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Professional Role Orientation and Social Activism

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This article examines the effects on social action of the client, bureaucratic, and professional role orientations of social workers. A national survey was conducted of 682 social workers who were members of the National Association of Social Workers. Systematic sampling was used and the questionnaire was self-administered. A bureaucratic orientation is not supportive of activism; a client orientation encourages activism; and a professional orientation—taken alone—is neither conservatizing nor reinforcing of activism. However, an orientation to the profession when coupled with a client orientation intensifies the activist effects of a client orientation for practice groups within social work. Possible explanations for these findings are presented.

Three primary and often conflicting role orientations are frequently identified as empirical referents of professionalization. These orientations are to the profession, to the employing organization, or to the consumers of service. The group the worker identifies as the primary reference group is an important indicator of the degree of professionalization. Professionals may commit themselves to the values, norm, expectations, and conceptions of client needs legitimized within their professions by colleagues and professional organizations. Or, professionals may become bureaucrats committed to movement up through the agency hierarchy by strict adherence to organizational rules, regulations, and demands. Or, professionals may give their primary loyalty to clients' requests, even when it violates professional expectations and/or organizational norms. Social workers choose the role orientation that will help them cope best with the demands made by the profession, the agency, and the clients (Abels and Murphy, 1981). This article addresses

how these various career orientations affect social workers' commitment to activism.

Sample

The current study sample came from the 1984 National Association of Social Workers (NASW) list of approximately 90,000 members; a systematic sampling procedure selected every seventieth name until 1,333 names were obtained. These social workers were asked to respond to a self-administered, eight-page questionnaire consisting of 81 items regarding their professionalization, commitment to social action, and demographic and agency characteristics. Questionnaires were mailed to the members in October 1984. The return rate of usable questionnaires was fifty-seven percent ($n=764$). Unemployed, retired and student respondents were not included in the analysis. This reduced the sample to 682 full-time and part-time social workers. Comparisons between respondents and nonrespondents and the entire membership of NASW revealed similarities in agency position, field of practice, gender, age and race. Thus, the sample is representative of NASW membership.

Measures of Role Orientation, Conflict Approval, and Commitment to Activist Goals

The concept of role orientation was examined in a study by Billingsley (1964) of professional social workers in child protective and family counseling agencies. Billingsley developed a social work role orientation index in which the respondent had to choose between the conflicting demands of the social work profession, client, agency or larger community. On the basis of responses to the items, each representing a conflict involving two of the four systems, respondents received a high, medium or low score on professional, client, agency, and community role orientations. These items were included in the questionnaire, and using the formula indicated by Billingsley, serve as the basis of the trichotomous indexes of professional, agency, and client role orientations used here. No community index was considered since there was little variation in respondents' commitment to the community items. Billingsley's index was

selected because it is the only one developed and tested with master's social workers. Scott (1965) explored role orientation in a study of nonprofessional social workers in a public welfare agency, and Wilensky (1964) used it to distinguish professors, lawyers, and engineers.

One aspect of social worker activism is the means social workers will endorse to bring about social change. To measure their commitment to various strategies of social change, respondents were asked to answer questions concerning their approval or disapproval of a range of profession-sponsored social action strategies directed toward public welfare and mental health. The strategies were classified according to whether they were institutionalized or noninstitutionalized and whether they were based on consensus or conflict approaches. An institutionalized strategy involved "the use of a formally organized, publicly-sanctioned structure for processing pressures for social change" whereas "a noninstitutionalized strategy operates outside formal and legitimated structures" (Epstein, 1969, p. 49). Strategies ranged from expert testimony (institutionalized consensus) to actively organizing welfare and mental health recipients to protest (noninstitutionalized conflict).

A public welfare and a mental health index were developed utilizing the four conflict strategy items in each reform area—informing clients of their rights and encouraging them to file complaints through public welfare and mental health agencies, openly campaigning for political candidates who endorse these reforms, offering support to community action groups advocating these reforms, and actively organizing protest actions at public welfare and mental health agencies. These measures indicate respondents' approval of conflict strategies for the profession in each reform area. Public welfare was selected because it is a traditional target of social work reform and mental health because the largest group of the members of NASW worked in mental health settings (Reeser, 1986). Social workers were ranked high on these indexes if they indicated approval of three or more of the strategies in a given institutional context. An analysis of responses to these items indicated that a majority of the social workers accepted consensus strategies, both institutionalized and noninstitutionalized. In comparison, there was a

considerable lack of acceptance among respondents over strategies that involved conflict. Thus, the consensus strategy items were not included in the indexes.

