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WORK-RELATED PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL WORKERS VERSUS ADMINISTRATORS:  
MORE GRIST FOR THE "IS SOCIAL WORK A PROFESSION?" MILL

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ABSTRACT

The work-related perceptions of 683 employees of a federally funded public assistance agency were examined by occupational classification. The results show that persons employed as social workers report distinctively different patterns of attitudes and values than do those employed as administrators. These distinctions were most dramatic for the younger members of each group. The overall results fail to refute previous predictions of an evolving and critical duality in the field of social work.

From the time that Flexner (1915) first raised the issue of the professional status of social work, writers in every decade have debated the topic. Some, like Flexner, have denied that social work is a profession, while others (e.g., Greenwood, 1957) have awarded it full professional status. Still others have created such labels as "semi-profession," "mid-level profession" or "emerging profession" to describe where social work lies in the middle ground (see Leighninger, 1978, for a review). The concern with this issue has been so great that Leighninger (1978) concludes that much of social work's history can best be understood in light of attempts at professionalism -- and, apparently, attempts to resolve the matter of the field's professional status. Yet in spite of the attention this topic has historically received, an acceptable resolution does not seem to be at hand. Even in the 1970's, writers at the same school of social welfare (Leighninger, 1978; Specht, 1972) reached dramatically different conclusions with regard to both the present professional status of social work and its foreseeable future.

In what is perhaps the most negative appraisal, Specht (1972) argued that social work was "undergoing a fundamental change and may even be approaching its denouement." In support of this position, Specht examined a number of ideological trends (activism, anti-individualism, communalism, and environmental determinism) each

of which the writer viewed as impacting negatively on social work's professional status. Specht predicted that social work would break up into two tiers, one professional (comprised of administrators) and one not (comprised of social workers or direct service personnel). He differentiated these tiers by the terms "social welfare" for the former and "social work" for the latter. Specifically, Specht suggested that: 1) "those professionals whose major tasks and functions are concerned with the planning, administration, and evaluation of social welfare services will probably continue as a professional group with their own identity." And, thus, "graduate schools of social work would then become graduate schools of social welfare devoted to training this type of professional," while 2) providers of direct services, turned out by undergraduate schools, would be absorbed into other fields such as public health or education or be left with the role of providing sub-professional service in areas such as public assistance or corrections. (All emphases added here.)

The present paper provides some rudimentary evidence that Specht's prediction of a split between "social welfare" and "social work" may indeed have come to pass -- at least as reflected by the work-related perceptions of administrators vs. providers of direct services in one rather large public assistance agency. No attempt will be made here to conclusively define the characteristics of a "profession" nor to comparatively place administrators vs. service providers on a continuum of professionalism. Rather, it is our intent to examine some potential differences between the perceptions of administrators and service providers in a public assistance agency and stimulate some thought about the implications of these differences for social work education and on-the-job training in social service organizations. In this regard the present study is, perhaps, unique; to date there has been no empirical test of Specht's predictions, however indirect. It only seems clear at this point that Specht's beliefs are, at least, not shared by social workers themselves -- who have been found to report high levels of self-perceived professionalism (Clearfield, 1977; Dyer, 1977). The present paper provides data that are relevant to Specht's predictions, yet less susceptible to acquiescence or respondent bias than are self-reports of professionalism. Furthermore, while other studies have examined the perceptions and attitudes of the composite social service employee (e.g., Finch, 1975), the present paper provides, to the authors' knowledge, the first empirical study that compares the perceptions of different occupational classifications of social service employees, in particular administrators vs. social workers. Such analyses by occupational classification may be important. Elsewhere (e.g., Fein, 1973; White, 1977) researchers have found critical between-sub-group differences that were initially masked in previously published composite analyses.

## Method

### Sample and procedure

A general attitude survey was handed, by various departmental representatives, to all employees (n = 931) of a federally-funded public assistance agency in an eastern state. Six hundred eighty-three (73%) of these questionnaires were completed and returned by direct mail to the senior author. Each respondent could be classified into one of eight occupational groups, the designations for which were provided by the host organization. The designations are: upper-, mid-, and lower-level administrators, social workers, case technicians, consultants, reviewers, and clericals. Demographic characteristics of the total sample are shown in Table 1.

### Measures

In addition to demographic questions, the survey used in the present study assessed the five traditionally important organizational variables described below.

