



**Social Workers' Perceptions of How Participation in Continuing Education Activities Leads to Changes in Knowledge, Attitudes, and Behaviors**

<b>Journal:</b>	Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education
<b>Article Title:</b>	<i>Social Workers' Perceptions of How Participation in Continuing Education Activities Leads to Changes in Knowledge, Attitudes, and Behaviors</i>
<b>Author(s):</b>	<i>Donna Leigh Bliss, Charles A. Smith, Amy Cohen-Callow, and David A. Dia</i>
<b>Volume and Issue Number:</b>	<i>Vol. 7 No. 2</i>
<b>Manuscript ID:</b>	72027
<b>Page Number:</b>	27
<b>Year:</b>	2004

Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education is a refereed journal concerned with publishing scholarly and relevant articles on continuing education, professional development, and training in the field of social welfare. The aims of the journal are to advance the science of professional development and continuing social work education, to foster understanding among educators, practitioners, and researchers, and to promote discussion that represents a broad spectrum of interests in the field. The opinions expressed in this journal are solely those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the policy positions of The University of Texas at Austin's School of Social Work or its Center for Social Work Research.

Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education is published three times a year (Spring, Summer, and Winter) by the Center for Social Work Research at 1 University Station, D3500 Austin, TX 78712. Journal subscriptions are \$110. Our website at [www.profdevjournal.org](http://www.profdevjournal.org) contains additional information regarding submission of publications and subscriptions.

Copyright © by The University of Texas at Austin's School of Social Work's Center for Social Work Research. All rights reserved. Printed in the U.S.A.

ISSN: 1097-4911

URL: [www.profdevjournal.org](http://www.profdevjournal.org)

Email: [www.profdevjournal.org/contact](http://www.profdevjournal.org/contact)

# Social Workers' Perceptions of How Participation in Continuing Education Activities Leads to Changes in Knowledge, Attitudes, and Behaviors

*Donna Leigh Bliss, MSW, Charles A. Smith, MSW, Amy Cohen-Callow, MSW David A. Dia, MSW*

## Introduction

A significant aspect of 20th century North American societies has been the professionalization of their workforces. One estimation is that almost 25 percent of the American workforce could claim membership in a profession (Cervero, 2001). Given the importance of the various professions in social, economic, psychological, business, judicial, military, and religious contexts of American society, Cervero emphasizes the importance of understanding what is at stake in terms of the continuing education of these professions.

The emergence of continuing education in the late 1960s arose from the recognition of the need for professionals to maintain high standards of practice coupled with a realization of the limitations of less formal means of learning (Houle, 1980). Early continuing education activities tended to center around short courses, lectures, or conferences. This gradually evolved into a broad array of activities that also included reading journals, books and manuals, watching films and videotapes, and listening to audiotapes (Houle).

The growth of continuing education in the social work profession became more pronounced during this same period of time (Davenport & Wodarski, 1989). While social workers have long used activities such as "conferences, institutes, consultation, supervision, and self-directed study (e.g. reading journal articles)" (Davenport & Wodarski, p. 32), to stay current with the growing social work knowledge base, prior to 1970 most schools had

departments of social work that played only minor roles in this process. Schools typically concentrated on long-term training and staff development as their primary focus was on increasing the supply of MSW social workers (Davenport & Wodarski).

This began to change in the 1970s as the amount and diversity of both on- and off-campus continuing education activities that also targeted populations beyond MSW social workers increased. One important impetus for these changes came from the federal government as "Title IV-A and Title XX of the Social Security Act included regulations which dictated orientation for new staff, ongoing training, and short-term training workshops" (Davenport & Wodarski, p. 33). In addition, non-professional and paraprofessional groups began to be targeted by continuing education programs in addition to professional groups such as BSW and MSW holders.

