



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 1
Issue 3 *Spring*

Article 3

April 1974

The 'Credentials Trap' and Social Work Staff Utilization

Ralph Segalman

California State University, Northridge

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Segalman, Ralph (1974) "The 'Credentials Trap' and Social Work Staff Utilization," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 1: Iss. 3, Article 3.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.1045>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol1/iss3/3>

This Article is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

THE 'CREDENTIALS TRAP' AND SOCIAL WORK STAFF UTILIZATION

Ralph Segalman

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

S.M. Miller and Frank Reissman have "put the finger" on the "professional guilds" which, they believe are the "gate keepers" of the American professional "pseudo-meritocracy."⁽¹⁾ Miller and Reissman conclude that these guilds "lock out" the poor and otherwise competent persons from socio-economic upgrading by overemphasis on formal professional schooling rather than on pragmatic testing for results and achievements related to the service to be provided.

The insistence upon professional schooling is particularly emphasized where norms of quality and quantity production are ambiguous or unusable. This is particularly the case in the human services which encounter great difficulty in defining their profession and the professional knowledge base. Thus great reliance is placed upon specific academic-professional preparation on the assumption that such preparation will insure a high standard of service.⁽²⁾ This assumption has never been tested, and is probably untestable until a more clear definition of the service is arrived at. It may even be possible that professional preparation may tend to downgrade the quality of service by "screening out" or "teaching out" the moral commitment of the worker and directing the service into a utilitarian contractual relationship as described by Etzioni.⁽³⁾

This type of work expectation by the practitioner may eliminate the thrust for humane social change which is a heritage of social work and leave only a residue of 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. "service workers," for whom social work is more of a job than a calling or a cause. This phenomenon might provide an explanation for some of the problems in the profession. These include: an exodus of master's degree workers from public welfare when and where they were most needed, (except in those instances where lucrative administrative posts are occupied); an exodus of master's level social workers from the inner cities to the more comfortable surroundings of the middle class suburban agencies; an aversion of many social workers to become directly involved in the problems of the poor while expressing deep concern over the problems of the poor; the evident strains between the master's level workers and social service aides (where such aides are employed), the decades of traditional emphasis in child care on "wasp" adoptions and amelioration of middle-class parent-child tensions at the expense of and neglect to hundreds of thousands of black, brown, handicapped and other "difficult-to-place" children who were relegated to substandard institutions, foster homes and relatively permanent "bedlam-type" group care homes; and finally, the inability or aversion of social workers to take meaningful leadership in the forging of social welfare policy, which has long been left to economists, political scientists and other disciplines. Where social policy is forged by these disciplines, the resulting plans tend to place emphasis upon eligibility categories,

costs, jobs and regulations without sufficient provisions for individual differences, family life patterns and necessary socio-economic upward and lateral mobility opportunities without which such plans cannot achieve their intended purposes.

The credentialized "trade union" pattern of "lock-out" of the poor and "uneducated" from the more lucrative opportunities and status positions in social work might have continued indefinitely except for external developments.

Pressures from public welfare workers for unionization and recognition as social workers; increasing demands of Welfare Rights organizations and clients for a "piece of the social work action"; the appearance and growth of "non-professional" "casefinding" and "outreach worker" programs within community action agencies which sought acceptance of their inner city clientele by established professional agencies and recognition of their workers as referring colleagues; and legal changes in the Social Security Act of 1967 requiring the hiring of welfare clients as social service aides in public welfare agencies have brought to the center of the stage the need to differentially define the specific roles and duties of the social service "professional" worker, the social service "semi-professional" and the social service technician.

