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# PROFESSIONAL ACHIEVEMENT IN SOCIAL WORK

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*The authors report on a study of the professional achievements of 719 recently graduated California MSWs. Respondents are assigned an achievement score which is an index based on responses to seven questions. The scores of low achievers and high achievers are compared to analyze associations with: validating factors (e.g., salary), personal factors (race and gender), and pre-MSW factors (e.g., undergraduate education).*

There are many different ways by which to improve the quality of professional practice. This may be done on the job by introducing systems of accountability, in-service training, and program evaluation; professional associations utilize licensing, codes of ethics, journals, and courses in continuing education. In professional education, several means are used including systems of accreditation, statements of educational policy, curricula review, and exit examinations. However, an adequate assessment of the value and effectiveness of professional education requires a linkage between what happens to students in professional education and how graduates perform as professionals, both on the job and in other professional activities. Therefore, it is essential that educators examine what becomes of the products of their efforts.

This paper is an analysis of associations between some of the characteristics of students and the extent of their professional achievements in social work. Our analysis is based on

ratings of the professional achievements in social work of 719 MSW graduates of seven California MSW programs<sup>1</sup> between 1977 and 1981.

## EDUCATION AND ACHIEVEMENT

Research on the subject reveals that there is a positive association between education and achievement, but there is not yet clarity as to why and how this occurs.<sup>2</sup>

### Achievement

The most frequently used measure of achievement is economic productivity which is usually based on salaries graduates receive in their first jobs.<sup>3</sup> Other measures of achievement include whether graduates go on to work for advanced degrees, the type and quality of graduate schools they attend, and the prestige of their occupations.<sup>4</sup> Some studies report the use of more subtle (but difficult to measure) qualities such as intelligence, initiative, and responsibility demonstrated by graduates in their professional work.<sup>5</sup> Most studies by social workers on this subject measure achievement during or immediately after the educational experience by using grade point average and performance in field work.<sup>6</sup>

There is a good deal of overlap between the concepts of *achievement* and *leadership*. The latter is frequently measured in terms of communication skills<sup>7</sup> or the degree to which the professional carries supervisory and managerial responsibilities.<sup>8</sup> Karger argues that those professionals who deal with ideas exert a high degree of control over the profession: "Scientific symbols and social work research are used to enforce a division of labor with its attendant status classifications, and those symbols are manipulated to maintain and reproduce both the culture and hierarchy of the social work profession."<sup>9</sup>

### Education

In addition to the completion of a degree, quality of education is measured by such factors as SAT and GRE scores, prestige of the educational institution attended, quality of the

faculty, student-faculty ratio, and library and research expenditures per student.<sup>10</sup>

### Other factors

There appears to be, as Solmon and Taubman state it, "No good explanation of what in particular education does to make a person more productive. . ."<sup>11</sup> The kind of education a person receives and his subsequent achievements are heavily influenced by such factors as family and social class backgrounds<sup>12</sup>, genetic endowment<sup>13</sup>, the prestige of the institution attended<sup>14</sup>, race, sex, urban/rural residence, and regional residence.<sup>15</sup> There does seem to be some agreement, though, that education is a powerful socialization process that significantly affects the ways in which professionals behave in their careers. As Bucher and Stelling put it in their report of a study of students of psychiatry, internal medicine, and biochemistry: "The nature of the outcomes of professional socialization—i.e., the specific professional identity, commitment, and sense of career—is largely determined by the character of the socialization process."<sup>16</sup>

### THE STUDY

In our study of professional leadership we chose to deal with the question of "professional achievement" rather than questions of what professionals *do* (i.e., practice) and *how well* they do it. This choice was made because, first, we do not believe there are suitable instruments to measure the quality of professional social work practice. Second, one of our assumptions is that the characteristic that most distinguishes professionals from others is a capacity to *think* about, *make judgments* about, and *integrate knowledge* in their work. This characteristic is, of course, also difficult to measure. However, it is demonstrated, we believe, when professionals *conceptualize* and *write* about their work, and by the extent to which they *communicate* with and *synthesize knowledge* about practice and programs for others.

We believe that professional achievement emerges over time and cannot be identified at the point of completion of a

degree. Presenting and publishing papers, and holding office in a professional association, for example, are professional activities that most MSWs do not engage in straight away after graduation. More likely, these professional achievements crystalize within five or more years after completion of the MSW. Thus, the population we have studied—MSW graduates of the classes of 1977 to 1981, who were out of school only for from one-to-five years—would be less likely to demonstrate professional achievements than many of their counterparts who had graduated before 1977. We expect, therefore, that the degrees of achievement of these cohorts of graduates will become stronger over time.

