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THE PRESTIGE AND EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PUBLIC WELFARE WORKER

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ABSTRACT

An empirically-based study was conducted to determine how BSW and MSW social work students differentially assess the relative prestige and effectiveness of public welfare work in relation to the fifteen other social work methods and to ascertain what methods they would ideally like to enter upon graduation from their programs. The study findings point dramatically to a wide discrepancy between the BSW and MSW student's view of the public welfare worker. Not only was the average prestige and effectiveness of welfare work rated significantly higher by the BSW students, but more than five times as many BSW as MSW students indicated a desire to enter welfare work. The implications of these findings are discussed, with particular reference to social work education.

Recent years have witnessed widespread public skepticism, serious cutbacks in social service programs, and extended attacks on social work's effectiveness. In today's "Age of Accountability," little is taken for granted and social workers are increasingly called upon to demonstrate that what they do is worth supporting. No longer is the effectiveness of social work taken for granted, nor are the questions surrounding it stilled by eloquent rhetoric.¹ Wherever social workers turn, the demand is the same: show that your efforts on behalf of

clients are beneficial, your clients are being helped, and your work has made a difference.²

These accelerated challenges to social work's effectiveness have also revived the disquieting question, "what are social workers worth?" Many have casually dismissed or loudly deplored social work's relentless pursuit for public recognition and acceptance. However, social work's preoccupation with its status is an understandable consequence of the discrepancy that exists between the prestige social work aspires to and/or feels it deserves and the prestige it is actually granted.³ In its most fundamental sense, the importance of social work's prestige can hardly be overemphasized. Not only does the social ranking of social work directly reflect the level of approval society attaches to social work, but it affects the individual practitioner's concept of self, his relationships with other professionals, his influence potential, and, ultimately, the effectiveness with which he offers services to clients.⁴

While heightened concerns over social work's functional worth have touched all social workers to one degree or another, they have had a particularly unsettling impact on the welfare worker. In the eyes of the public, the worth of the welfare worker has traditionally been equated with that of the client population he serves; needless to say, the typical layman does not entertain an overwhelmingly favorable view of the welfare client. In addition, the welfare worker has been relegated to a conflictual position within the social work profession itself. On the one hand, he is regarded as performing a necessary, legitimate social welfare service; on the other hand, he is frequently type-cast as a "paper pusher" of the lowest order.

While the prestige granted the public welfare worker by society and by the social work profession has been widely acknowledged, little is known about how social work students view the welfare worker. The purpose of this paper is to describe and present the results of an empirically-based study conducted to determine how BSW and MSW social work students differentially assess the relative prestige and effectiveness of welfare work in relation to the remaining fifteen other social work methods and to ascertain what methods they would ideally like to enter upon graduation from their programs.

INSTRUMENT

The major instrument utilized in this study was a one-page, pre-tested questionnaire. The instrument was designed to provide each

student with an opportunity to indicate his own assessment of the prestige and effectiveness of sixteen different social work methods. In addition, the student was requested to provide demographic data and to specify what social work method (if any) he would like to enter upon graduation from his program.⁵

The method designations were developed and standardized by the National Association of Social Workers staff in 1972. The prestige and effectiveness of each method were assessed using a five-point, Likert-type scale, where 1 represented "lowest" and 5 represented "highest." The methods were randomly ordered and assessed for prestige on one side of the instrument and for effectiveness on the other side. No operational definitions for prestige, effectiveness, or the methods were presented on the instrument, as it was felt the students would already have their own unique definitions of these and would more than likely interpret them in their own way. One would suspect that three of the sixteen methods might present a discriminatory problem: casework, psychotherapy, and private practice. However, a glance at the three tables will reveal that the students did indeed discriminate between these three methods, as the ranks of each varied widely.

The instrument was tested for item reliability by utilizing 41 students. Each student was requested to complete the questionnaire twice, with a three-week time span between both testings. Pearson Product Moment correlations were generated for each of the 32 items from time 1 and time 2. All of the items generated a correlation of .731 or higher, which indicates a high degree of reliability for each item. The average correlation coefficient for the 32 items was .792, with an average significance level of .091.

