

The Death Penalty Attitudes of Social Work Students: Current and Future Opportunities

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Although much is known about the death penalty attitudes of U.S. adults, the attitudes of social workers are less clear. The current study assesses the death penalty attitudes of 406 social work students at a southern university. Support was measured in isolation, in conjunction with alternative sentencing structures, and using vignettes to provide mitigating factors about the defendant and the crime. Social work students reported low levels of death penalty support (32%), which decreased when alternative sentences were provided (11%). Death penalty support was lowest on case vignettes (range: 0–16%). Implications for social work and future research directions are discussed.

The field of forensic social work has grown dramatically over the past several decades, exploring how individuals, families, and communities intersect with the criminal justice system and where prevention and intervention efforts can most effectively be directed. Although the vast majority of clients who make contact with the criminal justice system will not be sentenced to death, it is important to understand social workers' perceptions of the death penalty for several reasons. First, social workers are the largest group of mental health providers in the United States, and comprise 60–70% of community mental health services (Proctor, 2004). In this capacity, social workers engage a variety of clients (e.g., defendants, victims, families, witnesses) through the criminal justice, mental health, and child welfare systems. As the mission of the social work profession is to “enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in

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poverty” (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2008, pre-ambled), social workers also interact with communities disproportionately affected by capital crime and the death penalty (e.g., communities affected by poverty and communities of color; Baumgartner, De Boef, & Boydston, 2008; Phillips, 2009). Further, the NASW (2015) first issued a professional policy stance opposing the death penalty in 1997, a stance that has been upheld in all subsequent bi-annual policy revisions. Therefore, social workers are likely to view the death penalty differently than members of the general public, as they are trained to view social issues through a justice-oriented lens (Lambert, Pasupuleti, & Allen, 2005). Using this lens, individuals sentenced to death constitute an especially vulnerable population because their legal punishment has absolute consequences.

Second, as the field of forensic social work has matured, social workers are increasingly involved in providing expert testimony and working on multidisciplinary death penalty mitigation teams (e.g., Andrews, 1991; Guin, Noble, & Merrill, 2003; Schroeder, Guin, Pogue, & Bordelon, 2006; Terrell & Staller, 2003). It is imperative that social workers working within the criminal justice system acknowledge and explore their own preferences and biases about the death penalty and those sentenced to death. These implicit attitudes have the potential to introduce stigma into the therapeutic relationship and negatively affect outcomes (Austin, Goble, & Kelecevic, 2009; Gould & Perlin, 2000; Unnever & Cullen, 2012). Finally, although behavioral health services are typically available for victims of crimes, services are not always extended to the surviving loved ones and family members of executed defendants. For example, Betancourt et al. (2006) advocated for social workers to take a leadership role in empowering the families of convicted and executed defendants to speak out about the emotional toll of the death penalty, as this work is consistent with the mission and values of the social work profession.

The current study examines the death penalty attitudes of undergraduate and graduate social work students at a large state university in Florida. Currently, 36 states have abolished the death penalty, have a moratorium on executions, or have not executed a prisoner in the past 5 years (Death Penalty Information Center [DPIC], 2015b). Florida is not part of this trend. In the past 5 years, Florida is the only state that has increased the number of executions performed annually (DPIC, 2015c). Gaining a deeper understanding of the death penalty attitudes of social work students in an active death penalty state may help catalyze the translation of NASW’s policy stance of abolition into practice. Below, the history of the death penalty in the United States is briefly discussed. Then, the primary ideological factors associated with support for and opposition to the death penalty are critically reviewed. Finally, the current study is situated within the literature on death penalty attitudes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

History of the Death Penalty

Capital punishment has a long history in the United States, a tradition imported from Britain to the new world with executions occurring in the colonies as early as 1608 (Randa, 1997). Although the use of capital punishment is, of course, not limited to the west, the death penalty has been a defining feature of the U.S. legal system since well before the nation's founding in 1776 (Bohm, 2011). The abolitionist movement has an equally long and vibrant history, bolstered by the Quaker origins of many new world settlers and an influential international treatise published in 1767, which condemned torture and the death penalty, and advocated for justice (Beccaria, 1767; Schabas, 1993). Prison reforms to improve both the physical conditions and the moral outcomes of imprisonment began as early as 1787, as the fledgling U.S. sought to distance themselves from the perceived severity of English social policy (Meskell, 1999).

Abolition—and the shift from punishment to rehabilitation as the goal of the criminal justice system—gained traction slowly throughout the 19th century as states grappled to define which crimes were eligible for a death penalty sentence, how executions were to be carried out, and whether executions would be conducted in public spaces (Bohm, 2011). However, in the build up to World War I, both the use of capital punishment and public death penalty support increased sharply, with pro-death penalty sentiments enduring until the decades following World War II. Death penalty support sunk to an all-time low of 42% in 1966 (Jones, 2014), and in 1972, the Supreme Court case *Furman v. Georgia* suspended the death penalty across the United States (Randa, 1977). The Court noted that arbitrariness of application translated into cruel and unusual punishment, a violation of the Eighth Amendment (Bohm, 2011).

The moratorium on capital punishment was short-lived, however, as three southern states immediately introduced legislation to revise their death penalty statutes in the wake of *Furman*. Revisions standardized eligibility and application, allowed for the introduction of aggravating and mitigating factors, separated sentencing from the original trial, and created a formal system of appeals (Bohm, 2011; Butler & Moran, 2002). Known collectively as the *Gregg decision* (*Gregg v. Georgia*, 1976; *Jurek v. Texas*, 1976; *Proffitt v. Florida*, 1976), these guided discretion statutes were approved by the Supreme Court in 1976, which officially reinstated the death penalty in Florida, Texas, and Georgia. Dozens of states followed suit, and executions resumed in 1977. Since the *Gregg* decision, more than 1,400 individuals have been executed across the US (DPIC, 2015c).

The number of annual executions and public death penalty support peaked in the mid-1990s, with nearly 100 individuals executed annually

(Bohm, 2011; Hood, 2005). Since that time, both have waned. Currently, 31 states still have the death penalty, down from 38 in 2007 (DPIC, 2015c, n.d.). However, only 12 states have executed a prisoner in the past 10 years. Further, in 2015, the Pew Research Center estimated public support for the death penalty at 56%—down from its peak of 80% in 1994, and the lowest level of support recorded since the reinstatement of the death penalty.

The overall decline in the use of the death penalty across the United States, however, obscures regional application trends. More than 81% ($n = 1,148$) of the 1,414 U.S. executions since the *Gregg* decision have been carried out in southern states (Borg, 1997; Hood, 2005). The vast majority of executions from all other regions of the United States occurred in Missouri and Ohio (DPIC, 2015c). Between 2010 and 2015, however, only nine states have carried out 10 or more total executions, with three southern states—Texas ($n = 81$), Florida ($n = 22$), and Oklahoma ($n = 21$)—leading the nation.

