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THE OCCUPATIONAL PRESTIGE OF SOCIAL WORK

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ABSTRACT

A survey of two hundred and fifty six social work educators pertaining to the prestige of social workers indicated that social workers were viewed as having less prestige than fourteen of the twenty-two occupations with whom they were compared. Factors both contributing to and lessening the prestige of social work were identified, as well as suggestions for enhancing social work's prestige.

Through the years, social research and other literature have provided various evidence of the diminished credibility and devalued status of the social work profession. More than twenty years following publication of Ernest Greenwood's observation in *Social Work* that the profession was seeking to rise within the professional hierarchy, ¹ numerous arguments have accumulated that social workers have not achieved the regard and esteem accorded other occupations.² Indeed, low professional autonomy and authority within human service agencies have served to further illuminate social work's image as a "semi-profession."³ Additionally, recent research by Condie et. al. suggests that despite the fact that the public may have greater awareness of social work roles than in past years, they still feel they would not consult a social worker for a personal problem. The authors conclude that the profession may lag behind the ministry, medicine, and psychiatry in prestige. ⁴

Perhaps the most direct confrontation to the profession in recent years was provided by Richan and Mendelsohn who perceptively described social work as an "unloved profession," overdependent, insecure, unloved by clients it has stopped serving, and even unloved by itself. "Seeking professional status, they are second-class citizens in the ranks of the professions."⁵ This situation may be compounded by what Max Lerner persuasively views as an identity crisis surrounding

various professions. He suggests that social work, among others, must recapture the sense of vocation or calling implicit in its helping function.⁶

It has been noted elsewhere that much energy has been expended in studying the image, status, and role of the social worker and considerable research has focused on the way social work is viewed by other professions.⁷ Little attention, however, has been directed to systematic study by social workers of their standing in the professional hierarchy. The purpose of this research is to examine the social worker's prestige through the perceptions of social work educators who represent social work among the hierarchy of academic disciplines.

A mailed questionnaire survey of graduate social work educators was conducted during the summer of 1978 to determine: 1) the way social work educators perceived the prestige accorded social workers relative to the prestige they believed was accorded members of twenty two other occupations, 2) what social worker educators believed contributed to the prestige of the social work profession, 3) what educators believed lessened the prestige of the social work profession, and 4) what educators thought social work practitioners had to do to improve their prestige.

Occupational Prestige

It is known that all complex societies are characterized by a prestige ordering of occupations. Knowledge and skill are, perhaps, the most accepted determinants of such prestige, but income, difficulty of training, intelligence required, and the occupation's overall value to society, must be viewed as significant contributing factors. The ability to exercise greater control over scarce resources, authority, and privilege, often are granted to more valued occupations.⁸

Studies of occupational prestige have been reported for many years. The well known research of the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) in 1947, and the replication in 1963, indicated that welfare workers ranked in prestige about the same as policemen, undertakers, newspaper columnists, and farm owners, but considerably lower than professors, psychologists, and public school teachers.⁹ More recent research by Tremain using his Standard International Occupational Prestige Scale, located social workers with a score of 52, as compared to medical doctors (78), physicists (76),

lawyers (73), psychologists and sociologists (68), government administrators (64), teachers (61), musicians (56), journalists (55), nurses (54), librarians (54), clergymen (54), peace corps members (53), stenographers (48), policemen (40), and laborers (18).¹⁰

The extreme importance of social work's prestige as it relates to the individual practitioner, client, and the profession itself, was proposed by Kadushin as early as 1957.¹¹ He argued that the prestige of the profession affected the social worker's self-concept, relationships with other professions, and feelings about his job. Kadushin drew two important conclusions at the time. First, the prestige level of social work was not as yet clearly positioned. Secondly, social work consistently ranked high on occupational prestige scales of the total range of occupations, but among the lowest of the professions listed. Tremain's published findings twenty years later tend to substantiate at least one of Kadushin's conclusions, that social work is ranked among the lowest of the professions in prestige.

