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PROFESSIONAL-BUREAUCRATIC CONFLICT AND  
INTRAORGANIZATIONAL POWERLESSNESS  
AMONG SOCIAL WORKERS

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Since Max Weber's classic writings on bureaucracy, the relationship between professionalization and bureaucracy has been a central focus of organization theory and research (e.g., Parsons, 1947; Gouldner, 1954; Blauner, 1964; Blau, 1968, Meyer, 1968b; Blau and Schoenherr, 1971). Some research suggests that professionalization and bureaucratization are alternative or conflicting modes of organization (Udy, 1959 ; Stinchcombe, 1959; Litwak, 1961; Burns and Stalker, 1961; Thompson, 1961; Hall, 1963; Hage, 1965). While other research suggests that professionalization and bureaucratization are actually congruent because structural accommodation minimizes dissension between professionals and bureaucrats (e.g., Blau, 1968; Meyer, 1968b; Kirsch and Lengermann, 1972). However, the resolution of professional bureaucratic discord does not always occur and may vary depending on the status or legitimation of the profession. In the case of an emerging profession or semi-profession, like social work (Scott, 1969; Toren, 1969), this conflict may remain unresolved and produce alienation and work dissatisfaction. This research investigates the impact of bureaucratic constraint and professionalism on one aspect of alienation among social workers: powerlessness, or disaffection regarding one's participation in organizational decision-making.

This research treats powerlessness as an organizationally - specific phenomenon. With some exceptions (e.g., Blauner, 1964; Clark, 1959; Lefton, et.al., 1959; Segal, 1969), powerlessness has been dealt with in a societal context (Lystad, 1972). In most research, powerlessness (or any form of alienation) has been viewed as a generalized manifestation of person-to-world or person-to-society relations. Intraorganizational powerlessness has been of interest primarily because of its alleged ramifications beyond the organizational context in which it is generated. Seeman (1967) found little support for this "generalization hypothesis", and suggests that this is due to persons' propensity to segmentalize different spheres of life. In this vein, the present research treats powerlessness as an organizationally-specific phenomenon, not as a diffuse aspect of a person's relation to his social world.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Professional-bureaucratic conflict is based on divergent values lodged in two distinct modes of social control: formal rules and internalized norms.

The professional values of autonomy, service, and knowledge are incongruent with ideal-typical bureaucratic values of discipline and rule compliance (Gross, 1959; Blau and Scott, 1962). The professional is dedicated to providing a service to clients in accord with internalized professional norms established outside his work organization. The bureaucrat, on the other hand, is concerned with providing a service in accord with organizational rules that often overlook professional norms. From the standpoint of the professional, his training and specialized knowledge is the legitimate basis of his role behavior. To the bureaucrat, organizational authority and rules are the most legitimate basis for role behavior. These external loyalties of professionals pose a threat to organizations that demand high levels of commitment to bureaucratic procedures.

Power is a central issue in this conflict. Professionalized employees are likely to expect and demand participation in strategic organizational decisions, regarding personnel, policy formation, and program development. Bureaucrats may resist such infringement on their decision-making prerogatives. The resulting discord, if left unresolved, may diminish morale, alienate professionals, and actually inhibit the organization's ability to provide a service.

However, a power struggle between professionals and bureaucrats is not an inherent characteristic of organizations employing professionals. Over time, some structural accommodation is likely. For example, negative relationships between employee expertise and span of control suggest that professional-bureaucratic conflict may open channels of upward communication for expert staff (Meyer, 1968b) and decrease organizational supervision of professionals (Blau, 1968). But these studies (Meyer, 1968b; Blau, 1968) investigated professionalization on the collective level and neglected the response of individual professionals to such bureaucratic accommodation. In spite of structural adjustments, professional-bureaucratic discord may persist on the individual level. The present research investigates the reactions of individual role occupants to bureaucratic constraint.

Professionals do not necessarily experience greater powerlessness than nonprofessionals. In fact, some research indicates that persons in professional occupations feel less powerlessness than persons in nonprofessional occupations (Segal, 1969; Kirsch and Lengermann, 1972). These studies compared different occupations, rather than determining the impact of the professionalization of persons within particular occupations. Research on persons within particular professional or semi-professional occupations suggests that bureaucratic constraint increase feelings of powerlessness. In a study of nurses, Pearlin (1962) found that powerlessness was greater where the supervisors were less accessible and more autocratic. Among scientists employed in a bureaucratic setting, Miller (1967) found that low research autonomy and low company encouragement for professional activities exacerbated alienation. These studies indicate that both nurses and scientists respond negatively to bureaucratic constraint.

Other research, though not on powerlessness, reveals that social workers who are more professionally oriented are more likely to view agency procedures

as obstructive, more likely to perceive a large gap between social work theory and agency practice, and more likely to value work autonomy (Scott, 1969). Although Scott (1969) did not investigate the impact of professionalism on powerlessness, his study clearly demonstrates that professionalism arouses some dissatisfaction with the bureaucratic setting. This dissatisfaction may now, however, be expressed in overt social action. Social workers committed to a "neutralist" professional stance, are less inclined to endorse radical social action, e.g., rent strikes, social welfare protests (Epstein, 1970a). In contrast, such non-institutional action is accorded greater support by "client-oriented" social workers and less support by bureaucratically-oriented social workers, (Epstein, 1970c). Thus, professionalism, per se, may arouse conflict within the bureaucracy (Scott, 1969), without increasing radical social work action (Epstein, 1970a, 1970c). Focusing on intra-agency relations, the present research will investigate the impact of professionalism and bureaucratic constraint on intraorganizational powerlessness among social workers.