Factors Associated with Supporting or Opposing the Death Penalty

There are no universal reasons for supporting or opposing the death penalty. Death penalty attitudes are entwined with notions of the true purpose of the criminal justice system (i.e., punishment vs. rehabilitation) and are often grounded in emotion, rather than evidence (Bohm, 2011; Firment & Geiselman, 1997; Lambert et al., 2005; Vandiver, Giacomassi, & Gathje, 2002; Vollum, Longmire, & Buffington-Vollum, 2004). In national samples and samples comprised of university students, death penalty support is generally associated with being male, White, and Republican (Baker, Lambert, & Jenkins, 2005; Bohm, 1992; Ergun, 2014; Lambert et al., 2008; Mallicoat & Brown, 2008; Stack, 2000; Steiker & Steiker, 2015; Whitehead & Blankenship, 2000). Further, although the directionality of the relationship is unclear, religious faith and death penalty support are often linked, which underscores the complicated connection between morality and death penalty attitudes (Applegate, Cullen, Fisher, & Vander Ven, 2000; Bias, Goldberg, & Hannum, 2011; Pew, 2015; Unnever & Cullen, 2006; Young, 1992).

People who support the death penalty endorse either the deterrent effect of capital punishment, a need for retribution or revenge, or a desire to incapacitate violent criminals. Those who oppose capital punishment cite a desire to show mercy, express concerns about the unfair administration of the death penalty, worry that death sentences contribute to the brutalization of society, and note the problem of innocence. Each of these ideological stances are defined below and then a critical review of the evidence supporting these claims is provided.

The three primary ideologies provided for supporting the death penalty are deterrence, retribution, and incapacitation (Bohm, 1992, 2011; Lambert, Camp, Clarke, & Jiang, 2011; Lambert, Clarke, & Lambert, 2004). Deterrence is defined as the notion that the existence of the death penalty deters people

from committing crimes (Britto & Noga-Styron, 2015; Radelet & Lacock, 2009). According to this position, the death penalty is needed to maintain law and order in society, with executions serving to lower the murder rate (Cochran, Boots, & Heide, 2003; Lynch, 2002; Robinson, 2009). Retribution is described as the idea that the punishment must fit the crime; the notion of “an eye for an eye,” or “a life for a life” figure prominently among supporters of retribution (Bohm, 1992; Lambert et al., 2004; Lambert et al., 2008). Proponents of retribution believe that punishments must be proportionate to the harm caused by the offense; thus, if one commits murder, then only death is appropriate (Bohm, 1992). Incapacitation suggests that individuals convicted of murder must be executed to prevent them from killing again, and to protect hypothetical future victims (Lambert et al., 2004; Marquart & Sorenson, 1989). In addition, embedded in the notion of incapacitation is the (albeit incorrect) assumption that it is cheaper to execute a prisoner than to keep them in prison for life (Robinson, 2009).

The four primary ideologies provided for opposing the death penalty are mercy/ethic of care, unfair administration, brutalization of society, and innocence (Hood, 2001; Lambert et al., 2004; Unnever & Cullen, 2005). Mercy is described as the idea that showing compassion to defendants is more important than exacting revenge (Hood, 2001). In addition, proponents of mercy indicate a belief that the death penalty is an explicit demonstration of society’s cruelty (Vandiver et al., 2002). Unfair administration suggests that racial, socioeconomic, and other disparities drive unequal application of the death penalty (Mallicoat & Brown, 2008; Phillips, 2009). Proponents note that defendants of color are disproportionately affected by the death penalty, with both the race of the defendant and the race of the victim predicting death sentences for capital crimes (Baumgartner et al., 2008; DPIC, 2015d). Brutalization of society is described as the notion that having a legal system that executes defendants actually increases social violence and brutality within the U.S. culture (Vandiver et al., 2002). And finally, many opponents of the death penalty provide innocence as their primary rationale. That is, defendants are sometimes exonerated based on DNA testing, new evidence, or the identification of faulty witness testimony (Whitt, Clarke, & Lambert, 2002; Unnever & Cullen, 2005).

Overall, the reasons for supporting or opposing the death penalty have a strong emotional and moral component and are often not grounded in scientific fact (Bohm, 2011; Vandiver et al., 2002). For example, the crime rate has decreased dramatically over the past several decades in states with and without the death penalty (Chalfin, Haviland, & Raphael, 2013). Further, those states with the highest number of executions generally also have higher than average crime rates, perhaps indicating that the death penalty does not have a deterrent effect on crime (Bohm, 2011; Chalfin et al., 2013). Further, although many individuals who support the death penalty suggest that a defendant’s death promotes closure and healing among the victim’s loved

ones (Lambert et al., 2004), when questioned, victim's families often do not equate death with justice (Armour & Umbreit, 2012; Berns, 2009).

The unfair administration of the death penalty and the problem of innocence are also well-documented (e.g., Baumgartner et al., 2008; Bohm, 2011; Hood, 2001, 2005; Zimring, 2003). Black defendants are disproportionately sentenced to death for the murder of a White victim when compared to cases involving White defendants (regardless of victim race) and Black victims (regardless of defendant race; Baumgartner et al., 2008). For example, of the 324 interracial murder death penalty cases documented since the Gregg decision, less than 10% ($n = 31$) involved a White defendant and a Black victim or victims. In contrast, more than 90% of executions ($n = 293$) occurred in cases with a Black defendant and a White victim or victims (DPIC, 2015d).

Finally, the mission of the Innocence Project (n.d.) is to use advances in forensic science to exonerate individuals wrongly accused and convicted of crime. Since the organization's inception in 1992, more than 300 people in the United States have been exonerated by DNA testing alone, including 18 defendants who had been sentenced to death. This suggests that wrongful convictions of innocent citizens are not isolated or rare events, even in capital cases (Innocence Project, n.d.; Whitt et al., 2002).

The Marshall Hypothesis

The Marshall hypothesis, named after Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, who noted in his 1972 *Furman* dissent that the American public was largely unaware of critical information about the theory and practice of the death penalty. He hypothesized that popular support for the death penalty was best explained by a lack of knowledge about the practice, and that knowledge and support were inversely correlated (Bohm, 1987; Lee, Bohm, & Pazzani, 2014). Further, he suggested that if death penalty support was grounded in notions of revenge or retribution, then introducing factual information would have no impact on these attitudes.

The Marshall hypothesis has been tested in a variety of contexts with mixed results. Many studies support the inverse relationship between knowledge and death penalty support (Bohm & Vogel, 1991, 2004; Cochran & Chamlin, 2005; LaChappelle, 2014; Robinson, 2009; Sarat & Vidmar, 1976; Steiker, 2009; Vidmar & Dittenhoffer, 1981; Wright, Bohm, & Jamieson, 1995), with the strongest relationships detected among younger participants, women, and people of color (Bohm, 1989; Bohm & Vogel, 1991; Bohm, Vogel, & Maisto, 1993; Lambert et al., 2011). Likewise, a belief in retribution has been shown to moderate this relationship (Bohm & Vogel, 2004; Bohm et al., 1993; Michel & Cochran, 2011). Null findings, however, are not uncommon (e.g., Cox, 2013; Ellsworth & Ross, 1983; Lambert & Clarke, 2001; Lee et al., 2014), with authors speculating that characteristics of the defendant or the crime may also influence death penalty attitudes. To explore this

hypothesis, Burgason and Pazzani (2014) used vignettes to examine the intersection of defendant and crime details with respondent characteristics. The authors note that death penalty support increased when respondents were given information about a defendant's prior criminal history, and decreased when negative information was provided about the victim. However, the relationship between mitigating (rather than aggravating) factors about the defendant and death penalty attitudes remains unclear.