The latter part of the 20th century also marked a movement toward mandatory continuing education for various professional groups, including social workers, due to concerns about the need for maintaining professional competence and the limitations of licensing and certification boards (Edwards & Green, 1983). Yet, the authors note little evidence existed that there was a clear relationship between participation in continuing education and maintaining professional competence. As of 1980, only 10 states had laws requiring provisions for social work continuing education. Given the mounting criticism of mandatory continuing educa-

---

*Donna Leigh Bliss, MSW, Adjunct Faculty and Predoctoral Fellow in Maternal and Child Health, University of Maryland Baltimore, School of Social Work.*

*Charles A. Smith, MSW, Adjunct Faculty and Hartford Geriatric Doctoral Fellow, University of Maryland Baltimore, School of Social Work.*

*Amy Cohen-Callow, MSW, Teaching Fellow, University of Maryland Baltimore, School of Social Work.*

*David A. Dia, MSW, Adjunct Faculty, University of Maryland Baltimore, School of Social Work.*

*Authors' Note: Dr. Llewellyn Cornelius and Dr. Donna Harrington provided guidance on the development and analysis of this research. The preparation of the study, collection and input of data, and preparation of this article could not have been completed without the collaborative efforts of colleagues at the University of Maryland School of Social Work, including Dara Bergel, Ann Gantt, Emmett Gill, Yeun Rho, and Rebecca Sander.*

tion, coupled with doubts about its link to professional competence, Edwards and Green made the prediction that the national movement toward continuing education had peaked. Instead, they offered guidelines for relicensure and recertification programs that were based on examinations to assess competency. They also noted that some professional organizations had already moved away from mandatory continuing education to using relicensure and recertification programs.

However, in contrast to the predictions of Edwards and Green (1983), mandatory continuing education has since become an increasingly popular means of regulating professional practice in the latter part of the 20th century (Cervero, 2001). Cervero notes mandatory continuing education requirements for certified public accountants grew from 23 states in 1976 to 49 states as of 2001. For pharmacists, the increase was from 14 states to 47. In terms of social workers, Barton, Dietz, and Holloway (2001) write that as of 1996, 35 states along with the District of Columbia have required licensed or certified social workers to participate in continuing education, with an average requirement of 17.5 hours per year. The Association of Social Work Boards reported that as of 2004, 47 states along with the District of Columbia now have mandatory continuing education requirements for social workers (Association of Social Work Boards, 2004).

### Adult Learning Theory

The past two decades or so have also witnessed an increased interest among researchers, educators, and continuing education providers on understanding the characteristics of adult learners. Adult learning theory, first introduced in the 1970's by Knowles, emphasizes the importance of educators understanding the learners (Shannon, 2003). Andragogy, a European concept that is concerned with the art and science of adult learning, became an important focal point for those who wanted to distinguish adult learning from child learning or pedagogy (Merriam, 2001). The theory is composed of four assumptions Knowles made regard-

ing the nature of adult learners. These include: (1) "adults are self-directed in the planning and evaluation of their learning, (2) adults learn through experience, (3) adults have a problem-solving approach to learning, and (4) adults learn best what is relevant and useful" (Shannon, 2003, p. 266).

While the assumptions of adult learning theory have become increasingly accepted, the theory itself has not been evaluated nor has the principle that adults are self-directed and able to identify what they need to know been proven (Shannon, 2003). A review of the literature adds support to Shannon's claim regarding the lack of empirical evaluation of adult learning theory.

### Literature Review

#### Adult Learning Theory and Continuing Education

Academic Search Premier, CINAHL, ERIC, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, Professional Development Collection, PsycINFO, and Social Work Abstracts databases were searched using keywords *continuing education* and *adult learning theory*. Seven out of the 44 articles located were empirical (operationally defined as studies that had a sample and used quantitative or qualitative analyses to assess research questions). Four of these seven articles concerned continuing education rather than formal education, with two focusing on physicians, one focusing on nurses, and one focusing on teachers and administrators. None were found that focused on social workers. A search using keywords *continuing education* and *adult learning theory* and *social work* yielded one empirical study. Cartney (2000) incorporated adult learning theory into a qualitative study of a group of British social work practice teachers and their students to investigate how identifying students' learning styles can be used to promote learning in practice placements. While findings supported the role of understanding learner styles to facilitate learning in practice placements, the author states this information also has broader relevance to the continuing professional development of students "for if social workers are to engage in continuing professional development as lifelong learners within a demand-

ing and changing profession, the ability to learn is a crucial prerequisite. Awareness about how we learn best can usefully underpin this process and may offer one tangible way in which social work can move toward achieving the goal of lifelong learning for practitioners" (p. 642).