That we have dealt only with fairly recent graduates of seven California schools seems to us not to be a significant limitation of the study. That is, social work education in California is not very different from the rest of the country. We believe also that the respondents (Rs) having been in the field for only one-to-five years is not a significant limitation from the perspective of social work education. Educational institutions should be most interested in the achievements of their *recent* graduates because they are the most current representation of the effects of the educational program that is currently in operation. The longer the period of time since graduation the less likely there is to be a relationship between an alumnus's education and the current program of his or her school.

The indicators we use for professional achievement are as follows:

1. Does the R attend conferences?
2. Does the R participate in continuing education programs?
3. Has the R presented one or more papers at a conference?
4. Does the R hold office in a professional association?
5. Is the R's primary professional task concerned with *communication* or with *practice*? (*Communication* tasks are those concerned with supervising, teaching, administering and planning programs, and research; *practice* tasks are concerned with providing counseling, casework, group work, and psychotherapeutic services to clients.)

6. Has the R enrolled in an advanced degree program after completing the MSW?
7. Has the R published one or more papers?

In using these seven indicators of professional achievement, our expectation was that we would, for the most part, find small proportions of all Rs in the high achieving group. However, we believe these small percentages of the professional population are significant because they represent the intellectual, political, and administrative leadership of the profession.

We began our research with a pilot study of 74 MSW graduates of the University of California, Berkeley, School of Social Welfare. The pilot study permitted us to test and then refine the questionnaire used for the larger study. Results of the pilot study indicated that the measures we were using allowed us to discriminate among Rs.

For the larger study reported here, questionnaires were sent to 2579 MSW graduates of the five years, 1977 through 1981, from the seven public universities in California that offer the MSW. The questionnaire was sent from the school from which the R had graduated, with a cover letter from the dean of that school. Attempts were made to find correct addresses for the 271 letters returned because of incorrect addresses, including a cross-check with NASW's mailing list and an ad placed in the California NASW *Newsletter* which asked missing Rs to contact us.

A total of 790 questionnaires were returned, 71 of which were not usable. Thus, we had 719 usable responses. Our response rate is difficult to figure because we have no way of knowing how many of the questionnaires actually reached the addressees. We can say that we have responses from approximately 26 percent of those who received MSWs from the seven schools between 1977 and 1981; 31 percent of the questionnaires sent were returned.

In our response group we find approximately the same proportions of men and women (28 percent and 72 percent) as in the graduating classes of the California schools and MSW graduates nationwide in 1977-81. The distribution of

ethnic minorities is approximately the same among the group of Rs as among the MSW graduates of the California schools. And, as expected, the return rate decreases with each year since graduation. This occurs because, over time, the schools tend to lose contact with their alumni. Thus, our R group is heavily weighted toward recent graduates.<sup>17</sup>

The questionnaire included questions that covered the seven measures of professional achievement described above as well as descriptive information on year of graduation, schools attended, degrees, age, gender, employment, salary, licenses attained, time elapsed between graduation and first job, and amount of full-time work experience prior to the MSW. Rs were also asked questions about the use and relevance of their graduate education.

### The Achievement Index

Each of the 719 Rs was given an overall achievement score by combining the ratings they received on the seven measures (we indicate in parentheses the number of points that could be achieved on each measure): conference attendance (0, 1, 2); enrolled in continuing education (0, 1, 2); presented a paper at a conference (0, 4); holds office in a professional association (0, 4); performs primarily knowledge-communicating tasks on job (0, 4); enrolled in a degree program after MSW (0, 7); published one or more papers (0, 4, 8). The ratings give varying weights to a different kinds of achievement (e.g., presentation at a conference is assigned more points than attendance at a conference).

Respondent's overall achievement scores ranged from 0 to 31. One hundred forty Rs (19.5%) with scores of 0 and 1 were identified as "low achievers"; one hundred fourteen Rs (15.9%) with scores of 8 to 31 were identified as "high achievers." Most of the Rs (435, 60.5%) fell into the group of "middle achievers."

In our analysis we deal primarily with the 140 low achievers and 114 high achievers. We chose to focus on the extreme groups because we believe that these are the two groups about whom educators should be most concerned;

that is, 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.

## THE FINDINGS

We have organized the findings of the study in three categories: 1. validating factors; 2. personal factors; and 3. factors related to pre-MSW education, pre-MSW job experience, and Rs' perceptions of the utility of their MSW education.