The Death Penalty Attitudes of University Students

As stated, the majority of the extant literature on death penalty attitudes draws conclusions from national probability samples of adults (e.g., Ergun, 2014; Pew, 2015). Research conducted among undergraduate university students in the United States suggest that students indicate lower levels of death penalty support when compared to the general public (e.g., Baker et al., 2005; Bohm & Vogel, 1991; Bohm et al., 1993; Cox, 2013; Firment & Geiselman, 1997; Lambert & Clarke, 2001; Worthen, Rogers, & Sharp, 2014). Taken together, in the majority of samples, death penalty support was associated with self-identifying as male and white, and holding politically conservative beliefs or identifying as Republican. Studies that evaluate students enrolled in specific degree programs are less common, although stronger death penalty support was noted among students majoring in criminology and criminal justice when compared to students in other majors (Lambert et al., 2008; Farnworth et al., 1998). Mirroring trends in national samples, religiosity was not a consistent predictor of death penalty attitudes for university students. However, when death penalty support was measured along a continuum, rather than as a binary construct, increased religious saliency was significantly associated with lower levels of support (Worthen et al., 2014).

Only one study that examined the death penalty attitudes of social work students was located. Pasupuleti et al. (2005) compared the death penalty attitudes of 172 social work students to those held by 234 students from a variety of other majors in a large Midwestern university. Among the entire sample of students, less than half (48%, $n = 195$) expressed any support for the death penalty. However, only 36% of the social work students reported any level of support, with less than 10% indicating that they were strongly (6%) or very strongly (3%) in favor of the death penalty. When compared to students in other majors, social work students were significantly more likely to question the deterrent utility of the death penalty, and express opposition based on a mercy/ethic of care ideology, the unfair administration of the policy, and concern about the brutalization effect on society. For social work students in the sample, as academic level increased, support for the death penalty decreased—a relationship not detected among the other students in the sample. The authors speculate that social work education itself may influence death penalty attitudes, given the curricular focus on rehabilitation,

social justice, and psychosocial assessment. However, Farnworth et al. (1998) noted a similar trend among students across a variety of majors. When compared to first-year students, the college seniors were significantly less likely to support the death penalty. Therefore, the true contribution of the social work curriculum on death penalty attitudes is unclear.

Although the empirical evidence base is limited, it appears that social work students differ from other students in key ways. Social work students are much less likely to support the death penalty when compared to students in other majors. Just over a third of the social work students in Pasulpuleti et al.'s (2005) study expressed death penalty support, compared to 48–66% of students surveyed in a similar time period from a variety of majors (Baker et al., 2005; Cox, 2013; Lambert & Clarke, 2001; Worthen et al., 2014). However, more than 70% of students majoring in criminology or criminal justice expressed some level of death penalty support (Lambert et al., 2008). The extreme variation in death penalty support perhaps indicates that stark differences exist between students who are drawn to the social work major and those students who pursue other majors, especially criminology and criminal justice.

CURRENT STUDY FOCUS

Although much is known about the general death penalty attitudes of the American public and university students in the United States, several critical gaps in the literature require further investigation. The current study addresses these gaps by examining the death penalty attitudes of undergraduate and graduate level social work students at a large state university in Florida. As research suggests that persons living in nondeath penalty states are less likely to support the death penalty (Ergun, 2014; Worthen et al., 2014), understanding the death penalty attitudes of persons living in an active death penalty state is important (Borg, 1997). Specifically, little is known about the death penalty attitudes of social workers, and a thorough evaluation of these attitudes among social work students in the state of Florida is important for several reasons. First, the majority of research examines death penalty support in abstract, binary terms (e.g., assessing death penalty support with one yes or no question; Bohm, 1992; Worthen et al., 2014). The current study measures death penalty support using a 7-point response option, which allows for a more nuanced understanding of the strength of that support. Further, death penalty support is measured independently and in concert with other sentencing options (e.g., life in prison) to gauge whether support is moderated by the availability of alternative sentencing.

Second, although university students appear to be less supportive of the death penalty than members of the general public, and social work students report the lowest levels of death penalty support among students overall, it is unclear whether and how social work education itself affects these attitudes

(Lambert et al., 2005; Pasupuleti et al., 2005). The current study builds upon these findings by providing a deeper understanding of how undergraduate social work students may differ from graduate social work students, and whether discussions about the long-term effects of the death penalty for social work clients are addressed in the core competencies.

Third, although the literature indicates that self-identifying as male, White, and Republican are associated with increased death penalty support (Bohm, 1992; Ergun, 2014; Lambert et al., 2008; Stack, 2000; Whitehead & Blankenship, 2000), it is unclear whether these trends are representative of social workers. The majority of social workers, and by extension, the majority of social work students enrolled in degree programs across the United States, self-identify as female, White, and Democrat. Therefore, it is important to investigate these relationships among a subset of university students who differ from the general population of university students on demographic characteristics associated with death penalty support. In addition, the literature is mixed on whether religious saliency is a useful predictor of death penalty support or opposition. For example, although Lambert et al. (2008) noted that religious saliency did not predict death penalty attitudes among their sample of university students, national polls often indicate that increased religious saliency and Catholic faith are associated with lower levels of death penalty support (e.g., Bias et al., 2011; Pew, 2015; Young, 1992).

Finally, more research is needed to test the Marshall hypothesis using case vignettes. Although Burgason and Pazzani (2014) found that death penalty support increased when aggravating factors about the defendant's prior history were introduced, the influence of mitigating factors on support is unexplored. The current study uses case vignettes to provide the contextual psychosocial information (i.e., mitigating factors) that serves as the theoretical bedrock of social work intervention. It is hypothesized that increasing knowledge, not just about the implementation of the death penalty itself but also about the circumstances of defendants who face death penalty sentences, will be inversely correlated with death penalty support.

We used a sample of 406 social work students to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the death penalty attitudes of social work students at a state university in Florida?
2. Do social work students report lower death penalty support when other sentencing options are offered (e.g., life in prison)?
3. Do social work students' death penalty attitudes differ by demographic, political, or religious characteristics?
4. Can social work students' death penalty attitudes be predicted by the major reasons to support or oppose the death penalty?
5. Do social work students report lower death penalty support when they have access to mitigating factors about the defendant or the crime?

METHOD

Participants

Participants were recruited from the College of Social Work at a public 4-year, nationally ranked state university in Florida with an enrollment of slightly more than 40,000. The College offers accredited programs at the Bachelor, Master, and Doctoral level and offers face-to-face, fully online, and distance learning options for Master's of Social Work (MSW) students. Between 600 and 900 students are enrolled across all programs (depending on the semester), with the majority of enrollment clustered at the MSW level. Students enrolled in any of the three degree programs offered through the College of Social Work were eligible for participation.

Study Design and Sampling Procedures

Data were collected between May and August of 2013 using a cross-sectional, self-report survey design. A purposive sampling strategy of social work students enrolled at the Bachelor, Master, and Doctoral level was used. No personally identifying information was collected from any participant and all information was gathered via self-report. Because of the characteristics of the sample, recruitment into the study occurred on two fronts: face-to-face and online. Face-to-face surveys were delivered to introductory major-restricted courses at the Bachelor and Master level to maximize exposure and minimize student overlap. A member of the research team attended each identified course one time and reviewed the informed consent form orally before students opened the survey booklet. To minimize coercion, the instructor of the course was asked to step out into the hallway and students were reminded that their participation was voluntary and would not affect their standing in the course or within the College.

In addition, an online version of the survey hosted by Qualtrics was emailed to all registered students at the Bachelor, Master, and Doctoral level during the same period. Using both face-to-face and electronic methods was deemed necessary as roughly a third of students are enrolled in fully online or distance learning programs. Students were asked to only complete the survey once, regardless of format. All procedures were reviewed and approved by the university Human Subjects Review Board.

