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General Values and Work Values of Social Work Students in Hong Kong

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Abstract

This paper reports research that examined general values and work values held by university students studying social work in Hong Kong. Results were compared with values held by similar students studying in different majors. Results indicated that social work students rated general values such as *benevolence*, *self-direction*, *universalism* and *tradition* higher than their non-social work counterparts. They also rated work values such as *altruism*, *creativity*, *supervisory relations*, *independence* and *intellectual stimulation* more highly. However, the social work students held lower values associated with *economic returns*, thus supporting a view that students with an inclination towards social work tend to espouse *self-transcendence* and *intrinsic* work values, and are less influenced by *material rewards*. Among the social work respondents, gender differences were found in both general and work values. Differences were also noted between the groups with different modes of study. Implications for social work education and future research are discussed.

Keywords

Chinese, general values, Hong Kong, social work students, work values

Social work tends to be a profession that relies heavily on practitioners holding certain positive beliefs and values that must underpin the helping process (Barnard, 2008). For this reason, it is relevant for social work educators to understand more about the value systems developed by their current and graduating social work students who are due to join the profession in the near future.

Values

Values are described as being “...socially shared concepts of what is good, right, and desirable” (Knafo, Roccas, & Sagiv, 2011, p.178). These values tend to govern people’s perceptions, predilections, attitudes, motivations, choices, decisions, and behaviours. It is possible to group values together in several ways— for example those related to operating as a member of society, those related to religious beliefs, family values, those related to politics, and so on. For the purposes of this paper, two related but separate constructs are identified, *general values* and *work values* (Lyons, 2003). *General values* are those that embrace *freedom, wealth, meaning in life, social justice, and mature love*, while *work values* relate specifically to *autonomy, salary, prestige, supervisory relationship and job security*. Values of both types are regarded as crucial in determining an individual’s life choices and career decision-making (Brown & Crace, 1996; Judge & Bretz, 1992).

The study reported here focused on the general and work values held by social work students in Hong Kong, and compared these values with those held by students undertaking

other majors.

Rationale

A good foundation for the systematic examination of human values is provided by Shalom Schwartz's theory of universal human needs (Schwartz, 1996), and Donald Super's concept of work values (Super, 1995). The two instruments described below were used to collect data for this study.

Theory of universal human needs: Schwartz postulated that 10 discrete types of values form a human values system, in which some values are mutually compatible and others conflicting. The instrument known as *Schwartz Values Survey (SVS)* was constructed to tap the 10 general values of an individual (Schwartz, 1992). The types of values Schwartz identified were *universalism* (protection for the welfare of all; social justice; a world at peace), *benevolence* (maintaining and promoting the wellbeing of people; helpfulness; responsibility), *tradition* (respect for customs, tradition, culture and religion), *conformity* (compliance with social norms; self-discipline; obedience), *security* (safety and stability of society and self; family security; social order), *power* (prestige, high status and dominance over others; social power; authority), *achievement* (personal success; influence), *hedonism* (personal pleasure and gratification; enjoying life), *stimulation* (excitement, innovation, and challenge; varied life), and *self-direction* (free and independent thinking and action; creativity; independence).

In a circular structure depicting the value system (Figure 1), compatible values are

situated nearby, whereas conflicting values are located at a distance. The 10 values together form 4 higher-level values, namely: *openness to change* (composed of stimulation and self-direction), *conservation* (tradition, conformity, and security), *self-enhancement* (composed of power, achievement, and hedonism), and *self-transcendence* (universalism and benevolence).

Schwartz's model has been supported empirically by research in 55 countries (Ros et al., 1999). In addition, a significant strength of the model is that values are conceptualized as an integrated, organized and coherent system, instead of simply a collection of unrelated individual values (Schwartz, 1996). Change in one value can lead to changes in other values, so as to maintain the integrity of the system as a whole (Bardi et al., 2009, cited in Bardi & Goodwin, 2011).

Super's Concept of Work Values: Super (1995) drew upon earlier work by Ginzberg et al. (1951) to develop a *Work Values Inventory* (WVI). The instrument contains 15 subscales, each covering a separate cluster of values in the domain of work. The subscales can be classified under three major categories (described below), forming the basic structure of Super's concept of work values (Super, 1962).