In prior research, the professional-bureaucratic conflict notion has been used to interpret observed relationships between professionalization and some form of alienation or work dissatisfaction. The interaction hypotheses implicit in this notion have not been explicitly tested. To test the professional-bureaucratic conflict hypothesis, it is necessary to examine the relationship between professionalism and powerlessness (or some form of alienation) within different levels of bureaucratic constraint. Therefore, the present research will determine whether professionalism induces greater powerlessness only when the organization is unreceptive to such professional commitments.

#### HYPOTHESES

Marxists notwithstanding, it is rather difficult to visualize a person as feeling powerless unless his desire for power exceeds his actual power. Prior conceptions of powerlessness imply such a discrepancy between desired and actual power, but it has typically been measured by either perceived actual power or desired power (Seeman, 1959; Clark, 1959; Pearlin, 1962; Neal and Rettig, 1963; Bonjean and Grimes, 1970; Kirsch and Lengermann, 1972; Shepard, 1972). A recent study (Payne, 1973) reveals that persons who have little power do not necessarily desire more, suggesting that a discrepancy measure is necessary to avoid attributing powerlessness to some persons, who actually feel little powerlessness. In this research powerlessness is conceptualized and measured as a discrepancy between desired and actual power.

Two classes of independent variables are included in the present research: individual characteristics (i.e., professionalism) of social workers, and aspects of the bureaucratic context. The bureaucratic structure should affect powerlessness primarily by allocating actual power; while, professionalism should affect powerlessness by altering social workers' desire for power. Powerlessness is essentially a byproduct of individual-organization conflict. This makes it a particularly useful focus for studying professional-bureaucratic discord.

Four variables, reflecting professionalism, are included in this study; professional training, professional activity, the degree of pro-change belief and idealism. The first two variables are behavioral indicators of professional commitment, and are fairly standard measures of professionalism (Hall, 1968; Goode, 1969; Hickson and Thomas, 1969). Pro-change and idealism are included because they should tap the degree to which social workers are committed to the "service ideal". Commitment to the "service ideal" is a defining characteristic of professionalization (Hall, 1968). Based on the implications of theoretical and empirical inquiry regarding social workers (e.g., Scott, 1969; Toren, 1969), it is hypothesized that these four variables will be positively related to powerlessness. The greater the professionalism of social workers, the greater their powerlessness.

Three work characteristics are included: work autonomy, rule subservience, and position level. Work autonomy and rule subservience represent indicators of bureaucratic constraint. Based on research indicating that professionals or semi-professionals react negatively to bureaucratic impediments (Pearlin, 1962; Miller, 1967), it is expected that social workers, in general, will feel more powerless when they have less work autonomy and are subjected to greater rule subservience. Prior research indicates that social work supervisors are less inclined toward radical social action (Epstein, 1970b) and less critical of the social welfare bureaucracy (Scott, 1969), suggesting that position level should be negatively related to powerlessness.

The professional-bureaucratic conflict notion suggests a specification of these linear hypotheses. Professional-bureaucratic conflict should be greatest when social workers evince high professional commitments while the bureaucratic work context places strong limitations on their role activities. Consequently, professionalism should induce greater powerlessness primarily where social workers are subjected to high bureaucratic constraint; and, bureaucratic constraint (i.e., low work autonomy or high rule subservience) should induce powerlessness especially when social workers are professionalized. This leads to the following interaction hypotheses:

- I. Among social workers who exhibit high professionalism (i.e., high professional training, high professional activity, high pro-change beliefs, and high idealism), low work autonomy will induce greater powerlessness than high work autonomy; among those who exhibit low professionalism, this relationship will not occur.
- II. Among social workers who exhibit high professionalism, high rule subservience will induce greater powerlessness than low rule subservience; among those who exhibit low professionalism, this relationship will not occur.

#### METHOD

The hypotheses are tested by a secondary analysis of data collected in 14 public rehabilitative and social welfare agencies in a Midwestern metro-

politan area in 1964 (see, for example, Hage and Aiken, 1967 and Aiken and Hage, 1966 for previous research with this data). Interview data from the 144 social workers in these organizations are used in the analysis.

The individual is the unit of analysis. All variables are measured by questionnaire data, including measures of organizational structure (i.e., work autonomy and rule subservience). Perceptions of structure measure the degree of bureaucratic constraint because such perceptions are apparently more important than "objective" structural conditions. Social workers' perceptions of bureaucratic constraint are quite variable even within similar organizational contexts (Scott, 1969), and the impact of professional-bureaucratic conflict is best determined by examining whether professionalized social workers respond differently to perceived bureaucratic constraint than social workers who display minimal professionalism.

### Measurement of Variables

Four variables reflect the professionalism of social workers; professional training, professional activity, pro-change beliefs, and idealism. The two behavioral indicators, professional training and professional activity are commonly used by sociologists (e.g., Hall, 1968; Goode, 1960; Hickson and Thomas, 1969). The professional training index was based on a combination of education and the amount of professional training. The scores ranged from zero to three, and were constructed as follows:

0. Absence of advanced (graduate) training and other professional training.
1. Absence of advanced training but some other professional training.
2. Advanced training but no other professional training.
3. Advanced training and some other professional training.

Professional activity was measured by the following three items dealing with professional participation:

To what professional organizations do you belong?  
How many of the last six meetings have you attended?  
Have you ever presented a paper or held an office in a professional organization?

Respondents' answers to each question were assigned a value of zero or one as follows. A one was assigned if the respondent belonged to at least one professional association, if the respondent attended at least four of the last six professional meetings, and if the respondent had presented at least one paper at a professional meeting. These item scores were then summed to yield an index with a range of zero to three.