Measures

A measure of death penalty support was created for this study drawing items from two previous studies of the death penalty attitudes of university students (i.e., Lambert et al., 2008; Pasupuleti et al., 2005). Questions evaluating death penalty support and reasons for supporting or opposing capital

punishment were replicated from these studies to facilitate comparison between groups. All other items were designed specifically for this study.

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

A nine-item demographic questionnaire collected descriptive information on sex/gender, race, age, and degree program as well as religious saliency, frequency of religious attendance, and political affiliation.

DEATH PENALTY SUPPORT

Overall death penalty support was assessed using a seven-item closed-ended response category. Specifically, they were asked to select the statement that best reflects their attitude towards the death penalty: 1 = I am very strongly opposed to the death penalty; 2 = I am strongly opposed to the death penalty; 3 = I am somewhat opposed to the death penalty; 4 = I am uncertain about the death penalty; 5 = I am somewhat in favor of the death penalty; 6 = I am strongly in favor of the death penalty; 7 = I am very strongly in favor of the death penalty.

In addition, a follow-up question was added, asking students to choose what sentence they would recommend for an individual convicted of murder. Response options included the death penalty, life in prison without the opportunity for parole, life in prison without the opportunity for parole plus restitution, life in prison with the opportunity for parole, and I have no opinion. Both *parole* and *restitution* were defined in the question.

REASONS FOR SUPPORTING OR OPPOSING CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

Sixteen items representing the major reasons for supporting (i.e., deterrence, retribution, and incapacitation) or opposing (i.e., mercy/ethic of care, unfair administration, brutalization of society, and innocence) capital punishment were selected based on prior studies (i.e., Lambert et al., 2008; Pasupuleti et al., 2005). Specifically, for death penalty support there were two measures for deterrence, four measures for retribution, and two measures for incapacitation. In addition, for reasons to oppose the death penalty, there were four items for mercy/ethic of care, two items for unfair administration, and a single measure each for brutalization and innocence. All 16 items were answered with a 5-point Likert-type agreement response scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). These items performed well in other samples, with index alphas ranging from .67 to .84 (Lambert et al., 2008).

VIGNETTES

Nine vignettes presented cases eligible for a death penalty sentence in Florida. Vignettes provided additional information on the circumstances of

the crime, and/or the motivation or history of the defendant. Two vignettes presented actual death penalty cases in detail including information about the defendant's history of childhood victimization, mental capacity, mental health issues, and other mitigating circumstances. Students were prompted, "If you were a juror on this case and the defendant was found guilty, what sentence would you recommend?" Response options included (a) death penalty; (b) life in prison without parole plus restitution; (c) life in prison without parole; (d) life in prison with parole; and (e) other: please specify. The other category allowed students to enter as much text as they wished.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to calculate frequencies and percentages that described students' personal characteristics, level of death penalty support, and preferences for alternative sentencing options to the death penalty for a defendant convicted of murder. Descriptive statistics were also used to describe students' level of agreement or disagreement with the seven major reasons for supporting or opposing the death penalty and preference for the death penalty in case vignettes.

Inferential statistical analysis was conducted in two steps. First, independent samples *t*-tests were conducted. Analyses examined between-group differences on levels of death penalty support on five variables: sex/gender, race, political affiliation, religious saliency, and academic level. The dependent variable was the seven-item closed-ended scale of death penalty attitudes. Five dichotomous independent variables were created. Sex/gender was measured as male/female, with males serving as the reference group. A race variable was created with Whites serving as the reference group, and non-Whites as the comparison group. Political affiliation was measured as Republican/Democrat, with Republicans serving as the reference group. A religious saliency variable was created with students who reported that religion had not played a part in their lives serving as the reference group, and those who claimed that religion had played a part in their lives as the comparison group. Finally, an academic level variable was created with undergraduates serving as the reference group, and graduate students as the comparison group. The size of each group, mean score, standard deviation, and *t* scores were reported (Argyrous, 2011). An alpha-level of .05 was used in all tests of significance. It was decided a priori that if a statistical difference was detected on a specific variable, then that variable would serve as a covariate for all subsequent analyses.

Second, ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis was conducted. The OLS regression model assessed the predictive ability of the seven ideological reasons to support or oppose the death penalty on death penalty attitudes. OLS regression provides a model significance test and an *R*-squared effect size statistic. Ninety-five percent confidence intervals (95% CI) will

be reported for the standardized Beta (β) coefficient. The R -squared value can be interpreted as the proportion of the variance of the dependent variable explained by the independent variables added into the model. The 95% CI is interpreted as the confidence that β value observed in the sample reflects the true β value of the population (Kutner, Nachtsheim, Neter, & Li, 2005). Multicollinearity was assessed using variance inflation factors (VIF) values, with a value greater than 10 indicating multicollinearity between variables (Kutner et al., 2005). OLS regression is an appropriate statistical test for estimating the effects of one independent variable on the dependent variable while statistically controlling for the shared effects of other independent variables (Kline, 2011).

RESULTS

Characteristics of the Sample

In total, 435 surveys were completed in the classroom ($n = 199$) or accessed electronically ($n = 236$). We found no significant differences between face-to-face and electronic survey responses on demographic characteristics, death penalty attitudes, or vignette responses. Although only three students declined to participate in classroom settings, nine students accessed the online survey but did not complete any questions. These responses were excluded from analysis. Another seven students only completed the first two questions on the online survey. Data from these surveys were used in descriptive statistics on the first two items only; responses are excluded from all subsequent analysis. Thirteen cases were excluded from analysis as students indicated a major in another field. The 406 eligible responses comprise 63% of 643 social work students enrolled during the 2013 summer semester.

Detailed participant characteristics are reported in Table 1. Participants were majority female (88.7%; $n = 337$), Caucasian (68.7%; $n = 259$), and enrolled in the Master's program (62.6%; $n = 238$). The mean age was 28 years ($SD = 9.263$) with a range of 18–66. The median age, however, was 24, reflecting the majority of students enrolled in graduate-level coursework. The demographic breakdown of survey participants reflects the overall composition of enrolled social work students.

Death Penalty Attitudes

The level of death penalty support is reported in Table 2. The majority of students in the sample (52.4%, $n = 203$) indicated that they were opposed to the death penalty. Specifically, 13.7% ($n = 53$) indicated that they were strongly opposed, 18.6% ($n = 72$) reported being strongly opposed, and 20.1% ($n = 78$) indicated being somewhat opposed to the death penalty. Sixteen percent ($n = 62$) of students were uncertain, and 31.7% ($n = 123$) reported

TABLE 1 Characteristics of the Sample

Characteristic	Frequency	%
Age ^a (<i>n</i> = 372)	—	—
Gender (<i>n</i> = 380)		
Female	337	88.7
Male	42	11.1
Transgender	1	0.3
Degree (<i>n</i> = 380)		
BSW	125	32.9
MSW	238	62.6
PhD	17	4.5
Race (<i>n</i> = 224)		
Caucasian	259	68.7
African American	54	14.3
Hispanic	30	8.0
Multi-racial	22	5.8
Asian	4	1.1
Other	8	2.1
Extent religion has played a role in life (<i>n</i> = 378)		
A great deal	129	34.1
A fair amount	130	34.4
Not much	78	20.6
Not at all	41	10.8
How often attends religious services (<i>n</i> = 380)		
More than once a week	50	13.2
Once a week	69	18.2
Two or three times a month	33	8.7
Once a month	28	7.4
Special holidays only	42	11.1
Almost never	83	21.8
Never	75	19.7
Political party affiliation (<i>n</i> = 376)		
Democrat	199	52.9
Independent	72	19.1
Republican	63	16.8
Libertarian	15	4.0
Green party	5	1.3
Other	7	1.9
None	15	4.0

^a*M* = 27.99; *SD* = 9.263.

any support for the death penalty. Specifically, 4.1% (*n* = 16) indicated that they were very strongly in favor, 7% (*n* = 27) reported being strongly in favor, and 20.6% (*n* = 80) reported that they were somewhat in favor of the death penalty. Data were missing for 18 participants.

