Status Enhancement and Social Problem Concerns: An Essay on the Course of State Social Work Associations

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Recommended Citation

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Social work's ability to contribute to the development of a more just and humanistic society is currently inhibited by a state-level preoccupation with status enhancement. Professional status conscious-ness, in itself, does have potential for promoting developmental forms of professional accountability and the further humanization of service bureaucracies. Current circumstances, however, prevent the fulfillment of either of these potentials.

Professional accountability mechanisms necessarily depend upon the actual or threatened withdrawal of privilege or prestige. A fundamental erosion of status consciousness would reduce the subjective signifi-cance of sanctions and lessen their effectiveness in preventing pro-fessional negligence and abuse. The developmental character of status accountability, however, is distorted by the distribution of the external sources of potential sanction. Since these sources of sanction generally exclude economically and culturally marginal social sectors, status concern indirectly fosters accountability to the interests of privileged sectors. As social problem generating social structures complement privileged interests, more than those of the disadvantaged, professional status concern involves a measure of tacit support for these institutional arrangements.

The other potentially developmental consequence of professional status consciousness concerns its promise for contributing to the humanization of service bureaucracies. Status concern is a necessary but insufficient condition for the development of a sense of profession-al identity, which may serve as a countervailing force to those bureaucratic norms and practices which dehumanize service delivery.[1] A constructive professional role in the humanization of the social service sector, however, requires a professional identity that is committed to the engagement of the institutional sources of social problems, as well as effective service delivery.

Several conditions frustrate a fulfillment of this "countervailing potential." First, the distinction of professional identity from those activities performed within existing institutional contexts remains ambiguous. The planned public relations campaign of the National Association of Social Workers, for example, is based upon a portrayal of current practice roles and boundaries. Social work's pursuit of a

traditional model of professionalism may also render the fulfillment
of a humanizing countervailing force problematic.[2] The emergence of
such a traditionalist professional force complements the service
bureaucracies' assignment of consumers to a powerless status. And
it is this very powerlessness that is the primary dehumanizing attri-
bute of existing service systems.

Social work, however, should not be faulted for seeking rewards
and recognition for its contributions to the existing order of society.
Professional status consciousness becomes problematic when professional
discourse implies that the pursuit of status enhancement is unrelated
to the support of institutionally generated social problems. Acknow-
ledgement of profession-systemic relations permits a more reflexive
orientation toward the interests served by specific professional
policy objectives. If the profession is to qualitatively mature in
performances and prospects, its orientation toward policy objectives
must include a sustained recognition that "what is best" for the
current organization of social work may or may not be "best" for the
society or its continued development.

The legislative priorities of professional social work associations
represent reasonable indicators of the degree of professional emphasis
afforded status enhancement, relative to a focus upon social develop-
ment priorities. The professional associations are formally charged
with responsibilities that are directly relevant to the themes of
"status enhancement," "humanization of the social services," and
"social reform." The explicit purposes of these associations include:
1) development and enhancement of practice standards, 2) advancement
of social policies consistent with professional values, and 3) improve-
ment of the conditions of professional employment. The professional
association's pursuit of multiple goals requires a relative allocation
of limited organizational resources. These allocative choices, in
turn, reflect social work's orientation toward its societal context.

Professional preoccupation with increasing access to privilege
and prestige serves neither social work's aspirations for the humani-
zation of direct services nor its visions of needed structural reform.
Such a preoccupation appears disturbingly pronounced in the state
legislative activities of the state chapters of the National Association
of Social Workers.

