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COMMENT ON "PROFESSIONAL ACHIEVEMENT" IN SOCIAL WORK

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Anything which would help explain professional achievement in social work would be an important contribution to knowledge. In the present instance poor conceptualization and weak data analyses do not support such a conclusion.

The conceptualization of achievement is defective. No theoretical basis is provided for item selection or interpretation. Blumer (1956:689-690) has pointed to the need for such a standard if social science data are to be useful.

Starting in reverse order, the item given the greatest weight is publishing a paper. One could be a high achiever by publishing two papers within five years of graduation. What are the chances of publishing even one paper? There are about 1,000 papers published each year in front-line social work journals. There are about another 3,000 papers published in lesser social work journals and non-social work journals. Using the 100,000 membership of NASW as a standard and cumulating the chances over five years the chances are one in five that a social worker can publish an article in a five year period. This is a generous estimate since less than half of all MSW's belong to NASW. Over half of all social work publication is by faculty members and by non-social workers. The chances for newly minted MSW's to publish

even one article within five years of graduation are less than 1 percent.

The next factor is to have enrolled in an advanced degree program beyond the MSW. The weight given to this is only one point short of high achievement. What are the chances of this happening? The latest listing of doctoral dissertations in *Social Work Research and Abstracts* (1984) contains 184 entries. Taking account of the long period in the pipeline and the fact that some social workers go into other degree programs, even at the master's level, in any given year there are probably five thousand MSW social workers seriously studying for a graduate degree. The chances of a social worker entering a graduate program for another degree after the MSW are less than one in twenty.

Entering a graduate program is a matter of interest and not difficulty. That can hardly be called an achievement. The terminal degree for the profession is still the master's degree. It is not going to change in the near term even though this may be desirable.

The next characteristic is the strangest of all. One can get half-way to being a high achiever by not engaging in direct practice. There is no reward for being a practitioner. This is sidestepped by saying that another measure is needed to reflect achievement in practice. Social work is a practice profession. To develop any measure of achievement which does not include direct practice as an option places the practitioner in a secondary position. Thus, this component of achievement is denied to anyone who wants a career as a practitioner. This is a deft way of cutting the heart out of the profession and recasting it in a planning-administration format.

The next criterion, holding office in a professional association, could be amusing if it didn't hold such ominous portent for the future of the profession. As with getting out of practice, one can get half-way to achievement by serving as an officer in a professional association. At all levels of NASW, which would be the chief arena for service, it is difficult to get people even willing to run for office. There is no

evidence that the most distinguished people in the field have run for top positions. In addition, NASW follows such a strict pattern of sexual and racial quotas that even the opportunity to run is denied to many in the organization. The chances of being able to serve as an officer in a social work organization are somewhat higher than for publication but still well below 5 percent. As with entering a graduate program, this factor is more a matter of interest than achievement. There remains the problem of how to make holding office an achievement and an honor.

The next characteristic is presenting a paper at a conference. This also allows one to get half-way to achievement with a single occurrence. It is much easier to present a paper than it is to get it published. In an era of declining attendance, at many conferences papers are even accepted as a way to guarantee participation. Writing papers is not the diversion of choice for most social workers. It is probable that not more than one social worker in ten presents a paper in a five year period. This is a generous estimate.

That leaves the two final criteria, attending conferences and participating in continuing education. Here one would have to do both of these more than once to get half-way to achievement. Both of these activities are highly accessible to any social worker who wants them. There are numerous opportunities to participate. A most generous estimate would be that 20 percent of all social workers participate in one of these activities in a five year period. This too is a matter of interest rather than earned position.

In sum, what Specht calls achievement is made up of things available to few social workers or things that are a simple matter of interest. The definition negates the importance of practice. Who would propose such a definition? Why the Dean of one of the select schools of the United States. Select schools attract large numbers of students who intend to go on for advanced degrees and who participate in the intellectual activities which would give them a good chance of being achievers with this measure. These are the places where the books and papers are written. The "top"

schools are influential in social work education but in recent years they have not contributed much to practice, especially casework practice. Casework is the method of most social workers.

