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# Helping others or a rewarding career? Investigating student motivations to train as social workers in England

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# Helping others or a rewarding career? Investigating student motivations to train as social workers in England

## **Abstract**

### ***Summary***

Understanding why people want to be social workers is important both for developing social work education and for the profession as a whole. This article presents evidence about the motivations of students enrolled on social work degree programmes in England and draws on data from 3000 responses of three successive intakes of students responding to six online surveys and 26 focus group interviews involving 168 students from nine different social work programmes in six case study sites. The article locates these data in the context of earlier studies of social workers' motivations, the changing policy context and the changes introduced by the new degree.

### ***Findings***

Similar to previous studies, the current analysis shows that altruistic motivations dominated, but students were also influenced by career issues and the day to day aspects of social work. The data highlight continuities with the former qualification in social work in the UK (the DipSW) and provide evidence that the introduction of the social work degree has not dramatically changed the underlying motivations of social work students.

### ***Applications***

Understanding student motivations is important in terms of recruitment to social work qualifying programmes and subsequent retention within the profession. Social work educators and employers need to pay attention to the consequences of mismatches between motivations and expectations about what professional practice involves.

## **Keywords**

Social work, motivations, social work education, social work research

## Introduction

Reasons for choosing social work as a career can be an important influence on the quality and nature of the profession. Students' motivations also have repercussions for the way they learn (Breen and Lindsay, 2002) and apply professional knowledge, values, and skills. They can either help sustain students through the professional and academic demands of the course, or contribute to a sense of disillusion and discontent.

Furthermore, it is important to understand why students apply for courses in order to plan recruitment strategies for social work qualifying programmes (Christie and Kruk, 1998) and to maximise retention once they enter the workforce (Depanfilis and Zlotnik, 2008).

As Maslow (1946) points out, there are many determinants of behaviour, including human factors such as moral choices and habituation, as well as environmental factors. Further, choices are always made within a context of what is possible given structural and organisational issues (Davey, 2002), such as the availability of places on an academic course or programme of study, the levels of support for and image of social work, including any gendered image of the profession. How these factors are balanced in any decision-making is subject to much philosophical and sociological debate (Elder-Vass, 2007). Consequently, positive reasons or desires, and motivations to become a social worker are but one factor in decisions to become a social worker. The article presents findings from the Social Work Degree Evaluation about motivations to be a social worker reported by early cohorts of social work degree courses students in England. These findings are located in the context of earlier studies of social workers' motivations, the changing policy context and the changes introduced by the new degree.

## Background

### *Motivation to study*

One set of theories seeks to explain motivation in terms of the cognitive evaluations of individuals towards different kinds of goal. For example, self-determination theory focuses on the degree to which motivations are intrinsically related to the nature of the behaviour or activity, or are extrinsic, when based more on external pressures or instrumental benefits of carrying out the activity. Overall, these theories focus on autonomy, relatedness and competence as key drivers of behaviour (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

A similar distinction has been applied to the respective roles of interest in a subject and overall learning goals in terms of the motivations of students, which have been found to be correlated (Breen and Lindsay, 2002). These authors developed a framework of motivations in terms of process (intrinsic) and outcome (extrinsic) motivations, which they divide into 'autonomous' and 'heteronomous' goals. Achievement of autonomous motivations or goals is judged through students' evaluations of their previous

knowledge, like the desire to understand more about social structures. Achievement of heteronomous goals, such as the desire to apply knowledge to professional practice, is externally judged.

The balance between instrumental (career and economic) motivations to enter higher education and more intrinsic desire for 'higher' learning has long been debated (Anderson and Green, 2006). Cosmin-Ross and Hiatt-Michael (2005) report, from a study of adult students' motivations, that internal (or 'autonomous') motivations, like self-esteem and satisfaction, are more important than external motivators, such as better career rewards. However, other UK evidence supports an increase in focus on instrumental motivations, partly, at least, because of the greater personal financial investment required of individual students and their families (Oyston, 2003). Further, Anderson and Green (2006) argue that education policy over the previous decade has emphasised the connection between higher education and national prosperity and competitiveness. Thus, personal motivations to undertake degrees may be reflecting various societal views and policy goals for higher education and are clearly influenced by policies in terms of funding.