Social work's recent development of an organizational capacity and
a base of political experience presents the profession with the oppor-
tunity to pursue a range of preferred policies at the state level.
During the 1974 to 1977 period, forty-three of forty-six state chapters,
responding to an exploratory survey, reported active pursuit of one or
more state legislative goals.[3] Thirty-five of these chapters reported
involvement in state legislative processes for two or more years during

the period. Forty-two chapters reported legislative action during 1976, compared to thirty-seven in 1975 and twenty-four in 1974. Moreover, only five of the chapters, reporting legislative activity, indicated that there had been no significant change in the level of their legislative efforts during the period. The remaining chapters reported a significant increase. Nevertheless, there remains great disparity in the relative investment of chapter budgets to legislative activity. The mean of chapter estimated allocation was fourteen percent but the median estimate was six percent.[4]

While the state chapters evidenced a capacity to address a range of social problem solving state policies, these priorities actually accounted for a relatively minor and declining share of the chapters' legislative agenda. Chapter legislative focus on the problems of poverty, racism, sexism, or the limitations of existing welfare, criminal justice, health and education systems was dwarfed by the chapters' pursuit of social work licensure and vendorship. Each of the forty-three chapters, reporting any legislative activity during the 1974 to 1977 period, placed first priority on licensure for one or more years. This single issue was listed as the foremost priority by thirteen of the twenty-four chapters active during 1974. The share of chapter agenda afforded licensure increased to two-thirds during 1975 (24 of 37) and 1976 (27 of 42). A similar pattern emerges in the chapters' more recent listing of 1977 legislative priorities. Both social work licensure and third-party payment provisions have a common relation to the institutionalization of professional status and privilege. In combination, they accounted for thirty-three of the reported forty-two first priorities of 1976 (78%).

Reference to the issues specifically subject to chapter lobbying efforts further supports the conclusion that state professional agenda have incorporated only a minimal focus upon social problem concerns. Thirty-two chapters reported the employment of lobbying during the period. Twenty-six of these chapters focused the lobbying efforts on licensure for one or more years. For the period as a whole, eighty-one percent of the lobbying-addressed priorities involved licensure or vendorship (47 of 58).

Available evidence, moreover, does not suggest that the legislative focus of state chapters become more social problem focused, following the attainment of legal regulation of social work. Chapters which operated in a context of no legal status were just as likely to focus upon social problem concerns as the chapters which had successfully established state registration or licensure. In fact, each of those chapters which has secured licensed status by 1976 placed first priority upon vendorship or the amendment of an existing licensure law.

Given the ideological heritage of social work, the pursuit of

special interests is typically associated with rhetorical justification
of those efforts. Professional self-interest concerns are defined in
terms of concern for public benefit.[5] Creation of a licensed service
monopoly, for example, is advocated soley in terms of consumer protec-
tion. The political and economic benefits to the profession itself,
resulting from the control over the supply of service providers, consti-
tutes a latent issue within professional discourse. In this regard, the
nature of the profession's advocacy of licensure fails to facilitate
rationality in public decision-making. The rhetorical justification of
policy preferences may constitute effective immediate-interest politics.
And selective definition of issues need not reflect anti-social intent.
Yet, dramatulurgical politics may well be dysfunctional to social
development. This is most true if the means by which formal public
choices emerge are regarded as crucial to the process of social develop-
ment. The issues do illustrate, however, the selective recasting of
the profession's interest in its own status enhancement, particularly
in the public advocacy of these two dominant state policy objectives.

One other consequence of this process of recasting policy objectives
is the emergence of contradiction in the assumptions of public positions.
The consumer protection rhetoric of licensure, for example, assumes
that service consumers lack the ability to distinguish incompetent
from competent workers. The stated rationale of vendorship, on the
other hand, assumes that consumers have the ability to distinguish
among relatively fine degrees and dimensions of service provider
competency. Given the latter, one would more logically advocate the
empowerment of consumers to make choices within an unrestrained service
market.

A standard justification of the profession's general quest for
improved status also involves problematic assumptions. It has been
suggested that the improvement of professional status, relative to other
fields, improves social work's ability to recruit and attract more
talented members of this society. This recruitment advantage, in turn,
is supposed to improve the quality of service. This rationale, however,
provides implicit support for a structural-functionalist model of
stratification and the oppressive cultural beliefs about the "reason"
for gross social inequality. Aggressive pursuit of expanded conceptions
of affirmative action, on the other hand, appear to be based upon a more
viable model of stratification.