Using these criteria the major way one not pointed toward an academic career could be marked as an achiever would be to be a supervisor who went to a lot of meetings and took continuing education courses. This is an estimate since no information is provided on the achievement components' frequency distribution. Specht, having created the world in his own image, has decided that it is truly beautiful.

In making this analysis, the technical quality of the research is accepted as given. The sample is poor, the rate of return is low, gamma is not a particularly powerful statistic, and there are a variety of other elementary sins. There is one technical issue which should be discussed; that is the question of whether it was legitimate to exclude the middle of the data. The principle of the excluded middle is a fundamental law of logic. It states that something is either something or it is not something; that one is either an achiever or is not an achiever.

Cohen and Nagel (1934:184-185) point out that when the middle is excluded it must meet criteria for withstanding logical objections. Given the known social differences between those who go to California State Colleges and those who go to California Universities, the contrast can be challenged. Time may even out the differences. There is ambiguity about achievements' meaning so there is a distinct possibility that the contrast proposed is meaningless. The middle data should not have been excluded.

The statistical differences between the two groups are not surprising. The University and the State College tend to draw from different populations: the former middle class and the latter upwardly mobile. I have some questions about the meaning of the data and the pattern of the differences but they are peripheral to the central point of this critique.

This brings me to the conclusions, which I support. While the data do not bear on the utility of prior experience

in social work education, it is true that there is no convincing evidence that prior experience is related to the quality of learning or future social work practice. In social work education prior experience is valued by agencies because either the students are familiar with the forms used in the agency or they are geared up to learn a new set of procedures easily. Alas, all too often field instruction begins and ends with being able to do the reports. Prior experience is a convenience to the school and the agency.

It is possible to design a study to test the utility of prior experience; but I wonder if it is worth it. It certainly won't contribute much to knowledge unless it is conceptualized, but it may be necessary to do it to put to rest all those requests by faculty members to get more mature and experienced students. In this world one can be age 19 and a second lieutenant in the infantry, but not considered mature enough for a first year casework placement.

The second conclusion is that the better the undergraduate preparation the more likely one is to achieve. In the context of this paper this should be restated: in California, the better the undergraduate preparation the more likely one is to go to a school of social work at a University than at a State College. There is no problem with the proposition but there is a problem with the state of social work education. It needs a Flexner report. Many years ago Myerson (1969) noted the importance of social work educators coming to some agreement about what the content of undergraduate social work education should be. In the absence of this it remains true that if one picked social work students on the basis of SAT scores alone they would probably do better than with any other combination of devices.

Just by looking at course outline content it is not possible to distinguish between BSW and MSW courses. The average textbook will claim in the introduction that it is suitable for graduate and undergraduate courses. It may be possible to demonstrate that the MSW is superior to the BSW in knowledge and skill, but it is not clear that this is true.

While Specht accepts the superiority of the MSW, one

doesn't have to look far for contrary estimates. Surveying the same California system Kraft (1982:27-38) concluded that the MSW curriculum was filled with fat and bilgewater and that reforms are needed in MSW education. Like the old Scotch verdict "not proven", the impact of the BSW on later achievement is not proven.

The profession is not clear about the meaning of the BA. NASW allows full membership to both categories. Social work may be the only profession with two terminal degrees. The field is clear. BSW's work at lower job classification grades for lesser salaries. They understand what achieved status means.

As it is, the question of the BA may be moot in a few years. The number of graduates has declined by about one-third since the inception of accreditation. The issue of the BA in social work should not hide the continuing need to bring greater attention to the nature and quality of undergraduate social work preparation. The better that preparation, no matter what the degree, the more hope there is for the profession. It is time to find out what constitutes that preparation.

In the last analysis this paper is true to its aims; it is an effort to show some accountability for social work education. Where it failed was in developing ideas that were relevant to education. What it did was demonstrate something that it didn't set out to do and which many social work educators, given their commitment to leveling, may find difficult to accept. Social class still makes a difference and if you are able to get to a high status school it improves your life chances. Given the flank attacks by Kraft and others I wonder what the leading schools could do to set a practice standard that would help the lower status schools educate their students so that practice was improved. This is something that medical education has done. Is there anything about the elitism of the "leading" schools in social work that prevents them from doing this? Or is it their political stance? Ignorance, after all, is a curable disease.

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