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What Kind of Social Policy do Social Work Students Prefer? A Comparison of Students in Three Countries

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Abstract

The goal of this article is to contribute to our understanding of the way in which students at the very beginning of their social work training view the sources of social problems and the way in which society should deal with these problems. This is part of an effort to determine the contemporary role of social change in the thinking of social workers in different national settings. Traditionally, social work has regarded social change as one of its primary professional objectives. Ever since the settlement houses were first established in the late years of the 19th century, many social workers have indeed been actively involved in social action aimed at bringing about social reform for the betterment of deprived segments of society. These efforts first took place in a period during which the term "welfare state" had yet to be coined and the notion of state responsibility for social protection for the poor was not widely accepted. Nevertheless, the conviction of these early social workers that social conditions were the prime cause of deprivation and poverty led them to actively seek improved social legislation and programs (Addams, 1910: Leighninger and Midgley, 1997).

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What kind of social policy do social work students prefer?

A comparison of students in three countries

⬤ **Idit Weiss, John Gal, Ram Cnaan and Rea Majlaglic**

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In recent years, a century after the settlement house era, resolutions adopted by representative organizations of social workers in various countries and expressed in their codes of ethics have reiterated the profession's adherence to these social goals (Banks, 1995; Parsloe, 1990; Wolk, 1996). Clearly, there has been change in the way in which the aims and methods of social work have been perceived over time and between societies. However, it would appear that the foundations of this commitment to social change include, firstly, a common belief that deprivation and poverty are primarily a consequence of various structural characteristics of advanced market societies. Secondly, there is a belief that change must take the form of state intervention on behalf of the various social groups which suffer deprivation (Leighninger and Midgley, 1997). Finally, there is an assumption that social responsibility for implementing change, that will improve the lot of disadvantaged groups in society, will not come of itself but rather requires the active involvement of social workers (Benn, 1991; Jansson, 1990; Jordan, 1990; Reid and Billups, 1986).

In spite of the general agreement among social workers that social action and involvement in policy formulation are central objectives of the social work profession, in practice most social workers do not take part in activities aimed at bringing about such change. Forms of activities aimed at achieving social change, be they legislative advocacy, reform through litigation, social action or social policy analysis, are not a significant part of the repertoire of most social workers in the USA, the UK and Israel (Figueira-McDonough, 1993; Payne, 1997; Spiro et al., 1997). Rather, most social workers engage in casework or direct practice, which focuses upon providing personal assistance to individuals or families, in order to better cope with the challenges they face in the existing environment (Aviram and Katan, 1991; Payne, 1997; Reeser and Epstein, 1987). Nor do most schools of social work provide their students with either sufficient knowledge or professional tools with which to undertake this type of activity (Specht and Courtney, 1994). Policy practice is a residual field of study and training in schools of social work in these welfare states (Hindmarsh, 1992; Gal and Weiss, 2000; Wyers, 1991).

One common explanation for this gap between the pronounced macro-goals of social work and the actual forms of practice undertaken by most social workers has focused upon the core values of many of the individuals who choose the profession: that is, in contrast to the proclaimed progressive goals of the profession, in fact

most students of social work reach the profession with attitudes that accept the existing social status quo that places the blame for inequality primarily on the deprived rather than upon society (Parsloe, 1990; Witherspoon and Kloko-Philips, 1987). These views, it is claimed, reflect the dominant ideologies in welfare states in recent years, in particular that of the New Right, that emphasize individual responsibility and place a premium upon competition in the free market (Jones and Novak, 1993; Marsland, 1995; Murray, 1984). Thus it is not surprising that social work students do not express any interest in social policy during their studies, nor do they engage in policy-practice after graduation (Guttmann and Cohen, 1992; Rubin and Johnson, 1984).