A number of models have been proposed for the process of differentiation of personnel, in order to satisfy the growing pressure by government, voluntary funding programs and other powerful societal elements for clarification of "who does what" in social work. Questions are raised about what kind of work and how much preparation does each level of worker need in order to competently perform the job. Most of these models tend to start with "social work" as it is, or social work as it claims to be, rather than social work as a service relevant to current social systems dysfunction and the differential problems and problem urgencies of target populations as they arise in individuals, group and communities in interaction with social system and sub-system dysfunction. Similarly, despite the fact that most social workers are social case workers (because they choose so to be and the profession tends to attract "social case worker" types of personalities), and despite the fact that the realities of the conditions of the society in our time are such that community organization workers and social action workers are in short supply, the models chosen for examination are not the "Ralph Naders" of social work, but rather the therapeutic individual or group serving institutionalized and generally routinized social case worker.

Thus the graduate school "factory delivered" model, predesigned and molded in advance, and relatively unrelated to differential societal priorities becomes the basis of analysis for "task-performance cycles" and similar operational examination, and it is predictable that what "comes out" of such study would resemble more a "cookbook" or "operational manual" than a schema for professional differentiation and

planning for utilization of professional and technical services in what has been generally accepted as a "sick society" requiring carefully planned interventions. The disposition of treatment resources emanating out of the current model can only produce "more of the same" of a social vehicle which some critics might denote as "ineffective at any speed" as far as mass society is concerned.

A more logical approach to redesign of the social work task distribution might seek to divide the differential responsibilities of the professional and technical practitioner. Furthermore, such a differentiation should take into account the distinctions between professional ideals and professional realities. Abraham Lincoln was once said to have indicated that we must know where we are, what we really want to accomplish, and what we are really ready to invest before we can determine what direction we might logically choose. It is on this type of approach that such distinctions can be clearly determined.

An examination of the professional ideal and actual performance patterns as differentiated from those of the technician is presented in the following table:

Task	Technician	Professional Ideal	Professional Reality
<p>1. Knowledge of theories of normative functioning of potential service beneficiaries and groups in their "life space."</p>	<p>Not considered a necessity for provision of service. If it is present, it is usually affective knowledge without cognitive expression by the technician.</p>	<p>Considered to be a basic necessity for performance of service as a professional, and is assumedly taught as such in graduate education.</p>	<p>Usually found among professionals but this cognitive knowledge is less "robust" than is usually found among other social and behavioral science graduates, although affective depth of knowledge is probably greater.</p>
<p>2. Competence in "theory building" for explanation of functionality of dysfunctionality experienced by potential beneficiaries of services and subsystems relating to them. (Competent theory building requires clear-cut goal definitions and operationally usable definitions of differential intervention methodology)</p>	<p>Not usually expected, but found in unusual instances among some technicians.</p>	<p>Definitely necessary for professional practice and in building social work knowledge.</p>	<p>This is usually quite limited in practice. The tendency of workers is to depend upon other disciplines when and if there are lines of continuing communication with these disciplines. Where they are culturally isolated little "theory building" occurs.</p>

Task	Technician	Professional Ideal	Professional Reality
<p>3. Competence in developing and devising an "assessment" system and analysis of plans for services.</p>	<p>Not expected in a technician. It is unusual when it is present.</p>	<p>Definitely a necessity for sharpening of professional practice methods.</p>	<p>In reality, this does occur but it is usually limited in depth, breadth and scope. This process is still in the rudimentary phases in the profession. The difficulty in devising a reliable and valid assessment system is compounded by a multitude of variables plus obfuscation encountered arising out of professional defenses.</p>
<p>4. Interaction with basic related scientific disciplines in terms of utilization of their unfolding contribution to theory, theory testing, and amendment.</p>	<p>Not expected in the technician. Unusual when it is present.</p>	<p>Interaction with related disciplines is a necessity if "updating" and purposeful revision of practice methodology is to be installed.</p>	<p>Such interaction, when it does occur, is quite limited in practice. Pressures for such interactions from within and without are increasing.</p>