Commitment to activist goals was measured by asking respondents to choose between the goals of individual adaptation versus societal change (Miller, 1981) and indicate whether "social work should devote most of its attention and resources" to the poor or to all social classes equally (Stewart, 1981). An activist goals index was developed which classifies as the least activist those social workers who favor the professional goal of helping individuals of all social classes adjust to the environment. Those respondents committed to societal change on behalf of the poor were assumed to hold the most activist goal orientation.

Role Orientations and Social Activism

The social work literature has traditionally treated professionalization and bureaucratization as conservatizing forces that change the focus of social work from social activism and service to low-income clients to loyalty to the agency and support for goals that will enhance the status of the profession (Bisno, 1956; Wilensky and Lebeaux, 1965; Galper, 1975; Wagner and Cohen, 1978; and Wagner, 1989). For example, Billingsley (1964) categorized as conformist those social workers who had a high commitment to both agency policies and professional standards. He categorized as "bureaucrats" those social workers who were primarily committed to implementing agency policy and standards. His labels imply that professional identification and agency commitment may reduce social workers' responsiveness to the needs of clients. Wagner and Cohen (1978) characterized professionalism as a "conservative political strategy and ideology" that expects professionals to identify with their agency and only support political issues that advance professional goals (e.g., licensure) "rather than issues that affect the oppression of poor, disadvantaged and minority peoples." On the other hand, Billingsley (1964) characterized a client orientation as an activist stance implying a "willingness to violate both agency policies and professional standards," . . . to meet client needs. In Wagner's (1989) study of radical social workers,

he found one group of activists who were client oriented and whose strategies for social change were consciousness raising and empowerment of clients. The foregoing assumptions about bureaucratic, professional, and client orientations suggest these hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. The greater the agency orientation, the lesser the approval of conflict strategies or activist goals for the profession.

Hypothesis 2. The greater the professional orientation, the lesser the approval of conflict strategies or activist goals for the profession.

Hypothesis 3. The greater the client orientation, the greater the approval of conflict strategies and activist goals for the profession.

Table 1 indicates the percentage of respondents scoring high on the measures of conflict approval and activist goals, by degree of agency orientation.

Table 1

Percentage Scoring High on Activist Goals and Conflict Approval Indexes, By Agency Role Orientation

	Agency Orientation		
	Low	Medium	High
Activist Goals ^a	45	36	35
Public Welfare Conflict Approval ^b	57	54	37
Mental Health Conflict Approval ^c	56	49	37

Note. N=670

^aKendall's tau-c=-.08, p<.05

^bKendall's tau-c=-.19, p<.001

^cKendall's tau-c=-.18, p<.001

The findings presented in Table 1 support Hypothesis 1. The data reveal statistically significant negative correlations between agency orientation and approval of conflict strategies in public welfare and mental health reform and commitment to activist goals. In the area of public welfare reform, 57% of the social

workers scoring low on agency commitment scored high on public welfare conflict approval as compared to only 37% of those scoring high on agency commitment. Fifty-six percent of those scoring low on agency commitment scored high on public welfare conflict approval as compared to only 37% of those scoring high on agency commitment. Although statistical significance was found, the negative correlation between agency orientation and commitment to activist goals was much too weak to indicate a relationship. Social workers with a strong allegiance to the agency may be less inclined to approve conflict strategies that threaten the agency than the abstract goal of societal change in behalf of the poor.