However, in spite of the claims that contemporary students reach social work education with attitudes that are not conducive to involvement in social change, the empirical foundations for claims of this type are not conclusive. Indeed, a number of studies undertaken during the 1970s and 1980s found that social work students at the beginning of their training were likely to explain poverty in structural terms, that they had racial egalitarian views, and that they even held more socialistic attitudes than students in other university faculties (Bargal, 1978; Cnaan and Bergman, 1990; Davis and Proctor, 1984; Enoch, 1988; Macarov, 1981; Schwartz and Robinson, 1991). Nevertheless, most of the research on these issues took place in periods during which public support for the welfare state was strong. Moreover, concrete data on the views of social work students regarding specific policy issues, such as the role of the state in ensuring the welfare of its citizens, the redistributional goals of the welfare state, the debate between selective and universal services and the impact of social services upon individuals are very limited in the literature. Finally, none of these studies sought to provide a comparative cross-cultural framework for their findings.

This study seeks to contribute to our understanding of the conceptions regarding these issues and others that students of social work in various national settings bring with them to social work training. The study compares students of social work in four schools of social work: one each in the USA and the UK and two in Israel. The choice of these four universities was dictated by a desire to compare social work students being educated in welfare states that are different yet share some common heritages and contemporary characteristics both with regard to welfare state institutions and to the social work profession. Thus, all three welfare states are close to the more liberal

welfare state model in the Esping-Andersen (1990) typology. More important, during the 1980s and early 1990s, New Right political leaders and parties held government in all three countries and sought to reform their welfare systems (Karger and Monnickendam, 1991; Pierson, 1993). In addition, there are some significant similarities and cross-cultural influences between social work and social work education in all three. In particular, the US model of social work has been very influential in the development of social work in Israel and the UK (Payne, 1997; Prager, 1988). The two Israeli schools of social work included in the study are the two leading schools in the country, but their orientations towards social work are very different. The Tel Aviv school favors a more psychological approach to the profession and is more supportive of private practice, while the Jerusalem school has traditionally been more policy-oriented and has emphasized the macro-aims of social work.

In the study there is an effort to try to determine the actual views of social work students immediately before the stage at which they embark upon their training and undergo a process of professional socialization. The study focuses upon two key questions.

1. What are the preferences of social work students with regard to social policy and explanations for the source of social problems?
2. Do the preferences of social work students with regard to policy and explanations vary across countries?

Methods

Respondents
The respondents in this study included 429 first-year social work students who can be divided into four sub-groups:

1. 130 students at the Tel Aviv University in Israel, comprising 96 percent of all first-year students at the school of social work;
2. 145 students at the University of Pennsylvania, USA, 98 percent of all first-year students at the school of social work;
3. 112 students at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Israel, comprising 86 percent of the student body of first-year students at the school of social work;
4. 42 students at the Cambridge campus of the Anglia Polytechnic University in the UK, who comprise 98 percent of all the first-year students at the school of social work.

The demographic characteristics of all four student groups and the results of a X^2 test can be seen in Table 1. The findings in the table indicate that there were statistically significant differences between the various sub-groups with regard to all the variables, apart from that relating to work. In the X^2 analysis, no significant differences between the demographic characteristics of the Tel Aviv and Jerusalem students were found. However, differences between the Israelis, on the one hand, and the British and American students, on the other, were identified, as were differences between the British and American student groups.

As can be seen from the table, most of the participants in the study were women. The proportion of men in the student population was higher in the Anglia sub-group, followed by Pennsylvania. A large proportion of the students in all the sub-groups was unmarried, though the proportion of married students was higher in the British group than in the others. With regard to the age of the participants in the study, the proportion of younger students (20–22) was highest in the Israeli groups. By contrast, the proportion of older students (over 28) was higher in the British sample, followed by the American sample. On the whole, the students at Anglia Polytechnic were the eldest. Most of the students in all four universities worked for a living. Most of the Israeli students reported that their families' income placed them in the lower or middle classes, while in the American and British samples the incomes tended to be middle-class or higher.

Instruments

The research instruments employed in the study included two questionnaires developed by the authors specifically for this research. Identical questionnaires were distributed in all four universities, the only differences being minor changes made in formulation of some of the statements so as to accommodate cultural or institutional differences. The first questionnaire examined views on social policy issues, and the second focused on the source of social problems. Participants in the survey were asked to indicate the degree to which the statements reflected their views on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 ('very little') to 5 ('very much'). Below is a short description of the two questionnaires.