1. Intrinsic work values—covering those related to striving for intrinsic satisfaction, or finding pleasure in work activities, namely: *altruism, creativity, achievement, aesthetics, independence, management, and intellectual stimulation.*

2. Extrinsic work values—related to pursuing monetary rewards or prestige, namely:
economic returns, security, prestige, and way of life
3. Concomitants—covering values related to working hard for social and environmental rewards: *supervisory relations, surroundings, associates, and variety.*

Method

Participants

Recruitment of respondents was on a voluntary basis, through invitation from the academic staff. A total of 99 social work students (69.7% female) from four universities in Hong Kong participated in the study. Within this sample, 37.4% were full-time Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) students, while the remaining were either part-time BSW (23.2%) or part-time Master of Social Work (MSW) students (39.4%). Ages ranged from 19 to 43 years, with a mean age of 26.2 years.

The 619 students from other majors were recruited by staff from both academic departments and student affairs offices through convenience sampling. Among them, 55.1% were females. Age ranged from 18 to 28 with a mean of 20.8. Areas of study included business (24.9%), engineering, mathematics, physical science (29.0%), social and behavioural sciences (12.5%), health care education (mainly nursing) (15.5%), arts and humanities (17.1 %) and others (1.0%). In terms of year of study, 42.5 % were from Year One, 37.3% from Year Two, and 20.2% from Years Three and Four. Data from this group were used to allow analyses of

differences in values held by social work and non-social work students.

Procedure

Participants were asked to complete the *Schwartz Values Survey (SVS-58)*, the *Work Values Inventory (WVI)*, and provide basic personal information. Respondents were allowed to complete the questionnaires in their own time, and then return them anonymously to the researchers.

Measures

Schwartz Values Survey (SVS-58). General values were measured using a Chinese version of SVS-58 provided by Prof. Shalom Schwartz. The SVS-58 contains 2 lists of values items—30 describing potentially desirable end-states in noun form, and the other 28 in adjective form. Each item represents a value defined by a short description. Respondents are required to rate each item on a 9-point scale. The scale ranges from -1 (opposed to my principles) to 0 (not important) through to 7 (of supreme importance) to indicate the degree of importance of each value as a guiding principle in their own life. In studies with adult samples in Australia, the instrument was found to have moderate internal consistency, with mean alphas of 0.67 across all value types (Scannell & Allen, 2000).

Super's Work Values Inventory (WVI). The WVI is a 45-item scale measuring work values. Respondents are asked to indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement for each statement on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The scale

contains the following 15 subscales of work values: *intellectual stimulation, altruism, aesthetic, management, creativity, achievement, economic returns, prestige, security, supervisory relations, associates, surroundings, variety, and way of life*. WVI has been widely used in research with students and with persons in various occupations, and its reliability and validity established (Neuman, Pizam, & Reichl, 1980).

The Chinese version was translated by the authors; and its equivalence with the original was assessed by a social scientist and a clinical psychologist. Finally, it was back translated to English and compared to the original scale by two bilingual university English teachers.

Both the scales were validated using local samples by Wong (2013).

Results and Discussion

Psychometric Properties of SVS and WVI

Most of the SVS and WVI subscales were reliable, but those named as *tradition, hedonism, achievement, way of life, and aesthetics* were somewhat lacking in internal consistency (Table 1). As explained by Schwartz et al. (2001), it is not uncommon for values measures to have a low reliability coefficient because the scales usually have very few items per subscale, and these few items try to cover a number of different dimensions. For example: the single category ‘*universalism*’ encompasses diverse values such as ‘*understanding and tolerance*’, ‘*striving for justice*’, and ‘*concern for nature*’. Similarly, ‘*Prestige*’ work values might include ‘*high social status*’, ‘*good reputation*’ and ‘*high level of importance*’, making it

difficult to establish consistency of measurement across the items. On this point, Schmitt (1996) argues that it is not prudent to judge a scale solely based on an arbitrary cut-off point, such as Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.7. Merely looking at subscale mean scores can be misleading. Often in psycho-social and sociological research it is more important to consider the specific information that each separate item contributes to building up a total picture, rather than rejecting a subscale simply because of a lower Alpha.