#### **Andragogy and Continuing Education**

Further searches substituting the term andragogy for adult learning theory yielded similar results. Of the 104 articles located, 12 empirical studies that were not previously identified when adult learning theory was used as a keyword were located, with six being directed toward continuing education, five toward formal education, and one that was not clear in its focus. Faculty, accountants, managers, and teachers and trainers were the subjects focused on in the empirical studies. Again, none were found that focused on social workers. Of the eight articles that were found when social work was added to the keywords "andragogy" and "continuing education," none were empirical.

#### **Adult Learning Theory and Continuing Education in Social Work**

While a review of the literature shows that adult learning theory has not been explicitly utilized in empirical research on social work continuing education, it is important to have a greater understanding about professionals in terms of their motivations, needs, and desires, in order to provide more effective continuing education (Shannon, 2003). While a considerable amount of research has been conducted on areas such as student perceptions and satisfaction, there is a limited amount of research on professional social workers and their perceptions of continuing education. Still, adult learning theory concepts such as the need for understanding learner perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs have been located in the social work continuing education literature.

Kane, Hamlin, and Hawkins (2002) examined licensed clinical social workers in Florida to identify which supervisory methods they had used and which they perceived to be most helpful in prepar-

ing practitioners for the managed care environment, state licensing requirements, and important practice areas. Findings showed social workers had experience with 12 of the 14 commonly used supervisory methods listed (e.g. field logs, process recordings, learning contracts, assigned readings, etc.). Behavioral observation and performance strategies were considered more effective than self-reflective methods.

Kane, Hamlin, and Green (2001) surveyed social work administrators and practitioners in Florida to determine their perceptions of knowledge and skill items they consider critically important and whether the university, agency, or both are the best resources to facilitate education of these knowledge and skill items. Findings showed skills such as cultural competency, systems thinking, and clinical case management were among those identified as being critically important in current service delivery environments. Respondents believed the university had the primary responsibility to teach skill items perceived to be most important, while skills perceived to be less important were considered a collaborative responsibility between the university and agency.

Barnett-Queen (2001) examined social workers in New Mexico concerning their attitudes and opinions regarding the use of the Internet for continuing education. Findings indicated that while a large majority of social workers have used the Internet, most have had no formal training in its usage and features. Substantial interest in using the Internet as a medium for continuing education programs for license renewal was reported.

Daley (2001) interviewed social workers, lawyers, adult educators, and nurses to determine how knowledge from continuing education activities becomes meaningful in professional practice. Findings from semi-structured interviews indicated that meaning making from knowledge gained at continuing education programs was framed through the unique nature of the work of each profession. For example, one way social workers engaged in this meaning making process was through the lens of their advocacy role whereby information from continuing education courses was used to help their

clients. "Social workers felt that it was 'vital to have the newest information' so that they could 'support, defend, and advocate' for their clients within larger systems and with other professionals" (p. 44).

Dattalo (1994) surveyed independent and agency-based social workers in Virginia on their current continuing education activities and perceived training needs. Findings showed that training in practice theories and practitioner roles were the topics of training licensed social workers believed could improve practice effectiveness.

While a body of literature exists concerning adult learning theory and continuing education, most of the articles located were conceptual papers, book chapters and reviews, and conference proceedings. Only 10 empirical studies were located that concerned continuing education and adult learning theory and only one addressed continuing education and adult learning theory in social work. The limited inclusion of adult learning theory concepts in empirical studies on social work continuing education reveals important gaps in the literature as no studies were located that addressed:

1. the kinds of continuing education activities social workers participated in,
2. the degree to which social workers believed participating in these activities had an impact on their practice as social workers, and
3. whether differences in license level affected these perceptions.

Given the importance that state licensing boards place on engaging in continuing education to improve professional competence, there is clearly a need for empirical research that addresses these issues. This study addressed these issues by:

1. identifying the types of continuing education activities licensed social workers attended in the previous year,
2. assessing their perceptions of how participation in these activities led to changes in their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors as social workers, and
3. examining whether these perceptions of change vary as a function of license level.

**Methods**

**Participants**

The sampling frame consisted of a September 2003 listing of 10,997 social workers with complete address information, licensed by the Maryland State Board of Social Work Examiners. A probability sample of 577 licensed social workers was mailed surveys. Twenty-eight of these were either undeliverable or ineligible, leaving 549 presumed valid addresses. The number of returned surveys was 230, yielding a 42 percent response rate.

Respondents were primarily white, female, ages 31 to 60, LCSW-C license level, and work full-time in social work. Table 1 contains specific demographic information on survey respondents.

