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The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 5
Issue 1 *January*

Article 7

January 1978

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Recommended Citation

Walz, Thomas H. and Macy, Harry J. (1978) "The MSW and the MPA: Confrontation of Two Professions in Public Welfare," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 7.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.1269>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol5/iss1/7>

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THE MSW AND THE MPA: CONFRONTATION OF TWO
PROFESSIONS IN PUBLIC WELFARE

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ABSTRACT

From its inception in the 1930's, public welfare has emerged as a major service industry commanding a sizeable portion of the public tax dollar. Concomitant with growth and size and expenditure has come the federalization of the program. In the face of a series of changes--the growth of welfare, added administrative complexity, and the emergence of new economic function--public welfare's identification with social work was weakened. Correspondingly, and perhaps logically, its identification with public administration has been strengthened. In this paper, there is exploration of the changes leading to the confrontation between social work and public administration within public welfare. A comparative analysis of this confrontation is undertaken, and the methods of conflict resolution between the professions are explored. The principal purpose of the paper, however, is to draw attention to the argument, stimulate further debate about this course of events, and encourage some public policy direction in public welfare.

The Emerging Confrontation: An Overview

Since its inception in the 1930's, public welfare has emerged as a major service industry, commanding a sizable

portion of the public tax dollar. In 1968, the combined federal outlays for social security programs amounted to \$51 billion. By 1973, this expenditure had increased to over \$100 billion. In terms of clients served, for one program alone (AFDC), the number of recipients increased from 5.349 million in 1968 to 10.980 five years later.¹ Expenditures in the public welfare sector have in fact grown so large that the economic aspects of the program now threaten to supplant its original social welfare orientation. In line with neo-Keynesian theory, recent policy decisions seem to suggest that public welfare is being transformed into a mechanism for economic stabilization.² It has become difficult to ascertain at this point just who the real "client" of public welfare is: the welfare poor or our shaky economy.

Concomitant with growth in size and expenditure has been the federalization of public welfare, a trend paralleled by other actions of the federal government in assuming greater control over the general market structure. The development of this central role of government in determining the nature and extent of economic growth policies is commonly referred to as "political capitalism." Thus, we will argue that public welfare has been made subject to political capitalistic policies.

Such policies within public welfare are not difficult to find. Ceilings are placed on the public social service budgets to limit budget deficits; long-term unemployed persons are shifted from inadequate social insurance programs (unemployment insurance) to top-heavy categorical assistance programs (AFDC); and welfare benefit levels are allowed to rise or fall according to varying inflationary and recessionary trends. Public welfare seems to be both a "victim" of the state of the economy and a "tool" used for its stabilization. The aggregate of policy decisions in HEW since the Nixon years would support this hypothesis.

From these twin trends--economic manipulation and increasing federalization of public welfare---have come a drastic

reorganization and restructuring of welfare agencies. A cursory look at the growth of public welfare over the last 40 years shows this to be so.

Public welfare was originally a "social welfare" program, closely identified with the social work profession despite the small numbers of MSW's in its early administration.³ Invented as a means of dealing with "mass poverty" in an industrial society, public welfare required a poverty-serving profession. Social work was society's choice for this mission.

However, in the face of a series of changes--the growth of welfare, added administrative complexity and the emergence of the economic function mentioned above--public welfare's identification with social work has become more tenuous. Correspondingly, and perhaps logically, its identification with public administration has been strengthened.

Organizational changes growing out of the re-definition of the proper function of public welfare have, in turn, produced a new occupational structure. A number of specific changes of this sort are evident. Although we will elaborate on these later in our discussion, let us list them briefly at this point:

- 1) The public welfare bureaucracy has been expanded, and its organization and administration have been further "rationalized."
- 2) New management-type personnel (MBA's, MPS's, CPA's, etc.) have been introduced into public welfare administration.
- 3) These managers have been moved to the top and center of the welfare administration, and have assumed a corresponding importance in policy making.
- 4) Social workers have been moved down in the public welfare administration, and their roles have been

redefined so that they no longer occupy a central place in the functioning of public welfare.⁴

Framework for Analysis

As hypothesized at the outset, the confrontation of social work and public administration in public welfare was an inevitable outcome of changes in public welfare function. In all probability, these changes are a microcosm of larger transformations occurring elsewhere in society. The dominance of the bureaucracy (the large corporation) as the preferred means of delivering goods and services in our society has resulted in a particular approach to administration, and has further established new power relationships, leading to conflict between those whose expertise lies in service to clients and those whose expertise lies in service to the institution. When the business of public welfare was social welfare, the social workers dominated; as the business of public welfare has become more "economic," the public administrator has come to dominate.