Sources of Organizational Attachment (SOA). A measure developed by Mowday, Porter, and Dubin (1974) was used to assess the perceived influence of 12 specific aspects of the job, work environment, and organization on the individual's desire to remain with or leave the organization. Responses to each potential source of attachment to the organization are assessed by convention on a seven-point scale ranging from "strong influence toward staying" (+3) through "no influence in either direction" (0) to "strong influence toward leaving" (-3). Scores on this scale are typically used to assess the relative value of each SOA to the members of different occupational groups or organizational units. It is generally assumed that groups with similar value systems will have similar SOA profiles, i.e., their ratings of the attachment value of the various sources will be parallel.

Organizational Commitment. This nine-item scale assesses the extent to which the individual: 1) believes in and accepts the values and goals of the organization; 2) is willing to exert high levels of effort on behalf of the organization; and 3) desires to remain a member of the organization (Porter and Smith, 1970; Porter, Steers, Mowday, and Boulian, 1974).

Perceived Competence. The individual's basic psychological feelings of competence which result from mastery of his/her work environment were assessed with the 23 item index developed by Wagner and Morse (1975). Initial validation studies of this measure (Wagner and Morse, 1975; Morse, 1976) have provided strong evidence that scores on this scale predict objective indices of work performance such as employee and work unit output.

Job Satisfaction. Respondent job satisfaction was assessed with the Job Descriptive Index (JDI) (Smith, Kendall, and Hulin, 1969). The JDI assesses satisfaction with work, pay, promotion opportunities, supervision, and co-workers.

Propensity to Leave the Organization. This one-item scale asked the respondent to estimate the likelihood that he/she will seek and accept another job (five point response format with the anchors: Very likely, somewhat likely, not sure, somewhat unlikely, very unlikely).

## Results and Discussion

One of the primary causes for the "de-professionalization of social work" Specht contends is that "increasing numbers of social work functions are being performed by non-MSWs," especially in government where there is increasing reluctance "to support graduate social work education or to hire professional social workers." This is certainly true in the present sample. Among the 154 employees who are designated as social workers, only 10% have a Master's degree and none have a doctorate. In contrast, 43% of the administrators (including all three levels) have Master's degrees and 3% have doctorates. This comparison is even more dramatic when only upper-level administrators are considered.

Table 2 summarizes the responses to the Sources of Organizational Attachment Scale for the total sample and each of the occupational classifications that comprise it. (Due to the relatively small number of upper-level administrators, upper- and mid-level administrators were combined for this analysis.) Given that upper- and mid-level administrators comprise the most highly educated sub-group, their responses are anchored against the left-hand margin of the table and the sources of organizational attachment are ordered in accord with the rank they were given by that particular sub-group. Responses for other sub-groups were then added to the table as appropriate within that framework.

Two findings here are worthy of note. First, the profile ranks of upper/mid-level administrators and social workers differ substantially. And, the largest rank differences occur for "job duties" and "values of the organization." One might speculate that of the 12 sources of attachment, these are the very two that might best differentiate professionals and non-professionals. In each case, these sources of attachment are rated lower in importance by social workers than by administrators.

Second, when the profile of ranks provided by social workers is compared with each other sub-group profile, that profile is most

similar - - not to other "professional" respondents (i.e., administrators) - - but to the profile provided by clerical workers ( $r_s = .63$ ,  $p < .05$ ) who constitute the least educated and professionally socialized sub-group.

Thusfar, the data provide little if any evidence that would refute Specht's predictions. It is important to note, however, that these data were obtained within a public assistance agency - - the very type of organization in which Specht predicted the professionalism of service providers would be at its lowest level. A dramatically different picture may emerge in other organizations, especially those organizations in the private sector which tend to hire more highly educated and socialized practitioners.