### ***Motivations to study social work***

There is a longstanding debate about the extent to which social work student motivations are influenced by personal experiences as well as professional or political considerations (Parker and Merrylees, 2002; Christie, 1998; Christie and Kruk, 1998; Marsh and Triseliotis, 1996; O'Connor *et al.*, 1984). However, political or 'social justice' motivations of social work students in several countries over the past 25 years are seen to be decreasingly important (Wilson and McCrystal, 2007; Christie and Kruk 1998; Marsh and Triseliotis, 1996; O'Connor *et al.*, 1984). The trend has been towards an approach geared at supporting people using services to overcome individual problems (Gilligan, 2007). Gilligan (2007) suggests that students' motivations and perceptions are determined by the dominant cultural 'frames', or internalised ways of seeing the world, which have become increasingly individualistic.

Marsh and Triseliotis (1996) argue that altruistic and career impetuses may co-exist; thus, social work offers the double attraction of a 'meaningful career' which also contributes to 'society's wellbeing' (p.28). This supports the idea of motivation consisting of a complex mixture of personal, idealistic, and professional intentions (Christie and Kruk, 1998; Christie and Weeks, 1998), representing a mix of autonomous and heteronomous motivations in Breen and Lindsay's (2002) terms.

### ***Policy background to the social work degree***

The decision to make social work a degree level qualifying profession was announced in March 2001 by the Department of Health (DH), then responsible for social services for both children and adults in England (for details see Evaluation of Social Work Degree Team, 2008). This meant the introduction of new social work undergraduate degree and

postgraduate level qualifications (DH, 2001), which are the only routes to social work qualification, unlike nursing, where diploma and degree level qualifications continue to run in tandem (Manthorpe *et al.* 2005). The new degrees replaced the Diploma of Social Work (DipSW), which was offered as a standalone qualification, alongside diploma level, undergraduate or postgraduate higher education awards (Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work, 1996). At the same time, non-means tested bursaries were also introduced for social work students not receiving financial support from their employer, and the age limit, preventing students under 22 from qualifying, was removed. All of these changes were intended to improve the quality of social work education and thereby the social work profession as a whole (Laming, 2003; Research Works Limited, 2001; Philpot, 1999). It was further hoped that the new qualifications would attract greater numbers of students, to offset a steady decline in the numbers of newly qualified social workers (ToPSS England, 2000).

### **The Social Work Degree Evaluation (SWDE)**

In 2003, the Department of Health commissioned the Glasgow School of Social Work, based at the University of Stirling; the Social Care Workforce Research Unit, based at King's College London; and Sharpe Research, an independent research company, to undertake a multi method evaluation aimed at examining the implementation and impact of the new degree. Data for the evaluation were collected between 2004-2007. This article focuses on and develops that part of the evaluation which addressed the impact of the introduction of the degree on students' motivations to study social work.

### **Methods**

A mixed methods approach was the most appropriate for the scope of information required by the overall remit for the evaluation, as reported elsewhere (Evaluation of Social Work Degree Qualification in England Team, 2008); Orme *et al.*, 2007). A variety of methods were employed, which helps overcome the limitations of any one method and allows for multiple perspectives to be presented (Tashakkori and Teddie, 2003). Such an approach is particularly appropriate to research complex policy evaluation (Gombey and Larson, 1992) by providing insights at different levels of social reality, which, as Layder (1998) notes:

*... should not be and cannot be understood as a unitary whole which is susceptible only to in kind of explanatory principle, theoretical assumption, or methodological approach. (1998, p.86)*

However, having multiple data sources and types, along with a geographically dispersed research team, proved very challenging; integrating the findings proved to be practically and conceptually complex. This article combines data from different methods sources, using students' characterisations of their motivations to contextualise underlying motivational factors identified through a survey. This can be thought of as 'method triangulation' (Johnstone, 1996).

The research received approval from King’s College London Research Ethics Sub-Committee. All participants received information about the project and those being interviewed or taking part in focus groups signed consent forms. The locations of the case study sites was not revealed by the research team, although it is likely that staff and students may well have revealed this to colleagues in other Higher Education Institutions.

This article draws on data from five sets of responses to an online survey developed by Sharpe Research and circulated to students in all the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) approved by the General Social Care Council (GSCC) to offer social work qualifying education in England, and from focus groups with students on five undergraduate and four postgraduate social work qualifying programmes in six randomly selected HEIs. The focus groups were held with students towards the beginning and end of their programmes.