The Impact of Alternative Sentencing Options on Death Penalty Support

The breakdown of support for alternative sentencing options is reported in Table 2. When alternative sentencing options were offered for a defendant

TABLE 2 Death Penalty Attitudes of Social Work Students

Attitude	Frequency	%
Attitude towards the death penalty ($n = 388$)		
Very strongly opposed	53	13.7
Strongly opposed	72	18.6
Somewhat opposed	78	20.1
Uncertain	62	16.0
Somewhat in favor	80	20.6
Strongly in favor	27	7.0
Very strongly in favor	16	4.1
Sentence recommended for person convicted of murder ($n = 384$)		
The death penalty	43	11.2
Life in prison without the opportunity for parole	95	24.7
Life in prison without the opportunity for parole plus restitution	160	41.7
Life in prison with the opportunity for parole	60	15.6
I have no opinion	26	6.8

convicted of murder, only 11.2% ($n = 43$) of students chose the death penalty. Twenty-five percent of students ($n = 95$) selected life in prison without the opportunity for parole, 41.7% ($n = 160$) chose life in prison without the opportunity for parole plus restitution, and 15.6% ($n = 60$) selected life in prison with the opportunity for parole. Seven percent ($n = 26$) of students indicated that they had no opinion. Data were missing for 22 participants.

The Importance of Demographic, Political, and Religious Characteristics

The sample was partitioned into independent groups using five demographic variables: sex/gender, race, political affiliation, religious saliency, and academic level. The results of independent t -tests are presented in Table 3.

TABLE 3 Independent Samples T-Test Results on Death Penalty Attitudes

Variable	Attribute	Death penalty attitudes			
		n	M	SD	t
Sex/gender	Male	42	2.62	1.72	3.652**
	Female	322	3.60	1.63	
Race	White	252	3.59	1.69	1.736
	Non-White	108	3.26	1.61	
Political affiliation	Republican	58	4.16	1.47	4.156**
	Democrat	194	3.17	1.62	
Religiosity	Nonreligious	113	3.40	1.83	.596
	Religious	250	3.51	1.61	
Academic level	Undergraduate	116	3.57	1.664	.694
	Graduate	249	3.44	1.689	

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

For this sample, we found no significant between-group differences on level of death penalty support on race, academic level, or religious saliency variables. However, sex/gender was significant, with males in this sample less likely to indicate death penalty support ($t=3.652$, $p<.001$, 95% CI: 0.452, 1.508). The mean score for males was 2.62 ($SD=1.72$) and 3.6 for females ($SD=1.63$). Likewise, political affiliation was also significant, with Republican students being more likely to indicate death penalty support ($t=4.156$, $p<.001$, 95% CI: 0.518–1.452). A 1-point mean difference was noted between Republicans ($M=4.16$; $SD=1.47$) and Democrats ($M=3.17$; $SD=1.62$). These two demographic variables (i.e., sex/gender and political affiliation) were entered into all subsequent analyses.

Reasons to Support or Oppose the Death Penalty

A total of 16 items representing the major reasons for supporting or opposing capital punishment were selected. Full text of the items and the index breakdown are reported in Table 4. There were seven variables representing the major reasons to support or oppose the death penalty. A deterrence index was comprised of two items, with a Cronbach's α of .68, a retribution index was created from four items and had a Cronbach's α of .86, and an incapacitation index was created from two items and had a Cronbach's α of .76. A mercy/ethic of care index was comprised of four items, with a Cronbach's α of .72. After reverse coding the second unfair administration item, an unfair administration index was created from two items and had a Cronbach's α of .76. The brutalization effect and innocence were each measured using a single item indicator.

OLS regression was used to determine the influence of major reasons for supporting or opposing the death penalty on overall death penalty attitudes, while controlling for the effects of sex/gender and political affiliation. Results are presented in Table 5. Predictor variables were included in a forced entry approach without any forward or backward stepwise selection processes. Using a forced entry approach allowed for theoretically informed regression models to be retained (Field, 2013). We examined the case to predictor variable ratio, multicollinearity by examining the VIF, model fit, and relationships between predictor variables and the dependent variable. The dependent variable was the seven-item scale measuring death penalty attitudes.

There were 340 cases and nine predictor variables, making the ratio 37.8:1, which exceeds the minimum ratio of 20:1 suggested for detection of effect size in multiple regression (Kline, 2011). Multicollinearity was assessed by examining the VIF. A VIF value above 10.0 indicates problems of multicollinearity (Kline, 2011). The VIF values for the variables in this analysis ranged from 1.012 to 2.451, signifying that multicollinearity between predictor variables was not evident in the model.

The R-squared effect size for the model was 0.699, indicating that almost 70% of the observed variance in the death penalty attitudes variable was

TABLE 4 Frequency Responses for Reasons for Supporting or Opposing the Death Penalty

Statement	Strongly disagree <i>n</i> (%)	Disagree <i>n</i> (%)	Uncertain <i>n</i> (%)	Agree <i>n</i> (%)	Strongly agree <i>n</i> (%)
Deterrence					
The states with the highest rates of executions have the lowest murder rates	63 (15.9)	130 (32.9)	156 (39.5)	34 (8.6)	12 (3.0)
The death penalty is necessary to maintain law and order	153 (37.9)	119 (29.5)	62 (15.3)	57 (14.1)	13 (3.2)
Retribution					
Murders deserve the death penalty since they took a life	76 (18.9)	126 (31.3)	117 (29.0)	67 (16.6)	17 (4.2)
I become angry when a convicted murder does not receive the death penalty	133 (32.9)	189 (46.8)	58 (14.4)	18 (4.5)	6 (1.5)
16-year-olds convicted of first degree murder deserve the death penalty	193 (47.7)	139 (34.3)	62 (15.3)	10 (2.5)	1 (.02)
I believe in the idea of an "eye for an eye, a life for a life."	167 (41.2)	131 (32.3)	61 (15.0)	36 (8.9)	10 (2.5)
Incapacitation					
Most convicted murders would kill again if given the opportunity	28 (7.0)	112 (27.9)	189 (47.0)	67 (16.5)	6 (1.5)
It is cheaper to execute a prisoner than to keep them in prison for life.	63 (15.9)	60 (15.2)	90 (22.8)	125 (31.6)	57 (14.4)
Mercy/ethic of care					
Showing mercy is more important than seeking revenge	15 (3.7)	48 (11.9)	115 (28.5)	173 (42.9)	52 (12.9)
The death penalty serves little purpose	34 (8.4)	154 (38.2)	88 (21.7)	92 (22.8)	35 (8.7)
The only purpose of the death penalty is to demonstrate society's cruelty	90 (22.4)	201 (50.1)	73 (18.2)	30 (7.5)	7 (1.7)
It saddens me when a person is executed, regardless of the crime they committed	28 (7.1)	116 (29.4)	75 (19.0)	131 (33.2)	45 (11.4)
Unfair administration					
Racial and ethnic minorities are more likely to be sentenced to death than white defendants	6 (1.5)	24 (6.1)	105 (26.6)	156 (39.6)	103 (26.1)
The race of the victim is not a significant predictor in cases where the death penalty is implemented*	89 (22.6)	155 (39.3)	106 (26.9)	35 (8.9)	9 (2.3)
Brutalization					
Executions set a violent example that leads to further violence in society	40 (9.9)	115 (28.5)	112 (27.8)	95 (23.6)	41 (10.2)
Innocence					
There is a good possibility that an innocent person will be wrongly executed	4 (1.0)	48 (12.1)	64 (16.1)	177 (44.6)	104 (26.2)