The picture that emerged here when using Multidimensional Scaling technique was that the *general* values of social work students basically complied with Schwartz's theory. The SVS subscales were aligned in a circumplex structure, as postulated by Schwartz (1996), offering support for construct validity of SVS (Figure 2).

However, the *work* values structure for social work students in the present study was different from the *intrinsic-extrinsic-concomitant* typology suggested by Super (1962). Four factors (accounting for 67.1% of total variance) were identified by Exploratory Factor Analysis with Varimax rotation. Factor 1 loaded on values attributed to *creativity, management, aesthetics, prestige, independence, and variety*. This factor could be termed "*intrinsic work values*". Factor 2 included values associated with *achievement, supervisory relations, altruism and intellectual stimulation*, and could be titled "*personal achievement and relationships*". Factor 3 can be regarded as "*extrinsic-concomitants*" as it consisted of values associated with *surroundings, associates and way of life*. Factor 4 could be named as "*economic returns and*

security". Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy was calculated to be 0.794, and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant ($p < 0.000$). The result was in line with a previous study that found the factor structure of WVI to be sample-dependent (Wong, 2013).

General Values of Social Work Students in Hong Kong

A trend that was noted in subscale mean scores, where social work students scored high on the subscales of *benevolence*, *self-direction*, and *universalism*, but low on *power*, *stimulation* and *tradition* (Table 1). This result makes good practical sense, as social work students theoretically espouse *self-transcendent* values and, for example, have concern for preservation and enhancement of people's welfare. Social workers respect individual's uniqueness and personal choice, and thus rate *self-direction* values highly, including *freedom*, *independence*, *choosing own goals*, and *creativity*. In contrast, social workers tend to place lower priority on *self-enhancement* values (such as power) which are incompatible with *self-transcendence* in Schwartz's theory. They have less concern for social status and prestige.

Closer examination the results of T-test shown in Table 1 reveals that social work students did score higher than the non-social work students in *benevolence* ($p < 0.01$), *self-direction* ($p < 0.01$) and *universalism* ($p < 0.001$). A very interesting finding is that although social work students scored low in *tradition* values compared to *benevolence*, *self-direction*, and *universalism*, they actually had higher scores than the non-social-work students in *tradition* values ($p < 0.01$). Hence, compared to their counterparts, they are more accepting of the customs

and ideas that traditional culture or religion offers.

Work Values of Social Work Students in Hong Kong

In terms of work values, social work students scored highest in the subscales of *supervisory relations*, *altruism*, and *achievement*. It is not surprising to find *altruism* and *achievement* ranked highly, because they embrace values that are essential in the helping professions. *Altruism* reflects the value attached to work that enables one to contribute to the welfare of others (White, 2005), while *achievement* places value on work that gives one the feeling of accomplishment (White, 2005). The highest score was in the subscale of *supervisory relations*. This probably reflects a cultural characteristic of Hong Kong Chinese students, who place great value on maintaining good inter-personal relationships, or “*guanxi*”, particularly relationships with superiors (Chu, 2008).

In contrast, work values associated with *management* (self-enhancement and social power), *aesthetics*, and *variety* were not rated as highly. Low ratings for values associated with *aesthetics* and *variety* suggest that social work students tend to place less value on making beautiful things at work and to accept repetitive tasks.

T-tests results in Table 1 show that social work students had higher scores than their non-social-work counterparts on WVI subscales of *altruism* ($p < 0.001$), *creativity* ($p < 0.01$), *supervisory relations* ($p < 0.05$), *independence* ($p < 0.05$), and *intellectual stimulation* ($p < 0.05$), but lower scores on *economic returns* ($p < 0.05$). These results seem to suggest that social work

students espouse *intrinsic* work values while paying less attention to *extrinsic* values, such as obtaining material rewards.

Gender Differences in General and Work Values

T-tests showed that female social work students tended to rate higher than males in *benevolence* (SVS) ($p < 0.05$), *tradition* (SVS) ($p < 0.05$), *achievement* (WVI) ($p < 0.01$), *surroundings* (WVI) ($p < 0.05$), *supervisory relations* (WVI) ($p < 0.01$), *associates* (WVI) ($p < 0.05$), *prestige* (WVI) ($p < 0.05$), *independence* (WVI) ($p < 0.05$), and *altruism* (WVI) ($p < 0.01$) (Table 2). The phenomenon of females scoring higher in *benevolence* is expected, and is similar to the findings of other studies reported in the literature (Ryckman & Houston, 2003; Schwartz & Rubel, 2005; Feather, 2004). However, the finding that females place higher value on *tradition* is contradictory to data from another study that suggests no gender differences (Schwartz & Rubel, 2005). Other studies have suggested that females attach greater importance to *achievement* (Feather, 2004; Ryckman & Houston, 2003); but in this study both sexes are found to have more or less the same *achievement* scores.