The literature reflects a multitude of causes for social work's diminished standing. Among these is the inability of professional schools to attract high quality students, stereotyping of social work by young people, lack of effective outcomes in practice, and the community's relatively low opinion of the clients served by the profession.¹² Folger, commenting on persons who enter social welfare occupations, is particularly condescending. He believes social welfare personnel are particularly unique since the majority have not obtained professional degrees prior to job entry. Domination by women, rapid job turnover, a large labor reserve, and indistinct boundaries in practice, contribute to low salaries and inability to attract men.¹³ While this portrayal may not be entirely accurate, it does carry some grains of truth. In fact, a more recent discussion by Kadushin suggests that men in social work may suffer from a "role strain" in relations with colleagues, clients, and the community as members of a profession categorized as female.¹⁴ While men do successfully adapt within the profession, the implication still remains that the profession's prestige may in some way be lessened.

Methodology

In the spring of 1978, deans of all graduate schools of social work were contacted explaining the study purpose and enlisting the assistance of their schools. Lists of all faculty employed as of

September, 1977, were requested.

Fifty-three schools, representing all geographic areas, smaller and larger, public and private institutions, expressed interest in participating. As faculty lists were received, the names were consecutively numbered. A total of 550 faculty members were selected as the sample for inclusion in the study using a computer list of random digits. All 53 schools were represented in the sample drawn. Participating schools subsequently received a set of questionnaires and letters explaining the purpose of the study, with instructions to distribute materials to those faculty selected. Return envelopes were provided.

The self-administered questionnaire consisted of three parts. The first had eight items to provide demographic and background data on respondents. Part two was an instrument developed by the author in which respondents were asked to consider on a rating scale of 1-5 whether social workers had much lower; lower; about the same; higher; or much higher prestige, as compared to members of twenty-two other occupations. Part three consisted of open-ended questions in which social work faculty were asked to comment on what they believe contributed to the prestige of social work as a profession, what lessened the prestige of social work as a profession, and what had to be done by social workers to improve their prestige within the community.

The questionnaire was pre-tested with faculty colleagues and with some practicing social workers. Suggestions were incorporated in the final format.

The Statistical Analysis System 76 was used to perform statistical procedures for data collected in parts one and two.¹⁵ Open-ended question data were hand tabulated following content analysis and categorization.

Two hundred and fifty-six faculty members (47 percent) completed questionnaires. In table 1, the sample of respondents is described according to sex, academic degree, rank, and teaching areas. More than 60 percent of respondents were male. The majority had earned doctoral degrees and were tenured. Nearly 90 percent had academic rank of assistant, associate, or full professor. They represented a wide diversity of teaching areas and specializations in schools of social work, although social planning and policy and research were mentioned most frequently.

TABLE 1
 CHARACTERISTICS OF THE STUDY SAMPLE
 OF SOCIAL WORK EDUCATORS (N=256)

Characteristics	Number	Frequency	Percentage
Sex			
Female	102		39.8
Male	154		60.2
Academic Degree			
Master's	100		39.1
Doctoral	156		60.9
Rank			
Instructor	9		3.5
Assistant Professor	65		25.4
Associate Professor	89		34.8
Professor	72		28.1
Lecturer	16		6.3
Other	5		2.0
Primary Teaching Area*			
Generic Social Work	48		18.8
Casework	38		14.8
Group Work	19		7.4
Community Organization	24		9.3
Social Planning/Policy	61		23.8
Research	57		22.3
Administration	30		11.7
Human Growth/Behavior	52		20.8
Other	40		15.6

*Some faculty mentioned more than one teaching area

The mean age of faculty respondents was 46.1 years. Mean years of teaching experience was 9.2 years.

Findings

Table 2 indicates fourteen occupations which social work educators believed were accorded higher prestige in the community than social workers. The lower the mean, the less prestige social workers enjoyed compared to the particular occupation.