Students enrolling in the 2004-5 academic year were invited to participate in the survey in their first and subsequent years of their studies. Students enrolled in 2005-6 were also asked to complete the survey soon after they started and again in their second year (the final year for postgraduate students). The survey asked students to identify all their motivations for choosing social work as a career from a pre-selected list of 13 options and then to indicate their most important motivation. These options were based on the findings from a series of group discussions with first-year students at the outset of the research. Items were developed from themes emerging from these discussions and the aims outlined in policy documents such as the Department of Health *Requirements for Social Work Training* (DH, 2002). The overall response to each of the survey phases is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Responses to the survey**

	2004-05 intake	2005-06 intake	2006-07 intake
Year 1	N=437	N=1362	N=807
Year 2	N=443	N=534	
Year 3	N=224		

The online survey recruitment methodology depended upon HEIs distributing information about the project to their students and a range of approaches was developed to encourage publicity for the survey. The researchers did not have access to information on the number of students who were given information about the study that could be compared with the numbers registering for the online survey. Indicative response rates, based on the number of completed questionnaires compared with the total number of students enrolling in all HEIs on each cohort, ranged from 5 percent in year 3 of the 2004-2005 intake to 24 percent among students enrolling in 2005-2006. A further phase of the survey was distributed, in paper format during classroom situations, to first year students enrolling in 2006-7 in a sub-sample of HEIs, resulting in a response rate of 74 percent. This phase showed similar distributions in terms of replies (see Table 1) and in the demographic characteristics of respondents (Evaluation of Social Work Degree Qualification in England Team (2008b). This suggests acceptable response representativeness was achieved, which is seen as being a particularly important measure of online survey response, given the difficulties in establishing sampling frames (Cook *et al.*, 2000).

### **Data Analysis**

Digitab, a market research company, produced the online questionnaire format and provided initial crosstabulations of the survey data, using QPSMR CL software. Further in-depth analyses were carried out using SPSS release 15 by the research team. This article uses both the analyses reported in the evaluation report (Evaluation of Social Work Degree Qualification in England Team, 2008a) and new analyses undertaken for this article.

When responses of the three phases of surveys from the 2004-5 cohort were integrated, it emerged that 122 students had answered the survey in each of the three years. Few differences were found on comparison with students responding to only one or two phases of the survey. Building on this, it was decided to adopt a purely cross-sectional approach, in order to allow for more sophisticated analysis. To this end, synthetic cohorts (Hakim, 2000; Heckman and Macurdy, 1980) were created, comprising all the first year, second year undergraduate and final year (second year postgraduate/third year undergraduate) students. This approach meant that the unit of analysis was a completed questionnaire, rather than an individual student.

In addition to uni and bi variate analysis, it was considered valuable to reduce the 13 separate items relating to motivations to a smaller number, using Principal Component Analysis (PCA). This provides a means of allocating each of a large number of items to a smaller number of underlying factors. As argued above, motivation is a multidimensional concept, so it is important to identify which aspects are related in order to reduce the dimensionality of the data from 13 items to a more manageable



number of latent variables, which can be used to infer rather than observe phenomena (Dunn *et al.*, 1993), thus allowing for more in depth analysis.

Two variables were derived: one showed the combinations of all motivations mentioned, in terms of items loading on the three factors; the second variable grouped answers to the question asking for students' 'most important' motivations into three categories corresponding to the factors. Following bivariate cross sectional analysis, not reported here for reasons of space (tables available from the authors), variables relating to student characteristics (see below) were entered into separate binary logistic regressions, to explore whether different groups of students were more or less likely to put each of the three motivations identified from the PCA as their most important motivation.

All focus groups were audio-recorded, with permission, and transcribed in full. Transcripts were entered into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software package, which facilitated data management and sorting. First, a selection of transcripts was read and categorised according to the main research questions. A number of sub-categories emerged, which directly related to the research questions, and the second process of analysis used these as a way of coding and analysing all the transcribed material. The qualitative analysis, for the purposes of this article, has been used to illustrate students' characterisations of the underlying motivational factors identified in the survey data.

## Findings

The findings are divided into two sections. The first reports on the distribution of motivations of students in the study, and the three factors identified by the PCA. The second section uses multivariate analyses to suggest that the prime reason for choosing to become a social worker may differ for students with different characteristics. Excerpts from the focus groups are used mainly as an illustration of the meanings of different motivations reported by students in the online survey.