TABLE 5 OLS Regression on Reasons to Support/Oppose Capital Punishment on Death Penalty Support

Variable	<i>B</i>	SE(<i>B</i>)	95% CI(<i>B</i>)	β
Sex/gender	-.354	.163	-.674, -.033	-.067*
Political affiliation	.015	.134	-.250, .279	.003
Deterrence index	.129	.093	-.054, .311	.061
Retribution index	.704	.096	.515, .894	.345**
Incapacitation index	.183	.070	.046, .320	.091**
Mercy/ethic of care index	-.775	.099	-.959, -.571	-.355**
Unfair administration index	.148	.065	.019, .276	.076*
Brutalization	-.211	.053	-.316, -.106	-.147**
Innocence	-.130	.057	-.242, -.017	-.077*
<i>R</i> -Squared	.699**			

Note. *B* represents the unstandardized regression coefficient, SE represents the standard error, and β represents the standardized regression coefficient. Sex/gender was coded as male = 1; Political affiliation was coded as Republican = 1. The dependent variable of death penalty support was coded as 1 = very strongly opposed, 2 = strongly opposed, 3 = somewhat opposed, 4 = uncertain, 5 = somewhat supportive, 6 = strongly supportive, and 7 = very strongly supportive.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

explained by the independent variables in the equation. For this sample, deterrence and political affiliation had nonsignificant effects. Sex/gender was significantly related to death penalty attitudes, with males less likely to express support. Retribution, incapacitation, and unfair administration had significant positive impacts, whereas mercy/ethic of care, brutalization, and innocence had significant negative effects. Based upon the standardized regression coefficients (β), mercy/ethic of care had the largest effect, followed by retribution.

Mitigating Factors Vignettes

Nine vignettes presented cases eligible for a death penalty sentence in the state. The full text of the vignettes, response options, and results are presented in Table 6. Vignettes represented two overarching themes—cases where respondents were likely to be sympathetic to defendants (Vignettes 1, 3, 5, and 6) and cases where the circumstances or the nature of the crime were more morally ambiguous (Vignettes 2, 4, 7, 8, and 9). Vignettes 8 and 9 described in detail two contentious historical cases, both of which resulted in the defendant being executed. The reliability of each subscale was adequate—the Cronbach's α for the sympathetic defendant subscale was .715, and the α for the morally ambiguous subscale was .803.

The death penalty was chosen by at least one student as their preferred sentence in eight of the nine cases. No students selected the death penalty for Vignette 6, which described capital drug trafficking, a crime eligible for the state death penalty although no citizen has been executed solely based on capital

TABLE 6 Vignette Responses

Statement	Death Penalty <i>n</i> (%)	Life in prison without parole plus restitution <i>n</i> (%)	Life in prison without parole <i>n</i> (%)	Life in prison with parole <i>n</i> (%)	Other <i>n</i> (%)
1. A 35-year-old man is convicted of first-degree murder for hunting down and killing the man who he alleges sexually abused him as a child. (<i>n</i> = 391)	8 (2.0)	39 (10.0)	90 (23.0)	196 (50.1)	58 (14.9)
2. A 51-year-old man is convicted of assisting his cousin in the murders of multiple people. It was established that the defendant did not commit murder himself. During the trial, it was revealed that both men were severely physically and sexually abused as children by their grandfather. All of the murder victims looked like the grandfather. (<i>n</i> = 391)	14 (3.6)	78 (19.9)	118 (30.2)	130 (33.2)	51 (13.0)
3. A 61-year-old man is convicted of murdering the man who raped and killed his daughter. (<i>n</i> = 381)	7 (1.8)	9 (2.4)	55 (14.4)	202 (53.0)	108 (28.3)
4. A 26-year-old gang leader is convicted of the murder of two rival gang members. The key witness in the trial is the rival gang leader. (<i>n</i> = 388)	32 (8.2)	60 (15.5)	131 (33.8)	125 (32.2)	40 (10.3)
5. A 46-year-old mother of three is convicted of first-degree murder for stabbing her husband to death in his sleep. The woman had been hospitalized with internal bleeding, broken bones, and severe burns seven times in the last three years. The police were regularly called to the house to break up domestic disputes. Although formal charges were never filed against the husband, the police are confident that the woman was the victim of domestic violence. (<i>n</i> = 387)	3 (0.8)	9 (2.3)	27 (7.0)	193 (49.9)	155 (40.1)
6. A 24-year-old man is convicted of trafficking 300 kilograms of cocaine into the state of Florida. He is of Haitian descent and claims that he was forced to bring the drugs to the United States under threat of violence	0	1 (0.3)	11 (2.9)	137 (36.1)	230 (60.7)

(Continued)

TABLE 6 Continued

Statement	Death Penalty <i>n</i> (%)	Life in prison		Life in prison with parole <i>n</i> (%)	Other <i>n</i> (%)
		without parole plus restitution <i>n</i> (%)	without parole <i>n</i> (%)		
7. A 62-year-old man is convicted of blowing up a federal building. After 40 years of service, he had been laid off 2 months before his planned retirement, which resulted in him losing his pension and insurance benefits. Two night shift custodians were killed in the blast. Although the man admits to planning and executing the bombing, he is extremely remorseful, claiming that he chose a time when the building should have been vacant. (<i>n</i> = 381)	38 (10.0)	92 (24.1)	87 (22.8)	119 (31.2)	45 (11.8)
8. A 33-year-old woman is convicted of paying two men to murder her husband and stepson in an attempt to collect a life insurance benefit. Court psychologists put her IQ at only 72—2 points above the legal classification for mental retardation, although the state cast her as the “mastermind” of the crimes. During the trial, it is discovered that she was raised in extreme poverty in the rural south, struggled with alcohol and drug use, and spent many years bouncing from one low-pay, low-skill job to the next. She met her husband—a recent widower and father of three—at the factory where she worked. He was her supervisor. A year prior to the murders, one of her husband’s children was killed in a car accident and the couple received a substantial life insurance payout. The woman states at trial that she met and hired the two men at a local Wal-Mart. She tells the court that she had a sexual relationship with both men and that she gave them money to buy guns and ammunition so that they could kill her husband and stepson. (<i>n</i> = 379)	53 (14.0)	78 (20.6)	136 (35.9)	54 (14.2)	58 (15.3)