1. The questionnaire on preferred social policy This questionnaire consisted of 22 statements, which sought to clarify attitudes toward social policy preferences (see Table 2, on pp. 66–68). In a principal components analysis, the Eigenvalue of seven factors was

Table 1 The demographic characteristics of the study population by universities and the results of the X^2 test of the demographic differences

Variables	Values	Tel Aviv		Jerusalem		Penn.		Anglia		X^2
		n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	
Gender	Female	114	88	100	89	114	79	27	66	16.39*
	Male	15	12	12	11	31	21	14	34	
Marital status	Married	6	5	11	10	26	18	17	40	37.26*
	Unmarried	123	95	101	90	119	82	25	60	
Age	20–22	79	61	70	62	30	21	2	4	143.60*
	23–25	36	28	32	29	48	33	8	19	
	26–28	9	7	6	5	21	15	6	14	
	29+	5	4	4	4	44	31	26	62	
Work	Yes	78	61	67	60	83	58	27	71	2.19
	No	49	39	45	40	60	42	11	29	
Parent's economic position	Low	50	43	43	43	31	22	9	22.5	48.36*
	Middle	50	43	42	42	52	37	9	22.5	
	High	16	14	16	16	57	41	22	55	

*$p < .001$

greater than 1, and the factors jointly explained 64 percent of the variation. The internal consistency in each of the seven factors was reasonable and ranged between .42 and .78.

The seven factors were:

1. 'State responsibility for housing', which included two questions, one of which was 'Would you support the adoption of legislation ensuring the right of all citizens to housing?'.
2. 'State responsibility for welfare', which included four questions, one of which was 'Do you think that the state should guarantee at least a basic standard of living to all citizens?'.
3. 'State responsibility for redistribution of wealth' included two questions, one of which was 'Do you think that the state should tax the rich more in order to increase welfare spending for the poor?'.
4. 'Personal willingness to finance the welfare state', which comprised four questions, one of which was 'Would you be willing to pay additional taxes so that the state could increase its welfare spending?'.
5. 'Support for selective services', which consisted of three questions, one of which was 'Do you think that disability benefits should be paid to the low-income disabled only?'.
6. 'Support for universal services', as expressed in three questions, one of which was 'Do you think that disability benefits should be paid to all disabled regardless of their individual income?'.
7. The final factor was 'The negative implications of welfare services', and consisted of four questions, one of which was 'Do you think that government assistance programs to the poor encourage laziness?'.

2. The questionnaire on the source of social problems   This questionnaire included 13 statements that sought to indicate the participants' views on the sources of two social problems: poverty and unemployment and delinquency (see Table 3, on p. 69). In a principal components analysis, four factors with Eigenvalues greater than 1 were identified. These four factors explained 57 percent of the variation.

1. The first factor was 'A lack of personal motivation as a cause of unemployment/poverty'. It consisted of five questions, one of which was 'Do you agree that people are poor because they lack sufficient will power?'.

Table 2 The factor scores of the seven factors of the questionnaire on preferred social policy

The item	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6	Factor 7
Would you support the adoption of legislation ensuring the right of all citizens to housing?	.71						
Would you support the adoption of a law ensuring the right to sheltered housing for all the elderly?	.69						
Do you think that there should be legislation promising work to all citizens?		.83					
Do you think that the country should guarantee at least a basic standard of living to all citizens?		.69					
Do you think that the country should grant health insurance to all citizens?		.57					
Do you support the adoption of legislation assuring the right of all citizens to an adequate standard of living?		.48					
Do you think that the country should act to lessen social gaps?			.63				
Do you think that the country should tax the rich more in order to increase welfare spending for the poor?			.52				
Would you be willing to pay additional taxes in order to increase resources for education?				.71			

Table 2 (continued)

The item	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6	Factor 7
Would you be willing to pay additional taxes so that the country could increase its welfare spending?				.66			
Would you be willing to pay higher social security taxes in order to raise the level of social security benefits?				.66			
Would you be willing to pay higher taxes in order to enable the country to introduce a national health insurance system for all?				.60			
Do you think that disability benefits should be paid to the low income disabled only?					.75		
Do you think child allowances should be paid to poor families only?					.74		
Do you think that social security should be paid to the low income elderly only?					.59		
Do you think that disability benefits should be paid to all the physically disabled regardless of their individual income level?						.79	
Do you think that child allowances should be paid to all families with children regardless of their individual income level?						.62	

