusion in the education of social workers, despite the trademark of the profession being service user oriented. Social work education in the United States requires a four-year undergraduate degree, or a two-year graduate degree, in social work. Both undergraduate and graduate social work degrees require students to complete internship hours working with individuals, families, groups, communities and/or organizations, with the goal of enabling and encouraging the application of social work-related knowledge, skills and values covered during classroom instruction (theory) within real-life settings (practice). For many students, the internship serves as the first encounter with service users of social service organizations, meaning they may have little-to-no understanding of service user experiences, or the skills needed to work collaboratively with service users, prior to this point in their academic careers.

Social workers are tasked with assessing service users of social service organizations for eligibility and need for services, thereafter, working collaboratively with service users to meet these assessed need(s). Social workers in the United States are expected to adhere to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics, which emphasizes respect for service users, service user self-determination and preservation of the dignity and worth of every person [1]. International professionals in the field of academia, as well as social workers and service users, have argued in favor of service users being included in the education of social work students to prepare and equip them with the knowledge, skills and values necessary to provide social work services to service users while on their internship and after graduation [2,3]. The consumer movement has helped bring light to the importance of service user inclusion, specifically within social work education.

The Consumer Movement

The consumer movement is an effort by service users of social services to gain control over their treatment and eliminate the associated stigma. The consumer role is a social role based on experiential knowledge of the system with which they are affiliated Kaufman (1999). The consumer movement in the United States has recently begun shaping policy and practice Bluebird (2000) but not social work education. This movement emphasizes the recovery process, conceptualized as having three phases:

- a) reclaiming a positive sense of self in relation to the presenting issue(s),
- b) active pursuit of health and
- c) “moving on” and claiming meaningful roles outside of being a consumer of social services Ridgeway (1999).

Service user inclusion should be a logical component of social work education since activism and focus on recovery are in harmony with social work values that include partnership and self-determination [1].

Methodology

This quantitative study is as an exploratory cross-sectional research study using non-probability purposive sampling techniques. The research tool is a non-pre-existing questionnaire, developed through a review of literature and theoretical framework, uploaded to Survey Monkey, thereafter, targeted toward social work faculty across the United States. Informed consent was attained through Survey Monkey before participants began the questionnaire. Data were collected from 12:00 AM EST March 1st, 2018 until 11:59 PM EST April 30th, 2018, a duration of 61 days. As of July 2014, there were 500 undergraduate and 233 graduate social work programs that are accredited by the CSWE. The CSWE provides an up-to-date list of all accredited undergraduate and graduate programs on their website, along with contact information for each program director. All 733 programs were emailed

invitations to participate in the Survey Monkey questionnaire; follow up reminders were sent on a weekly basis.

Research in the field of social work calls for ethical considerations and confidentiality to be at the forefront of study. It is of paramount importance that participants’ identities are always protected. Full IRB approval through Yeshiva University, Wurzweiler School of Social Work, was obtained before beginning data collection. Specific ethical considerations for social work faculty included fully informing them of the purpose of the study, maintaining confidentiality and gaining informed consent. Consent was obtained from every participant prior to the start of the questionnaire. All data were stored in a password protected cloud-based file. The population, social work faculty across the United States, are not considered to be a vulnerable population, nor an excluded category altogether, therefore no sub-population issues were anticipated or encountered.

The questionnaire was first piloted to small factions of qualified participants who provided feedback toward the betterment of the research tool. 404 social work faculty participated in the study during the 61-day data collection period. The main study question addressed by this study is, “what are the attitudes of social work faculty toward service user empowerment and consumerism?”

Results

The maximum possible composite score for this study (a 10-item inventory aggregated into a single composite score) was 50. The mean composite score was 41.977 (SD = 3.647), with the median score of 42 and the mode being 45 (N = 53 or 13.766% of participants). The lowest recorded score was 22 and the highest recorded score was 50, setting the range at 28. A visual depiction of the range of participants’ scores mirrored a normal curve as indicated in (Figure 1) with elements further detailed in (Table 1). Overall, findings show that sampled social work faculty are mostly in favor of service user empowerment and consumerism (mean composite score percentage of 76.322%).