### *Motivations for choosing social work as a career*

Table 2 shows how first year students in the three cohorts answered two questions about their motivations to be a social worker. The responses have been tabulated in order of response frequency, not in questionnaire order. For all three cohorts of students, 'Helping individuals to improve the quality of their own lives' was the most popular answer and 'Interesting, stimulating work' was the second. A complex mix of altruistic, career and personal fulfilment motivations was found, reflecting previous research outlined above. However, it is also clear that the more altruistic motivations were most frequent. The two most obviously altruistic goals, 'Helping individuals to improve the quality of their own lives' (individualistic altruism) and 'Wish to tackle injustice and inequalities in society' (societal altruism) were first and fourth most

common for students at all times on their courses. It is interesting to note that individualistic altruism was more common than societal, which again is in tune with trends noted earlier (Wilson and McCrystal, 2007; Christie and Kruk 1998; O'Connor *et al.*, 1984).

**Table 2: 'All mentioned' motivations for choosing social work as a career (online survey, first year respondents)**

	<b>2004-2005</b>		<b>2005-2006</b>		<b>2006-2007</b>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Helping individuals to improve the quality of their own lives	390	89	1235	91	691	86
Interesting, stimulating work	318	73	1051	77	600	74
Personal ability to get on with people	309	71	1008	74	589	73
Wish to tackle injustice and inequalities in society	297	68	990	73	566	70
Variety of work day-to-day	287	66	934	69	533	66
Good career prospects	220	50	784	58	540	67
Working in a team	219	50	690	51	407	50
High job satisfaction	188	43	670	49	400	50
Especially suitable career for someone with life experiences like mine	159	36	510	37	273	34
Being able to exercise individual responsibility for making my own decisions	148	34	491	36	319	40
Encouragement from family or friends	126	29	409	30	250	31
Opportunities for flexible working patterns	112	26	368	27	223	28
Well paid jobs	93	21	368	27	241	30
<b>Total number of students*</b>	<b>437</b>		<b>1362</b>		<b>807</b>	

\*Numbers and percentages do not sum because students were given the option of choosing more than one answer.

### Results from Principal Components Analysis

Previous research discussed in the introduction suggested that motivation was thought to be a meta-construct representing the constellation of a number of differing factors influencing an individual's intention to become a social worker. Table 3 presents the results from the Principal Components Analysis showing that all 13 original items included in the online survey question loaded highly onto one of three factors. These could be broadly described as encompassing 'Career factors'; 'Altruistic or personal qualities' (which covered both individualistic and more societal motivations); and the 'Day-to-day nature of social work'.

The last three columns of Table 3 show the correlations between each item and the three factors overall. The nearer their value to 1, the more highly they are correlated to that particular factor. Correlations in excess of .51 are generally taken to be indicative of good levels of correlation. For only two items, 'Helping individuals improve the quality of their own lives' and 'Being able to exercise individual responsibility' were the correlations to two factors of over .3, both of which were correlated to 'Altruistic or personal qualities' and 'Day-to-day nature of social work'. Thus, the items in the three factors (shaded in the table) generally have good correlations with each other but low correlations with the other factors, suggesting that they are measuring different underlying constructs.

**Table 3: Principal Component Analysis of student motivations (Synthetic cohort all students)**

Factor	Original item	Factor loading		
		1	2	3
Career factors	Good Career prospects	.120	.024	<b>.767</b>
	Well paid jobs	.059	-.008	<b>.763</b>
	Opportunities for flexible working	.134	.148	<b>.586</b>
Altruistic or personal qualities of students	Personal ability to get on with people	.122	<b>.675</b>	.085
	Working in a team	.209	<b>.586</b>	.208
	Wish to tackle injustice and inequalities in society	.266	<b>.459</b>	-.135
	Helping individuals improve the quality of their own lives	.362	<b>.448</b>	-.096
	Especially suitable career for someone with life experiences like mine	-.076	<b>.551</b>	.004
	Encouragement from family and friends	-.046	<b>.381</b>	.253
'Day-to-day nature of social work'	High job satisfaction	<b>.598</b>	.040	.151
	Variety of work day-to-day	<b>.691</b>	.098	.116
	Interesting stimulating work	<b>.765</b>	.037	.028
	Being able to exercise individual responsibility for making my own decisions	<b>.410</b>	.314	.133

- *The overall Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of Sampling Adequacy >0.5, which means that the sample is adequate for the analysis.*
- *Further, from the anti-image matrix, the KMO value for each individual is also >.5, suggesting a good sample for this analysis (Field, 2000)*
- *Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant (P<.01) which suggests that there is enough correlation between the variables to continue with the analysis.*

#### **'All mentioned' and 'most important' motivations**

Table 4 presents the distributions of the variables created using the results of the PCA, as described in the data analysis section. Over two thirds of students (69%, n=1960) gave one of the 'Altruistic or personal qualities' items as their most important motivation, compared with one fifth (20%, n=555) and about one eighth (12%, n= 334) respectively of students putting items relating to 'Day-to-day nature' of social work' or 'Career factors' as their most important motivation.