In the 1940s Kenneth Pray asserted that "the usefulness of profes-
sional associations as an instrument of social action is necessarily
limited by (their) primary functional concern with professional stan-
dards."[6] The recent legislative record of state chapters does suggest
that the latter function has been preferred, particularly as the func-
tion relates to status concern. Within the sociology of occupations,

It is thought that the primary and most direct consequence of
licensing is the improvement of the profession's own political economy.[7]
As professions more actively seek "state-regulation," the consumer
protection claims of licensing advocates must be more closely
examined in all fields of work. While policy impact is a familiar
subject of social work research, very little evidence has been brought
to bear upon the actual consequences of social work licensure. During
the interim, it is disturbing that studies of the relation between
advanced formal education and service delivery effectiveness do not
consistently support the logic of the criteria upon which multi-level
licensure is based.[8] As systematic attention is focused upon the
possible benefits of licensure, attention should also be directed
towards its possible social costs. Does strict licensure further
professional disengagement from the plight of those who are marginal
to the American cultural and economic mainstream? How adversely is
the opportunity for low-income mobility effected by the institutionali-
zation of additional credential barriers in a key field of the service
sector? How does licensure relate to non-clinical sectors of the
profession or the status of minority group members? Regardless of
ultimate research outcomes, it is notable that the continued void in
impact research has been accompanied social work's intensification of
licensure efforts.

Regardless of the orientation toward the specific issues of licen-
sure and vendorship or the general orientation toward the institutiona-
lization of professional status, the question of the propriety of the
state chapters' nearly exclusive preoccupation with these concerns seems
most compelling. When one legislative concern dominates professional
agenda, at any level of government, there is reason to scrutinize
more than simply the consequences of the enactment of a legislative
objective. Attention should also be directed to the distribution of
costs and benefits. If the reduction of gross inequalities in life
chances remains a collective professional commitment, the distributive
issue is paramount. Given the commonplace exemption of public employees
from licensure requirements, it seems likely that the most disadvantaged
are least likely to benefit from an emphasis on licensure. Accordingly,
the profession's desired role in the creation of a more just and humane
society is poorly served by preoccupation with licensure, even if
licensure provides some means of protection for certain sectors of the
consuming public. Preoccupation with status concerns also involves
opportunity cost. Resources directed toward licensure have simply not
available for the pursuit of social problem directed priorities. The
ideals of social work seemingly demand that the mix of professional
legislative priorities reflect some capacity for the subordination of
professional interests and the interests of more privileged social

sectors to the interests of those lacking the necessities of existence
and basic nurturance. The political agenda of professional associations,
at least partially, reflect the level of commitment to an altruistic
ideal. And it is this commitment which may ultimately legitimate a
claim to professional status.

The nation-wide pattern of restricted state professional agenda
may partially reflect a low regard for state politics and a limited
notion of the policy-making significance of the states. As mediating
structures within a federal system, the states serve a significant
sources of policy innovation. Centrally planned change is not always
preferable or politically feasible.[9] Accordingly, social work's
pursuit of a more socially developed society may be supported by
the open advocacy of a wide range of preferred state-level policies.

The apparent status-enhancement emphasis of the state-level chap-
ters also prompts concern for the relation of professional identity to
social policy relevancy. Ideally, social work's contribution to
social policy development incorporates the experiences of direct service
practitioners. These practitioners may provide valuable direction by
their translation of patterns of encountered private troubles into
relevant public issues and proposals for remedial legislation.[10]
Jack Rothman has noted that most social workers associate their pro-
fessional responsibilities for social policy relevancy with intra-
professional channels and the subsequent legislative activities of
the professional associations.[11] Moreover, the state professional
associations embody a potential for greater organizational responsive-
ness to the policy concerns of social work practitioners, than the
larger and more distant national organization. Alternate but non-
exclusive explanations for the restricted focus of state chapter
legislative activity include a lack of professional-organizational
responsiveness to the policy concerns of member practitioners or
a very limited commitment to state policy relevancy by those members.