METHOD AND SAMPLE

The instrument was distributed to BSW and MSW students attending thirteen accredited schools of social work located in ten different states. No attempts were made to utilize random sampling procedures, as they would not prove to be as effective as the acquisition of as large a sample size as possible. Of the total 1,790 respondents, 43.5% were BSW students and 56.5% were MSW students.

BSW Sample - A total of 778 students who responded to the study were BSW-level students. Their average age was 22.3 (median = 21.3) years; 82.5% were females and 17.5% were males. They had acquired an average of .17 (median = .07) years of paid social work experience prior to entering college.

MSW Sample - A total of 1,012 students who responded to the study were MSW-level students. Of these students, 67.2% were first-year and 32.8% were second-year students. Of these, 68.4% were female and 31.6% were male. Their average age was 27.5 (median = 25.6) years and they had acquired an average of 1.7 (median = 1.2) years of paid social work experience prior to entering graduate school.

The sex of the students was compared with the latest available Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) statistics concerning full-time bachelor's and master's degree students enrolled in accredited schools of social work. As previously noted, the sample for the present study was 82.5% female for the BSW students and 68.4% for the MSW students. The CSWE data revealed that females comprise 75.2% of the total BSW students⁶ and 66.2% of the total MSW students⁷ in the United States. This suggests that the sample for this study was representative of the total population of BSW and MSW students in relation to sex. No average age was attainable, for comparison purposes, from the CSWE statistics.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Table 1 displays the average prestige scores and the relative ranking of the sixteen social work methods. Welfare work ranked fourteenth in the judgement of the undergraduates and sixteenth in the judgement of the graduates. Analysis of variance showed a significant difference between the undergraduates' and graduates' assessment of the prestige of welfare work. The undergraduate students' prestige score was significantly higher ($p = .001$) than the graduates' score. In addition, the largest discrepancy between the undergraduate and graduate assessments of the relative prestige of the sixteen methods occurred in relation to welfare work. These differences may be attributable to the possibility that undergraduates generally operate under fewer biases or preconceived notions regarding different types of social service; they normally have had less in-depth exposure to the social welfare field than graduate students and may consequently have fewer, or less rigidly set, preferences regarding specialized fields of practice.

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Table 1

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The average effectiveness scores and the relative ranking of the sixteen social work methods are presented in Table 2. Welfare work was

ranked eleventh by the undergraduates and sixteenth by the graduates in effectiveness. Analysis of variance showed a significant difference between the undergraduates' and graduates' assessment of the effectiveness of welfare work. The effectiveness score of the undergraduate students was significantly higher ($p = .001$) than that of the graduate students. Again, the largest discrepancy between the assessments of the two groups of students occurred with respect to welfare work. Indeed, welfare work was assessed by the graduate students as the only method, of the total sixteen, ranking lowest in both prestige and effectiveness.

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Table 2

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Of the total 1,790 students, 208 did not specify an ideal method of employment choice. Eighty-eight of these 208 students were undergraduates, while the remaining 120 were graduates. As a result, the data displayed in Table 3 are based on the responses of 1,582 students. It should be noted that 21.4% of the undergraduate students designated welfare work as their ideal employment choice upon graduation from their programs, in contrast to only 3.9% of the graduate students. Restated, 5.49 times more undergraduates stated a desire to enter welfare work than graduates.

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Table 3

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The students' paid social work experience at the undergraduate and graduate levels was tested for correlation with their ideal employment choice patterns. No high or significant correlations were generated, either for the undergraduate level ($N = 690$) or the graduate level ($N = 892$) for the sixteen social work methods.