In terms of the combinations of motivations mentioned, just over half (56%, n=1605) the students mentioned items relating to all of the three factors. One third (33%, n=942) chose items relating to 'Altruistic or personal qualities' and 'Day-to-day nature of social work' factors only. Mentioning items relating to only one of the factors was much less common. Less than one in 14 students mentioned motivations relating to 'Altruistic or

personal qualities' (6%, n=170), 'Day-to-day nature of social work' (1%, n=17) or 'Career factors' (<1%, n=11 respectively) alone.

**Table 4: Motivations to be a social worker (synthetic cohort, all students)**

Most important motivations	N	%	Motivations mentioned	N	%
Altruistic or personal qualities	1960	69	Altruistic or personal qualities, Day-to-day nature of social work and Career factors	1605	56
Day-to-day nature of social work	555	20	Altruistic or personal qualities and Day-to-day nature of social work only	942	33
Career factors	334	12	Altruistic or personal qualities only	170	6
			Altruistic or personal qualities and Career factors only	114	4
			Day-to-day nature of social work only	17	1
			Career factors and Day-to-day nature of social work only	12	0
			Career factors only	11	0
	2849	100	Total students	2871	100

***Relationship between different motivations and students' characteristics***

Following Christie and Kruk (1998), we investigated whether students' motivations varied by age, gender or ethnicity, in addition to a number of other variables:

- Whether the student considered her or himself to be disabled
- Type of programme (whether studying as an undergraduate or postgraduate)
- Highest level of educational qualifications
- Previous experience.

As described above, these variables were entered into separate binary logistic regressions, to explore whether these variables made it more or less likely to put one of the items relating to each of the three motivations identified from the PCA ('Altruistic or personal qualities', 'Career factors' and 'Day-to-day nature of social work') as their most important motivation; the results from these logistic regression models are summarised in Table 5.

The odds ratios give an indication of relative probability of having a particular motivation, for students with different characteristics compared to a ‘reference category’ for each characteristic, controlling for other variables.

Putting ‘Career factors’ motivations as ‘Most important’ was predicted by ethnicity ( $p=.002$ ), gender ( $p=.016$ ), and prior work experience ( $p=.042$ ). The odds of students choosing ‘Career factors’ as their most important motives were over twice as high among Black students (not including Asian or ‘other’ ethnicities) compared with white (odds ratio = 2.4,  $p<.001$ ); about one and a half times as likely among men compared with women (odds ratio = 1.6,  $p=.016$ ); and only about two thirds as likely among students with previous voluntary work experience compared with those having paid experience with a social work employer (odds ratio = 0.61  $p=.038$ ).

**Table 5: Results of a logistic regression models testing the probability of having different motivations to be a social worker (synthetic cohort, all students)**

	Reference category	Career factors		Altruistic or personal qualities		Day-to-day nature of social work	
		P-value	Odds ratio	P-value	Odds ratio	P-value	Odds ratio
Age	<20	.634		.005		.002	
20-24		.981	.994	.392	1.161	.347	.829
24-34		.600	.874	.032	1.428	.040	.676
34-44		.745	1.088	.016	1.512	.002	.527
>44		.324	.694	.001	2.345	.002	.391
Ethnicity	White	.002		.538		.236	
Mixed		.619	.738	.879	.949	.614	1.207
Asian		.621	1.233	.367	1.330	.154	.569
Black		.000	2.331	.142	.772	.070	.640
Other (including Chinese)		.839	1.169	.967	1.023	.840	.876
Gender	Female						
Male student		.016	1.594	.072	.768	.928	1.016
Disability	Does not consider self disabled						
Considers self to be disabled		.942	.984	.951	1.010	.978	1.005
Programme	Postgraduate						

**Table 5: Results of a logistic regression models testing the probability of having different motivations to be a social worker (synthetic cohort, all students)**