**Table 1: Respondent Demographics (N = 230)**  
(Frequency totals may not equal 100% due to missing data)

Type	Number	%	Type	Number	%
<i>Gender</i>			<i>License Level (cont.)</i>		
Female	197	85.7	LCSW (Licensed Certified Social Worker)	12	5.2
Male	32	13.9	LCSW-C (Licensed Certified Social Worker-Clinical)	162	70.4
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>			<i>Current Employment Status</i>		
Caucasian	191	83.0	Full-time social work	145	63.0
African American	32	13.9	Part-time social work	59	25.7
Asian/Pacific Islander	3	1.3	Not social work	11	4.8
Hispanic/Latino	2	.9	Not employed	14	6.1
American Indian/Alaska Native	1	.4	<i>Current Practice Setting</i>		
Other	5	2.2	Administration	57	24.8
<i>Age</i>			Aging	31	13.5
21 to 30 years old	17	7.4	Child Welfare	47	20.4
31 to 40	48	20.9	Community Organization	13	5.7
41 to 50	60	26.1	Medical	47	20.4
51 to 60	75	32.6	Mental Health	125	54.3
61 to 70	26	11.3	Substance Abuse	21	9.1
71 and over	4	1.7	Other	52	22.6
<i>License Level</i>					
LSWA (Licensed Social Work Associate)	17	7.4			
LGSW (Licensed Graduate Social Worker)	38	16.5			

**Procedures**

This study is part of a larger study conducted at a Mid-Atlantic university school of social work in January 2004. Based on the research question identified, a single cross-sectional survey design

was used. The survey instrument went through several revisions prior to being pilot tested. Pilot testing involves giving out the survey instrument to a smaller sample of participants in order to obtain feedback on the performance of the survey items before the instrument is utilized (DeVellis, 2003). Final revisions of the survey were then made on the basis of the feedback from the pilot testing. The surveys were mailed on January 5, 2004. Included in the mailing were the survey, cover letter, and a business reply envelope addressed to the university. The survey was set up so those individuals who participated in continuing education activities in 2003 filled out the survey. Those who did not participate in any of these continuing education activities in 2003 were requested to skip the survey questions on participation and perceptions of change, and provide background information only. The survey received an exemption from the university IRB because it was an anonymous survey.

**Measures**

The survey included demographic variables such as gender, race/ethnicity, age, licensure level, year graduated with initial social work degree, current employment status, and current practice setting. Respondents were also given a list of seven continuing education activities they could have participated in including (1) workshops/conferences/seminars, (2) inservice training, (3) academic courses, (4) online courses, (5) supervision and/or mentoring, (6) consultation with peers, and (7) reading journals/books/etc. An additional "none of the above" category was provided. Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which participation in the seven continuing education activities led to changes in their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors using a 0 (no change) to 9 (very much change) Likert-type scale.

**Results**

Participation in workshops/conferences/seminars was the most frequently indicated continuing education activity participated in from January 1, 2003 to December 31, 2003 (97 percent), followed

**Table 2: Mean Perception of Participation in Continuing Education Activity Leading to Changes in Knowledge, Attitudes, and Behaviors**  
(0 = no change, 3 = little change, 5 = moderate change, 7 = much change, 9 = very much change)

Activity	n	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Supervision/mentoring	110	0	9	5.86	1.92
Consultation with peers	176	0	9	5.44	1.82
Academic courses	23	0	9	5.39	2.72
Workshop/conference/seminar	213	1	9	5.35	1.54
Reading journals/book/etc.	171	0	9	5.22	1.83
Inservice training	151	0	9	4.72	1.92
Online courses	13	0	7	3.77	2.77

*Note. Only respondents who participated in each type of continuing education activity are included.*

by consultation with peers (76.5 percent), reading journals/books/etc. (73.5 percent), inservice training (66.1 percent), and supervision/mentoring (47.4 percent). Two of the seven activities had substantially less participation than the other five with 7.8 percent participating in academic courses and 2.6 percent participating in online courses.

Mean scores on perceptions of how participation in continuing education activities leads to changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors indicate five activities led to moderate changes, one activity led to slightly less than moderate changes, and one activity led to somewhat little changes. Ranges on degree of change were from "no change" to "very much change" for six of the activities and "slightly more than no change" to "very much change" for one of the activities. Table 2 contains the distribution of mean perceived changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of the seven continuing education activities.