As a way of exploring the differences in orientation between the social work and public administration professional, we have chosen to draw upon two recent (though quite dissimilar) works: Daniel Bell's The Coming of Post Industrial Society and Robert Pirsig's Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance.

Bell and Pirsig: Two Complementary Perspectives

Daniel Bell, a Harvard sociologist, has developed a theory on the nature of current social change which can be used to explain the rising tension between social work and public administration in public welfare. Bell argues that contemporary social change can be understood through the analysis of three "axial principles" governing modern social development. These three catalysts of change are identified as (1) the economizing principle, (2) the participatory principle, and (3) the self-actualizing principle.⁵

The first of these, the economizing principle, is defined as the principle of maximizing production while minimizing cost; it is essentially an econometric concept which places ultimate value on optimizing production through maximum efficiency. Thus, it stresses the administrative goals of maximization, optimization, standardization, and rationalization. Bell sees the economizing principle as a guiding force in the development of the economy, technology, and the restructuring of occupations. The economizing principle is a carry-over from the industrial period that has become more extreme because of the greater potential for rationalizing production through new machine and organizational technologies. The economizing principle explains the growing interest in applying "scientific" approaches to management and planning; hence, the current popularity of the professional public administrator in public welfare.⁶

Bell's second axial principle, the participatory principle, explains changes in the political relationships between people in post-industrial society. It is evidenced by a series of human rights movements that have pushed the society toward more focused egalitarianism. Increasingly people show disdain for hierarchy and privilege. Though racism, sexism, and meritocratism are still prevalent, they are abhorred in principle. Many recent developments in public welfare, such as welfare rights movements and collective bargaining trends, are easily explained by the participatory principle.

Bell's third principle, the principle of self-actualization, is seen as a prime force in redefining modern culture. The search for personal growth and fulfillment (Bell's definition of self-actualization) is an important catalyst behind many popular social movements (e.g., personal growth fads). If the work worlds might be characterized by the economizing principle, the "after work" world seems better characterized by the self-actualizing principle. For many persons, there is a growing concern about the costs to personal growth and fulfillment that are experienced in the name of greater production and efficiency.

As Bell points out, these three axial principles are not easily reconcilable. Policy decisions based on economizing principles (e.g., efficiency) have severe human costs. The giant corporate bureaucracy creates an environment of frustration for both producers and consumers even though it affords desired "economies of scale."

Public welfare is replete with examples of the trade-offs taking place between these principles. The federalization of adult categories and the standardization of benefit allowances, for example, make for greater rational planning and easier economic management of income security programs, but at the expense of individualization of the program and humanization of its service delivery. In effect, important service goals are compromised by rationalizing welfare administrative behaviors.

The application of economizing principles in public welfare also affects the locus of decision making. Until recently, line workers had considerable discretionary authority in administrative matters. But in a highly rationalized, standardized, large-scale program, decisions tend to be made higher up in the hierarchy and are more likely to be reprocessed as downward directives to lower-level direct-service workers. This changing focus of decision-making produces a realignment of power, except where the professional group dominating the direct service level also happens to control management.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to find equal evidence of an aggressive application of the principles of participation and self-actualization in public welfare. Where such evidence is found, we often find practice in conflict with policy. Many current welfare reforms, from the worker and client perspective, are produced through collective bargaining (i.e., political force), not through willing administrative policy action. To a degree, most social conflict in post-industrial America can be understood as a clash of these axial principles. Their translation into priorities by social workers and public

administrators respectively tells us much about the two professions in terms of their value differences and the bases of their confrontation.

The standard textbooks in public administration generally support the position that the function of public administration is to implement public policy (political values) as effectively and rationally as possible.⁸ As one textbook writer puts it, "The passion for accountability gives public administration much of its distinctive character."⁹ This is the language of the economizing mode.

Public administration is almost exclusively based on a large organization model of service production and delivery. This presumes the need for a highly professionalized, corporate style of management. The public administrator is consequently schooled to accept and give priority to the economizing principle. This orientation is not surprising, since public administration was invented in the 1920's as a response to the growth in scale and complexity of public institutions and their rising importance in society.