In broad relief, these findings point dramatically to a wide discrepancy between the undergraduate and graduate student's view of the public welfare worker. Not only was the average prestige and effectiveness of welfare work rated significantly higher by the undergraduates, but more than five times as many undergraduates as graduates indicated

a desire to enter welfare work upon graduation from their programs. In view of findings such as these, a number of thought-provoking questions must be raised. Why do undergraduates hold an overwhelmingly more favorable view of welfare work than graduates? What implications does this hold for social work education and social welfare manpower? Concomitantly, how significant a role does an undergraduate or graduate social work program play in shaping the attitudes of social work students toward various fields of endeavor? The latter can hardly be overemphasized, for it is widely acknowledged that professional schools constitute major socializing agents for new professionals by setting models and defining a prestige system among specializations and sites of professional practice. The fact is, the predominant model in social work is the clinical practitioner, and the prestige of the clinic - with its counterpart in the casework agency - is well established as the pinnacle of attraction for social work students.⁶ Concomitantly, the question may be raised, what significant differences exist in the socialization processes between undergraduate and graduate social work programs that may contribute to enhancing the ever-widening alienation of graduate-level students from public welfare work?

These questions suggest the need for a review and reappraisal of the way in which the delivery of public welfare services is presented in graduate social work curricula. More importantly, it is suggested that social work educators - particularly those at the graduate level - begin taking a serious look at their own attitudes toward public welfare work - and the manner in which these attitudes are communicated, either implicitly or explicitly, to the frequently impressionable social work student. The question now becomes, will social work educators continue to relegate public welfare work to a subsidiary position or will they face the challenge of uncovering its true potential, of determining the vital role that it should and can play in contemporary social work practice? Will they affirm that the public welfare worker, social work's unsung hero, is still a vibrant and respected member of the social work profession?

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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Barbara K. Shore, "Accountability for What and to Whom?" Social Work 19, no. 4 (July 1974), pp. 387-88, 507; Marvin L. Rosenberg and Ralph Brody, "The Threat or Challenge of Accountability," Social Work 19, no. 3 (May 1974), pp. 344-50; Emanuel Tropp, "Expectation, Performance, and Accountability," Social Work 19, no. 2 (March 1974), pp. 139-48; and Scott Briar, "The Age of Accountability," Social Work 18, no. 1 (January 1973), pp. 2, 114.

2. Stuart A. Kirk, Michael J. Osmalov, and Joel Fischer. "Social Workers' Involvement in Research," Social Work 21, no. 2 (March 1976), p. 121.

3. Alfred Kadushin, "Prestige of Social Work - Facts and Factors," Social Work 3, no. 2 (April 1968), p. 43.

4. Ibid., pp. 37-39. See also Roland Meinert, "Professional Satisfaction of Social Workers," Social Work 20, no. 1 (January 1975), pp. 64-65; Kingsley Davis, Human Society (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1950), pp. 93-94; and Herbert Hiram Hyman, "The Psychology of Status," Archives of Psychology 38, no. 269 (June 1942), pp. 5-94.

5. This information was acquired through an open-ended question. The responses were then categorized into the sixteen different social work methods listed in the three tables.

6. Lilian Ripple, Denise Waterman, and Vivien Rabin, eds., Statistics on Social Work Education in the United States: 1974 (New York: Council on Social Work Education, 1975), p. 12.

7. Ibid., p. 26.

8. See Richard M. Grinnell, Jr. and Nancy S. Kyte, "The Future of Clinical Practice: A Study," Clinical Social Work Journal 5, no. 2 (Summer 1977), in press; Richard M. Grinnell, Jr., Nancy S. Kyte, and Mary Hunter, "The Prestige and Effectiveness of the Social Work Methods," Journal of Social Welfare 3, no. 3 (Winter 1976), in press; and Henry J. Meyer, "The Effect of Social Work Professionalization on Manpower," in Tony Tripodi, Phillip Fellin, Irwin Epstein, and Roger Lind, eds., Social Workers at Work: An Introduction to Social Work Practice (Itasca, Illinois: F.E. Peacock Publishers, Inc., 1972), p. 229.