In terms of work values, the data here reveal more gender differences in WVI subscales than those reported in earlier studies by Miller (1974) and Zaccaria et al. (1972). Females in this study were inclined to place more importance on *concomitants*, such as *surroundings*, *supervisory relations* and *associates*. This echoes prior research findings that females are more relationship-oriented and environment-oriented than males (Pryor, 1983, as cited in Elizur, 1994). Previous research has also suggested that Western female students are more altruistic

than males in their values (Hendrix & Super, 1968; Miller, 1974; Staats, 1981). That view is supported here with evidence from Hong Kong Chinese females in the present study. In addition to support the often-cited conclusion that females are more altruistic, people-focused, and environment-focused, the present study has showed that female social work students also place greater emphasis on *achievement*, *prestige*, and *independence* than male counterpart. Perhaps, this may reflect that the female-dominated profession attracts females with high work aspiration.

Effect of Mode of Study on General and Work Values

Different modes of study reflect variations in a wide range of demographic, social and psychological variables, including age, level of educational attainment, stage of psycho-social development, work experience, and financial status and thus have differential effects of an individual's values. One-way ANOVA results indicate that there was no significant difference among the three social work programmes in general values (SVS). Statistical differences in work values (WVI) were reported, including *way of life* ($p < 0.05$), *associates* ($p < 0.05$), and *variety* ($p < 0.05$) among the full-time BSW, part-time BSW and part-time MSW students.

Based on the LSD Post Hoc test results, full-time BSW students had higher scores than both MSW and part-time BSW students in both *way of life* and *associates* values (see Table 3). It is speculated that being still in the early adulthood stage, full-time BSW respondents concern more about their peers and their own lifestyles. As for the Variety work values, MSW students

were found to rate higher than both full-time and part-time BSW. Perhaps, MSW respondents had chosen programme different from their undergraduate majors reflecting their strong desire to try different kinds of work experiences in their future career development.

However, both the effects of gender and mode of study on values should be further examined in the future study with better research design and larger sample size.

Implications for Social Work Education and Future Research

Social work is a values-focused profession, and it is crucial for social work educators to understand their students' values systems. In Hong Kong there is a lack of localized instruments to enable educators to conduct regular assessments in this values domain. This study has indicated that Chinese translations of *Schwartz Values Survey* (SVS) and the *Work Values Inventory* (WVI) offer viable options for studying general and work values of social work students in Hong Kong. The instruments may be equally applicable for assessing trainee's values in other professions.

Although values are considered a reasonably stable construct, a few studies confirm that values (including work values) change over time (Jin & Round, 2011; Seligman & Katz, 1996). This can occur, for example, when students or trainees progress through courses that expose them to new ideas, and as they gain experience. Societal changes could also be related to values changes in students. SVS and WVI could be adopted in universities and colleges for examining students' changes in values over time.

This study was an exploratory one, and has some limitations. The adoption of convenience sampling (non-random method) and relatively small sample size limits the degree to which findings can be generalized to other student groups.

The findings of the present study could be shared with the social work students, to help them reflect upon values and the role they play in influencing choices, decisions and daily practices. Social work teachers can help students explore how their values form, and how values will affect their social work practice.

The evidence that in Hong Kong social work students' (particularly females) attach high importance to *supervisory relations*, may suggest a tendency for them to follow a superior's instruction so as to maintain a good relationship. This situation could be discussed in class, with students encouraged to think about, and resolve, dilemmas such as a conflict between following a superior's instructions and upholding social work principles and values.