9. A 34-year-old man and a co-defendant are convicted of stabbing a teenage girl to death during a home invasion. The man has a long history of arrest and incarceration, starting with theft at age 12. During the trial, the man's severe history of abuse at the hands of his stepfather is uncovered. The defendant's mother was involved with a series of abusive men (including his biological father) and married his stepfather when the defendant was 12 years old. The stepfather routinely beat and raped the mother until she was unconscious, molested at least one of the defendant's sisters, beat the defendant with a metal belt buckle, threw him down stairs and against walls, kicked and punched him, and made him watch acts of violence towards other family members. A judge characterized him as suffering the "most severe and unimaginable level of physical and mental abuse." The stepfather controlled the family's money, forcing them to live in extreme poverty. The defendant spent several years in a juvenile detention facility for assaulting his stepfather and was subjected to verbal and emotional abuse while in custody. Between turning 18 and committing the murder 16 years later, the defendant spent a total of 13 years in jail, mostly for theft.	52 (13.9)	73 (19.5)	109 (29.1)	81 (21.7)	59 (15.8)
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drug trafficking charges (Snell, 2011). For the other eight cases, the death penalty was selected by 6.75% of students on average ($M = 25.88$; $SD = 20.5$), with a range of 3 to 53 students (0.8–14%). An average of 1.2% of students ($M = 4.5$; $SD = 3.7$) selected the death penalty as their preferred sentence for vignettes on the sympathetic defendant subscale. An average of 9.86% of students ($M = 37.8$; $SD = 16.07$) selected the death penalty as their preferred sentence for vignettes on the morally ambiguous subscale. Vignettes 8 and 9 had the highest death penalty support: 13.82% and 13.56%, respectively.

Life without the possibility of parole plus restitution (LWOP + R) was selected as the preferred sentence by 12.72% of students ($M = 48.78$; $SD = 35.06$) across all nine vignettes. On the sympathetic defendant subscale, an average of only 3.78% of students ($M = 14.5$; $SD = 16.76$) selected LWOP+R as their preferred sentence. In contrast, nearly 20% of students ($M = 76.2$; $SD = 11.5$) chose LWOP+R as the preferred sentence on the morally ambiguous subscale.

Life without the possibility of parole (LWOP) was selected as the preferred sentence by 19.56% of students ($M = 75.0$; $SD = 39.23$) across all nine vignettes. On the sympathetic defendant subscale, 11.8% of students selected LWOP as their preferred sentence ($M = 45.25$; $SD = 34.65$). On the morally ambiguous subscale, 25.66% of students selected LWOP as their preferred sentence ($M = 98.4$; $SD = 25.24$).

Life with the possibility of parole (LWP) was selected as the preferred sentence by 35.84% of students ($M = 137.44$; $SD = 51.7$) across all nine vignettes. An average of 47.47% of students ($M = 182$; $SD = 30.23$) selected LWP as their preferred sentence for vignettes on the sympathetic defendant subscale. An average of 26.55% of students ($M = 101.8$; $SD = 32.97$) selected LWP as their preferred sentence for vignettes on the morally ambiguous subscale.

The “other” category was used by a substantial proportion of students on all nine vignettes. In general, students suggested a set number of years in prison (e.g., a “few years,” “5 years,” “10–15 years,” “20 years,” and etc.) plus mandatory therapeutic services. Entries in the other category typically suggested that although the student felt that a life sentence was inappropriate (many entries simply stated “less than life”), prison time was warranted. Although several entries on the sympathetic defendant subscale suggested that the defendant receive “no jail time,” “probation only,” or “counseling and hugs,” the majority of responses indicated long prison terms in concert with psychological counseling. In contrast, students were likely to suggest lifetime psychiatric institutionalization as an appropriate sentence for many of the vignettes on the morally ambiguous subscale.

DISCUSSION

The social work students in our sample reported low levels of death penalty support overall. Less than 32% of students expressed any support for the

death penalty, with only 11% of the sample reporting strong or very strong support. This finding reflects a slight decrease in death penalty support from Pasupuleti and colleague's (2005) examination of death penalty support—estimated at 36%—among undergraduate social work students. These levels of death penalty support are far lower than those reported by members of the general public (currently estimated at 56%; Pew, 2015). Further, the current study adds to the literature by measuring death penalty attitudes in nonbinary terms. Like other studies that conceptualize death penalty support along a continuum (e.g., Harris, 1986; Lambert et al., 2008; Pasupuleti et al., 2005; Worthen et al., 2014), the majority of death penalty support reported by the social work students in our sample clustered at the level of “somewhat supportive,” perhaps indicating ambivalence toward or lack of knowledge about capital punishment.

The low levels of death penalty support captured in isolation however, dropped even further when alternative sentencing options were provided. This trend has been noted among national probability samples, with support for the death penalty decreasing by 20% or more when respondents are offered life in prison as an alternative sentence for individuals convicted of murder (e.g., DPIC, 2010; Ergun, 2014). The current study expanded this concept by offering respondents several alternative sentences to the death penalty, including life in prison both with and without the possibility of parole, and the addition of mandatory restitution. More than 80% of the social work students in the sample chose one of the three life in prison alternatives to the death penalty. Only those students who expressed strong or very strong support for the death penalty retained these preferences when offered a less punitive alternative.

In national probability samples and samples of university students, self-identifying as male, White, and Republican is associated with increased levels of death penalty support (e.g., Bohm, 1992; Cochran et al., 2006; Ergun, 2014; Farnworth, Longmire, & West, 1998; Lambert, Clarke, Tucker-Gail, & Hogan, 2009; Lambert et al., 2008; Pasupuleti et al., 2005; Robinson, 2009; Pew, 2015; Stack, 2000; Whitehead & Blankenship, 2000). An analysis of the relationships between these demographic characteristics among social work students, however, revealed several unexpected findings. Although self-identifying as Republican was significantly associated with increased death penalty support, the other demographic characteristics of interest were either nonsignificant or yielded results not consistent with previous research. For example, for the social work students in our sample, self-identification as male was significantly associated with lower levels of death penalty support. On average, death penalty support was almost 1 point (on a 7-point scale) lower among males when compared to the support espoused by females in the sample. Although we cannot claim to understand why male social work students in the sample were less likely than female social work students to support the death penalty, these attitudes may

indicate than men who join the historically female social work profession (see Lubove, 1965) differ in key ways from men in the general public. That is, the male social work students in our sample may have personal characteristics, beliefs, or life experiences that affect their views of crime and the death penalty. Research is needed to explore the death penalty attitudes of male social workers more comprehensively.

In addition, racial self-identification was not a significant predictor of death penalty support for the social work students in the sample. This finding is likely influenced by the way race was entered into the model. Because of the characteristics of the sample and statistical power considerations, race was collapsed into a binary (white/non-white) which may have obscured our ability to detect differences in death penalty support among students of color.

Similarly, Pasupuleti et al. (2005) noted that as undergraduate level increased, death penalty support decreased. Although social work program characteristics (i.e., students are typically juniors before they can declare the major) and limitations in statistical power prevented a more sensitive investigation of undergraduate academic level, we found no between-group differences when comparing levels of support between undergraduate and graduate social work students. Therefore, it may be that individual student characteristics, rather than social work education, are driving the low levels of death penalty support espoused by social work students.

Finally, our results about the relationship between religious saliency and death penalty support mirror mixed results in the literature (Applegate et al., 2000; Bias et al., 2011; Lambert et al., 2008; Pew, 2015; Unnever & Cullen, 2006; Worthen et al., 2014; Young, 1992). For the social work students in the sample, religious saliency was a nonsignificant predictor of death penalty support. Similar findings are reported by Lambert et al. (2008) in an examination of the death penalty attitudes of university students. However, investigations of national samples often show that religious saliency and death penalty support are inversely correlated (e.g., Bias et al., 2011; Pew, 2015), although more comprehensive and nuanced investigations of religious faith and death penalty support suggest that the relationship is far too complicated to reduce to one variable (Applegate et al., 2000; Unnever & Cullen, 2006; Worthen et al., 2014). Further research is needed to unpack the interaction of religious faith and other personal value structures that may influence social workers' death penalty attitudes.