Task	Technician	Professional Ideal	Professional Reality
<p>5. Competence in developing or revision of "intervention" programs related to priority needs of potential clientele, as determined by acceptable research methods.</p>	<p>Usually not expected in a technician but it occurs often in specific circumstances.</p>	<p>A necessity in professional practice, if the professional is to use its resources effectively in terms of priorities of needs and target populations.</p>	<p>This type of meaningful revision of "intervention" programs related to priority needs of targeted potential clientele is quite limited in practice.</p>
<p>6. Competence in development of research methodologies to evaluate priority needs in populations to be served.</p>	<p>Not expected in technicians.</p>	<p>Expected for the sake of professional effectiveness. A necessary tool in determining who to serve, when, and how effectively done.</p>	<p>This competency is rare among professionals, and is even more rare in terms of practice. At best, competency relates to limited use of such research in practice.</p>
<p>7. Competence in development of research methodologies to determine differential effectiveness of intervention programs.</p>	<p>Not expected in technicians.</p>	<p>Expected for the sake of professional effectiveness.</p>	<p>In reality, this competency is rare among professionals, and is even more rare in practice, but use of results of such research is increasing.</p>

Task	Technician	Professional Ideal	Professional Reality
<p>8. Theoretical and practical involvement in short-range problems of clientele group and potential clientele group.</p>	<p>Usually not expected in technicians.</p>	<p>This is a necessity if the profession is to move toward broader and more effective problem-solving services.</p>	<p>In practice, this is only in the beginning stages in social work, in most settings.</p>
<p>9. Theoretical involvement in long range and medium range problems of clientele and potential clientele.</p>	<p>Usually not expected in technicians.</p>	<p>This is a necessity if social work is to move toward preventative processes and be oriented toward broad problem solving (ex: Income-transfer plans).</p>	<p>In reality, this is only at a beginning phase, and quite young in social work's history.</p>
<p>10. Practical involvement in long range problems of clientele and potential clientele.</p>	<p>Usually not expected in technicians.</p>	<p>This is a necessity if social work is to use its knowledge and skills in helping effect medium and long-range solutions to problems.</p>	<p>In reality, this requires a knowledge, skill and methodology based upon clearly chosen and defined social action and intergroup relations methodologies, which social work has yet to develop and/or acquire</p>

Task	Technician	Professional Ideal	Professional Reality
<p>11. Competence in simple "assessment" procedures with middle-class clientele.</p>	<p>Usually positive under supervision, but limited to quality of supervision available.</p>	<p>Positive and necessary for effective service to this group in population.</p>	<p>Usually this is the strongest competency of professionals, especially on an individual basis.</p>
<p>12. Competence in simple "assessment" procedures with lower-class clientele and potential clientele.</p>	<p>Usually positive (In fact quite often "very competent" due to cultural and status communality of many technicians with this population group--as long as they retain their "stance" of lower class relationships.)</p>	<p>Positive and necessary if social work is to serve those in the population who obviously show most urgent needs.</p>	<p>Positive--but often less competent than technician due to status and cultural gap and due to frequent misuse of unrelated personality dynamics theory and middle-class professional "stance."</p>
<p>13. Competence in simple "intervention" process with middle class clientele.</p>	<p>Positive--but limited to amount and quality of supervision available, and to depth and breadth of status gap with clientele.</p>	<p>Positive.</p>	<p>Positive, primarily because most social workers are middle class themselves and share the same values with these clients.</p>

Task	Technician	Professional Ideal	Professional Reality
<p>14. Competence in simple "intervention" procedures with lower class clientele.</p>	<p>Positive, but supervision is necessary for continued process evaluation.</p>	<p>Positive.</p>	<p>Positive, but limited by differential communications systems, statuses, value systems, cultural gaps, and true involvement in client problem.</p>
<p>15. Competence in more sophisticated intervention procedures -- (all classes).</p>	<p>Much less than that expected of the professional. Possibly this service could be "partialized" with sectors of involvement differentially assigned to technicians and professionals.</p>	<p>Positive.</p>	<p>Positive, but limited more with lower class populations and with needs and values which are differentially present among lower class clientele than among middle class workers.</p>
<p>16. Competence in "out-reach" ability with middle-class clientele.</p>	<p>Limited due to cultural, status, communicative and other gaps.</p>	<p>Positive.</p>	<p>Positive, but in reality practice this is quite limited due to lesser proportional effort exerted by professionals in this area of service outside of office or clinic.</p>