		Career factors		Altruistic or personal qualities		Day-to-day nature of social work	
Under grads		.492	1.185	.206	1.256	.042	.643
Highest educational qualification	Degree	.077		.077		.552	
	GCSE or equivalent	.233	.674	.534	1.161	.661	1.137
	A-level or equivalent	.024	.608	.030	1.427	.565	.889
Prior experiences	Any paid employment by social work employer	.042		.037		.009	
	Any paid employment in related field	.919	.983	.005	1.384	.001	.642
	Any (relevant) voluntary work	.038	.606	.012	1.460	.160	.787
	Any personal experience	.087	2.062	.804	1.094	.103	.414
	None of these	.392	1.370	.288	1.366	.054	.464
Constant		.000	.197	.332	1.363	.005	.303
Hosmer and Lemeshow Goodness of fit		p=.121		p=.811		p=.776	
Nagelkerke R Square		.045		.039		.043	
Omnibus chi square		46.340 (p<.001)		55.436 (P<.001)		53.940 (p<.001)	

Putting ‘Altruistic or personal qualities’ as ‘Most important’ motivations were predicted by age (p=.005) and prior work experiences (p=.037). The odds of students in the three older age groups putting ‘Altruistic or personal qualities’ as their most important motivation were generally higher than for younger students. The odds of students aged between 25 and 34; aged between 35 and 44; and aged 45 and over, were between one and a half and two and a third times higher (odds ratio = 1.4, p=.032; odds ratio = 1.5,

p=.016; and odds ratio = 2.3, p=.01 respectively) compared with students aged under 20.

The odds of students with experience of paid or voluntary work in a field related to social work putting 'Altruistic or personal qualities' as their most important motivation were about one and a half times higher (odds ratio = 1.4, p=.005 and odds ratio = 1.5, p=.012 respectively) compared with students having previous experience of paid work with a social work employer.

Indicating the most important motivation as the 'Day-to-day nature of social work' was significantly predicted by age (p=.002) and whether students were studying at undergraduate or postgraduate levels (p=.042) and prior work experience (p=.009). Older students were generally less likely to put this as their most important motivation. The odds of students in the three older age groups (25-35, 34-44 and 45 and over) to indicate this type of motivation as the most important were between two fifths and two thirds as likely as their colleagues aged under 20 (Odds ratios 0.68, p=.04; 0.53, p=.002; and 0.39, p= 0.002 respectively).

Compared with postgraduates, the odds of undergraduate students indicating that 'Day-to-day nature of social work' is the most important factor, were less than two thirds (odds ratio = 0.64, p=.042.). The odds of students with experience of paid work in a related field putting 'Day-to-day nature of social work' as their most important motivation were about two thirds (odds ratio = 0.64, p=.001), of students having experience of paid work with a social work employer.

### ***Student accounts of motivations***

Students participating in the focus groups characterised their motivations in ways that accord with the three basic factors identified from the survey. Further, many of these accounts of motivations refer to more than one of these factors. However, some students did talk about simple altruistic motivations to help people, either on an individual level or in terms of more societal changes:

*To me, the most overriding factor of people that need social services are, in fact, that they're extremely poor. And my motivation is just to try and help someone achieve something that they want. And I think I'll have done something if I can achieve that.*

(Case studies, Student Focus Group, Time One)

Personal experiences were often given as reasons for wanting to help others, either more generally or to help people in the same circumstances. Also, personal experience that entailed contact with social workers as a service user were sometimes said to motivate, either to be a better social worker or because of positive experiences with a social worker they had encountered:



I grew up in foster care and so had direct experience of social work and stuff, and the impact that good and bad social workers can have on your life. So I thought, you know, typical 'wanting to make a difference' thing, to have an effect on someone else's life, or help them if I could.

(Case studies, Student Focus Group, Time One)

Career motivations were, for many students, linked to more altruistic motivations, in order to develop their role in caring or related work area (for which they may well have had fundamentally altruistic motivations), or for reasons of personal fulfilment through taking on more interesting or responsible work. Becoming a professional was also seen as an important aspect of career development:

I mean I have worked with homeless people and you know, I just thought it would be a good thing to do really, to get a qualification that would open up all the doors to me. So just working as a worker, rather than not having that qualification, I mean, it sounds really sort of awful, but I want a profession.

(Case studies, Student Focus Group, Time One)

The 'Day-to-day nature of social work' was mentioned (for example, in terms of not wishing to work in an office) but this appeared from the focus groups to be far less important than other motivations and was almost always linked with other kinds of motivation in an individual response.