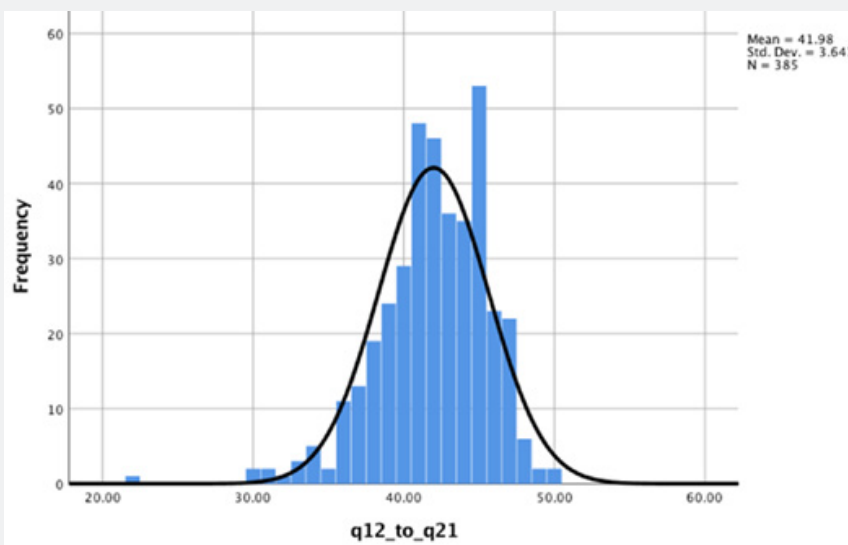


Figure 1: Service User Empowerment and Consumerism Composite Score Histogram.

Table 1: Service User Empowerment and Consumerism Frequency Distribution.

| Question | M (SD) | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|--|----------------|-------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|----------------|
| q12. It is difficult to know if service users are being truthful (REVERSE SCORED) | 3.686 (0.799) | 12.1% (49) | 48.8% (197) | 27% (109) | 7.2% (29) | 0.2% (1) |
| q13. It is necessary to ask service users what they think before decisions about them are made. | 4.605 (0.753) | 1.7% (7) | 0.7% (3) | 3.0% (12) | 22.5% (91) | 67.3% (272) |
| q14. Service users are the “experts” on themselves | 4.574 (0.689) | 0.7% (3) | 1.0% (4) | 3.5% (14) | 27.7% (112) | 62.4% (252) |
| q15. Service user participation in case planning is important in making the right decisions | 4.707 (0.629) | 1.2% (5) | 0.2% (1) | 0.7% (3) | 20.8% (84) | 72.3% (292) |
| q16. It is important to treat service users as individuals as opposed to “typical” (aggregate) service users | 4.756 (0.602) | 1.2% (5) | 1.0% (4) | 16.3% (66) | 76.7% (310) | 95.3% (385) |
| q17. Service users are reluctant to say what they really mean when speaking to social workers (REVERSE SCORED) | 3.083 (0.880) | 3.0% (12) | 30.9% (125) | 33.7% (136) | 26.5% (107) | 1.2% (5) |
| q18. Talking to service users about their issues is an additional burden on them (REVERSE SCORED) | 3.958 (0.856) | 25.0% (101) | 49.0% (198) | 13.9% (56) | 7.2% (29) | 0.2% (1) |
| q19. Service users and social workers are equals | 3.533 (1.166) | 2.7% (11) | 21.5% (87) | 16.3% (66) | 31.7% (128) | 23.0% (93) |
| q20. To protect service users, social workers should tell service users that everything is going well with their case (REVERSE SCORED) | 4.252 (0.990) | 48.3% (195) | 33.7% (136) | 5.0% (20) | 5.9% (24) | 2.5% (10) |
| q21. It is important for academic institutions and social work organizations to build rapport with the surrounding community | 4.823 (0.510) | 0.7% (3) | 0.0% (0) | 1.0% (4) | 11.9% (48) | 81.7% (330) |
| Mean composite score | 41.977 (3.647) | | | | | |
| Note: The total n or f for each variable may not add to the total sample size of N = 404 due to missing data. | | | | | | |

Implications and Contributions to Social Work

The focus of this study pertains to collegiate social work curricula across the United States lacking service user inclusion at the academic level, despite the trademark of the profession being service user oriented. Social work is defined as “a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. [...] social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing” [4]. As the definition highlights, social work aims to engage people to enhance wellbeing and values collective responsibility in achieving this aim. The empowerment of individuals, groups and communities in need requires their active inclusion in the social work process of assessment, intervention and evaluation of services, yet service users’ views and perspectives are often ignored during this process [5,6]. This study’s findings indicate that the majority of social work faculty are in favor of service user empowerment and consumerism.

There is a great deal of information to be gleaned from those with experiential knowledge on subject matter, beyond the limits of academic knowledge. The inclusion of service users in social work academia could help bridge the gap between academic knowledge and experiential knowledge. More importantly, meaningful inclusion of service users, defined as citizen power as opposed to tokenism or non-partic-

ipation [7] is key in maintaining an environment where there is buy-in from all parties to advance social work theory and eventual practice.

Limitations

A major limitation to this study is the exclusion of service users in a study designed to highlight the importance of service user inclusion. The primary reason behind this decision was to first establish the attitudes of social work faculty across the United States. This is not designed to be an exhaustive and complete study on the topic, further research must be done including service users, students and other constituents.