### Validating Factors

The findings provide some external validation of our index of professional achievement. As can be seen in Table 1, all of the percentage differences and gammas are in the direction supporting the proposition that high achievers receive recognition from employers and colleagues. Four of the six associations are statistically significant below the 5 percent level. High achievers are more likely than low achievers to be employed immediately after receiving the MSW. High achieving Rs were more likely than low achieving Rs to be currently employed (n.s.), and to be earning higher salaries. High achieving Rs are more likely to have "fit" between the major professional tasks they perform in their jobs and the kinds of tasks they consider most important. More high achieving Rs had received some kind of license. And more high achieving Rs reported that they were members of the National Association of Social Workers (n.s.).

### Personal Characteristics

The two personal characteristics of Rs we have examined are race and gender. As can be noted in Table 2, neither of these characteristics are associated with professional achievement. Percentages of Caucasians and percentages of males among low and high achievers are approximately equal.

Interestingly, though, minority Rs are over-represented



TABLE 1  
 ASSOCIATIONS BETWEEN RESPONDENTS' (Rs')  
 PROFESSIONAL ACHIEVEMENTS AND  
 COLLEGIAL/EMPLOYER RECOGNITION

|   | Low<br>Achievers | High<br>Achievers | Significance<br>Level | Gamma |
|---|------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|-------|
| 1 R was employed immediately after receiving MSW (i.e., no time elapsed between graduation and first job) | 36.4%            | 54.1%             | p < .005              | .32   |
| 2 R was currently employed at time of the survey  | 87.5%            | 92. %             | n.s.                  | .25   |
| 3 R's salary was \$19,000 or more per annum   | 48.6%            | 71.9%             | p < .0002             | .46   |
| 4 There was "fit" between R's primary task & perception of "most important" task                          | 46.4%            | 59.7%             | p < .035              | .26   |
| 5 R had received a license  | 7.1%             | 29. %             | p < .0001             | .65   |
| 6 R is a member of NASW   | 57.3%            | 61.7%             | n.s.                  | .09   |

in *both* the high and low achieving groups. That is, as can be seen in Table 3, the percentages of minorities who are both low achievers and high achievers are higher than the corresponding percentages for Caucasians.

This apparent contradiction can probably be understood as an "affirmative action effect." Schools of social work have made extraordinary efforts to recruit minority students by various means, such as special stipends and outreach recruitment. In addition, schools often admit minority students

whom they perceive to be less well prepared for graduate education than is desirable. It should come as no surprise, then, that more than a proportional number of minority graduates will appear in the low achieving group. However, it is also very likely the case that well-qualified minority students have better than average chances to advance to leadership positions in the profession. Thus, we think this finding illustrates both some of the costs and some of the benefits of affirmative action in recruiting minorities for the profession.

### Pre-MSW Education, Pre-MSW Job Experience, and Perceptions of Education

As can be seen in Table 4, high achievers are more likely to have had pre-MSW social work job experience (64.9%) than low achievers (55.2%), but this difference is not significant.

The gamma of .2 is very low and provides only weak support for the assumption usually made in admissions to MSW programs that pre-MSW social work job experience is desirable. The other four associations are statistically significant and the gammas are quite high, ranging from .48 to .69. High achievers are more likely than low achievers to have attended a University of California (U.C.) School than a State University (S.U.) School\*; they are more likely than low achievers to have a BA rather than a BSW; and high achievers are more likely than low achievers to consider the MSW educations relevant in their current work and to be working in the area of specialization they followed in the MSW studies.

\* University of California (U.C.) refers to the schools at University of California, Los Angeles, and University of California, Berkeley. (S.U.) refers to the schools at Fresno, Sacramento, San Diego, San Francisco, and San Jose. In California, the U.C. schools are considered to be the research-oriented schools. They each have doctoral programs. The S.U. schools are more practice oriented and do not offer doctoral programs.

TABLE 2

ASSOCIATIONS BETWEEN RESPONDENTS' (R<sub>s</sub>)  
PROFESSIONAL ACHIEVEMENT AND RACE AND GENDER

|                | Loc<br>Achievers | High<br>Achievers | Significance<br>Level | Gamma |
|----------------|------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|-------|
| R is Caucasian | 67.1%            | 66.7%             | n.s.                  | .01   |
| R is Male      | 30.7%            | 33.6%             | n.s.                  | .07   |

TABLE 3

RESPONDENTS' ETHNICITY & ACHIEVEMENT  
LEVELS (IN PERCENTAGES)