The findings support the notion that bureaucratic perspectives and commitment to agency values and norms are supportive of a conformist rather than an activist stance. Epstein (1970) found the same results in his study of social workers from the New York City Chapter of the NASW. Robert Merton (1969) suggested that workers who strictly follow agency rules and regulations are unable to meet the multiple needs of clients. This rigidity becomes reinforced "as a defense against client demand and leads to the formation of a 'bureaucratic personality.'" The overconcern with obeying regulations "induces timidity, conservatism, and technicism." Wagner (1989) found in his study of radical social workers that those with a "technobureaucratic" orientation repudiated "the ideals of social work and social change, . . . and viewed "upward mobility as an end in itself.

Table 2 shows the relationship between professional orientation and approval of conflict strategies and activist goals. Hypothesis 2, which states that a professional orientation is not supportive of social work activism, is not demonstrated by the findings. No significant relationship was found between degree of commitment to the profession and approval of conflict strategies or activist goals. The findings are supported by previous research (Epstein, 1970).

Table 3 shows the relationship between client commitment and approval of conflict strategies and activist goals.

The findings indicate statistically significant positive correlations between client orientation and approval of conflict

Table 2

Percentage Scoring High on Activist Goals and Conflict Approval Indexes, By Professional Role Orientation

Measures of Activism	Professional Orientation	
	Low n=302	High n=367
Activist Goals ^a	38	39
Public Welfare Conflict Approval ^b	45	50
Mental Health Conflict Approval ^c	43	48

Note. N=669

^aKendall's tau-c= .00, not significant

^bKendall's tau-c=.04, not significant

^cKendall's tau-c=.05, not significant

Table 3

Percentage Scoring High on Activist Goals and Conflict Approval Indexes, By Client Role Orientation

Measures of Activism	Client Orientation		
	Low n=182	Medium n=215	High n=272
Activist Goals ^a	28	39	47
Public Welfare Conflict Approval ^b	31	43	63
Mental Health Conflict Approval ^c	32	47	56

Note. N=669

^aKendall's tau-c=.16, $p < .001$

^bKendall's tau-c=.30, $p < .001$

^cKendall's tau-c=.22, $p < .001$

strategies in public welfare and mental health reform and commitment to activist goals. Thus, 31% of those scoring low on client orientation scored high on public welfare conflict approval as compared to 63% of those scoring high on client

orientation. The findings for mental health reform and activist goals follow the same pattern. Epstein (1970) also found that social workers with a strong client orientation were most willing to approve of conflict strategies for social workers in the interest of clients. The findings in both studies lend support to Wilensky's (1964) view that professionals whose primary allegiance is to their clients are likely to regard their professions as movements for social change. Cooper (1977) argued that social work professionals are "change agents" who are "uniquely capable of moving from a case to cause" and, as a result, work to bring about social change in society.

Effects of Professionalization on Agency and Client Orientation

There are two opposing theories in the sociology literature regarding the relationship between professional values and norms and bureaucratic elements of organizations. In one theory, the two orientations are regarded as contradictory (Barber, 1963; Etzioni, 1964; Scott, 1966; Finch, 1976; Abels and Murphy, 1981). Scott (1966) suggested that professionals' resistance to rules, to bureaucratic standards, and to supervision were bases of professional bureaucratic conflict. Wasserman (1971) asserted that social workers who want to advocate for clients would need to buck the organization; whereas, those who adapt to the agency would either become very frustrated or "mindless functionaries."

The opposing view is that bureaucratic and professional orientations are at least partially complementary (Blau and Scott, 1962; Whatcott, 1974; Pruger, 1973; Pawlak, 1976; York and Henley, 1986). Hall (1968) found that some bureaucratic dimensions, such as technical competence as the basis for promotion, were positively associated with measures of professionalization. He suggested that an equilibrium can exist between the two orientations. Engel (1970) found that physicians working in moderately bureaucratized settings were more likely to perceive themselves as autonomous than those in solo or small-group practice. Mintzberg's (1979) categorization of organizations poses a challenge to the notion that work in a

bureaucratic organization is in conflict with attaining autonomy. He labels one organizational type as a "professional bureaucracy" in which the emphasis is on the power of expertise of professionals who draw on standards from outside the organization and control their own work. He regarded social work agencies as an example of professional bureaucracies.