Table 2 (continued)

The item	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6	Factor 7
Do you think that all the elderly should receive social security benefits regardless of their individual income level?						.60	
Do you think that benefits to poor families increase their dependence upon society?							.84
Do you think that unemployment benefits undermine the willingness of the unemployed to work?							.81
Do you think that benefits paid to the poor undermine their willingness to work?							.74
Do you think that government assistance programs to the poor encourage slackness?							.70
Alpha	.56	.72	.42	.63	.64	.60	.78

Table 3 The factor scores of the four factors of the questionnaire on the source of social problems

Do you agree that . . .	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
People are unemployed because they do not make sufficient effort to find work?	.78			
People are poor because they prefer to live at the expense of others?	.78			
People are poor because they lack sufficient will-power?	.78			
Most of the unemployed do not really want to work?	.73			
People are poor because they tend to spend their money irresponsibly?	.60			
Poverty is the result of a society that is organized on the basis of a free market?		.77		
Unemployment is the result of the government's economic policy?		.65		
People are poor because they belong to socially excluded population groups?		.54		
Financial pressures are a significant cause of crime?			.76	
Criminal offenses are the result of society's failure to provide the basic needs of individuals?			.70	
Poverty, unemployment and racial discrimination are significant factors in the emergence of crime?			.65	
People are poor because they did not have equal educational and occupational opportunities?			.64	
Criminal offenses committed by an individual are a symptom of mental problems?				.87
The roots of criminal offenses are to be found in the intra-personal problems of the criminals?				.75
Alpha	.81	.50	.68	.49

2. 'Social sources of poverty/unemployment', which included three questions, one of which was 'Do you agree that poverty is the result of a society that is organized on the basis of a free market?'.
3. 'Social causes of delinquency', which also consisted of three questions, one of which was 'Do you agree that criminal offenses are the result of society's failure to provide the basic needs of individuals?'.
4. 'Psychological causes of delinquency', which consisted of two questions, one of which was 'Do you agree that most criminals suffer from states of mental stress that are the cause of their illegal actions?'.

Procedure
The questionnaires were distributed anonymously in required courses taught to first-year students in the four universities during the first weeks of studies, in the second half of 1998. All the questionnaires were completed voluntarily by the students in class.

Statistical procedure
In order to discover if the preferences of the students differed between the universities, the major statistical tool employed was a one-way MANOVA. In cases in which the differences were found to be significant, univariate ANOVA analyses were undertaken in order to examine the differences between the universities with regard to each of the factors. When found to be significant the analysis was followed by a Scheffe test to identify the source of the differences.

   As significant differences were found between the four universities regarding the demographic variables – gender, marital status, age and socioeconomic status of the parents (see Table 1) – MANCOVA analyses were undertaken with regard to the interval variable, while MANOVA analyses were undertaken with regard to gender and marital status. These tests sought to discern whether the differences between the various groups were a result of demographic differences.

Results

Students' attitudes towards social policy
The mean scores received on each of the factors relating to the views of the students regarding social policy preferences in each of the

universities are presented in Figure 1. As can be seen in the figure, there are variations in the views of the students in the different universities. In a one-way MANOVA analysis, these variations were found to be significant ($F(21,1260) = 22.71$; $p < .001$). In order to discover the source of the differences, univariate ANOVA tests were undertaken with regard to each of the factors. In these analyses, significant differences were found in all the factors apart from that described as 'personal willingness to finance the welfare state'.

Figure 1 shows that with regard to state responsibility for housing, the mean scores of all four groups of students were over, or near, 4, indicating a high level of support. Nevertheless, the univariate ANOVA test showed significant differences ($F(3,424) = 3.16$; $p < .05$). The Scheffe test indicated that significant differences were found between the Pennsylvania and Tel Aviv groups, with the latter group of students more strongly supporting state intervention in this field.