License level was collapsed into three categories (LSWA, LGSW, and LCSW-C/LCSW) to simplify analysis and increase category sample sizes. LCSW-C and LCSW were collapsed into a single category (LCSW-C/LCSW) given that both are certified level licenses (Board of Social Work Examiners, 2004). Table 3 contains mean perception of changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors due to participation in the seven continuing education activities for license category.

**Table 3: Mean Perception of Change in Knowledge, Attitudes, and Behaviors Due to Continuing Education Activity for License Category**

Continuing Education Activity	License Category		
	LSWA	LGSW	LCSW-C/LCSW
Workshop/conference/seminar	4.9 (n = 16)	5.7 (n = 35)	5.3 (n = 161)
Consultation with peers	4.9 (n = 13)	6.6 (n = 29)	5.3 (n = 133)
Reading books/journals/etc.	4.5 (n = 11)	5.6 (n = 26)	5.2 (n = 133)
Inservice training	4.9 (n = 13)	5.0 (n = 29)	4.6 (n = 108)
Supervision/mentoring	5.5 (n = 12)	6.9 (n = 23)	5.6 (n = 74)
Academic courses	2.5 (n = 2)	5.7 (n = 3)	6.0 (n = 17)
Online courses	0.0 (n = 1)	4.3 (n = 3)	4.5 (n = 8)

Note. 0 = no change, 3 = little change, 5 = moderate change, 7 = much change, 9 = very much change.

Analyses of variance (ANOVA) were run on license category for each of the seven CE activities. Assumptions were adequately met. Significant differences were found for license category and changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors due to supervision/mentoring,  $F(2,106) = 4.216, p = .017$  and changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors due to consultation with peers  $F(2,172) = 7.106, p = .001$ . No significant differences were found for license category and changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors due to workshops, inservice training, academic courses, online courses, and reading journals/books/etc. Table 4 contains the results of the seven ANOVA's.

**Table 4: ANOVA's for License Category (LSWA, LGSW, and LCSW-C/LGSW) on Perceptions of Changes in Knowledge, Attitudes, and Behaviors Due to Participation in Continuing Education Activities**

Continuing Education Activity	F	df	p
Workshop/conference/seminar	1.421	2, 209	.244
Inservice training	.727	2, 147	.485
Academic courses	1.874	2, 19	.181
Online courses	1.4	2, 9	.296
Supervision/mentoring	4.216	2, 106	.017*
Consultation with peers	7.106	2, 172	.001*
Reading books/journals/etc.	1.453	2, 167	.237

\* Significant,  $p < .05$

Further analyses examined the influence of level of licensure on changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. Statistically significant differences revealed were: (1) LGSW social workers

reported higher perceived changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors due to supervision/mentoring than LCSW-C/LCSW social workers and (2) LGSW social workers reported higher perceived changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors due to consultation with peers than LSWA and LCSW-C/LCSW social workers. Table 5 contains the results of the Tukey HSD post hoc analyses that were conducted in order to examine all the different combinations of pairwise comparisons between the different groups. Tukey HSD is generally considered to have adequate power and good control over Type I errors when conducting multiple comparisons (Field, 2000).

**Table 5: Tukey HSD Post Hoc Analyses on Changes in Knowledge, Attitudes, and Behaviors Due to Supervision/Mentoring and Consultation with Peers**

Licensure Levels	Supervision/Mentoring		
	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval	p
LGSW > LCSW-C/LCSW	1.26	.1717 to 2.35	.016*
Licensure Levels	Consultation with Peers		
	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval	p
LGSW > LSWA	1.63	.27 to 2.99	.014*
LGSW > LCSW-C/LCSW	1.26	.43 to 2.1	.001*

\* Significant,  $p < .05$

Note. (0 = no change, 3 = little change, 5 = moderate change, 7 = much change, 9 = very much change).

### Discussion

Social workers participated in a diverse range of continuing education activities with almost all (97 percent) attending at least one workshop/conference/seminar in the past year. This was not surprising given the prominence of these activities in continuing education offerings. Informal activities such as consultation with peers and reading journals/books/etc. follow with 76.5 percent and 73.5 percent participation levels, respectively. Academic courses (7.8 percent participation) and online courses (2.6 percent participation) had the least participation. This may be due to academic courses being considered part of more formal education experiences rather than continuing education. Also, online courses might still be novel phenomena that social workers might not consider as part of a menu of continuing education activities.