These two conceptions would predict different social action consequences from the interaction of agency and professional orientations. Following those who emphasize the contradictory aspects of bureaucratic and professional norms, one would expect that a strong identification with the profession would neutralize the conservatizing effects of an agency orientation. Following those who emphasize the complementary aspects of bureaucratic and professional norms, one would predict the opposite outcome. This theory would suggest that a strong orientation to the profession and an orientation to the agency would produce even greater conservatism than would a strong orientation to the agency alone. These opposing predictions are tested empirically in Table 4 which indicates the correlations between agency orientation and the measures of social activism under conditions of low and high professional orientation.

Table 4

TAU-C Correlations Between Activism Indexes and Agency Orientation, Under Conditions of Low and High Professional Orientation

Measures of Activism	Professional Orientation	
	Low n=301	High n=365
Activist Goals	-.11 ^a	-.07
Public Welfare Conflict Approval ^b	-.14 ^b	-.14 ^c
Mental Health Conflict Approval ^c	-.14 ^b	-.12 ^b

Note. N=666

^ap<.05

^bp<.01

^cp<.001

High orientation to the profession was found to have no effect on the relationship between agency orientation and the activism of social workers for the total sample and for the practice subgroups of caseworkers, group workers, and clinical social workers. There were too few community organizers to calculate the correlations. It was decided to do the analysis for these groups within the profession since they have distinct identities, values, and interests. Bucher and Strauss (1961) conceptualized a profession as a group of "segments" organized around specialties which often conflict with one another in their idea of mission, work tasks, methods, clientele, interests and associations. The findings support neither theory of the effects of professionalization on agency and professional norms.

The next notion tested is what consequences professionalization has (e.g., reduces or intensifies) on the radicalizing effects of a client orientation. Table 5 indicates the correlations between client orientation and the measures of activism under conditions of low and high professional orientation for the total sample and Table 6 presents the correlations for caseworkers, group workers, and clinical social workers.

High professionalization slightly intensified the activist effects of client orientation for the total sample. For example, the positive correlation between client orientation and mental

Table 5

TAU-C Correlations Between Activism Indexes and Client Orientation, Under Conditions of Low and High Professional Orientation

Measures of Activism	Professional Orientation	
	Low n=300	High n=366
Activist Goals	.16 ^a	.19 ^b
Public Welfare Conflict Approval	.20 ^b	.23 ^b
Mental Health Conflict Approval	.15 ^a	.21 ^b

Note. N=666

^ap<.01

^bp<.001

Table 6

TAU-C Correlations Between Activism Indexes and Client Orientation, Under Conditions of Low and High Professional Orientation Within Professional Segments^a

Measures of Activism	Professional Orientation					
	Low			High		
	CW n=98	GW n=8	THER n=86	CW n=104	GW n=13	THER n=119
Activist Goals	-.04	-.19	.18 ^c	.23 ^c	.36	.17 ^c
Public Welfare						
Conflict Approval	.12	.19	.10	.29 ^d	.57 ^c	.18 ^c
Mental Health						
Conflict Approval	.13	.19	.03	.30 ^d	.31	.13 ^c

Note. N=428^b

^aThere were two few community organizers to calculate TAU-C.

The abbreviations CW, GW, and THER stand for casework, group work, and therapy respectively.

^bThis sample size is smaller than in the other tables because it does not include other methods of social work practice such as planning, administration, etc.

^c $p < .05$

^d $p < .001$

health conflict approval is somewhat stronger when coupled with a high orientation to the profession as a reference group than when coupled with a low professional orientation. However, the effects on activism of a professional orientation coupled with a client orientation were negligible for the profession as a whole.

In contrast, professional orientation intensified the social action effects of client orientation for some practice groups within social work. Thus, for caseworkers and group workers, the negative correlations between client orientation and commitment to activist goals under conditions of low orientation to the profession (TAU-C=-.04 for caseworkers and -.19 for group workers) became a positive correlation under conditions of high orientation to the profession (TAU-C=.23 for caseworkers and .36 for

group workers). There was no effect for clinical social workers. The positive correlations between client orientation and approval of public welfare strategies were stronger under conditions of high professionalization (TAU-C=.29 for caseworkers, .57 for group workers, and .18 for clinical social workers) than under conditions of low professionalization (TAU-C=.12 for caseworkers, .19 for group workers, and .10 for clinical social workers). The same was true for mental health conflict approval (TAU-C=.30 versus .13 for caseworkers, .31 versus .19 for group workers, and .03 versus .13 for clinical social workers).