As for state responsibility for welfare, the mean scores of all the groups were around 4, with the exception of the Jerusalem students. And, indeed, the univariate ANOVA results indicated significant differences between the groups ($F(3,424) = 50.03$; $p < .001$). The mean scores of the Tel Aviv group were significantly higher in comparison with the other groups. By contrast, the mean scores of the Jerusalem students were the lowest and were found to be significantly different from the other groups included in the survey.

The greatest differences between the groups were found with regard to state responsibility for redistribution ($F(3,424) = 74.28$; $p < .001$). The most supportive were social work students in Tel Aviv and in Anglia, whose mean scores were over 4. Their support for this type of social policy was similar to that expressed for state intervention in the welfare and housing fields. The Pennsylvania students followed, with the Jerusalem students significantly the least supportive of state intervention in redistribution.

As for financing the welfare state, the mean scores of all four groups were similar and no significant differences were found ($F(3,424) = 2.70$; $p > .05$). Students in all the universities expressed lukewarm readiness to fund the welfare state and its programs.

An examination of the views of the respondents with regard to the negative impact of welfare services upon the individual indicates that the means scores of all the groups are below 3, with the exception of the Jerusalem students. This can be observed in the significant differences found in the univariate ANOVA test ($F(3,424) = 21.84$;
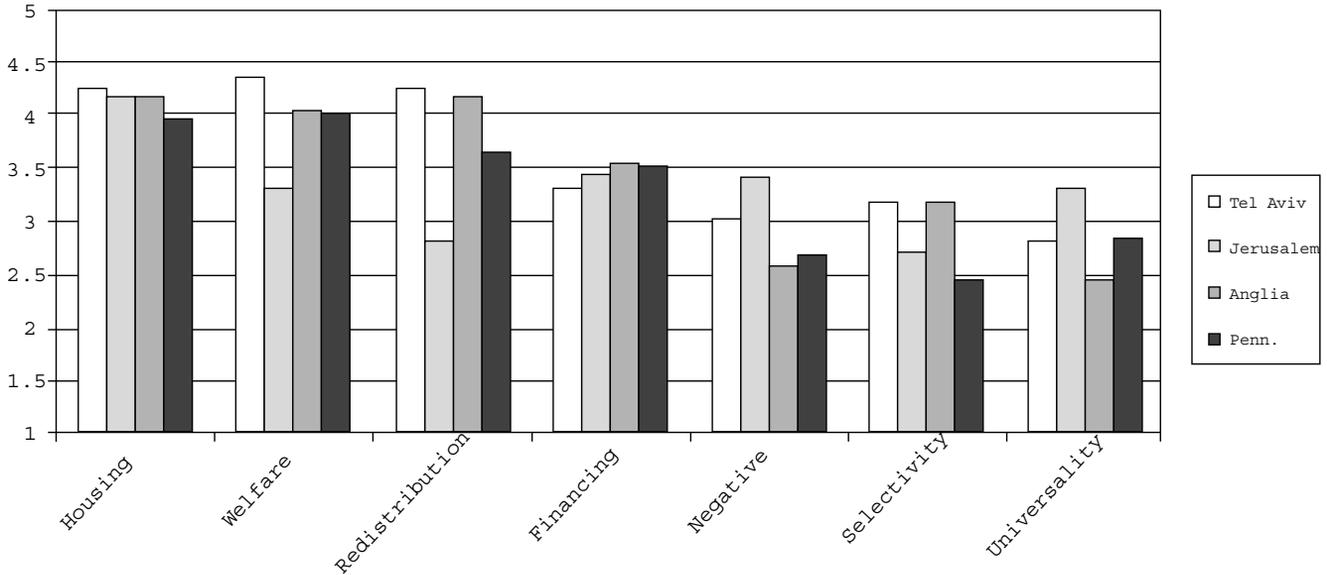
Figure 1
Mean scores of student attitudes towards social policy

$p < .001$). The mean score of the Jerusalem group was 3.39, indicating that the Jerusalem students, who were significantly the least supportive of the welfare state idea, also tended to be the most conscious of the negative impact of welfare. Statistically significant differences were also found between the Tel Aviv students and those in Pennsylvania and Anglia, with the Israeli students more conscious of the negative impact of welfare services upon clients.