The pro-change and idealism indices represent general orientations to the world and reflect the intensity of extra-organizational value commitments. Pro-change refers to the degree to which persons are interested in and desire social change. This index was constructed from the following items:

There is something refreshing about enthusiasm for a change.  
If I followed my convictions, I would devote much time to change movements . . . a primary need today.  
Current situation in the community calls for change . . . we must respond at once!  
. . . to get anywhere, the policy of the whole system must be changed, not just isolated individuals.  
Any organizational structure becomes a deadening weight in time and needs to be revitalized.  
I am not satisfied with the world as it is now, I intend to spend more of my life trying to change it.  
It would be nice if . . . older citizens could retain . . . enthusiasm for initiating change which often characterizes youth.

Respondents answered "definitely true", "more true than false", "more false than true" or "definitely false". These items are dichotomized and summed to construct the index. The range is from zero to seven.

Idealism refers to the extent to which persons have a value, rather than an interest, orientation. To the value-oriented person, the realization of ultimate values is prior to the interests of particular persons or groups (see Neal, 1965 for a more elaborate discussion). The following seven items comprise this index:

Having ideals is a wonderful thing, but realistically speaking in important decisions in life, personal/group interests play the major decisive role.  
The society of tomorrow is already developing from values believed in today.  
I am so deeply concerned about social injustice that I would rather join a community program that may not be good than miss the opportunity to do something about it.  
When I hear of people who are deprived of freedom or just treatment . . . I find myself planning how I can help them.  
The most important issues in the world today are issues of social justice. I would rather be called an idealist than a practical man.  
When dealing with problems of my own job, I find myself trying to make decisions that will solve bigger issues of justice for all mankind . . . the world's problems are my problems.

Respondents answered on a four point scale ranging from "definitely true" to "definitely false". These answers were dichotomized and summed, so the range of the index is from zero to seven.

Three aspects of the work context were measured: position level, work autonomy, and rule subservience. Position level was simply coded as head, supervisor, or caseworker.

The work autonomy and rule subservience measures are based on Hall's (1963) dimensions of bureaucracy. Work autonomy is identical, on the individual level, with the hierarchy of authority, and rule subservience subsumes rules governing the work situation and the obligations of role occupants. As Hall's (1963) research indicates, these are distinct dimensions of bureaucracy.

Work autonomy refers to the degree to which role occupants are immune from supervisory control, and was measured by the following twelve items:

I feel that I am my own boss in most matters.

A person can make his own decisions here without checking with anybody else.

No one can get necessary supplies without special permission.

Everyone here has a superior to whom he regularly reports.

There can be little action taken here until a supervisor approves a decision.

How things are done around here is left pretty much to the person doing the work.

People here always get their orders from higher up.

A person who wants to make his own decisions would be quickly discouraged here.

Even small matters have to be referred to someone higher up for a final answer.

People here are allowed to do almost as they please.

I have to ask my boss before I do almost anything.

Any decision I make has to have my boss' approval.

Respondents answered on a four point scale ranging from "definitely true" to "definitely false". After dichotomizing each answer, they were summed to yield an index ranging from zero to twelve.

Rule subservience refers to the degree to which formal rules strictly govern the work setting and activities of role occupants. The following nine items measure rule subservience:

Written orders from higher up are followed without question.

The employes are constantly checked for rule violations.

The time for coffee breaks is strictly regulated.

Nothing is said if you come to work late occasionally.

Most people here make their own rules on the job.

There is no rules manual.

People here feel as though they are constantly being watched to see that they obey the rules.

Smoking is permitted only in certain designated places.

Employes are not allowed to leave their work areas without permission.

The response format was identical to that used for other indices, and the procedure for constructing the index was identical. Index scores range from zero to nine.

The power comprising the index of powerlessness concerns the participation of social workers in strategic organizational decisions, not work decisions. The index of work autonomy measures freedom to make decisions regarding one's role behavior. The measure of powerlessness concerns desired and actual power over organizational decisions, regarding policy, program, and personnel matters. This focus on intraorganizational power places powerlessness in the context of an oligarchic-democratic organizational dilemma.



The discrepancy between desired and actual power measured powerlessness. Respondents' perception of their actual power was measured by the following items:

How frequently do you usually participate in decisions to hire new staff members?

How frequently do you usually participate in decisions on the promotion of professional staff?

How frequently do you usually participate in decisions on the adoption of new programs?

How frequently do you usually participate in decisions on the adoption of new policies?

Respondents' desired power was measured by similar items, as follows:

How frequently do you think you should participate in decisions to hire new staff members?

How frequently do you think you should participate in decisions on the promotions of professional staff?

How frequently do you think you should participate in decisions on the adoption of new programs?

How frequently do you think you should participate in decisions on the adoption of new policies?

Respondents answered these questions on a five point scale, ranging from "always" to "never". Individual means on all four items (for actual and desired power) were computed separately and then subtracted to arrive at discrepancy scores. The discrepancy for a social worker equaled the sum of desired minus actual power for each item. This index ranges from zero to twenty with higher values representing greater powerlessness.

## RESULTS

The zero-order correlations between the independent and dependent variables are presented in Table 1. Only the degree of pro-change beliefs and professional training are significantly related to powerlessness. As expected, greater pro-change sentiments are associated with higher levels of powerlessness. The relationship between professional training and powerlessness is opposite to that predicted. The greater the professional training of social workers, the less their feeling of powerlessness.