...And I liked the idea of being able to work with so many different types of people, in so many different settings, like the kind of flexibility and no day being the same. Not having to be behind a desk all the time.

(Case studies, Student Focus Group, Time One)

## Discussion

Changes to social work education and the policy framework in which it is provided have highlighted the possibility that students' motivations to study social work will differ from those observed in the past (Gilligan, 2007). This article has used results from a national multi-method evaluation of the new social work degree qualification in England to investigate continuities and changes in students' motivations to study social work. We believe that this is the first time that data on student motivations have been examined in terms of attempting to demonstrate the constellation of differing underlying constructs that comprise students' motivations as a whole.

Overall, the evaluation does not suggest that introducing the social work degree has changed student motivations, which were found to be influenced by a complex mix, comprising altruistic impulses, ideas about career prospects, and perceptions about what daily life as a social worker might be like, although, altruistic motivations were

broadly dominant. These findings are consistent with earlier research carried out with social work students (ADSS, 2005; BMRB Social Research, 2005; Christie and Kruk, 1998; Marsh and Triseliotis, 1996) and with trends over the past 25 years (Wilson and McCrystal, 2007; Christie and Kruk 1998; Marsh and Triseliotis, 1996; O'Connor *et al.*, 1984). The fact that older students, in each of the succeeding age groups, were more likely to indicate motivations related to altruistic factors compared with younger may be worthy of further exploration, to investigate whether this represents a trend in the motivations of future generations of social workers. Such a trend would be consistent with the general motivations to enter higher education, which have become increasingly instrumental and career focused (Oyston, 2003; Anderson and Green, 2006).

It is perhaps to be expected that students studying social work should have these kinds of motivations, which reflect the social construction of 'social work' as a profession in the media, in both positive and negative terms. Social workers are generally portrayed as caring people (Henderson and Franklyn, 2007; Christie, 2006) wanting to help, although sometimes in misguided ways or operating ineffectively and bureaucratically (Henderson and Franklyn, 2007; Foulkes, 2005). The importance of personal history is interesting, as it reflects experience of both good and bad social work, as illustrated in the focus group responses.

Previous work experience was also an important influence on motivation. Those having experience of paid work in a social services setting were more likely to have more instrumental motivations ('Career factors' or 'Day-to-day nature of social work') compared with students having other forms of work experience (paid or voluntary), who were more likely to put 'Altruistic or personal qualities' as motivations. Students who had previously worked for a social work employer therefore are likely to be motivated by becoming a professional rather than to study social work as such, which accords with previous work (Dunworth, 2007; Furness, 2007). Further, those with no experience of working with a social work employer and undergraduate students are likely to have less awareness of the day-to-day nature of social work. However, this is in slight contradiction to the finding that older students were also less likely to be motivated by issues relating to the day to day nature of social work. Further research would be needed to explore the reasons for these differences.

The higher priority assigned to career reasons among male social work students possibly provides some explanation of the well known differential career progression within social work, with men being over represented in social work management (Christie, 2006). In sharp contrast, the increased likelihood of being motivated by career factors among Black respondents suggests a complex interaction between expectations and reality, as social workers from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds are underrepresented in management roles (Skills for Care, 2008). Such a finding lends some support to Christie's (2006) suggestion that Black men tend to 'drift and/or fall into'

(p396) social work, which is possibly seen as less racist than other professions, although further work would be needed to explore this suggestion.

As we discussed above, Cosman-Ross and Hiatt-Michael (2005) report internally based motivations to study a degree as being most important. The altruistic or personal qualities kinds of motivations we found to be dominant for social work students may be thought to be more intrinsic, or autonomous (in Breen and Lindsay's (2002) terms) in the sense of being related more to internal drives for self-fulfilment rather than more instrumental, externally judged or heteronomous (in Breen and Lindsay's (2002) terms) factors that may underlie career-based motivations. Attending to the internal nature of motivations is therefore likely to be a valuable way of developing personalised approaches to students and newly qualified social workers more generally.

Students whose motivations match the overall learning goals of the discipline are reported by Breen and Lindsay (2002) to do better in their studies. The extent to which the reported motivations of students match the requirements of social work and the degree course is therefore important. Consequently, the findings reported here suggest that including questions about motivations in student admissions processes and indeed potentially in recruiting social workers may be valuable in selecting students and supporting them through the course. However, as with other areas of admissions, this would need further research to establish its effectiveness, as we report elsewhere (Manthorpe et al 2008).