The means and standard deviations of the remaining study variables are presented by occupational classification in Table 3. The results in this table show that while social workers generally express mid-range levels of job satisfaction, they report lower levels of organizational commitment and perceived competence and a higher likelihood of leaving the organization than any other group. Upper- and mid-level administrators, on the other hand, discriminate themselves by reporting higher levels of commitment and competence and a lower likelihood of leaving the organization than any other group - - in addition to generally high levels of satisfaction with the facets of work sampled by the JDI. (These findings do not appear to be confounded by level in the organization in that clericals, reviewers, and case technicians provide profiles on these variables that are comparable to, or more "positive" than, the profile provided by social workers.) Although the differences between lower-level administrators and social workers are not as extreme, the overall results in Table 3 serve to illustrate some of the substantial differences between the attitudes and perceptions of administrators and social workers that may have been underestimated in previous studies which assessed responses of the composite social service employee (e.g., Finch, 1975) or only one sub-group of employees (e.g., mid-level managers, Haynes, 1970). In particular, the fact that social workers in the present study reported relatively low levels of perceived competence may have important implications for their performance and working life quality. Much recent evidence (Dipboye, 1977; Korman, 1976; Morse, 1976; Snyder and Williams, 1982) has shown, for example, that low or negative perceptions of competence may lead to such undesirable work outcomes as poor performance, absenteeism, turnover, and career dissatisfaction. In addition, several theorists have suggested that such attitudes may act as a barrier to self-selection into administrative roles - - a common source of promotional opportunities for social workers.

Given the likely importance of low levels of self-perceived

competence among social workers, and Specht's prediction that the situation was worsening across time, one further analysis was conducted. In an attempt to simulate longitudinal data, perceived competence scores for administrators and social workers were broken down by respondent age group. (To provide the n necessary for this analysis, upper-, mid-, and lower-level administrators were combined.) These results are presented in Table 4.

An examination of the data in Table 4 reveals that the perceived competence of social workers decreases monotonically with age, a finding that is not true for administrators. Additionally, it may be worthy of note that although the competence of social workers increases with age, it never even reaches the lowest level of competence reported by administrators in any age category. The most compelling and significant contrast between administrators and social workers, however, involves the perceived competence of the youngest members of each group of respondents. It is clear that the most recently trained administrators and social workers in this sample (those trained in the decade since Specht's predictions) are entering the workforce with dramatically different beliefs about their ability to perform effectively on the job. Even if relatively high levels of perceived competence were not to be construed as an indication of professionalism, in light of the research on competence cited previously this finding could signal some very unfortunate future consequences for young social workers in the public sector.

Within the organization examined here, the overall findings of this study empirically substantiate an aspect of Specht's (1972) predicted duality in the field of social work, though not the demise of the field he forecast. While the present study has clear methodological limitations (e.g., it does not provide the actual longitudinal data necessary for an adequate test of trends across time; its sample is comprised of workers employed by a single public assistance agency), it does suggest that: 1) previous studies that had investigated only the composite social service employee or that involved self-reports of perceived professionalism may have underestimated some of the important (and evolving?) differences between the relative values and attitudes of administrators and social workers, and 2) more rigorous tests of the issues addressed here are warranted - - particularly in the private sector where circumstances may differ substantially. Such studies may help educators and practitioners head off some unintended and unwanted developments in the field of human services. In fact, the acid test of social welfare/social work as a profession may well involve how the field attempts to understand and deal with the apparent duality focused upon here.

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Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample by Percentage of Response  
(Total N = 683)

Characteristics	%	Characteristics	%
Age (yr)		Occupant of Supervisor position	
20-30	37	Yes	22
31-40	33	No	78
41-50	13	Time on present job	
51+	17	1 yr.	27
Sex		1-5 yr.	59
Male	26	5 yr.	14
Female	74	Time in present organization	
Education		1 yr.	14
Some high school or less	0	1-5 yr.	52
High school graduate	20	5 yr.	34
Some college	19		
Associate degree	7		
Bachelor's degree	25		
Some post Bachelor's work	18		
Master's degree	8		
Some post Master's work	2		
Doctoral degree	1		

Table 2  
Ranks and Mean Scores for Sources of Organizational Attachment by Occupational Group