However, ceiling effects often occur when using discrepancy measures (see Stouffer, *et. al.*, 1949). The zero-order correlations may be spurious or may actually conceal relationships between other variables and powerlessness because of such ceiling effects. Social workers with greater professional training may feel less powerless simply because they have more power and the potential range of the discrepancy measure is thereby delimited. Similarly, position level may be negatively related to powerlessness because those at higher organizational levels have more power. To avoid such ceiling effects, actual power must be controlled.

TABLE I

ZERO ORDER CORRELATIONS BETWEEN  
INDEPENDENT VARIABLES AND POWERLESSNESS

Position Level	-.15
Work Autonomy	-.08
Rule Subservience	.09
Professional Training	-.37***
Professional Activity	-.05
Pro-Change	.17*
Idealism	.001

\* p < .05  
 \*\* p < .01  
 \*\*\* p < .001

TABLE 2

PARTIAL CORRELATIONS BETWEEN INDEPENDENT VARIABLES AND  
POWERLESSNESS CONTROLLING FOR THE AMOUNT OF POWER

Position Level	.22**
Work Autonomy	.05
Rule Subservience	-.03
Professional Training	-.22**
Professional Activity	.18*
Pro-Change	.24**
Idealism	.05

\* p < .05  
 \*\* p < .01  
 \*\*\* p < .001

TABLE 3

PARTIAL CORRELATIONS CONTROLLING  
FOR THE AMOUNT OF POWER AND OTHER SELECTED VARIABLES

INDEPENDENT VARIABLE

<u>Control Variable</u>	<u>Pro-Change</u>	<u>Professional Activity</u>	<u>Professional Training</u>	<u>Position Level</u>
Pro-Change		.16*	-.23**	.18*
Professional Activity	.22**		-.28***	.18*
Professional Training	.25**	.25**		.22**
Position Level	.20*	.14 ns	-.22**	
All Variables Controlled	.21*	.20	-.28***	.14 us

\* p &lt;.05

\*\* p &lt;.01

\*\*\* p &lt;.001

The first-order correlations, controlling for actual power, show a different pattern of results (see Table 2). The sign of the relationship between position level and powerlessness changes and becomes statistically significant ( $r=.22$ ). Among social workers with higher status positions, powerlessness is actually greater than among social workers at lower levels in the organizational hierarchy. Apparently, a supervisory position sensitizes social workers to the bureaucratic limitations on their service function. The association between professional training and powerlessness is reduced ( $r=.22$ ) when controlling for the amount of power, suggesting that social workers with greater professional training experience less powerlessness partly because they possess more power. It is noteworthy that the sign of the professional training-powerlessness relationship remains negative, contrary to our hypothesis. In contrast, other indicators of professionalism are related, as predicted, to powerlessness. More pro-change social workers feel greater powerlessness ( $r=.24$ ), and the predicted relationship between professional activity and powerlessness is statistically significant when controlling the amount of power. More professionally active social workers experience greater powerlessness ( $r=.18$ ).

Together, these four variables (i.e., position level, professional training, professional activity, pro-change beliefs, and idealism) explain 20% of the variance in powerlessness. However, these variables may not have independent effects on powerlessness because they are, in some cases, highly interrelated. For instance, the positive relations between position level and powerlessness might be due to the fact that social workers in higher positions are more professionally active ( $r=.50$ ) and express greater pro-change sentiments ( $r=.22$ ). To ascertain whether these variables have independent non-overlapping effects on powerlessness, additional controls are added in Table 3. These data demonstrate the relative stability of the relationships revealed in Table 2 when other controls are introduced. More importantly, with all four variables controlled, only the relationship between position level and powerlessness is revealed as spurious. Professional training, professional activity, and pro-change beliefs have independent effects on powerlessness among social workers.

The importance of these three variables is further demonstrated by eliminating alternative explanations. One might argue that various background factors, such as age or tenure in the agency, might explain these relationships. Five background variables were considered: age of the social worker, time in position, time in the agency, mobility within the agency, and academic quality of college. None of these variables affect powerlessness, precluding the possibility that they can interpret or explain these relationships.

In sum, three professional characteristics emerge as important determinants of powerlessness: professional training, professional activity, and pro-change beliefs. Contrary to our predictions, one professional characteristic (i.e., idealism) and two work characteristics (i.e., work autonomy and rule subservience) are unrelated to powerlessness. One aspect of the work context, position level, is only spuriously related to powerlessness. Controlling for professional characteristics, position level is not significantly correlated with powerlessness.

These findings demonstrate the importance of investigating the effects of professionalism within particular occupations. Some prior research indicates that persons in professional occupations experience less powerlessness than persons in non-professional occupations, (Segal, 1969; Kirsch and Lengermann, 1972). The present study, like some others (Pearlin, 1962; Miller, 1967), demonstrates that powerlessness within a particular occupational category (i.e., in this case social workers) varies with the professionalization of individual practitioners.

The positive association between some professional characteristics (i.e., professional activity and pro-change beliefs) and powerlessness articulates with prior research on feelings of powerlessness among nurses (Pearlin, 1962) and scientists (Miller, 1967). A prior study on social workers (Scott, 1969) indicated that those with a professional, as opposed to a bureaucratic, orientation perceived greater discrepancy between social work theory and agency practice and characterized the agency as less professional. The present findings extend Scott's (1969) by demonstrating that professionalism engenders greater feelings of powerlessness regarding organizational decision-making.