The research tool employed in this study was a quantitative questionnaire, and as with any quantitative questionnaire, the aim here was breadth at the expense of depth. Nuance was non-existent with the use of this structured questionnaire. Furthermore, the questionnaire was constructed with a pre-existing knowledge of a potential for high social desirability of participant responses (participants may have answered in such a way as to appear as though they value service user empowerment and consumerism more than they really do). Since “neutral” was a choice in the majority of questions, it’s likely that greater variation could have been established if “neutral” was not an available choice within the questionnaire. Purposive sampling, employed in this study, is a non-probability sampling technique, yielding results that are not as generalizable as probability sampling methods [8,9].

Areas of Future Research

The researcher's goal has been to learn about the attitudes of faculty within social work programs toward service user empowerment and consumerism. The overarching idea has been to expand upon the consumerism movement and include service users in the development and eventual delivery of services geared toward them. The information gathered could eventually lead to the development of a "best practice" model, which could be implemented and evaluated on an ongoing basis. Future funding could enable programs to implement this "best practice" model and evaluate the outcomes for service users and students, thus fulfilling the need for evidence on the effectiveness of service user inclusion in social work education [10]. This study, by no means exhaustive and complete, aims to move one step closer to this "best practice" model by being a point of reference for future studies of similar nature.

The natural next step would be to study faculty perceptions of service user inclusion in social work organizations before studying faculty perceptions of service user inclusion in social work education. Thereafter, approaching this topic from a qualitative perspective could be fruitful. As this study only includes social work faculty across the United States, eventual next steps could further expand the sample to include students, service users and/or careers.

Service users of social work services have formed advocacy groups to fight for inclusion in the shaping of social services and have used the slogan "nothing about us without us" in their mission. Service users argue for inclusion in all aspects of social work services from the education of future social workers to the evaluation of services and consultation on policies [5,6,11,12]. This exploratory study only examines how social work educators perceive service user empowerment and consumerism. Further research is needed through exploratory, descriptive and explanatory study designs to bridge the gap between this study's findings and the expressed spirit of the social work profession [13].

References

1. National Association of Social Workers (2008) Code of ethics of the National Association of Social Workers 8(2): 37-44.
2. Brown K, Young N (2008) Building Capacity for service user and Carer Involvement in Social work Education. *Social Work Education: The International Journal* 27(1): 84-96.
3. Levin E (2004) *Involving Service Users and Carers in Social Work Education*, SCIE Guide 4, London, Social Care Institute for Excellence, UK.
4. International Federation of Social Work (2014) *Global definition of social work*. USA.
5. Peter Beresford (2013) From 'other' to involved: User Involvement in Research: An Emerging Paradigm. *Nordic Social Work Research* 3(2): 139-148.
6. Munro K, Ross MK, Reid M (2006) User Involvement in Mental Health: Time to Face up to the Challenges of Meaningful involvement? *International Journal of Mental Health Promotion* 8(2): 37-44.
7. Sherry R Arnstein (1969) A ladder of Citizen Participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35(4): 216-224.
8. Rubin A, Babbie E (2016) *Essential Research Methods for Social Work* (4th ed.). Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole Cengage Learning, USA.
9. Grinnell RM, Unrau YA (2014) *Social Work Research and Evaluation: Foundations of Evidence-based practice*. (10th edn), New York: Oxford University Press, USA.
10. Karen Robinson, Martin Webber (2013) Models and Effectiveness of Service user and carer Involvement in Social Work education: A literature review. *British Journal of Social Work* 43(5): 925-944.
11. Fox Joanna (2011) The view from inside: Understanding Service user involvement in Health and Social care Education. *Disability & Society* 26(2): 169-177.
12. Spiers S, Harney K, Chilvers C (2005) Service user Involvement in Forensic Mental Health: Can it work? *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology* 16(2): 211-220.
13. Baldwin Mark, Sadd June (2006) Allies with attitude! Service users, academics and Social Service agency staff learning how to share power in running social work education courses. *Social Work Education* 25(4): 348-359.



This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License
DOI: [10.19080/PBSIJ.2019.13.555855](https://doi.org/10.19080/PBSIJ.2019.13.555855)

Your next submission with Juniper Publishers will reach you the below assets

- Quality Editorial service
- Swift Peer Review
- Reprints availability
- E-prints Service
- Manuscript Podcast for convenient understanding
- Global attainment for your research
- Manuscript accessibility in different formats
(Pdf, E-pub, Full Text, Audio)
- Unceasing customer service

Track the below URL for one-step submission

<https://juniperpublishers.com/online-submission.php>