In terms of the degree to which participation in these activities leads to changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors, six out of seven were considered leading to moderate changes and one slightly more than little changes. In addition, all mean perceptions of changes cluster toward the middle of the change continuum, suggesting these activities tend to be relatively homogeneous in their ability to lead to perceived changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. While this study did not explicitly examine the relationship between mandatory continuing education and its rationale that participation in continuing education leads to improved professional competence in an ever-changing practice world, the findings suggest participation in many kinds of continuing education activities leads to at least moderate perceived changes in the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors that are part of social work practice.

State licensing boards typically award different levels of licensure depending on the degree received and examination level passed (Board of Social Work Examiners, 2004). Higher-level licenses, such as LCSW-C and LCSW, have more professional responsibilities associated with them compared to entry-level licenses, such as LSWA and LGSW. Findings that there were significant differences in changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors between participation in consultation with peers and supervision/mentoring suggest perceptions of change are similar for some continuing education activities, but vary in others, depending on license category.

Participants with LGSW licensure reported higher perceived changes due to supervision compared to participants with LCSW-C/LCSW licensure. Similarly, participants with LGSW licensure reported higher perceived changes due to consultation with peers compared to participants with LSWA and LCSW-C/LCSW licensure. Given that social workers with an LGSW license must be supervised in order to be eligible for advanced licensure such as LCSW or LCSW-C, these findings suggest that the two CE activities that are interpersonal in nature may lead to more perceived

changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors for LGSW social workers. This may help explain why LGSW social workers might perceive greater changes from supervision/mentoring and consultation with peers. Yet, state licensing boards do not typically accept supervision/mentoring and consultation with peers as "approved" continuing education activities.

As state licensing boards continue to require mandatory participation in continuing education activities in order to maintain licensure, the rationale behind this requirement can be examined. While state licensing boards may give more "weight" to formal continuing education activities such as workshops/conferences/seminars and academic courses and less "weight" to informal continuing education activities such as consultation with peers and reading journals/books/etc., feedback from social workers in this study reveal that five of these activities are similarly perceived to lead to moderate changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. This would suggest that policies that award differential credit to one type of activity over another may not acknowledge the actual professional gains social workers believe they receive from informal continuing education activities.

Adult learning theory emphasizes the self-directed and evaluative nature of adult learners (Merriam, 2001). The National Association of Social Workers (2004) emphasizes these adult learning theory concepts in its NASW Standards for Continuing Education that state social workers are personally responsible for their continuing education, including identifying their own learning needs. This necessitates the need for continuing education providers and state licensing boards to be more responsive to feedback from social workers concerning which continuing education activities they perceive lead to more changes in social work practice.

While an important rationale behind mandatory continuing education of social workers is the need for maintaining professional competence, findings from this study show that social workers engage in numerous types of continuing education



activities – some of which may not be recognized by state licensing boards. These activities include reading books/journals, receiving supervision/mentoring, and consulting with peers. In addition, findings that LGSW social workers have higher perceptions of changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors due to participation in two of these continuing education activities also raises questions about whether state licensing boards need to adjust their continuing education requirements to take into consideration the needs of social workers with different license levels.

**Limitations**

One limitation of the study is the response rate of 42 percent. While the study originally began with a probability sample of licensed social workers in Maryland, the response rate raises the need for some caution about the generalizability of study findings, although this rate was similar to the initial response rates of other studies. For example, Barnett-Queen (2001) considered his response rate of 44 percent to be usable. Kane, Hamlin, and Green (2001) reported an initial response rate of 47 percent that was increased to 66 percent by using a second mailing. Kane, Hamlin, and Hawkins (2002) had an initial response rate of 34 percent. A second mailing increased the response rate to 53 percent.

A second limitation was the low cell sizes of some of the cross-tabulations between the dependent variables and license levels. The frequency distribution was highly skewed toward LCSW-C (n = 162, 70.4 percent). LGSW was the second most common license level (n = 38, 16.5 percent), while LSWA (n = 17, 7.4 percent) and LCSW (n = 12, 5.2 percent) were much less common.

