

March 1987

Rejoinder

Harry Specht

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Specht, Harry (1987) "Rejoinder," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 14: Iss. 1, Article 16.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.1804>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol14/iss1/16>

This Article is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



sustain only a more narrow account of findings and a much more modest assessment of their implications for the profession.

REJOINDER

HARRY SPECHT

The comments by Chaiklin and Lause are representative of the sort of scholarly, but sterile and despairing, criticism that pervades social work education today. They have many technical complaints about the Specht-Britt-Frost paper: the conceptualization of the variables is defective; the response rate is too low; the sample is poor; the weightings are inappropriate; gamma is not a sufficiently powerful measure of correlation; and so forth. I have responded to most of these issues elsewhere, (1) so I will address only two here.

First, in our paper we focused the analysis on only the high and low achievers, leaving out the middle group. Both Chaiklin and Lause object to this for reasons that are not clear. For instance, Lause first quotes our reason for making this choice: "It is important that schools of social work develop educational policies that will reduce the proportion of potential low achievers and increase the proportion of potential high achievers." (That sounds just as sensible as when we first wrote it.) Then Lause asks, "Does this refer to the whole of social work education?" Well of course it does. But why does he ask? Because he believes that "market forces" shape "the wholesale structure of opportunity for high and other levels of achievement." As near as I can figure, he means to say that social work educators have no capacity to give leadership and direction to their own enterprise; so why bother to determine the factors associated with degrees of achievement? How sad; and how embarrassing it is to have this belief in one's incapacity to determine and implement objectives acknowledged publicly. If it is widely held, that sense of incapacity will not serve the interests of social work education very well; for, surely, the public has the right to expect more from its educational leaders.

But we have wandered, along with Lause, from the issue of splitting the sample, so let us return. Chaiklin, too, objects to our focusing on the extremes. To do this, he says, requires "logical consistency". Okay. Then he says, "time may even out the differences". Is that logical? It's as logical as any other aimless stab at the future you can make by using your crystal ball. Differences may even out also because of continuing education, supervision, and attrition due to aging, death, illness, accidents, war and what not. This kind of clairvoyance is fun, but not logical. And despite all those maybe's about the future, there are no maybe's about the differences we found in the present, and those differences merit explanation. You can do all the technical nitpicking you want, but we used *seven* measures of achievement; all seven measures support our hypothesis. We used *six* validating measures; all six support our hypothesis. The consistency of these findings in respect to a significant dimension of professional performance should merit a more substantial response to the questions we raise about the quality of BSW education.

This brings us to the second issue, which is a more serious one. The major thrust of Chaiklin and Lause's criticism is directed at the indicators we used to construct the index of professional achievement. They believe that the items in the index are too scholarly, intellectual, and knowledge oriented, and too concerned with participation in educational and professional activities. They would prefer an index based on indicators of practice competence.

Chaiklin and Lause, Specht, Britt, and Frost, and the entire field of social work yearn for measures of practice competence. It will certainly advance social work education and social work practice when we have them. But we don't, nor is there any sign that we will in the near future. Therefore, we selected a set of measures that, broadly, indicate the extent to which MSWs have "a capacity to think about, make judgements about, and integrate knowledge in their work" which is demonstrated when they "conceptualize and write about their . . . and communicate with and synthesize

knowledge about practice and programs for others." Now, why do Chaiklin and Lause feel so strongly that these kinds of activities are good measures for educators but fail to tap an essential dimension of professional achievement? There is in their comments a mixture of elitism (i.e., thinking and conceptualizing are, properly, best left to the professoriate), and of anti-intellectualism about practice. Apparently, they believe that practice of high quality is something that occurs apart from knowledge, critical thought, and use of theory. I don't. Is that because I am, as Chaiklin so generously says, "Dean of one of the select schools of the United States?" I don't think so. My observations of graduates of a large number of schools is that the best practitioners of all varieties (e.g. generalists, therapists, group workers, community organizers) are eager to learn about new ideas, to discuss and debate their own ideas, and to have an impact on their profession.

Chaiklin and Lause feel called upon to defend an imaginary practitioner. This imaginary practitioner is doing excellent work. However, the practitioner is so busy and overworked, and so poorly paid by an agency that lacks resources that it is not possible for him/her to join the professional association, or to attend a continuing education class or conference. This excellent practitioner is so dedicated to serving clients that there is no time to write about or discuss the excellent work being done and he/she refuses to take responsibility for supervising or teaching others or planning and developing programs. Unfortunately, no one is likely ever to know about, nor is the profession likely to benefit from, the excellence of this practitioner's work because there will be no evidence of it in any record, or in a paper, or a presentation at a professional meeting.

But wait! Perhaps hope lies in the use of Chaiklin's principle of "logical consistency". Maybe, "over time", the many clients who benefit from this excellent work will spread the news by word of mouth and the whole world will come to know of the benefits of excellent practice; or maybe, "over time", other professionals will be inspired by their associa-

tion with this excellent worker and it will lead to a complete revision of social work practice. Maybe, But don't hold your breath.

It is curious that the centrality to practice of knowledge is so readily dismissed as "just scholarship" and something that is relevant to academics but not practitioners. What is the purpose of all those courses we require students to take, of all of the papers they write, and the examinations they take? Are our professional associations, journals, newsletters, books and conferences *not* essential elements of the profession? If so, then social work education is a hoax.

Chaiklin does say that the profession, and especially the BSW, are hoaxy. But what does he propose? First, he shares Lause's view that "market forces" are likely to quash the BSW. He also thinks that social work education needs a "Flexner report".

The latter idea is not a bad one. Abraham Flexner was the most influential analyst of American higher education in this century. He wrote several reports on, among other things, general education and medical school education. Interestingly, in 1915, Flexner wrote a paper on social work education: "Is Social Work a Profession?"² It is a brilliant piece of work and no less relevant to social work education today than it was over seventy years ago. Flexner said that the first mark of a profession is that

the activities involved are essentially intellectual in character . . . The real character of the activity is the thinking process. A free, resourceful, and unhampered intelligence applied to problems and seeking to understand and master them – that is in the first instance characteristic of a profession. . . . The intellectual character of professional activity involves working up of ideas into practice, involves the derivation of raw material from one realm or another of the learned world. . . . [Professionals] need to resort to the laboratory and the seminar for a constantly fresh supply of facts; and it is the steady stream of ideas, emanating from these sources, which keeps professions from degenerating into mere routine, from losing their intellectual and responsible character.³

Perhaps we do need a Flexner report on social work education. But first we ought to agree on some fundamental principles about professionalism.

NOTES

1. Harry Specht, et. al., "Undergraduate Education of MSWs", Points and Viewpoints, *Social Work* (November–December 1984) pp. 555–560.
2. Abraham Flexner, "Is Social Work a Profession?", *Proceedings of the National Conference on Charities and Corrections*, 1915. Columbia University Press, 1915.
3. Ibid., pp. 578–9.