Clearly, social work educators viewed physicians, lawyers, physicists, and business executives, as occupational groups enjoying greater prestige among those included in this study. Engineers, clinical psychologists, and biologists, followed closely in prestige. Clergymen, government administrators, city planners, journalists, sociologists, and historians, ranked somewhat higher than social workers.

On the other hand, social workers were considered as enjoying higher prestige than eight of the occupations compared. Social workers were considered only slightly higher than musicians, but the means indicated increasingly greater prestige than public health workers, nurses, speech therapists, public school teachers, librarians, law enforcement officers, and physical education teachers. Despite some variations, these findings are generally similar to those of Tremain. In his research, physicians, lawyers, physical and life scientists, engineers, psychologists and sociologists, were all ranked higher than social workers. It is possible that social work educators may have overestimated the prestige of social workers, in light of Tremain's findings that teachers, nurses, clergymen, journalists, librarians, and musicians, also had higher prestige scores than social workers. Both these findings, and Tremain's, support the contention of Condie et. al. that social work does appear to lag behind medicine and the ministry in prestige.

Factors Contributing to Social Work Prestige

Respondents were asked directly what they believed contributed to the prestige of social work as a profession. Thirty percent stated that the humanitarian and altruistic concerns of the profession contributed to social work's standing. One educator praised social workers for the "willingness to do what we do."

TABLE 2
 PRESTIGE RATINGS OF SOCIAL WORKERS COMPARED TO OTHER OCCUPATIONS:
 HIGHER PRESTIGE OCCUPATIONS

Occupation	Social Workers' Prestige					Mean
	Much (1)	Lower (2)	Same (3)	Higher (4)	Much Higher (5)	
Physician	77.1	17.4	.8	1.2	3.6	1.367
Lawyer	50.6	40.3	4.3	1.2	3.6	1.667
Physicist	41.3	45.6	6.7	4.0	2.4	1.805
Business Executive	37.6	50.8	5.2	5.2	1.2	1.816
Professional Engineer	17.6	59.6	16.0	5.2	1.6	2.136
Clinical Psychologist	13.9	54.4	26.2	4.8	.8	2.242
Biologist	17.5	49.8	22.3	10.0	.4	2.258
Clergman/Rabbi	8.0	39.2	41.2	10.4	1.2	2.576
Government Administrator	5.6	36.5	44.4	13.1	.4	2.662
City Planner	4.4	33.3	50.8	10.7	.8	2.702
Journalist	2.8	37.1	41.4	17.5	1.2	2.772
Sociologist	4.8	28.5	49.0	16.1	1.6	2.811
Historian	4.8	36.3	33.5	23.4	2.0	2.814
Artist	4.9	29.6	30.8	32.4	2.4	2.979

TABLE 3
 PRESTIGE RATINGS OF SOCIAL WORKERS COMPARED TO OTHER OCCUPATIONS:
 LOWER PRESTIGE OCCUPATIONS

Occupation	Much Lower (1)	Lower (2)	Social Workers' Same (3)	Prestige Higher (4)	Much Higher (5)	Mean
Musician	4.8	26.7	34.3	31.5	2.8	3.007
Public Health Worker	1.6	8.3	69.2	19.4	1.6	3.110
Nurse	4.0	8.3	54.8	29.4	3.6	3.202
Speech Therapist	2.0	7.1	60.3	28.2	2.4	3.218
Public School Teacher	0	6.0	55.2	35.7	3.2	3.361
Librarian	.4	5.2	45.2	46.0	3.2	3.464
Law Enforcement Officer	.4	10.0	35.2	48.8	5.6	3.492
Physical Education Teacher	1.6	8.4	22.4	57.6	10.0	3.660

Twenty-three percent believed that the competence and effectiveness of practitioners were important factors. Twenty-one percent felt that prestige was related to meeting the needs of the communities served by practitioners. Nine percent noted that the prestige of the profession was directly related to the outstanding work of certain individuals who served in important roles as administrators of agencies, policy makers, and politicians. Interestingly, only seven percent stated that the profession's prestige was related to the development of more sophisticated knowledge and technology. A small number of respondents indicated that greater licensing of social workers, private practice, and increased control over welfare resources were important to the profession's prestige.