As for support for selective or universal services, the univariate ANOVA results indicated significant differences between the groups both with regard to selective ($F(3,424) = 19.8$; $p < .001$) and universal ($F(3,424) = 13.27$; $p < .001$) services. The findings show that the mean scores of the Tel Aviv and Anglia students were similar. As can be seen in Figure 1, the members of these two groups preferred selective services, targeted at the poor, over universal services for all. By contrast, among their counterparts in Jerusalem and Pennsylvania there were higher levels of support for universal services for all members of a defined social category than for selective, targeted services.

The students' views on the source of social problems
Figure 2 presents the mean scores of the four groups of students regarding the sources of social problems. The results with regard to the problem of poverty/unemployment indicate that students in all four universities place greater emphasis upon social causes than upon a lack of individual motivation. In other words, among the students of social work in all four universities studied social, rather than individual, approaches dominate in the etiology of poverty and unemployment. This trend is also dominant for explanations for delinquency, but only among students in the British and American universities in the study. While the students in Pennsylvania and Anglia preferred a social explanation to a psychologically-based approach, the attitudes of the two groups of Israeli students were different. The mean scores of both of the Israeli groups indicate that both of the two explanations received similar levels of support and neither was clearly preferred.

In order to ascertain if there were differences between the views of students in the four universities with regard to the perceived source of social problems, a one-way MANOVA analysis was undertaken. The findings indicated that the differences between the universities were indeed significant ($F(12,1266) = 17.28$; $p < .001$). Univariate ANOVA tests were then undertaken in order to find the source of
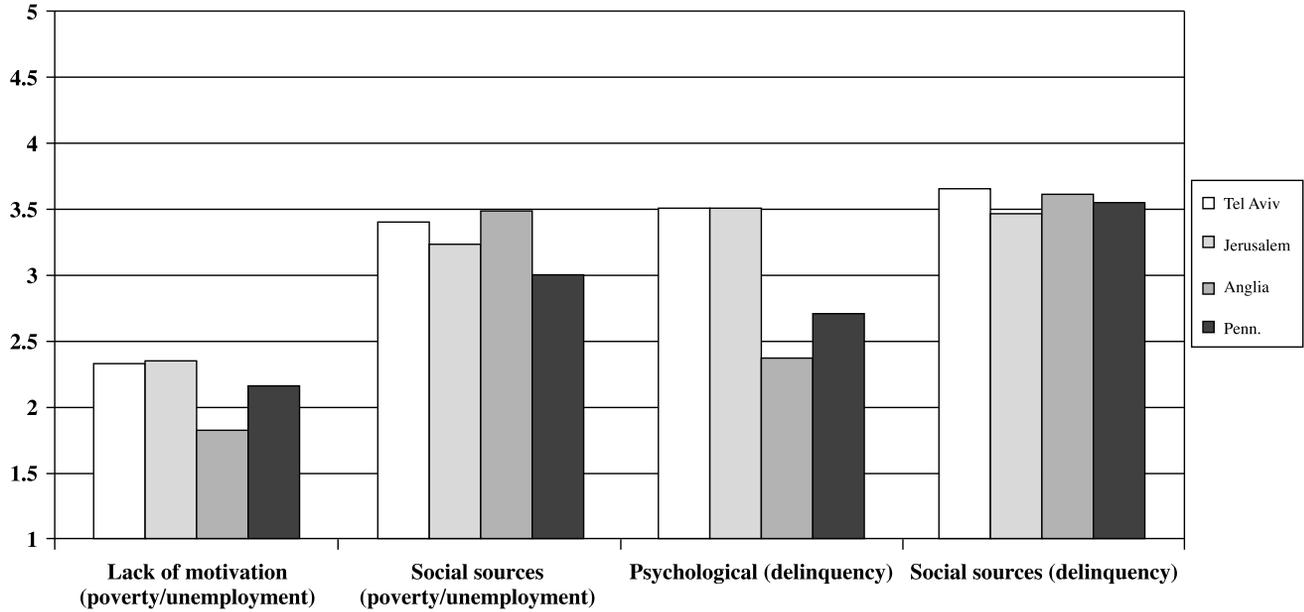
Figure 2
Mean scores of student attitudes towards the source of problems

the differences regarding each of the separate factors. An examination of the differences between the universities for each of the factors indicates that significant differences between the universities were found with regard to three factors: 'a lack of personal motivation as a cause of poverty/unemployment' ($F(3,423) = 8.31$; $p < .001$); 'social sources of poverty/unemployment' ($F(3,423) = 11.31$; $p < .001$); 'psychological causes of delinquency' ($F(3,423) = 60.03$; $p < .001$). No significant differences were found with regard to 'the social causes of delinquency' ($F(3,423) = 1.61$; $p > .05$).