**Strengths**

Given the limited empirical research on continuing education for social workers, an important strength of this study was that it assessed social workers on the continuing education activities they participated in, and also examined their perceptions of how participating in these various activities led

to perceived changes in their practice of social work as a function of their license category. No other study was located that examined these issues with social workers.

A second strength was that the study assessed aspects of adult learning theory in continuing social work education. Given the acceptance of adult learning theory concepts in the continuing education literature, findings that social workers with LGSW licensure perceive supervision/mentoring and consultation with peers leading to greater changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors highlights the importance of social work educators and policymakers needing to incorporate such feedback into CE offerings and CE requirements for licensure.

A third strength of the study was the scope of the continuing education activities assessed. This is important as social workers may exhibit a recall bias towards believing that the more formal types of activities such as workshops, conferences, and seminars constitute the domain of continuing education activities due to their acceptance by state licensing boards for license renewal. While more informal activities such as consultation with peers or reading books and journals may not be sanctioned by state licensing boards, findings show that social workers perceive these activities to be comparable to more formal continuing education activities in terms of their leading to changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors.

**Implications for Social Work Education and Research**

Given the limited number of empirical studies on adult learning theory and continuing education in social work, future research should involve assessing the assumptions of the theory as they apply to social workers that participate in continuing education activities. This is especially important as continuing education content and licensing policy requirements might not adequately incorporate feedback from adult learners who are assumed to be self-directed about identifying their learning needs and able to evaluate how these needs are being met.

The exploratory nature of this study calls for future research on how factors such as years of social work practice experience and social work practice areas, in addition to license level, affects how perceptions of changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors vary due to CE participation. In addition, research on identifying the processes by which continuing education content is translated into professional practice by social workers could be explored.

The National Association of Social Workers and state licensing boards will continue to view continuing education as essential for ensuring that clients receive the highest-quality services from social workers. Findings from this study suggest that the policies and practices of continuing education must be adaptable to the varying needs of social workers in order to better support this goal.

**References:**

Association of Social Work Boards. (2004). Social work continuing education. Retrieved August 2, 2004, from <http://www.aswb.org>

Barnett-Queen, T. (2001). Attitudes and opinions regarding the use of the Internet for continuing education among social workers. *Journal of Technology in Human Services*, 18, 145-169.

Barton, T. R., Dietz, T. J., & Holloway, L. L. (2001). Using a pretest-posttest design to evaluate continuing education programs. *Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education*, 4(1), 32-39.

Board of Social Work Examiners. (2004). Retrieved April 22, 2004, from <http://www.dhmv.state.md.us/bswe/index.html>

Cartney, P. (2000). Adult learning styles: Implications for practice teaching in social work. *Social Work Education*, 19, 610-626.

Cervero, R. M. (2001). Continuing professional education in transition, 1981-2001. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 20(1/2), 16-30.

Daley, B. J. (2001). Learning and professional practice: A study of four professions. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 52(1), 39-54.

Datalo, P. (1994). Perceived continuing education needs of licensed clinical social workers. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 30, 217-227.

Davenport, J., & Wodarski, J. S. (1989). Social work continuing education: An historical description. *Arête*, 14(1), 32-45.

DeVellis, R. F. (2003). Scale development: Theory and applications (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Edwards, R. L., & Green, R. K. (1983). Mandatory continuing education: Time for reevaluation. *Social Work*, January-February 1983, 43-48.

Field, A. (2000). *Discovering statistics using SPSS for Window*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Houle, C. O. (1980). *Continuing learning in the professions*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Kane, M. N., Hamlin, E. R., & Green, D. (2001). Perceptions of responsibility for the acquisition of skills and knowledge in current service environments. *Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education*, 4(1), 14-22.

Kane, M. N., Hamlin, E. R., & Hawkins, W. E. (2002). Which clinical methods are associated with better preparing social work students and practitioners for managed care, state licensing, and other important practice areas? *Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education*, 5(2), 15-27.

Merriam, S. B. (2001). *New directions for adult and continuing education*. Jossey-Bass.

National Association of Social Workers. (2004). NASW standard for continuing professional education. Retrieved June 3, 2004 from [http://www.naswdc.org/practice/standards/cont\\_professional\\_ed.asp](http://www.naswdc.org/practice/standards/cont_professional_ed.asp)

Shannon, S. (2003). Adult learning and CME. *Lancet*, 361, 266.