While social work has a dual focus of 'care and control' (Parton and O'Byrne, 2000), the essentially benevolent goals of social work (Clark, 2006) suggest a good fit between students' motivations and the 'discipline goals'. A basic altruistic motivation contains an essentially moral element, in the extent to which it suggests a certain moral character. How such altruistic aims are realised raises questions about the moral element of social work practice in terms of what is seen as the good to be fostered and developed by social workers.

Consequently, it may be of value for social work educators and managers of newly qualified social workers to explore the complex interaction between abstract ethics underpinning professional practice, as constituted through current political, organisational and social institutions (Biehal and Sainsbury, 1991; Clark, 2006), the reality of social work practice and the motivations and values of individual students and professionals. Clark (2006) emphasises this as of key importance for the social work profession. Service user led organisations may bring a particular perspective on this issue, and would therefore be a useful resource to support students and new social workers to start to reconcile these potential tensions. Of particular importance here is to emphasise the value of self reflection for students and practitioners, in order that they can understand their motivation. This carries implications for social work degree curricula and in the field for training and supervision practice, for all social workers.

Practice placement would be an ideal time to introduce students to such conflicts. Supporting and training practice assessors to explore such potential dissonance may prove valuable here. However, as we point out elsewhere (Moriarty et al. 2010) practice assessors are already finding it hard to undertake the role in addition to their usual duties, which means that any potential increase to workload would need careful management.

Students reported a complex mix of motivations, which reflects debates about the importance of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations to study more generally (Anderson and Green, 2006). It may therefore also be of value to encourage and train practice assessors along with social work educators and managers of newly qualified social workers to work with students to uncover the complexity of their motivations (Breen and Lindsay, 2002; Christie and Kruk, 1998). Again, such understandings could help students to develop critical and reflexive practice and understand better the complexities of service users' and other professionals' motivations.

Personal history and work experience appear to influence motivations to be a social worker directly and indirectly. This suggests that explicitly addressing the role which personal history and work experience play for students is likely to be beneficial for social work education (Furness, 2007). Working with students to identify the influence of personal experience on their ability or otherwise to undertake different aspects of social work therefore may be a valuable way to help them assimilate their personal experiences with theoretical and practical learning on the course (Christie and Weeks, 1998). Further, the research suggests that paying attention to the potential for students with different levels of paid or voluntary experience in social care or related settings to have a different balance of motivations is likely to be of value in developing appropriate kinds of support.

### ***Limitations of the research***

Some limitations of the research need to be identified before drawing final conclusions from the findings. The main limitations of the survey are the response rates and variation in the response from different HEIs, which may have biased the response. However, as noted in the methods section, the sample achieved in the main part of the survey had good response representativeness, which is seen as being at least as important as response rate, particularly in online surveys (Cook *et al.*, 2000). The focus groups with students in the six case study HEIs were undertaken at two points, soon after the students began their studies and shortly before the end. Analysis of this qualitative data was systematic (using N-Vivo) but nevertheless mainly descriptive in nature, mainly for resource and time issues; this analysis has been used here mainly as an illustration of the meanings the motivations reported in the online survey held for students.

## Conclusion

This article has explored the motivations given by early cohorts of social work degree students. The patterns identified reflect those found in earlier research, suggesting that social work motivations are enduring over time. Altruistic motivations, often influenced by personal experiences, are the most important with a slight tendency towards more individualistic rather than collectivist altruism. However, these altruistic impulses were very frequently accompanied by career factors and perceptions of the day to day nature of social work.

The increasing importance of the 'control' element of the 'care and control' social work role combined with the experience of working within tight budgets, large administrative burdens and ever changing policy imperatives in the UK (Ferguson and Lavalette, 2006) and in other countries (e.g. the United States, D'Aprix *et al.* 2004) may create a mismatch between initial motivation and experience of the work. It is possible that such a mismatch may be one factor leading to the high stress and burnout levels found in social workers (Furness, 2007; Evans *et al.*, 2005; D'Aprix *et al.*, 2004). The challenge therefore to social work educators, managers of newly qualified social workers and policy makers is to attempt to foster and consolidate these initial altruistic urges in order to support their survival (and that of the social workers themselves) and to support their career aspirations with the aim of increasing the likelihood of them wanting to continue working and developing as social workers.

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