Given that professional activity increases powerlessness, the negative impact of professional training on powerlessness seems paradoxical. These are alternative measures of professionalization, and one would expect the signs to at least be identical. This unexpected negative relationship between professional training and powerlessness has two interpretations. First, it suggests that professional training alleviates professional-bureaucratic conflict by facilitating the integration of social workers into the welfare bureaucracy. Professional socialization, itself, may induce social workers to accept or tolerate bureaucratic impingement on their role behavior. Second, social work training may simply induce minimal professional commitment to social work, per se. This is important because, as Hall (1968) suggests, it is professional commitment rather than professional membership that is the critical criterion of professionalism. Professional activity may be a better indicator of professional commitment; whereas, professional training may actually index a persons exposure to professional and anticipatory bureaucratic socialization. This could explain the negative relationship between professional training and powerlessness.

### Test of Interaction Hypotheses

To determine the impact of professional-bureaucratic conflict on powerlessness, the relationships between professionalization and powerlessness will be examined within conditions of high vs. low bureaucratic constraint. Two aspects of the work context (i.e., work autonomy and rule subservience) are used as indicators of bureaucratic constraint. To perform this analysis, all variables (except powerlessness) were dichotomized, and dummy-variable regression analysis tests for interaction effects. The behavioral measures of professionalism will be considered first.

The interaction effects between the two behavioral measures of professionalism (i.e., professional activity and professional training) and work

