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A RESPONSE TO "PROFESSIONAL ACHIEVEMENT IN SOCIAL WORK"

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This paper raises several interesting issues for policy and research in the field of social work education. Nonetheless, serious shortcomings undermine its analysis of background factors to professional achievement. Even if one suspends critical assessments of the study's rationale and of its central index, the evidence presented here seems far more ambiguous than acknowledged. The quality of data is the primary subject of these comments. For purposes of this symposium, however, it seems appropriate to preface them with a few questions.

The authors provide a direct but undeveloped explanation for the main comparisons of their analysis. Why focus on the extreme groups of high and low achievers? They advise, ". . . it is important that schools of social work develop educational policies that will reduce the proportion of potential low achievers enrolled and increase the proportion of potential high achievers." Does this refer to the whole of MSW education?

If so, the notion of shifting proportions in that manner greatly exaggerates the likely importance of education and aptitudes to overall levels of achievement, whether higher student potential is selected by admissions or developed through curricula. Market forces, not known to be particularly amenable to the plans of professional education, shape

the wholesale structure of opportunity for high and other levels of achievement. Would an inadequate pool of graduates with high potential be cited as one of the significant factors restraining the proportion of graduates attaining high levels of achievement? Of course, individual schools might accomplish some expansion in their share of "high achieving" graduates, at least as defined by the terms of this study's index. However, I have the impression that the whole of MSW education served as the authors' frame of reference throughout the paper.

It is important to be explicit in describing the study's model of high achievement. Theoretically, the index provides a broad gauge of the extent to which social workers communicate with and synthesize knowledge about practice and programs for others. The substance of that index, however, suggests that the idea of "scholarly role achievement" may be a more accurate characterization of the analysis than the concept of general achievement in social work. While the authors caution against confusing the concept of achievement with questions about what graduates do or how well they do it, the leading indicators of this index are hardly far removed from the criteria used in appointments and evaluations of university faculty. Publication occupies top rank. About two-thirds of all index points are accounted for by the combination of publication, papers at professional conferences, and enrollment in post-MSW degree programs. The archetype "high achiever" is in all likelihood a member of a university faculty, given the similarities between the sanctions and incentives of that setting and these indicators of achievement. In contrast, the index affords little regard for the initiatives of practitioners who use a generalist approach to direct service positions. Clearly, a worker engaged in substantial direct client services would not be a candidate for the model of "high achievement." The latter may assume leadership in neighborhood or civic organizations, initiate broader attention to unmet needs, and function as an essential catalyst for self-help groups or community action but still not be recognized by even a token of index points. Although such activi-

ties involve "communication with and synthesizing knowledge about practice and programs for others," the index appears to include only indicators which are more widely recognized within traditional university circles. If such demonstrations of achievement by direct service workers are excluded because they are judged as normal professional expectations in many direct service positions, the logic should also apply to the leading achievement indicators which are part of the normal expectations of a faculty role. The issue here is not that the accomplishments included in the index are lacking in importance to social work. However, the narrowness of the "achievement index" seems pronounced and consequential to the interpretation of these results.

The near preoccupation of the index with accomplishments in scholarly roles, and to a lesser extent in managerial ones, does not inspire much confidence in efforts to relate these research conclusions to social work's ability to provide "needed leadership" in the arenas of social welfare. If that model of achievement became the general priority of educational reforms at the MSW level, the consequences for such leadership would seem to be more problematic than a given article of faith. Would new legions of "experts" in academic and bureaucratic contexts necessarily translate into a more assertive or effective leadership in social welfare issues? Since the basic political climate seems prone to fits of hostility towards social programs and special populations, the profession might be ill-advised to virtually equate such cohorts with the various forms of leadership demanded by recent challenges to social welfare in all fields of practice.

Confidence in these results is undermined by several sample shortcomings, some of which are compounded by the index's emphasis on scholarly dimensions of achievement. With a response rate of about one in four all references to statistical significance seem dubious, particularly in relation to undergraduate degree (BA vs BSW) and auspice of the MSW (top tier-University of California vs second tier-State Universities). While one in three of the quarter who responded fell into the "extreme" high and low achieving

groups, the sample provided a mere handful of cases who earned their MSW from a top tier institution and had a BSW as undergraduate preparation. The sample was not adequate for even the most elementary control of possible spurious relations in comparisons of these two background factors. The explanation offered seems reasonable. BSW programs are found only in institutions of the second tier in the system of this particular state. Those who select professional identification at the undergraduate level may tend to earn their graduate degree from the same institution. Remembering the index's emphasis on scholarly achievements, the lack of an adequate sample in the UC-BSW category poses more than a minor inconvenience.

The particular division of institutional roles in this state argues against ready generalization to other regions. While claiming in their introduction that "social work education in California is not very different from the rest of the country," many state systems include the BSW within their top tier of universities. The authors' own interpretation of results suggest that this point of comparison is more important than any similarities which might exist between this sample and national norms of sex or race ratios. Nonetheless, the analysis proceeds as if there is no special hazard in generalizing to other states on the slightly favorable comparison of BA background to the BSW. Future studies may indeed support the conclusion that this difference in undergraduate background has effects independent of the status of the MSW granting institution, if achievement in social work is defined as it is in this study. Indeed, it is somewhat surprising that only sixteen percent of the overall variance in achievement could be attributed to the study's two principle background factors in the regression analysis. Institutions of the top tier have doctoral programs, entry into which would be a major demonstration of achievement. The same universities include outlets for publication and their alumni would seem to enjoy some advantages in terms of entry into faculty employment given the research emphasis and general status of their institutions. In general, this study's data appear to

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.