At an individual level, social work students who score relatively high in *tradition* values (the acceptance of the customs and ideas that one's culture or religion imposes on the individual) should be challenged and reminded of their tendency to maintain status quo and to be conservative. In addition, their inclination to rate *power* and *management* values low should be explored the reasons behind. They should be encouraged to develop aspiration for taking up more administrative responsibility in their future work and becoming more influential in building a work setting which facilitates social work practice that upholds our core social work

values, such as human worth, dignity, respect, personal caring and social justice. For social work educators, the most important work is to facilitate students better understand and clarify their own personal values and then further integrate both their own values with social work professional values. As such, they can excel in the values-based professional practice.

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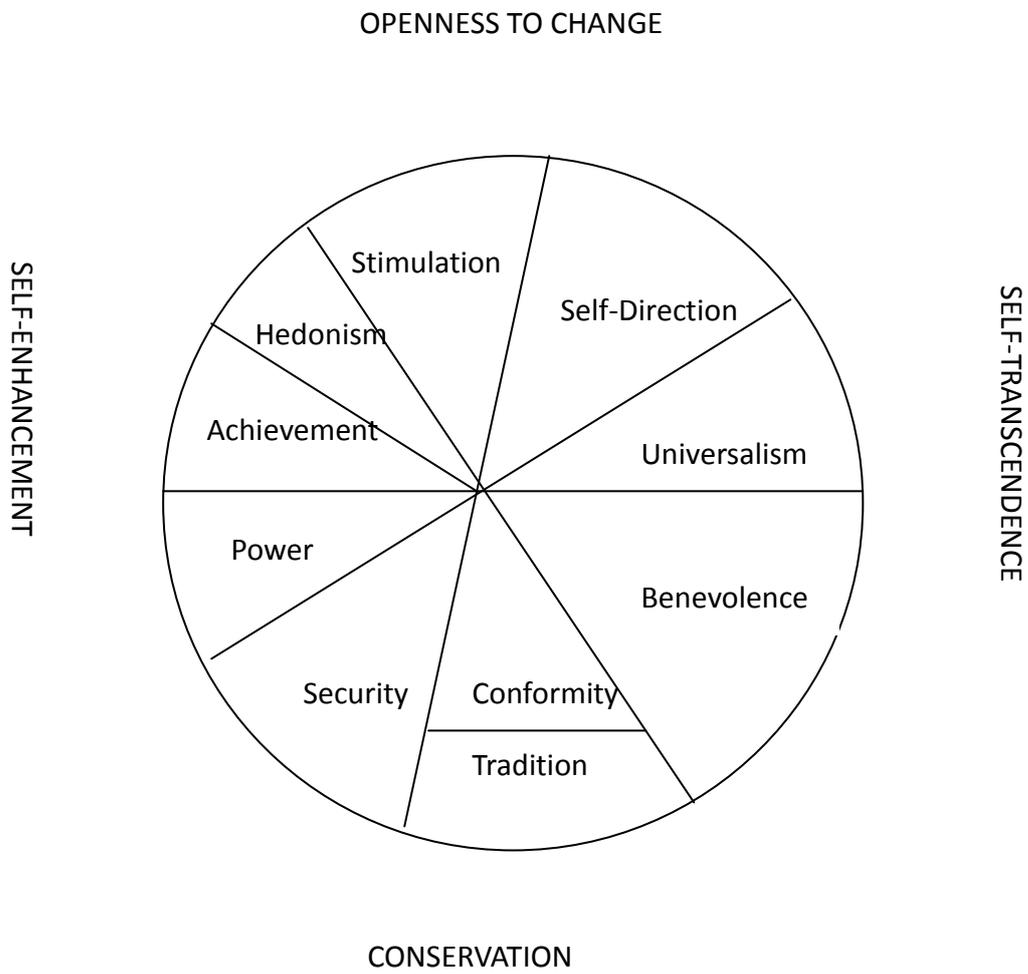


Figure 1. Schwartz's (1996) Universal Structure of Human Values System (p.5).