As can be seen in Figure 2, the British students were significantly the least supportive of the claim that a lack of motivation is a cause of poverty and unemployment when compared with the other three groups. With regard to the social causes of poverty and unemployment, the mean scores of the American students were the lowest and significantly different from those of the other students.

With regard to 'psychological causes of delinquency', significant differences were found between the Israeli students and those of their counterparts in Pennsylvania and Anglia. The Israeli students tended to place greater importance upon psychological factors as a cause of delinquency. A significant difference was also found between the British and the American students, in that the British students gave less credence to the psychological factors than did the American students.

Discussion

The findings of this study on the social policy preferences of social work students at the very beginning of their studies and the ways in which they explain the sources of social problems point to a number of common trends among students in the three different welfare states. Alongside these common trends, the study indicates that there is a divergence of views among the various groups on a number of issues.

If we sum up the results of the four groups in respect to the welfare state issues (the role of the state in welfare, housing and redistribution), we find that the mean results for all the groups were above or near 4, except in one of the measures of the Jerusalem group. These findings underline the fact that among the students in all three countries, there is firm support for the welfare state and for the main characteristics of social policy in welfare states, that is, state intervention that deals with the needs of citizens in fields such as welfare, housing and even redistribution. Nevertheless, differences

were identified in the degree of support for state intervention in these fields, as expressed by students in the various universities. The Tel Aviv students were most supportive of state intervention, followed closely by the British students. The Jerusalem students were the least supportive of the welfare state among the student groups. Interestingly, in contrast to the fluctuations in support for welfare state policies between the different universities, there was a considerable degree of convergence with regard to the issue of financing the welfare state. On this issue, the views of all the student groups were similar: they all expressed lukewarm readiness to pay for the welfare state.

The responses to questions relating to the perceived impact of welfare services indicated that there is relatively little support for the claim that these services have a negative impact on clients. Positions regarding this issue do not appear to be linked to views on the welfare state itself. Thus, while the Tel Aviv group was very supportive of the welfare state, its mean score on welfare's negative impact was higher than those of the British and American student groups. Clearly, the students at the Anglia and Pennsylvania schools of social work were much less preoccupied by the negative implications of these services than their Israeli counterparts.

The findings on universal and selective services indicate that strong support for the welfare state does not necessarily imply similar support for universal services. Indeed, we have found that the opposite is the case in this study. The two groups that expressed the strongest support for the three factors regarding welfare state intervention in the welfare, housing and redistribution fields – the Tel Aviv and Anglia groups – were also the most supportive of selective services. The student groups in Jerusalem and Pennsylvania, that were the least supportive of welfare state intervention in these fields, preferred universal services.

Regarding the source of social problems, social factors are perceived as the most dominant cause of poverty and unemployment by all the students. The dominance of social causes can also be observed in the responses regarding delinquency on the part of the British and American groups. By contrast, the Israeli students tend to place a greater emphasis upon personal psychological causes of delinquency than do the British and American students and they have no clear preference for either psychological or social causes for delinquency.

The study's findings indicate that, despite the changes that have occurred in welfare states over the last two decades, the critique of

the welfare state and the emphasis upon personal responsibility that have dominated public debate in Britain, the United States and Israel during these years, social work students still appear to adhere to some of the core views of the social work profession. As noted above, the social work students surveyed here tend to accept the claim that the sources of personal distress are rooted primarily in the social structure. Moreover, they place responsibility for dealing with social problems and the redistribution of resources upon the welfare state.