Social work, on the other hand, places a low priority on efficiency. The fact that it has chosen to support its professional identity through a casework model is a clear illustration of its limited emphasis on "quantitative production," for casework is a notoriously inefficient method for dealing with large-scale human problems. What critics fail to recognize is that the social work profession is rooted in the values of democracy and self-actualization--values with which its professional vocabulary is replete. Felix Biestik's book on the casework relationship, for example, stresses principles that approximate Bell's principles of participation and self-actualization.¹⁰

Further perspective on the confrontation of the two professions in public welfare can be gained from Robert Pirsig's popular semi-fictional work, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance.¹¹ Here, an imaginative use of metaphor permits the reader to understand and appreciate two distinct approaches

to modern administration (based on the traditional classic and romantic views of reality). The philosophic traditions of the classicist and the romanticist are characterized by the riders, (father, son, and two friends) their attitudes toward their cycles and toward cycle maintenance. The narrator is represented as a person reconciled to the world of technology, a rider who regards his cycle as more than a machine object. For him, the cycle is a scientific system, rationally designed to produce a whole greater than its parts. The joy of the machine is not only in its riding, but in understanding its design and caring for its operation. The ecology of man and machine is seen as essential and fulfilling. Through the use of mini-essays (Chautauquas), the author identifies this attitude as that of the classic or scientific view.

Another set of cyclists, a drummer/musician and his wife, are presented as romantics. They regard the cycle only as a machine object, created to give pleasure and to provide transportation; however, they have no regard for the scientific nature of its design, nor are they oriented toward its care and maintenance. Any breakdown in the machine produces for them only frustration and irritation. Lacking any ecological relationship to the functioning of their machine, they feel themselves helpless in the face of the machine's imperfections. With neither scientific mind nor disposition, they retreat from a world that is dominated by machine-science and controlled by complex social organization. The romanticist is presented as out of harmony with the directions of post-industrial society.

We use this example to show the contrasting philosophical traditions from which social work and public administration grew. There is strong evidence that social work fits the "romantic" view in modern society, while public administration is patterned after the "classic" view.

Pirsig's novel carries the argument beyond the aforementioned dialectic. The narrator is portrayed throughout as a man

seeking to reconcile these two opposing views. He recognizes reality as something more, something that requires the convergence and integration of the rationality of the classicist and the intuitive understanding of the romanticist.¹² Whether either narrator or author is completely successful in this effort is debatable. Nevertheless, the novel raises the question to which we address ourselves here: Can the differing perspectives of the social worker and the public administrator be integrated into a more balanced philosophy and method of public welfare administration?

Philosophical/Historical Tradition

Social work as a profession has its roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition of religious humanism.¹³ And, although it was established to cope with the casualties of industrialization, its early models were the church and the family.

Reform sociology and humanistic psychology have been social work's principal theoretical antecedents. Social work has more often pursued a course guided by ideology and values than by scientific empiricism; and it has never succumbed to the lure of logical positivism. Social work, in short, has been more art than science, despite efforts to build a practice theory upon the loosely tested hypotheses of an eclectic social science.

In contrast, public administration originated in the scientific tradition, and tries to apply the principles of science to complex human organizations. In the 1920's, Taylor and others developed a theory of human systems based on the paradigm of the machine system.¹⁴ Public administration found its disciplinary and theoretical antecedents in political science and business administration. More recently, economics and planning have been drawn into its curriculum. To a lesser extent, sociology and psychology are included, as electives, in the education of the public administrator.

Public administration, created as a way of dealing with the administrative complexity of large public institutions, has

lacked a strong ideology, other than that of science. Its main concern has been to remain objective in the implementation of political values.

Client Orientation

To the social worker, the client is always a "person," and, as history would have it, the weaker and more vulnerable person in the industrial world. The worker-client relationship, usually thought of as therapeutic, has been a traditional emphasis in the profession.

Even where social work developed methods related to group work, community organization, public policy and research, the central concern was on how to help the individual through these approaches. Personal growth and self-actualization of the individual and/or the family unit has been the service goal of social work. During the 1960's, with its stress on social reform and social action, a number of professionals moved away from the medical (treatment) model towards an advocacy model; however, by the 1970's this movement had largely disappeared,¹⁵ and the majority of the profession had returned to a clinical emphasis. Social workers traditionally have been most comfortable in a close, highly personalized service relationship with clients; consequently, the profession has attracted recruits who wish to carry on this tradition.

The public administrator's client orientation is less easily defined. The theoretical content of public administration centers on organizational life as if the organization itself were the client. While the organization is supposedly the means through which public values are translated into programs, practice suggests that the building and maintenance of a well-run machine can easily become the end rather than the means.