Respondents' Ethnicity

|                   | Caucasian | Minority |
|-------------------|-----------|----------|
| Achievement Level |           |          |
| Low               | 17.3      | 26.0     |
| Medium            | 67.3      | 50.8     |
| High              | 15.3      | 23.2     |
|                   | 99.9%     | 100%     |

gamma .08 (n = 542) (n = 177) p < .0004

TABLE 4

ASSOCIATIONS BETWEEN RESPONDENTS' (Rs') PROFESSIONAL ACHIEVEMENTS AND PRE-MSW EDUCATION, PRE-MSW EXPERIENCE, AND PERCEPTIONS OF EDUCATION

|   | Low Achievers | High Achievers | Significance Level | Gamma |
|---|---------------|----------------|--------------------|-------|
| R had pre-MSW work experience   | 55.2%         | 64.9%          | n.s.               | .20   |
| R received MSW from University of California (rather than State University) | 27.9%         | 52.6%          | p < .001           | .48   |
| R had a BA degree (rather than a BSW)                                       | 73.6%         | 93.9%          | p < .0001          | .69   |
| R considered MSW education relevant in current employment                   | 77.9%         | 93. %          | p < .001           | .58   |
| R worked in area of specialization followed in graduate school              | 71.3%         | 92. %          | p < .0001          | .65   |

### Discussion

We found no significant associations in respect to whether Rs were employed in urban or rural areas and in public, voluntary, or private agencies. Moreover, we found that as we controlled the associations in Tables 1, 2, and 4 for intervening variables (e.g., year of graduation, age) the findings appeared to hold. For example, Rs who have been out of school longer are more likely to be high achievers. But when we examined each of the five cohorts of graduates for the years 1977 to 1981 separately, the associations reported above did not change appreciably. Thus, the findings provide some external validation for the achievement scale and allow

us to reject race and gender as major factors in accounting for differences in achievement.

The antecedent variables of pre-MSW education (i.e., BA vs. BSW, and whether they attended U.C. or S.U.), Rs' perceptions of the relevance of their MSW education, and whether they work in their area of specialization appear to be the set of factors most strongly associated with degree of professional achievement.

The interaction of these four variables is less clear than the others. We have discussed the differences in professional achievement between MSWs who have either a BA or a BSW in a separate paper.<sup>18</sup> (In that paper, we overlooked Berengarten's significant 1964 study of admissions predictions and student performance. Berengarten found that the performance of MSW students who had been liberal arts majors in the humanities (e.g., English, history, and philosophy) was significantly higher than had been predicted by the ratings the students had been given in the admissions review of their potential for success. Berengarten's findings led him to conclude that graduate social work education should put more effort into recruiting students who do their major undergraduate work in the humanities.<sup>19</sup>) However, undergraduate degree is strongly related to the differences in the percentages of high- and low-achieving Rs who received their MSWs at either U.C. or at S.U. That is, only 8 percent of all the U.C. lows and highs were BSWs whereas 23 percent of all the S.U. lows and highs were BSW. (In the total population of Rs, 9 percent of U.C. Rs were BSWs and 30 percent of S.U. Rs were BSWs.) Thus the S.U. had almost three times as many BSW students as U.C. It is very likely that one of the reasons for this imbalance is the fact that all five S.U. schools and neither of the U.C. schools offer the BSW degree; and all of the S.U. schools offer advanced standing in the MSW program to holders of the BSW while the U.C. schools do not.

We analyzed the five variables in Table 4 in a multiple regression, and the results were inconclusive. School attended (i.e., U.C. or S.U.) and undergraduate degree (i.e.,

BA or BSW) account for a little more than 16 percent of the variance ( $< .02$ ). The school attended is the stronger of the two predictors. Thus, these two factors are highly confounded, which is not surprising in light of the higher proportions of BSWs attending the S.U. schools.

The findings of the study suggest that there are two factors to which graduate schools of social work should give close attention. First, some of us in social work education may have mistakenly assumed that pre-MSW work experience is a better screening mechanism for potential achievers than it actually is. If that is so, the adage "practice makes perfect" should be counter-balanced with the adage "practice makes permanent." While work experience may provide some applicants with knowledge about the profession, it may instill in just as many others a limited and fixed view of what the profession is. Our findings suggest that this assumption should be re-evaluated.

Second, the findings of this study provide evidence that undergraduate preparation is strongly associated with professional achievement. The influence of undergraduate preparation appears to be a combination of both the kind of undergraduate degree held and the school attended. However, the nature of our data is such that we are unable to clarify this relationship. Whatever it is, though, the finding should give social work educators at both the BSW and MSW levels cause to scrutinize the quality of the undergraduate education of applicants to graduate schools.

We expect that some educators will not agree with our way of measuring professional achievement. Others will assert that what we have measured is only *a part* of that elusive quality. We would not disagree with the latter view, and would welcome further research on the other parts. But for the moment, we believe that what we have measured is of significance to the profession, for we must be concerned with identifying, recruiting, and educating professionals who can achieve in the areas that we have studied.