As many chapters remain in the formative stages of their organiza-
tional development, they vary in the degree and means by which on-going
general membership involvement is secured. In most cases, however,
annual chapter meetings appear to serve as the prime source of general
membership input. In addition to the state chapter boards, the members
of voluntary legislative committees exert considerable influence in
shaping chapter agenda. Member apathy appears to be a primary factor
limiting the legislative effectiveness of the state organizations.
Member apathy may also account for the limited focus of state chapter
agenda. In response to a recent open-ended inquiry, thirty-four of the
responding forty-three chapters cited member apathy as a primary factor
limiting their legislative effectiveness. One chapter president, simply
explained, "This drastically changes (apathy) when issues become pocket-

book concerns." In their efforts to involve their membership and due to their heavy reliance upon voluntary action by their membership, the state organizations may move toward a heavy status-enhancing legislative focus.[12] This restriction of agenda, in turn, may alienate those who expect priorities to focus more directly upon pressing social problems.

In summary, the recent legislative record of state professional associations suggests that the president of the National Association of Social Workers may have been premature in exempting social work from the category of professions (medicine, law) subject to increasing public disenchantment.[13] Opportunity for the pursuit of self-serving interests and the potential for manipulation of the public trust may have more to do with the entrenchment of traditional status than the field of professional endeavor. Intra-professional political processes shall determine how future social work legislative priorities relate to the status interests and social problem concerns of social work and its professional associations.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1   William Richan, Allan Mendelsohn. Social Work: The Unloved
        Profession. (N.Y.: Franklin Watts, Inc., 1973) p. 52

2   Alan Gartner, Frank Riessman. The Service Society and the Consumer
        Vanguard. (N.Y.: Harper and Row, Inc., 1974) p. 148-9

3   An exploratory questionnaire was circulated among the fifty state
    chapters during the spring of 1977. The four non-responding
    chapters were geographically dispersed and representative of the
    states according to the legal status of social work. A commitment
    was made to refrain from identifying any chapter with any of their
    fifteen item responses. Manuscript on file at Saint Louis Univer-
    sity, School of Social Service.

4   Measures of central tendency based upon the responses of forty-
    three chapter offices. Inquiry was issued during the winter of
    1977-78.

5   For general discussion of the role of interests, recasting
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    Alvin W. Gouldner. The Dialectic of Ideology and Technology:
        The Origins, Grammar and Future of Ideology.
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6   Kenneth Pray, "Social Work and Social Action."
        PROCEEDINGS. National Conference of Social Work, 1948, p. 500

7   Randall Collins. Conflict Sociology: Toward an Explanatory
        Science. (N.Y.: Academic Press, 1975) p. 342

8   Tony Tripodi, Phillip Fellin, Henry Meyer. The Assessment of
        Social Research. (Itasca, Illinois, 1969) p. 164

9   J. Strumpf, B. Granger. "Social Welfare Planning: An Essay"
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    For a more general assessment of the limitations of centrally
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Peter Berger, Richard Neuhaus. To Empower People: Role of
    Mediating Structures in Public Policy.
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10   William Schwartz. "Private Troubles or Public Issues: One Social
        Work Job or Two?" Social Welfare Forum (N.Y.: Columbia
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11   Jack Rothman. Planning and Organizing for Social Change: Action
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12   For strong argument that the influence of the most powerful
     professional associations is attributable to their provision
     of non-collective benefits to members see:

     Mancur Olson. The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and
        the Theory of Groups. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Press,
        1977) 139-166

13   "Social Work Prognosis Is Good, Says Katz," in NASW News
        vol. 23, No. 1, January 1978, p. 11