These findings appear remarkable to the extent that social work educators varied widely in their perceptions of factors contributing to the profession's prestige. One must conclude that educators convey considerable uncertainty as to what are the actual strengths of the profession.

Factors Lessening Social Work Prestige

Similarly, educators showed little consensus pertaining to factors which lessened the profession's prestige. Twenty-five percent indicated that the profession was hurt by those persons ineffectively practicing social work without sufficient training. Another twenty-five percent noted the negative image of social work held by the public. Seventeen percent believed that the profession was hampered by society's overall lack of concern for the problems, causes, and clients of social work.

A small number of respondents (7 percent) commented that the profession was hindered because the techniques used by practitioners generally lacked an empirically tested base. An equal number (7 percent) noted that the profession lacked clear definitions and purposes for what it was doing. A few stated that social work prestige was diminished through mismanagement of agencies and programs, poor educational programs, and its female orientation and leadership.

Improving Social Work Prestige

Nearly a third (33 percent) of the respondents stated that practitioners could improve their community prestige by demonstrating greater concern for assessing effectiveness of what they are doing.

One educator commented that the profession must "demand a more precise level of practice to weed out incompetence." Another believed that practitioners must be "more sensitive to the public's demand for accountability."

Twenty-four percent stated that practitioners should demonstrate more concern for social causes in the community. As stated by one professor, social practitioners should:

..."become advocates for improved standards of living for clientele and non-clientele alike...devote more time in supporting human causes rather than professional ones."

Twenty percent clearly stated that social work required more effective public relations techniques as a means of interpreting the profession's purposes. Many noted that NASW could do more to enlist the media in supporting this effort. Nine percent thought that practitioners should conduct professionally related research and seek publication of their findings. Seven percent stated that social workers could improve their prestige by becoming more involved in the political process. Several pointed to the improved image of the profession related to the fact that some members had been elected to high public offices in recent years.

Summary and Implications

This research was aimed at determining how graduate social work educators perceived the prestige of social workers as an occupational group relative to the prestige accorded twenty-two other occupations in the community. The author also wanted to determine what educators considered as factors which both contributed to, as well as lessened, the prestige of social work as a profession. Finally, the study aimed at providing some guidelines pertaining to those efforts practitioners could make to further enhance their prestige in the community. Further research would be helpful, of course, in examining more completely the manner in which the public and other occupational groups perceive the strengths and limitations of the profession.

The study findings indicated that social workers are viewed as having less prestige in the community than fourteen of twenty-two occupations with whom they were compared. They were perceived as having greater prestige than only eight of the occupations.

The similarity of these findings with other research inves-

tigations suggests that social work ranks among the lowest of the professions in prestige. One must conclude, therefore, that this rather tarnished portrayal of the profession must be attended to in the years to come if social work is to attain greater access to resources and authority considered vital to achievement of its various purposes. It is clearer that in the years to come, social work's tendency to fall back upon its humanitarian purposes to justify its standing will have to shift toward a policy of increased accountability as a means of commanding respect from the community. The findings of this research point out that the profession is hindered to the extent that it fails to assume greater responsibility for assessing competency and effectiveness in agency work. In the future the profession will have to address the problem of inadequate preparation of practitioners and steps will have to be taken to insure basic as well as continuing educational preparation for effective practice. Perhaps the professional schools and NASW will have to develop a course of action which will serve to remove the stereotyping of social workers and seek to attract qualified young people to the profession as is done in medicine, law, psychology, and other fields. Indeed, the profession must reshape its image so that the community views social workers as knowledgeable, well trained, research orientated, and visibly concerned with solving community problems.

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