Task	Technician	Professional Ideal	Professional Reality
<p>17. Competence in "out-reach" process with lower-class clientele.</p>	<p>Usually positive in technicians.</p>	<p>A necessity. (One cannot supervise a technician unless one can provide him with an able "model").</p>	<p>This competence is very limited due to cultural and status gaps and suspicions of clientele of most "professionals"--this is a basic life style method of lower class "coping" with "strangers."</p>
<p>18. Competency in development and testing of long-range services for particular and priority "populations-at-risk".</p>	<p>Not applicable or expected in technicians.</p>	<p>This is a basic necessity for professional leadership of technicians and other workers.</p>	<p>The usual practice behavior tends to indicate either an unwillingness to carry out this task, or lack of competency in the task.</p>
<p>19. Competency in understanding of public policy in its implications for services provided or not provided.</p>	<p>Not expected or applicable but sometimes encountered in technicians.</p>	<p>A basic necessity for professional leadership, planning of services, cooperation with other agencies, etc.</p>	<p>In practice, this is quite limited among professionals except for some newer graduates. Most social workers tend to either avoid public policy or downgrade their potentiality in this area.</p>

Task	Technician	Professional Ideal	Professional Reality
<p>20. Ability to influence and effect public acceptance of improvements in public policy in relation to services.</p>	<p>Not expected or applicable among technicians.</p>	<p>A basic necessity for a professional group if it is to provide public social policy which will support rather than counteract social services.</p>	<p>In reality, social work influence is limited by low acceptance by public of the professional image, low power, and low self-image or expectations of effectiveness by profession.</p>
<p>21. Responsibility for planning and recommending services and changes in services in relation to needs as evident from experience and research.</p>	<p>None expected in technicians.</p>	<p>Expected and necessary, (if it is really a responsible profession.)</p>	<p>In reality, changes suggested are usually limited in scope and meaning among social workers. Professionals tend to be "enablers" when asked, rather than active planners and leaders.</p>
<p>22. Responsibility for assistance to other "helping service" fields with relevant advice, based on experience and research, in seeking "flank" support of mutually necessary public policy improvement.</p>	<p>None expected in technicians.</p>	<p>Expected and necessary, ideally, if social work is to have effective linkage with other humane services.</p>	<p>In reality, social work interaction with other helping services is miniscule in scope and intensity. (Probably this is due to a lack of definition of the profession which could promote "comfort" with related humane services).</p>

Task	Technician	Professional Ideal	Professional Reality
23. Responsibility for planning, developing and promotion of preventative services.	None expected in technicians.	Expected, espoused and necessary in relation to the public model posited by the profession.	In reality, this activity is miniscule. Greatest emphasis is on individual, highly selective, and generally remediative in thrust.
24. Responsibility for development, revision and testing of new approaches and methods for amelioration of social pathology.	None expected in technicians.	Expected and necessary for professional effectiveness, if espoused professional claims are to be upheld.	In reality, this is miniscule. If present it is more often than not a "claimed" innovation representing past patterns of untested operation.
25. Responsibility for development, revision, and relevance of ethical code related to professional manifest purposes.	Not expected in technicians.	This is to be both expected and necessary for professional effectiveness and acceptance.	In reality, ethics code represents only a slight constraint on profession, and acts more in the nature of a sacredotal cohesive symbol.