For the public administrator, the concept of client also includes the general public, in the belief that public

agencies are obligated to reflect the public interest. Also included as client is the policy maker, since he/she is the person to whom the public administrator is immediately accountable.

The public administrator is not usually hired to increase, expand, or improve the quality of public welfare services and money payments; nor are such services or expenditures highly valued by the general public or most public policy makers. Service goals are generally in conflict with the efficiency orientation of the public administrator.

The relationship of the social worker and the public administrator, respectively, to the public welfare client differs in proximity, intensity, and function. The social worker, who dominates the direct service line, is nearest in organizational location to the client; this proximity breeds considerable intimacy (relationship) which (given the functional role of the social worker) can easily be converted into advocacy behavior on behalf of the client. Conversely, the social worker is loosely bound to the center of bureaucracy and is often hidden from the exercise of many of its controls (e.g., what happens in a home visit remains largely unknown to agency management).

The public administrator dominates the managerial level, and is consequently located at the greatest distance from the client, shielded from potentials of intimacy and frequently reminded of loyalty to the organization by policy-making superiors. Client interests are often weighed against some ambiguous standard of the public interest. While many public administrators are advocates of client interest, this does not come naturally to a profession lacking strong identification with welfare clients.

When viewed from the client's perspective, the social worker is more gate-opener than gate-keeper. The reverse is true of the public administrator. Again, this can be stated only in general terms, since there are exceptions on both counts.

Techniques

Some tools of social work are relationship skills, informational and referral skills in locating accessible specific resources for client use. These often involve an ability to manipulate resources to free some resources for the client. This, as previously mentioned, has involved the individual and has, in the main, employed the casework method/practice theory is based upon

an understanding of human behavior and human motivation; it focuses on personal interventions that alter motivational and behavioral patterns (e.g., helping clients with decisions about jobs, marriage, relationships with children). Social workers whose practice theories and methods go beyond an individual focus are nonetheless highly client-oriented.

The public administrator, by contrast, has been schooled in political, organizational and economic theory as well as in management science. Practice methods are based on administrative techniques and skills, ranging from budgeting procedures to personnel management. Current approaches make heavy use of computer-based data processing for accounting, planning, and decision-making. Interpersonal skills are stressed in so far as they help the administrator relate to policy makers and the general public, and to handle consumer and employee grievances and dissatisfaction.

It is interesting to note that while the computer and other management science technologies have become common tools for the public administrator, they remain an enigma for many social workers. This is another illustration of Pirsig's thesis.

Language-Communication

The language of social work reflects its origin in reform sociology, humanistic psychology, and the everyday language of clients. Public administration, on the other hand, uses a language borrowed from the disciplines of political science, business administration, economics, and, more recently, computer science. Public administration is at home with the language of science; social work is more comfortable with the expressive language of feeling (the language of the romanticist).

Language is important since it shapes our very thoughts and feelings. Thus, the language gap between the two professions inevitably produces conceptual and communicational difficulties. These will continue to increase as long as the gap remains unbridged.

Power Shift

The balance of power in public welfare is shifting from social work to public administration. At the state and county levels this appears to be happening less through a "replacement" strategy (the removal of social workers) than through an "add-on" strategy (building new power units around the functions of management, planning and evaluation). At the federal level, however, there appears to have been a wholesale replacement of social work types with management types in the policy-making and regulatory sectors. The occupational makeup of HEW has changed considerably since the inaugural days of the Nixon administration.

This power shift is a microcosm of a phenomenon occurring in the entire macro-organization world. As Bell argues, the coming of the post-industrial society has created a new power elite built around those who control management knowledge and information. It is information and knowledge, Bell claims, not wealth and property, that is the source of power in high technology society. Professional managers are in demand in all of the larger institutions. Increasingly, they need have only expertise in management science; less consideration is paid to their substantive knowledge of the "service product" of their agency. This is a triumph of style over content.

The general public, while uncertain about the capacity of bureaucracy to produce and deliver goods and services, has generally accepted the proposition that "service" production and delivery can be improved by greater rationalization and professionalization of its management. The current "management-accountability" trend, given much support in the post-Watergate years, reflects the belief that better management can solve most of the ailments of our institutions, including the higher growth rate and cost of public welfare.

We need only recall the impact of a similar trend in 1962 (which expanded the profession of social work in public

welfare) when increases in social services were expected to be public welfare's panacea, to realize what the probable outcome of the current trend of rationalized management approaches will be in welfare. But for the moment, the management/planning professions are riding high and can be expected to continue to do so in the immediate future.