TABLE 1
AVERAGE PRESTIGE SCORE BY SOCIAL WORK METHOD AND STUDENT STATUS

Method	Student Status				Difference	F Ratio	Significance Level
	Undergraduate (N=778)		Graduate (N=1012)				
	Score	Rank	Score	Rank			
Psychotherapy	3.967	1	3.817	6	.150	8.2946	.01
Education/Teaching	3.841	2	3.941	3	-.100	4.8330	.05
Private Practice	3.784	3	4.008	1	-.224	15.8916	.001
Consultation	3.783	4	3.972	2	-.188	19.9875	.001
Program Development	3.753	5	3.826	5	-.073	2.8677	n.s.
Supervision	3.739	6	3.496	10	.243	32.0957	.001
Community Organization	3.735	7	3.474	11	.261	31.4171	.001
Administration	3.708	8	3.940	4	-.232	21.3014	.001
Group Work	3.596	9	3.274	12	.322	62.9160	.001
Staff Development	3.509	10	3.585	9	-.076	3.3035	n.s.
Planning	3.501	11	3.636	8	-.135	9.4319	.01
Research	3.496	12	3.660	7	-.164	9.3503	.01
Casework	3.421	13	3.052	13	.369	47.7476	.001
Welfare Work	2.979	14	1.960	16	1.019	343.3647	.001
Personnel	2.961	15	2.715	14	.246	28.8320	.001
Fund Raising	2.725	16	2.648	15	.077	2.5073	n.s.
Totals	3.531		3.438		.093		

TABLE 2

AVERAGE EFFECTIVENESS SCORE BY SOCIAL WORK METHOD AND STUDENT STATUS

Method	Student Status				Difference	F Ratio	Significance Level
	Undergraduate (N=778)		Graduate (N=1012)				
	Score	Rank	Score	Rank			
Education/Teaching	3.710	1	3.549	1	.161	12.5754	.001
Group Work	3.694	2	3.317	4	.377	82.9471	.001
Casework	3.560	3	3.004	13	.556	154.8842	.001
Community Organization	3.558	4	3.183	6	.375	71.5348	.001
Psychotherapy	3.553	5	3.181	7	.372	55.2855	.001
Private Practice	3.473	6	3.434	2	.039	0.7136	n.s.
Consultation	3.424	7	3.430	3	-.006	0.0205	n.s.
Program Development	3.395	8	3.275	5	.120	7.5992	.01
Planning	3.319	9	3.167	8	.152	12.7159	.001
Supervision	3.293	10	3.139	10	.154	12.7008	.001
Welfare Work	3.226	11	2.383	16	.843	270.7429	.001
Staff Development	3.177	12	3.115	11	.062	2.1383	n.s.
Research	3.145	13	3.147	9	-.002	0.0018	n.s.
Administration	3.095	14	3.032	12	.063	2.0360	n.s.
Personnel	2.951	15	2.786	14	.165	17.9968	.001
Fund Raising	2.863	16	2.861	15	.002	0.0017	n.s.
Totals	3.340		3.125		.215		

TABLE 3
IDEAL EMPLOYMENT CHOICE BY STUDENT STATUS

Method	Student Status				Totals	
	Undergraduate (N=690)		Graduate (N=892)		(N=1582)	
	Percent	Rank	Percent	Rank	Percent	Rank
Casework	38.3	1	26.9	1	31.9	1
Psychotherapy	13.3	3	17.9	2	15.9	2
Welfare Work	21.4	2	3.9	7	11.6	3
Community Organization	7.0	4	9.4	4	8.3	4
Administration	1.7	9	12.6	3	7.8	5
Private Practice	4.9	5	5.8	6	5.4	6
Planning	2.3	8	6.7	5	4.8	7
Group Work	3.5	7	3.6	8	3.5	8
Consultation	4.1	6	2.7	10	3.3	9
Education/Teaching	1.7	9	2.7	10	2.4	10
Program Development	1.2	10	3.1	9	2.2	11
Staff Development	0.0	12	2.7	10	1.6	12
Research	0.0	12	1.3	11	0.8	13
Supervision	0.6	11	0.4	12	0.5	14
Fund Raising	0.0	12	0.0	13	0.0	15
Personnel	0.0	12	0.0	13	0.0	15
Totals	100.0		100.0		100.0	