Nevertheless, as noted, the findings uncover a number of differences between the different groups with regard to levels of support for different welfare state policies and the sources of distress. The fact that the MANCOVA analysis did not yield any significant differences based on the demographic variables indicated that, regardless of significant variations between the four samples, the explained variation in attitudes towards the welfare state appears to reflect institutional and cultural variations across countries. Thus, for example, the scores of the American students with regard to state support for housing were lower than those of the other student groups. This can be construed as reflecting the fact that, while in Britain and Israel intervention in housing is traditionally perceived as the responsibility of the state, this is not the case in the United States (Forrest et al., 1990; Heady, 1978; Roter and Shamai, 1990). Another example is the tendency among Israeli students to place greater emphasis on the psychological causes of delinquency than their American and British counterparts. This may reflect the approach to delinquency in Israeli social work, which employs an intra-psychic explanation and is dominated by an individualized treatment model (Weiss, 1998).

The results of the study indicate that, with regard to most of the issues examined, the Jerusalem group was least supportive of the welfare state and most preoccupied by its negative impact. In particular, the differences between the responses of members of this group and those of the other Israeli group are marked. These differences may be explained by the political preferences of members of the two Israeli groups. In a X^2 test, significant differences were found between the students in these two groups regarding responses to a question relating to their party choice in the last general elections ($X^2 = 5.48$; d.f. $= 1$; $p < .05$). The findings indicated that more students in the Tel Aviv group voted for center-left and left parties (56 percent as compared with 41 percent of the Jerusalem group), while among the Jerusalem students, support for the right

was more marked. Although parties on the left in Israeli politics tend to be outwardly supportive of the welfare state and state intervention in the economy, the major right party, the Likud, adheres to a free-market approach to the economy.

The findings also point to an interesting lack of coherence in the responses of students: support for state intervention in various fields is not necessarily linked to support for the type of universal services most associated with the traditional Beveridge welfare state. Indeed, those students most supportive of the welfare state were also the most enthusiastic proponents of selective services. The lack of support for universal services may be a reflection of changing attitudes towards the nature of the welfare state and the erosion of non-targeted services in recent years in public debate. However, it may also be linked to the instinctive logic of students most committed to social change and redistribution to focus state support upon the most needy. This position may also be linked to a lack of knowledge regarding the negative implications of selectivity. On the whole, there is much less consistency in the responses of the Israeli students than their counterparts in the United States and Britain. This may be a result of the fact that the British students are both older than their Israeli counterparts and often have field experience. In the case of the American students, they begin their social work studies after having taken a four-year college degree. In the British case, some of the students are actually employees of social service departments whose training is funded by these services. By contrast, the Israeli students tend to be younger and lacking any professional experience or academic training, although most of them were discharged from a mandatory 2–3 years' military service shortly before they entered university.

Conclusion

The findings presented here provide very little support for the claim that social workers' reluctance to engage in policy practice and social change after their graduation is linked to their initial views on the causes of social problems and the role of the state in their alleviation. Indeed, this study of the views of social work students at the beginning of their training in three different welfare states indicates that they support a major role for the state in dealing with social problems. With regard to the sources of social problems, the findings tend to reinforce the conclusions of studies undertaken in various welfare states during the 1970s and 1980s, which stressed

the acceptance of structural explanations for distress on the part of social work students. Students embarking on the first stages of their professional education in schools of social work in the USA, the UK and Israel in the late 1990s grew up in times in which individualism, personal responsibility and the free market became key values in the political and social debate. However, this does not appear to have significantly undermined their understanding of the impact of social structure upon personal distress and their conviction that society has a key role in dealing with disadvantage.

However, based on current trends, it would appear that upon graduation very few of these students will actually engage in policy practice or social action. More likely, most will follow the well-trodden path that leads to direct practice and a focus on the individual and the family. The causes for this outcome do not appear to be rooted in the impact of the welfare debate upon the views of social work students beginning their professional training. The causes should be sought elsewhere: in the professional education process itself perhaps or in the contours of the profession and its institutional setting.

This study examined the attitudes of students of social work in a very limited number of schools of social work in each of the three countries studied. Clearly, these findings cannot be regarded as necessarily representative of the attitudes of all social work students in these countries. Further research in additional schools will be required in order to reinforce the general applicability of these conclusions.

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