The findings indicate that a more professional role orientation has no consequences for the social action effects of an agency orientation. However, a strong professional orientation intensifies the radicalizing effects of client orientation for caseworkers, group workers and clinical social workers. The findings seem to be contradictory in that some cases strong professional identification has no effect; and in other cases, it intensifies expressions of activism. One possible explanation for professional orientation having no effect on adherence to bureaucratic norms may be that there is no inherent conflict or complementarity between bureaucratic and professional values and norms. They may be independent of one another. Wilson, Voth and Hudson (1980) in their study of social workers found that bureaucratic and professional orientations are independent dimensions. Social workers were likely to value autonomy and innovation in their work at the same time as they valued bureaucratic elements. York and Henley (1986) found that social workers were satisfied with the level of bureaucracy in their organizations and believed that they had professional autonomy.

There are several possible explanations for the intensification effect of professional role orientation on social workers who strongly identify with their clients. A high professional role orientation may be indicative of a strong degree of integration with one's professional colleagues. Social workers who feel supported by their peers may be more likely to express their political beliefs through professional channels than those who feel less integrated into the professional community. A strong identification with the profession may be an indication of a commitment to social work as a vehicle for expressing one's activism.

The NASW encourages its' membership to engage in social and political action as a "professional responsibility." Thus, those social workers who identify with the profession may be encouraged and reinforced in their activism.

It may be that social workers who are client oriented and oriented to the profession as a reference group, identify with a particular group of social workers who share their political beliefs and who reinforce the expression of these beliefs through professional channels.

Epstein (1970) found that a more professional role orientation intensifies the conservatizing effects of agency orientation and it intensifies the social activism of social workers with a client orientation. He concluded that professional norms and values are so undefined, they can either support or challenge the status quo. It may be that social work professional orientation has become defined enough to be supportive of those with an activist commitment to clients, but not of those who primarily identify with the agency. Professionalization is a process that occurs over time. Two decades of efforts by the NASW and the Council on Social Work Education to increase the professionalization of social work may be paying off.

Summary and Conclusions

This article has examined the effects on social action of the client, bureaucratic and professional role orientations of social workers. The findings indicate that a bureaucratic orientation is not supportive of activism, a client orientation encourages activism, and a professional orientation—taken alone—is neither conservatizing nor reinforcing of activism. However, an orientation to the profession as a reference group when coupled with a client orientation intensifies the activist effects of a client orientation for practice groups within social work. When coupled with an orientation to the agency as a reference group, an orientation to the profession has no effect on the activism of social workers.

Sociologists and social work theorists alike have warned of the conservative effects of professionalization. Critics of the professions have viewed professions as supporting the status quo in their attempt to maintain or acquire power and status (Mills,

1953; Freidson, 1970; Larson, 1977; Bisno, 1956; Galper, 1975; Wilding, 1982). Some sociologists and fewer social workers have regarded professionalization as a positive and progressive force (Durkheim, 1933; Moynihan, 1965; Halmos, 1970; Cooper, 1977; Billups, 1984).

This empirical study as well as a few others (Epstein, 1970; Wagner, 1989) indicate that strong attachment to the social work profession does not imply a detachment from idealism or social change strategies. The findings are contrary to conventional wisdom. Client orientation may be integral to an activist commitment for social workers. It may be that identification with social work intensifies the activist commitment to clients because social work has become a progressive force for social change. NASW supports social workers' involvement in political action and has made protest a more legitimate activity for professionals through its representation at various protest demonstrations (NASW News, October 1983; May 1986).

The differences found in this study among practice groups within social work, and at times the lack of effects found for the profession as a whole, supports the argument made (Epstein and Conrad, 1978; Wagner, 1986) that social work is not a unified professional community, but, is comprised of segments "pursuing different objectives in different manners and more or less delicately held together under a common name at a particular period in history" (Bucher and Strauss, 1964).

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