Of course, concern for quality in education should be, in itself, reason enough to search for means to improve the out-

comes of our efforts. But, if that is insufficient motivation, there is no dearth of other reasons why social work educators should be anxious to improve the quality of social work education. Applications and admissions to schools have dropped dramatically; graduates are finding it increasingly difficult to find employment. Government and the public, for the most part, are unsupportive and hostile toward social work and the social services. As colleges and universities throughout the country attempt to grapple with the financial problems they are confronting, social work programs will be among the most vulnerable targets. It is essential, therefore, that we continue to search for means by which to increase the proportion of our graduates who will be able to provide leadership to the profession and the community.

## NOTES

1. The schools are: U.C. Berkeley, U.C.L.A.; and the California State Universities at Fresno, Sacramento, San Diego, San Francisco, and San Jose.
2. Lewis C. Solmon and Paul J. Taubman (eds.), *Does College Matter? Some Evidence of the Impacts of Higher Education*. (New York, Academic Press, 1973).
3. A. Westoby, D. Webster, and G. Williams, *Social Scientists at Work* (Guildford, Surrey, England: Society for Research into Higher Education, 1973).
4. James W. Henson, *Institutional Excellence and Student Achievement: A Study of College Quality and Its Impact on Educational and Career Achievement* (Doctoral dissertation, University of California at Los Angeles, 1980).
5. Ralph J. Stogdill, "Personal Factors Associated with Leadership: A Survey of the Literature," C.G. Browne and Thomas S. Cohen (eds.), *The Study of Leadership* (Danville, Ill.: Interstate Printers and Publishers, Inc., 1958).
6. For examples, see Sidney Berengarten, *Admissions Predictions and Student Performance in Social Work Education* (New York: Council on Social Work Education, 1964); Walter H. Bailey, *A Comparison of Performance Levels Between BA and BSW Social Workers* (Dissertation, Catholic University, 1979); Thomas Walz and Gretchen Buran, "Graduate School Performance of the Undergraduate Social Work Major," *Social Work Education Report* 16:3 (September 1968); and Cordelia Cox, "Performance of Undergraduate Social Welfare Majors in Graduate Schools

- of Social Work," *Social Work Education Reporter* 13:2 (June 1965).
7. F.J. Roethlisberger, "The Administrator's Skill: Communication," in Browne and Cohen (#5 above).
  8. Michael J. Austin, *Professionals and Paraprofessionals*, (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1978).
  9. Jacob H. Karger, "Science, Research, and Social Work: Who Controls the Profession?" *Social Work* 28:3 (May 1983), p. 202. Also see Allen Rubin and Aaron Rosenblatt (ed.), *Sourcebook on Research Utilization* (New York: Council on Social Work Education, 1979); and Aaron Rosen and Elizabeth Nutschler, "Social Work Students' and Practitioners' Orientation to Research," *Journal of Education for Social Work* 18:3 (Fall 1982), pp. 62-68.
  10. Henson (#4 above).
  11. Solmon and Taubman (#2 above), p. 3.
  12. Kenneth J. Arrow, "Higher Education as a Filter," *Journal of Public Economics* 2:3 (July 1973), pp. 38-45; also see Mark Blaug, *The Economics of Education: A Selected Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1978); and Solmon and Taubman (#4 above).
  13. Dael Wolfe, "To What Extent Do Monetary Returns to Education Vary with Family Background, Mental Ability, and School Quality?" in Solmon and Taubman (#4 above); S. Bridgeman, "Problems in Estimating the Monetary Value of College Education," S.E. Harris (ed.), *Higher Education in the U.S.A.: The Economic Problems* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960).
  14. Lewis C. Solmon, "The Definition and Impact of School Quality," Solmon and Taubman (#2 above).
  15. R.L. Lassiter, Jr., *The Association of Income and Educational Achievement* (Gainesville, Fla.: University of Florida Press, 1966); and C.A. Anderson, "Regional and Racial Differences in Relation Between Income and Education," *School Review* (January 1955), pp. 38-45.
  16. Rue Bucher and Joan G. Stelling, *Becoming Professional* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1977), p. 20.
  17. Of questionnaires returned, the proportions by years of graduation are 1977 - 13%; 1973 - 14%; 1979 - 16%; 1980 - 26%; 1981 - 31%.
  18. "Undergraduate Education and Professional Achievement of M.S.W.s," *Social Work* 29:3 (May/June, 1984), pp. 219-224.
  19. Berengarten (#6 above).