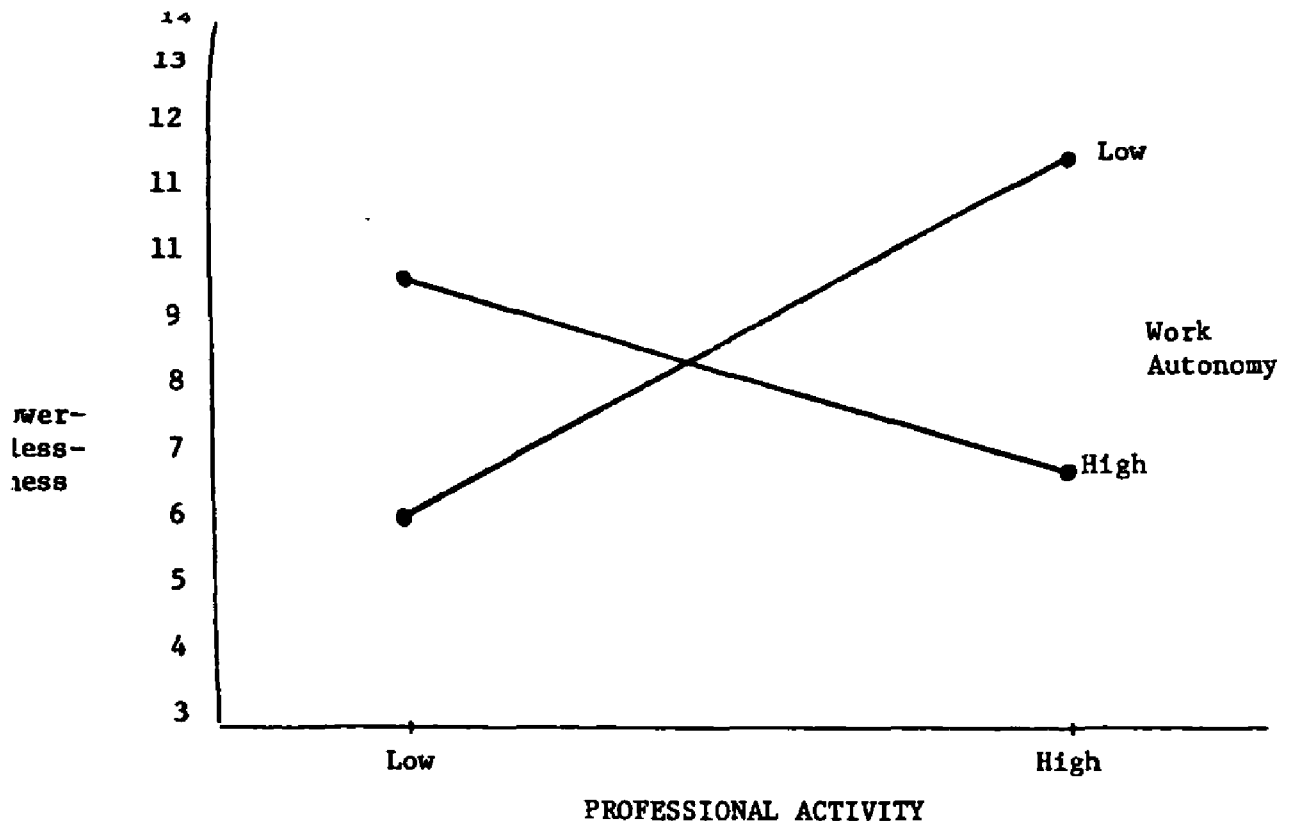


FIGURE 1: POWERLESSNESS BY WORK AUTONOMY AND PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITY

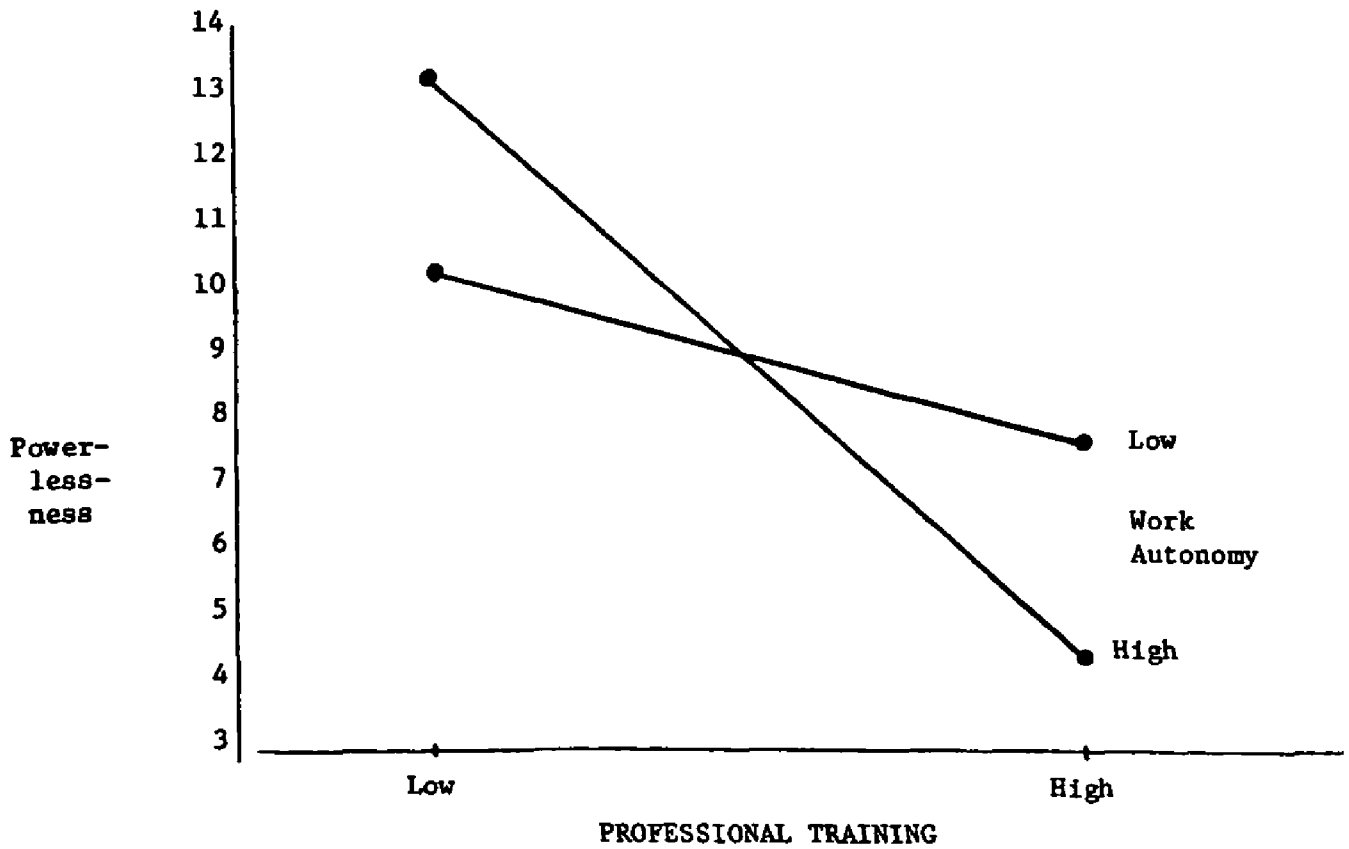


FIGURE 2: POWERLESSNESS BY WORK AUTONOMY AND PROFESSIONAL TRAINING

autonomy support the professional-bureaucratic notion. Figure 1 depicts the statistically significant interaction effect ( $F=9.83$ ,  $p < .01$ ) between professional activity and work autonomy. Among social workers who exhibit high professional activity, those with low work autonomy feel more powerless than those with high work autonomy. On the other hand, those who exhibit low professional activity do not feel impotent when confronted with bureaucratic constraint on their role behavior. In fact, the relationship reverses. High work autonomy engenders greater powerlessness than low work autonomy among social workers reporting low professional activity.

Interestingly, the sign of the relationship between professional activity and powerlessness changes under high and low work autonomy. Where social workers have low work autonomy, greater professional activity increases powerlessness; in contrast, where social workers have high work autonomy, greater professional activity actually decreases powerlessness. Professional activity apparently magnifies powerlessness only in an organizational context which is inhospitable to professional commitments. While, professionalism actually enhances the integration of social work staff into the bureaucracy when the organization respects their professional commitments and accords them a high degree of work autonomy. As supported by some research (Blau, 1968; Meyer, 1968b; Epstein, 1970c), professionalization is not necessarily incongruent with bureaucratization.

The impact of professional training on powerlessness also varies depending on the degree of work autonomy accorded social workers. A work autonomy by professional training interaction effect ( $F=7.08$ ,  $p < .01$ ) indicates that low work autonomy engenders greater powerlessness than high work autonomy among social workers with high professional training (Figure 2). Professional-bureaucratic conflict (i.e., high training and low work autonomy) exacerbates felt powerlessness. The opposite relationship occurs for social workers with low professional training. Although the sign of the relationship between professional training and powerlessness does not differ under the two work autonomy conditions, the relationship is noticeably stronger when work autonomy is low. This suggests that the integrative effects of professional training vary depending on the bureaucratic setting. Where organizations provide high work autonomy, greater professional training more strongly depresses felt powerlessness.

An anomalous finding in Figures 1 and 2 also warrants attention. Surprisingly, social workers who are less professionally active and have less professional training actually feel more powerlessness when they are granted substantial work autonomy. Such persons may have adopted a thoroughly bureaucratic orientation and eschewed professional values of autonomy. A person, who is committed to bureaucratic discipline, may construe work autonomy as role ambiguity and organizational inefficiency. As a consequence, work autonomy may engender dissatisfaction that is reflected in feelings of powerlessness.