Source of Organizational Attachment	*Upper and Mid-level Administrators (n = 35)		*Lower-level Administrators (n = 66)		Social Workers (n = 154)		Technicians (n = 210)		Consultants (n = 30)		Reviewers (n = 46)		Clericals (n = 130)		Total Sample (n = 683)	
	Rank	$\bar{x}$	Rank	$\bar{x}$	Rank	$\bar{x}$	Rank	$\bar{x}$	Rank	$\bar{x}$	Rank	$\bar{x}$	Rank	$\bar{x}$	Rank	$\bar{x}$
Job duties	1	1.77	4	1.09	7	.42	6	.64	2.5	1.23	8	.49	7	.62	4	.70
Immediate work colleagues	2	1.69	2	1.65	1	1.72	2	1.52	1	1.60	1	1.65	1	1.67	1	1.63
Effectiveness of unit	3	1.49	3	1.26	3	.74	3	.85	5	.80	6	.70	3	1.09	3	.92
Geographical location of office	4	1.09	1	1.71	2	1.16	1	1.59	2.5	1.23	2	1.24	2	1.54	2	1.43
Reaction to performance	5	1.06	5	.53	8	.36	5	.65	6.5	.63	9	.35	6	.68	6	.57
Values of the organization	6	.77	8.5	.29	11	.11	4	.75	4	.90	10	.33	4	1.06	5	.59
Effectiveness of the overall organization	7	.51	12	.02	5	-.56	8	.35	11	.10	11	-.17	5	.73	9	.14
Reputation of the organization	8	.49	11	-.20	4	-.57	12	.01	8.5	-.37	12	.11	8	.56	11.5	-.02
Promotion prospects	9	-.23	6	-.42	6	-.54	10	-.23	6.5	-.63	3	-.85	12	-.30	7	-.42
Supervisor's response to feelings	10	-.17	7	-.34	12	-.10	11	.15	8.5	-.37	4.5	-.74	11	.45	11.5	-.02
Salary Prospects	11	.09	8.5	.29	9	-.31	7	.50	12	-.03	4.5	-.74	9	-.54	10	-.05
Supervisor's structuring of work	12	.03	10	.23	10	.24	9	.24	10	.17	7	.54	10	.49	8	.28

NOTE: Tied ranks are assigned the mean of the ranks they would otherwise occupy.

\*Designations (Upper, Middle, Lower) for administrators were provided by the focal agency. They represent exactly the system the agency itself uses to classify its managers.

Table 3  
Means and Standard Deviations for  
Remaining Variables By Occupational Group

	*Upper and Mid-Level Administrators		*Lower-Level Administrators		Social Workers		Case Technicians		Consultants		Reviewers		Clericals		Total Sample	
	$\bar{X}$	S	$\bar{X}$	S	$\bar{X}$	S	$\bar{X}$	S	$\bar{X}$	S	$\bar{X}$	S	$\bar{X}$	S	$\bar{X}$	S
Organization Commitment	29.97	6.46	26.36	6.78	22.97	7.40	27.75	7.60	27.43	6.01	26.13	8.12	28.99	7.32	26.73	7.69
Perceived Competence	83.93	9.01	80.67	11.67	75.34	10.56	77.90	10.97	82.48	12.09	78.43	11.82	79.80	10.42	78.54	11.06
<u>Satisfaction</u>																
Work	36.51	9.20	34.05	10.00	29.09	9.92	28.35	10.12	35.70	10.24	30.48	12.00	26.91	10.86	29.68	10.66
Promotion Op- portunities	20.17	14.38	18.42	12.44	15.53	13.78	16.31	13.82	15.47	10.12	14.78	14.72	17.12	15.86	16.56	13.98
Co-Workers	42.00	9.29	42.50	9.29	38.38	11.42	37.91	12.93	39.47	12.33	39.26	11.63	39.02	11.46	39.03	11.70
Supervision	40.60	11.74	37.92	12.32	40.21	12.21	38.33	12.61	40.60	11.10	40.15	11.24	40.77	11.32	39.47	12.05
Pay	24.11	10.07	24.67	9.67	19.81	11.17	22.49	12.23	26.47	11.38	16.83	11.87	14.15	11.41	20.33	11.99
Likelihood of Leaving	2.31	1.32	2.89	1.39	3.23	1.33	2.64	1.46	2.43	1.30	2.87	1.39	2.45	1.24	2.75	1.39

\*Designations (Upper, Middle, Lower) for administrators were provided by the focal agency. They represent exactly the system the agency itself uses to classify its managers.

Table 4  
 Perceived Competence of Administrators and Social Workers  
 By Age Group

<u>Ages in yrs.</u>	<u>Administrators</u>		<u>Social Workers</u>		<u>t-test of Mean Differences</u>
	<u><math>\bar{x}</math></u>	<u>s.d.</u>	<u><math>\bar{x}</math></u>	<u>s.d.</u>	
21-30	86.36	7.72	72.81	9.32	4.44, p<.0001
31-40	79.59	11.74	76.19	11.07	1.42, p<.10
41-50	83.18	9.40	78.93	10.03	1.17, ns
51+	83.42	10.83	79.25	13.11	.93, ns