Task	Technician	Professional Ideal	Professional Reality
<p>26. Responsibility for setting general guidelines for differential functions of technicians and professionals in service to clientele.</p>	<p>Usually not expected or limited in nature and extent.</p>	<p>For the professional, this is positive responsibility--if most effective use is to be made of personnel at differential levels for maximum social work services where and when most needed.</p>	<p>In reality, little effective work has been done in this realm. Extremes of ineffectual technician activity due to lack of defined role are quite frequent, as are instances of unguided, unsupervised activity by technicians. Professionals have not, as yet, been able to focus clearly on this concern, or have not given it priority.</p>
<p>27. Responsibility for planning, supervision and guidance of professional technical education and training for more effective service to priority "target" populations, with involvement of such populations in program planning and service delivery.</p>	<p>Usually not expected or limited in nature and extent.</p>	<p>This is a positive necessity if effective service and coordination is to be achieved by technicians and professionals, in terms of targeted populations and services.</p>	<p>In reality, this is only in its beginning phases in professional, educational programs generally. Outside of educational institutions, in practice, it is minimal. In any event, little or no involvement of target populations occurs in the process.</p>

Task	Technician	Professional Ideal	Professional Reality
<p>28. Authority is secured by practitioners at various levels from public bodies to develop self-regulation programs, dealing with technical matters usually beyond public comprehension.</p>	<p>Usually not applicable with technicians.</p>	<p>This is usually considered a necessity for an effective professional service.</p>	<p>In actuality, except in a few states, this does not exist. Most of the public seems to be of opinion that anyone can perform social work and related helping services.</p>
<p>29. Achievement of sufficient experience, based upon tested results, to make possible general societal recognition of a specialized and clearly definable body of knowledge, methodology, value system and set of skills which are primarily developed and used by the technical or professional group.</p>	<p>Not applicable with technicians.</p>	<p>This is usually a basic necessity for an effective and functional profession.</p>	<p>In actuality, this is far from the case. Social work knowledge is either impossible to define or to separate out from other related disciplinary knowledge. Methods, values and skills are used by other helping services and are often independently developed by them without reference to social work.</p>

Task	Technician	Professional Ideal	Professional Reality
<p>30. Expansion of program within the operation relevant to upcoming societal needs based upon research and analysis.</p>	<p>Not applicable with technicians.</p>	<p>Applicable. A responsible profession must look ahead toward future needs of clientele and potential clientele or find itself unprepared to provide required and possibly urgent services.</p>	<p>There is little or no provision for this currently within the social work profession, except for expansion of staff membership to include bachelor's level personnel (but without preparation for interlevel human relations, supervision realities, and differentiation of responsibilities).</p>
<p>31. Concern for, and provision of day-by-day services and interventions as indicated.</p>	<p>Where professional supervision is given this activity is primarily by "instruction" or "recipe" with constraints established by professionals, and usually without provision of and adequate understanding of the causal problem relating to the intervention. Where no professional supervision is given, intervention is primarily related directly to the need expressed by client and not necessarily related to the causal factors of problem experienced by the clientele.</p>	<p>The professional needs to be concerned with, understand, and differentiate between symptomatic and basic causes of problems; and needs to be able to help in choice of and application of interventions, based upon immediate range needs and goals as well as intermediate and long-range needs and goals, if social work espoused claims are to be upheld on the "stage" of reality.</p>	<p>In this area of competence, the profession holds up well, but primarily on an individual or small group service basis, and primarily with clientele which is most amenable to reception of offered services. This is usually more of a "success" with middle class, case-work oriented clientele, but not among lower class clienteles and community ranged interventions.</p>

From an examination of the foregoing charted analysis, it is apparent that social work probably cannot make much progress until it has overcome its "identity crisis." Differentiation of tasks based on outmoded or societally irrelevant models can only aggravate, rather than solve social work's confusion in relation to more effective utilization of manpower and resources.

It is quite probable that society and communities will not wait for social work to "come up" with the practitioners applicable to current societal needs. Community action directors have become community organizers for social action and manpower development. Psychologists serving in local mental health clinics are now becoming "community psychologists." Leaders in ethnic and welfare groups are fast becoming community developers for social action. Probation officers assigned to urban areas are drawing upon local volunteer personnel in the development of community organization for prevention of juvenile delinquency or for "gang" neighborhood work. Police advisors are developing intergroup relations mechanisms for prevention of community tensions or for mediation in confrontation resolution. In most of these developments, social work has not been evident either as a leadership or "know-how" professional resource.

