Work-Related Perceptions of Social Workers Versus Administrators: More Grist for the "Is Social Work a Profession?" Mill

Robert A. Snyder
Northern Kentucky University

Jane M. Ridolphi
University of Alabama

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

Robert A Snyder
Northern Kentucky University

Jane M. Ridolphi
The University of Alabama

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 over-
all results fail to refute previous predictions of an evol-
ving anc 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 res-
olution 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 posi-
tion, 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 <u>planning</u>,
<u>administration</u>, and <u>evaluation</u> of social welfare services will
probably continue as a <u>professional</u> group with their own identity."
And, thus, "<u>graduate</u> schools of social <u>work</u> would then become
graduate schools of social <u>welfare</u> devoted to training this type
of professional," while 2) <u>providers</u> of direct services, turned out
by <u>undergraduate</u> 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 reflect-
ed 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 character-
istics 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 implica-
tions of these differences for social work education and on-the-job
training in social service organizations. In this regard the pres-
ent 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 <u>composite</u>
social service employee (e.g., Finch, 1975), the present paper pro-
vides, 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 im-
portant. 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 grad-
uate 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 Organiza-
tional Attachment Scale for the total sample and each of the occu-
pational 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 mar-
gin 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 substan-
tially. 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., admin-
istrators) - - but to the profile provided by clerical workers
(r_s = .63, p< .05) who constitute the least educated and pro-
fessionally 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 pro-
fessionalism 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 var-
iables 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 cler-
icals, 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 underesti-
mated 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 par-
ticular, 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 out-
comes as poor performance, absenteeism, turnover, and career dis-
satisfaction. In addition, several theorists have suggested that
such attitudes may act as a barrier to self-selection into admin-
istrative 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 con-
ducted. 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 per-
ceived 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 com-
petence 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 com-
petence cited previously this finding could signal some very un-
fortunate 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 meth-
odological limitations (e.g., it does not provide the actual long-
itudinal 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.

References

Clearfield, S. M. Professional self-image of the social worker: Implications for social work education. Journal of Education for Social Work, 1977, 13, 23-30.

Dipboye, R. L. A critical review of Korman's self-consistency theory of work motivation and occupational choice. Organizational Behavior and Human Performance, 1977, 18, 108-126.

Dyer, P. How professional is the BSW worker? Social Work, 1977, 22, 487-492.

Fein, M. The real needs and goals of blue collar workers. The Conference Board Record, 1973, February, 28-29.

Finch, W. A., Jr. Education and jobs: A study of the performance of social service tasks in public welfare. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1975.

Flexner, A. Is social work a profession? Proceedings, National Conference of Charities and Corrections, Maryland, 1915.

Greenwood, E. Attributes of a profession. Social Work, 1957, 2, 45-50.

Haynes, K. S. Job satisfaction of mid-management social workers. Administration in Social Work, 1979, 3, 207-217.

Korman, A. K. Toward an hypothesis of work behavior. Journal of Applied Psychology, 1970, 54, 31-41.

Leighninger, L. Professionalism and social work education: Substance and structure. Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare, 1978, 5, 183-213.

Morse, J. J. Sense of competence and individual managerial performance. Psychological Reports, 1976, 38, 1195-1198.

Mowday, R. T., Porter, L. W., and Dubin, R. Unit performance, situational factors, and employee attitudes in spatially separated work units. Organizational Behavior and Human Performance, 1974, 12, 321-238.

Porter, L. W. and Smith, F. J. The etiology of organizational commitment: A longitudinal study of employee-organizational relationships. Unpublished manuscript, University of Califoria, Irvine, 1970.

Porter, L. W., Steers, R. M., Mowday, R. T., and Boulian, P.V.
    Organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and turnover
    among psychiatric technicians. Journal of Applied Psychology,
    1974, 59, 603-609.

Smith, P. C., Kendall, L. M., and Hulin, C. L. The measurement of
    satisfaction in work and retirement: A strategy for the study
    of attitudes. Chicago: Rand McNally, 1969.

Snyder, R. A. and Williams, R. R. Self theory: An integrative
    theory of work motivation. Journal of Occupational Psychology,
    1982, 55, 257-267.

Specht, H. The deprofessionalization of social work. Social Work,
    1972, 17, 3-15.

Wagner, F. R. and Morse, J. J. A measure of individual sense of
    competence. Psychological Reports, 1975, 36, 451-459.

White, B. J. The criteria for job satisfaction: Is interesting
    work most important? Monthly Labor Review, 1977, 100, 30-35.

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		
51+	17	Time on present job	
		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)		Case Technicians (n = 210)		Consultants (n = 30)		Reviewers (n = 46)		Clericals (n = 130)		Total Sample (n = 683)	
	Rank	X̄	Rank	X̄	Rank	X̄	Rank	X̄	Rank	X̄	Rank	X̄	Rank	X̄	Rank	X̄
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	
	X̄	s	X̄	s	X̄	s	X̄	s	X̄	s	X̄	s	X̄	s	X̄	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
Satisfaction																
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 Opportunities	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

Ages in yrs.	Administrators $\overline{x}$	s.d.	Social Workers $\overline{x}$	s.d.	t-test of Mean Differences
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