In general, the major ideological reasons driving death penalty support were supported when tested among this sample of social work students. Nearly 70% of the variance in death penalty support was explained by the seven major reasons to support or oppose the death penalty drawn from the criminological literature, after controlling for sex/gender and political affiliation. For the social work students in our sample, retribution and incapacitation significantly predicted increased levels of death penalty support; mercy/ethic of care, the brutalization effect, and innocence significantly

predicted decreased levels of death penalty support. These findings are consistent with research conducted among samples of social work students (Pasupuleti et al., 2005), criminal justice students (Lambert et al., 2008), and members of the general public (Ergun, 2014; Pew, 2015). Interestingly, however, in multiple regression analyses, neither deterrence nor political affiliation significantly predicted death penalty support. These findings suggest that the deterrent principle is a less compelling reason to support the death penalty when compared to mercy/ethic of care and retribution, which yielded the largest regression coefficients.

One unexpected finding from multiple regression analyses, however, was that the unfair administration index (i.e., the belief that racial or socio-economic factors play a role in death penalty sentencing) was significantly associated with increased levels of death penalty support. The implications of this finding are unclear, although responses may simply indicate a lack of knowledge about the racial and socio-economic disparities in capital sentencing (Baumgartner et al., 2008; Mallicoat & Brown, 2008; Phillips, 2009). In other samples of university students, the innocence variable often functions in a similar fashion; that is, respondents who espouse both strong support of and strong opposition to the death penalty acknowledge the problems inherent to implementation (e.g., Pasupuleti et al., 2005). Therefore, the social work students in our sample who expressed death penalty support may acknowledge that racial and other disparities exist in the use of the death penalty, although this knowledge does not dampen their support of the policy overall.

Finally, responses to nine case vignettes provided a more comprehensive examination of the influence of mitigating factors on death penalty support. Vignettes provided insight into the motivation of the defendant for committing the crime, mitigating circumstances of the crime itself, and, in some cases, pertinent details about the defendant's history of victimization or mental state. Across all nine vignettes, death penalty support was extremely low, ranging from 0% to 14%. In cases depicting a sympathetic defendant (e.g., avenging the rape and murder of a loved one), less than 2% of students selected the death penalty. However, even in cases where the defendant's motivations were more morally ambiguous, death penalty support averaged at less than 10%. Death penalty support was the highest on two lengthy vignettes extrapolated from contentious death penalty cases which resulted in an execution. It should be noted, however, that only 14% of social work students selected the death penalty for these cases, compared to 32% of students who expressed some level of death penalty support when the question was initially posed. This finding reflects the complexity inherent to assessing death penalty support through the use of vignettes. As Burgason and Pazzani (2014) noted, in-depth contextual information provided through vignettes has the potential to introduce bias, as the respondent must grapple with the exigent circumstances of the crime, including the defendant's actual role in committing that crime.

Across all nine vignettes, almost 70% of students preferred one of the three life in prison options to the death penalty. Roughly half of those students who selected life in prison as their preferred sentence chose LWP. This trend perhaps speaks to the rehabilitation focus and justice-oriented lens of the social work profession (Lambert et al., 2005). Further, this study contributes to the literature by assessing whether students feel that paying restitution is an important adjunct to LWOP sentences. Overall, fewer students selected LWOP+R when compared to LWOP. However, students were more likely to indicate a preference for restitution in vignettes on the morally ambiguous subscale. Specifically, LWOP+R was the most common sentence on Vignette 7, which described a bombing. More research is needed to examine the perceived value of restitution in conjunction with other sentencing structures.

The “other” category was used by a substantial proportion of students on all nine vignettes. In general, students suggested a set number of years in prison (e.g., a “few years,” “5 years,” “10–15 years,” “20 years,” and etc.) plus mandatory therapeutic services. Entries in the other category typically suggested that although the student felt that a life sentence was inappropriate (many entries simply stated “less than life”), prison time was warranted. Although several entries on the sympathetic defendant subscale suggested that the defendant receive “no jail time,” “probation only,” or “counseling and hugs,” the majority of responses indicated long prison terms in concert with psychological counseling. In contrast, on the morally ambiguous subscale, students were likely to suggest lifetime psychiatric institutionalization as an appropriate sentence for many of the vignettes. Across all nine vignettes, many students indicated frustration with the limited sentencing options provided in the study (i.e., death penalty and three life in prison options) and the lack of integration of legal sentencing and mental health services. Overall, our findings lend support to the Marshall hypothesis that increasing knowledge about defendants eligible for the death penalty translated into decreased levels of death penalty support. Specifically, our results provide further evidence for the strength of this inverse relationship among social work students.

The current study situates the death penalty attitudes of social work students within the larger context of waning public death penalty support. Although the future of the death penalty is more uncertain now than it has been at any time since the *Gregg* decision, more work is needed to increase the presence of social work in the abolition movement and to improve social work services delivered to defendants, victims, families, and communities affected by capital crime and the death penalty.

Limitations

Several limitations of the current study warrant careful consideration of the application and utility of the results presented. First, the results of

the study are based on responses from a self-selected subsample of the total population of enrolled social work students at one university. In a field with overt liberal leanings, students who support the death penalty may have been less likely to participate due to social desirability biases. Therefore, respondents may differ from non-respondents in a variety of ways, not all of which were measured in the current study. As a result, the findings reported above may not be generalizable to social work students more broadly. Second, several historical threats must be considered when interpreting the results. In the months prior to data collection, two prominent death penalty eligible cases were widely reported in the media: the Boston Marathon bombing and the kidnapping and rape of three women by Ariel Castro. The widespread media coverage of these events may have influenced death penalty support in unknown and unknowable ways.

Implications for Social Work Practice

This study highlights potential curricular opportunities available for introducing social work students to knowledge about the death penalty and the victims, defendant, families, and communities affected by capital punishment. Currently, only a few social work programs offer coursework that specifically addresses the profession's intersection with the criminal justice system and the death penalty (Epperson, Roberts, Ivanoff, Tripodi, & Gilmer, 2013). In our sample, when provided with case vignettes, students were likely to suggest prison sentences shorter than life in concert with restitution and mental health services. This supports a national trend away from the death penalty and towards restorative justice and victim-offender mediation programs, even for violent and capital crimes (Beck & Britto, 2006; Umbreit, Vos, Coates, & Armour, 2006).

Looking forward, opportunities exist for the social work profession to take a leadership role in the abolition movement. Research is needed to explore and assess social worker's engagement with capital cases. The social work literature indicates both a need and an opportunity for social workers to serve on death penalty mitigation teams and to provide expert testimony on the psychosocial context of the defendant and the crime. As much research suggests that the application of death penalty is fraught with racial and socioeconomic disparities, and that many persons sentenced to death were themselves victims of abuse, it is imperative for social workers to intervene on the behalf of this vulnerable population (Baumgartner et al., 2008; Mallicoat & Brown, 2008; Phillips, 2009). Although victims of capital crimes absolutely deserve justice, justice might be better reframed in terms of rehabilitation, supportive psychological counseling, and victim-offender mediation, rather than reduced to punishment and death.

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