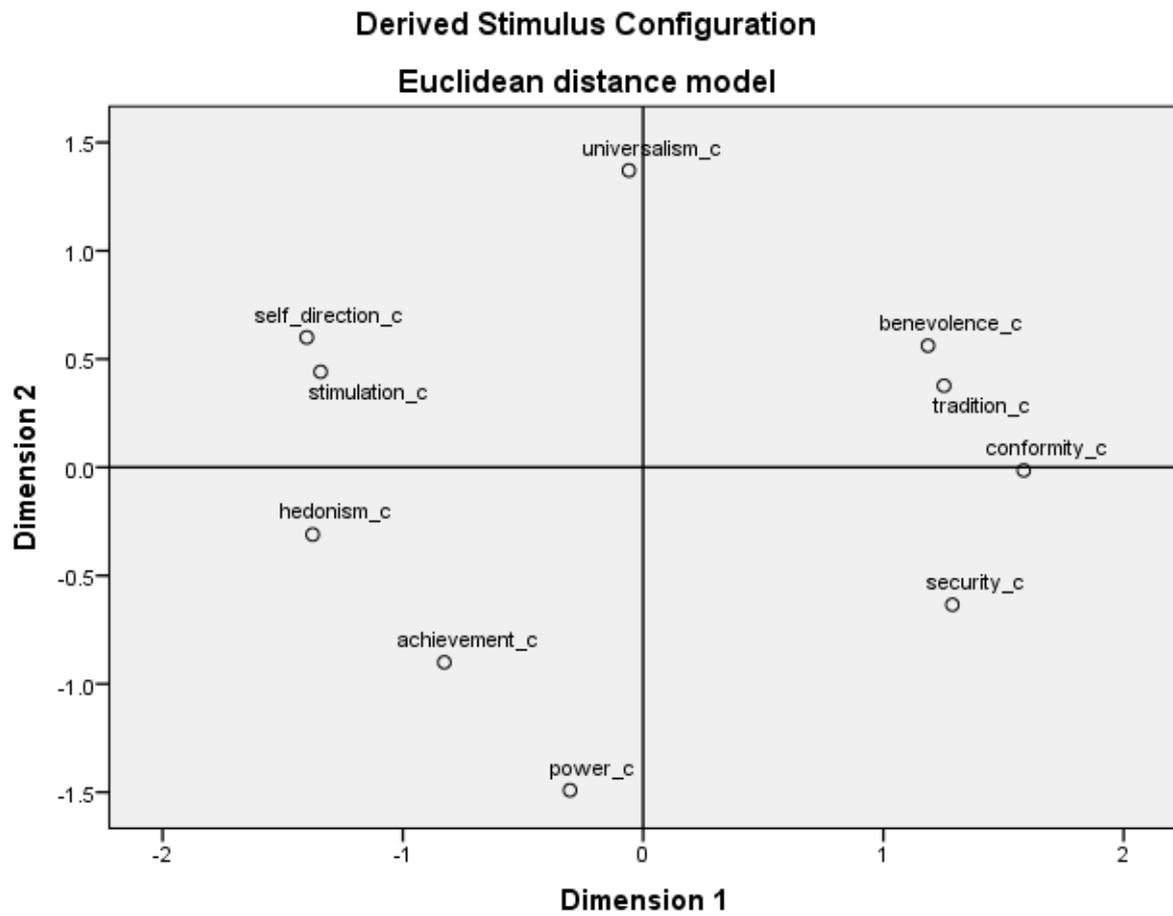


Figure 2. Multidimensional Scaling Map of the Relative Positions of SVS-58 Subscales of Social Work Students in Hong Kong

Notes: Based on SVS-58 centred sub-scales scores. N = 99; Kruskal's stress= .13769;

Stress and squared correlation (RSQ) = 0.87861.

Table 1.

Comparison between Means for Social-Work and Non-Social-Work Students on Both Schwartz Values Survey and Work Values Inventory Subscales