Social work's response to the power shifts in public welfare will be mixed. There is evidence that a large number of social workers at the administrative level will support the management trend and adopt the public administrator's vocabulary and skills. Others may leave or be asked to leave and will move on to more hospitable environments. A few die-hards will remain and fight the trend. These last will be casework types, persons experienced in client advocacy, or the young romanticists who have little affection for the bureaucracy and its rationalized approach to management.

The intensity and strength of the confrontation between social work and public administration professionals will depend heavily upon the grit and capacity of those who choose to stay, and on the evaluation of the success of the management approach both by the public and by policy makers. Failure to reduce welfare costs and caseloads could destine the professional management approach to an early demise.

It is unlikely that the public administrator will choose to share in the perspective of social work, even though some recent public administration literature suggests the need for a new ethic to guide the moral choices faced by workers in that field.¹⁶ Since there is little in the academic or work experience of public administrators to suggest that they will adopt some other position, any integration of perspectives which might occur will probably be the result of one-sided efforts by significant numbers of social workers attempting to take on the appearance of public administration. Should this happen, it will be due in part to the heavy bombardment of public welfare functionaries at all levels by management/accountability training and thinking. Never

before in the history of public welfare has there been a more aggressive campaign to resocialize social workers in this manner.

Probable Future

Although social work in the traditional sense may to a certain extent be co-opted by public administration, we feel that increasing confrontation rather than reconciliation will characterize the future relationship of the two professions. Our position is supported by several factors:

First, many direct service workers have become disenchanted with the "rational" approach to administration, planning, and evaluation. Not only does it go against their grain, as we have seen, but it also reduces their professional autonomy. (With data analysis and processing technologies, even unimportant decisions are being made higher up.)

Second, little is being done to discipline or control the sentiments of lower echelon staff members. The force of resistance will probably grow and will be expressed in future collective bargaining efforts.

Third, clients themselves will add to the growing tensions between workers in the two fields which serve them. Although the client group may consist largely of the unwanted and the victimized, it is nonetheless increasing in size; and its members are becoming more sophisticated in organizational advocacy. Coalitions which channel worker disenchantment and client unhappiness could upset the neatness of the rationally administered welfare state.

Thus, unless the values of participation and self-actualization are made the highest principles of public administration, we cannot accept the turning over of the public welfare system to professional administrators. It is our conviction that the welfare client is best served by workers motivated primarily by concern for their fellow man, not by a slavish devotion to the abstract principles of "rational" economizing or bureaucratic efficiency.

FOOTNOTES

¹Michael C. Barth, George J. Curcagno, John L. Palmer, Towards and Effective Income Support System: Problems, Prospects, and Choice, Institute for Research on Poverty (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974), p. 26.

²Thomas Walz, "External Factors Affecting Public Welfare," Public Welfare, Vol. 32, No. 4, pp. 38-46.

³Ronald C. Federico, The Social Welfare Institution (New York: D.C. Heath and Company, 1973), p. 158.

⁴Through the separation of services from money payments, most social workers have been relocated in the service sector or have been translated into new-type personnel for the Income Maintenance Section. In some states, the separation is so complete that a different county director heads each unit.

⁵Daniel Bell, The Coming of Post Industrial Society (New York: Buni Books, Inc., 1973), p. 12.

⁶The references to "public administrator" do not refer exclusively to those holding M.P.A.'s, but include a wide category of business majors, accountants and planners who identify with the M.P.A. orientation. Likewise, references to social workers go beyond the M.S.W.'s in welfare. We feel that those outside the terminal professional training still tend to identify most closely with one or the other orientation and hence, justify the rather loose use of professional label in this analysis.

⁷Bell, op. cit.

⁸John M. Pfiffner and Robert Presthaus, Public Administration (New York: The Ronald Press, 1967), p. 6.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Felix Biestik, The Casework Relationship (Chicago: Allen and Unwin, 1961).

¹¹Robert Pirsig, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance (New York: Morrow, 1974).

¹²Ibid.

¹³Walter Friedlander, Introduction to Social Welfare, 4th edition (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1974), pp. 58-125.

¹⁴pfiffner and Presthaus, op. cit., p. 172.

¹⁵An observation expressed at a recent meeting of the Deans and Directors of Schools of Social Work.

¹⁶See, for example, Nicholas Henry, Public Administration and Public Affairs (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1975).