This lack of social work services applicable to the surgent social issues of the day may leave social work in the position of some of the civil rights organizations of the early sixties who seemed to be saying to the activists of that day, "Wait for us-- we're supposed to lead you!"

If this is the case, social work may well be dissipating valuable energy and time in task analysis of the individual or limited group service model. There probably will always be a place for the routinized social case worker, but the claims of social work in regard to "macro" social problems are fast being faulted. Social work may gain a tight hold on its credentialization only to see itself bypassed by newer, different and apparently more effective models of human services in the "here and now," as judged and chosen by the unserved clientele or their underwriters.

NOTES

THE 'CREDENTIALS TRAP' AND SOCIAL WORK STAFF UTILIZATION

(1) Miller, S.M. and Frank Reissman, Social Class and Social Policy, Basic Books, New York, 1968 (See particularly the chapter on "The Credentials Trap.").

(2) A typical example of this type of credentialization is provided in a proposed "Licensure of Social Workers: Chapter 449," as contained in Social Work: Newsletter to Alumni Social Work Alumni Association--Madison, May 1970. This proposed licensure contains the following components which show considerable dissonance within the general purposes of social work:

"History:

During the development of social services in the State of Wisconsin, personnel with a variety of academic and non-academic backgrounds were utilized in providing welfare and casework services to clientele. As programs have progressed and become more sophisticated, it has become increasingly necessary to redefine acceptable minimal standards for "professional" and semi-professional workers. Current emphasis upon delivering a high level of client-centered services augmented by well defined technical assistants indicated both a readiness and a need for more structure in delineating professional employment standards.

449 (01) DEFINITIONS

1. Social Worker

This is intended to refer to anyone who performs duties for which the job classification or description is that of social worker, caseworker, welfare worker, social work counselor, social or casework therapist, or any such designation whether the agency is public or private or whether the individual is engaged in private practice. This is not to include those persons engaged in like occupation who are already licensed under some other professional provision, including but not limited to medical doctors, licensed psychologists, psychiatrists, or licensed marriage counselors.

449 (02) ELIGIBILITY FOR LICENSURE

To receive certification as a licensed social worker the applicant shall have received a Bachelor's Degree in social work from an accredited university or college, having accumulated no less than 18 credits in course work designated in that major; or shall have received a Master's Degree in social

work from an accredited school of social work; or shall have a Bachelor's Degree from an accredited university or college and has accumulated a minimum of 30 credits in the humanities and social services.

449 (10) PRIVATE PRACTICE

No person shall enter into private practice after this statute becomes in force who has not received a Master's Degree in social work from an accredited school of social work, who has not completed a minimum of two years' social work experience, and who has not been duly licensed by the Department."

The historical component refers to but does not define what is meant by "high level of client-centered services" or "well-defined technical assistants," but merely indicates "readiness and a need for more structure in delineating professional employment standards." The definition component exempts persons already licensed in other professions who presumably also perform social work functions, and yet, despite training in other occupations, are permitted to continue to perform such social work functions. This assumes that training in other professions is equivalent to training in social work. If this is the case, what then is social work?

In the eligibility component, it is clear that one may practice in a public or voluntary agency with baccalaureate preparation but for private practice one must be equipped with a master's degree. Thus, for those who are to be served who cannot pay the cost, public or voluntary charitable agency service is "good enough," but for those who can pay for the service, only a master's degree and special experience will suffice. Is this not a clear example of socio-economic class discrimination, a practice supposedly rejected by espoused social work values which would, if not grant preference of qualified service to the poor, at least give them an even break?

(3) Etzioni, A., A Comparative Analysis of Complex Organizations, Glencoe, Illinois, Free Press, 1961.