	Social Work Students (N=99)	Non-Social-Work Students (N=619)	Total (N= 718)	
SVS Subscale	Mean (Raw Scores)	Mean (Raw Scores)	Mean	Cronbach's Alpha
Conformity	4.4470	4.3957	4.4028	0.659
Tradition**	3.9232	3.5725	3.6209	0.472
Benevolence**	5.0707	4.7974	4.8351	0.720
Universalism***	4.8485	4.4720	4.5239	0.769
Self-Direction**	4.8949	4.6853	4.7142	0.580
Stimulation	3.5051	3.5983	3.5854	0.762
Hedonism	4.4680	4.5439	4.5334	0.402
Achievement	4.5556	4.4625	4.4753	0.660
Power	3.2465	3.2336	3.2354	0.721
Security	4.4424	4.5047	4.4961	0.604
WVI Subscale				
Creativity**	3.6020	3.3673	3.3993	0.882
Management	3.0034	2.9687	2.9735	0.735
Achievement	4.0067	3.9298	3.9404	0.387
Surroundings	3.9933	4.0393	4.0330	0.590
Supervisory Relations*	4.3737	4.2321	4.2516	0.781
Way of Life	3.9192	3.9812	3.9726	0.396
Security	3.6936	3.7781	3.7665	0.688
Associates	3.9529	4.0296	4.0190	0.656
Aesthetics	3.0135	2.9401	2.9503	0.460
Prestige	3.5084	3.5293	3.5265	0.569
Independence*	3.6566	3.4957	3.5179	0.536
Variety	3.2694	3.1729	3.1862	0.717
Economic Returns*	3.9798	4.1513	4.1277	0.793
Altruism***	4.0952	3.6349	3.6978	0.834
Intellectual Stimulation*	3.5589	3.4023	3.4239	0.604

Note. All t tests are two-tailed. * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001

Table 2.

Gender Difference in Schwartz Values Survey and Work Values Inventory Subscale Scores among Social Work Students

	Male (N=30)	Female (N=69)
SVS Subscale (Raw Scores)	Mean	Mean
Conformity	4.1500	4.5761
Tradition*	3.5600	4.0812
Benevolence*	4.7600	5.2058
Universalism	4.8750	4.8370
Self-Direction	5.0000	4.8493
Stimulation	3.7778	3.3865
Hedonism	4.6000	4.4106
Achievement	4.5083	4.5761
Power	3.1667	3.2812
Security	4.2067	4.5449
WVI Subscale		
Creativity	3.4828	3.6522
Management	3.0667	2.9758
Achievement**	3.7222	4.1304
Surroundings*	3.7667	4.0918
Supervisory Relations**	4.0778	4.5024
Way of Life	3.7667	3.9855
Security	3.5333	3.7633
Associates*	3.7667	4.0338
Aesthetics	3.0111	3.0145
Prestige*	3.3000	3.5990
Independence*	3.4778	3.7343
Variety	3.2778	3.2657
Economic Returns	4.0333	3.9565
Altruism**	3.8111	4.2206
Intellectual Stimulation	3.5000	3.5845

Note. All t tests are two-tailed. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Table 3.

One-way ANOVA Results on Both Schwartz Values Survey and Work Values Inventory

Subscales by Mode of Study

	1.Full-timeBSW student (N=37)	2.Part-time BSW student (N=23)	3.Part-time MSW student (N=39)	
SVS Subscale (Raw Scores)	Mean	Mean	Mean	Post Hoc Test
Conformity	4.4392	4.5978	4.3654	
Tradition	3.7784	4.0261	4.0000	
Benevolence	5.0054	4.9826	5.1846	
Universalism	4.6723	4.9402	4.9615	
Self-Direction	4.8216	4.8087	5.0154	
Stimulation	3.4955	3.1304	3.7350	
Hedonism	4.2342	4.6377	4.5897	
Achievement	4.4797	4.5543	4.6282	
Power	3.0054	3.6348	3.2462	
Security	4.2378	4.6522	4.5128	
WVI Subscale				
Creativity	3.5676	3.6377	3.6140	
Management	2.8559	3.1449	3.0598	
Achievement	4.0360	4.0435	3.9573	
Surroundings	4.0270	4.0435	3.9316	
Supervisory Relations	4.3063	4.5652	4.3248	
Way of Life*	4.0991	3.7391	3.8547	1>2; 1>3
Security	3.6036	3.9420	3.6325	
Associates*	4.1441	3.7826	3.8718	1>2; 1>3
Aesthetics	2.9730	3.0725	3.0171	
Prestige	3.5405	3.3913	3.5470	
Independence	3.6036	3.6812	3.6923	
Variety*	3.1622	3.0580	3.4957	3>1; 3>2
Economic Returns	3.9820	4.1449	3.8803	
Altruism	4.1532	3.9565	4.1228	
Intellectual Stimulation	3.4144	3.5217	3.7179	

Notes. Group means compared by ANOVA and LSD Post Hoc tests. * $p<0.05$; ** $p<0.01$; *** $p<0.001$

1= Full-time BSW students; 2= Part-time BSW students; 3= Part-time MSW students