The effects of professionalism on powerlessness do not differ when social workers are subject to high, as opposed to low, rule subservience. Using rule subservience as the indicator of bureaucratic impediments, the professional-bureaucratic conflict hypothesis receives only tenuous support. Neither the predicted interaction with professional activity ( $F=1.27$ , ns), nor with

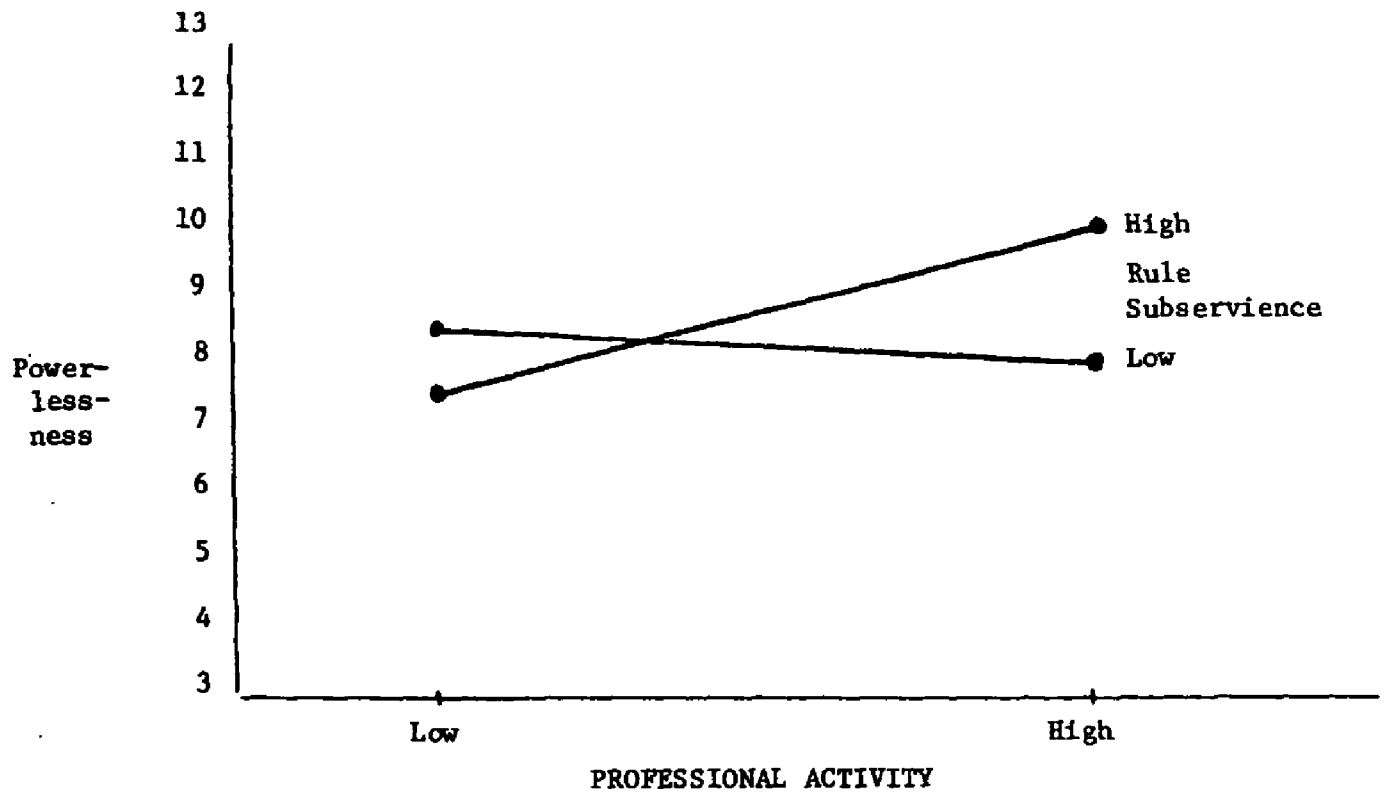


FIGURE 3: POWERLESSNESS BY RULE SUBSERVIENCE AND PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITY

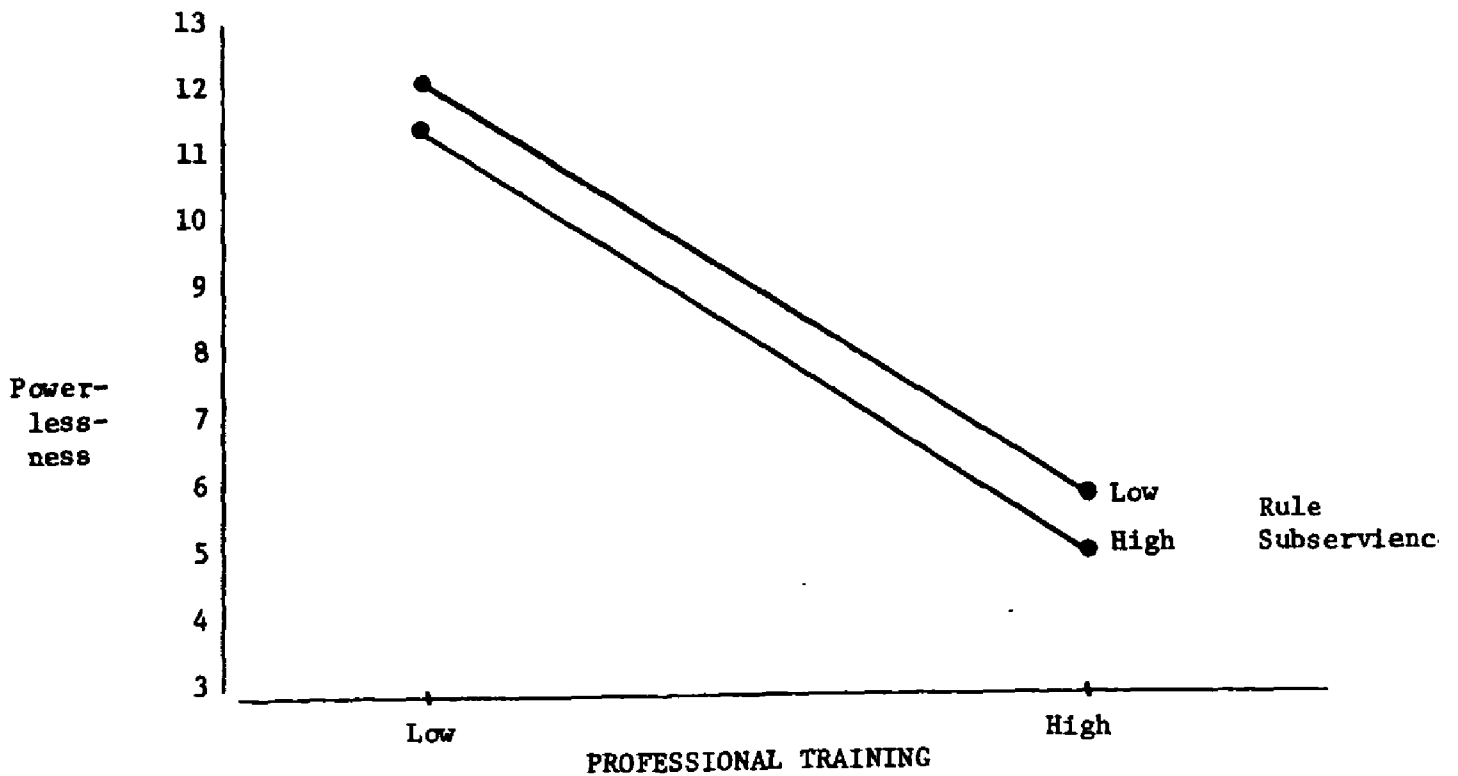


FIGURE 4: POWERLESSNESS BY RULE SUBSERVIENCE AND PROFESSIONAL TRAINING



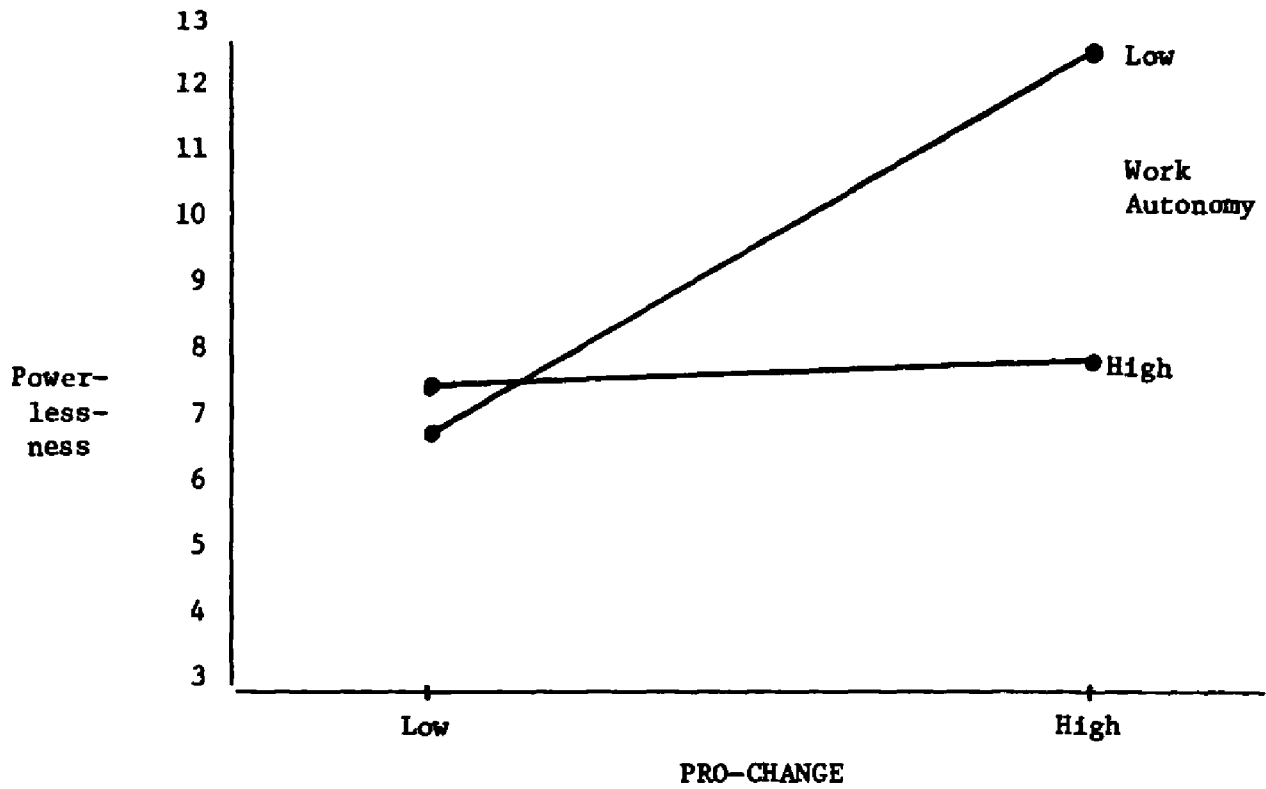


FIGURE 5: POWERLESSNESS BY WORK AUTONOMY AND PRO-CHANGE

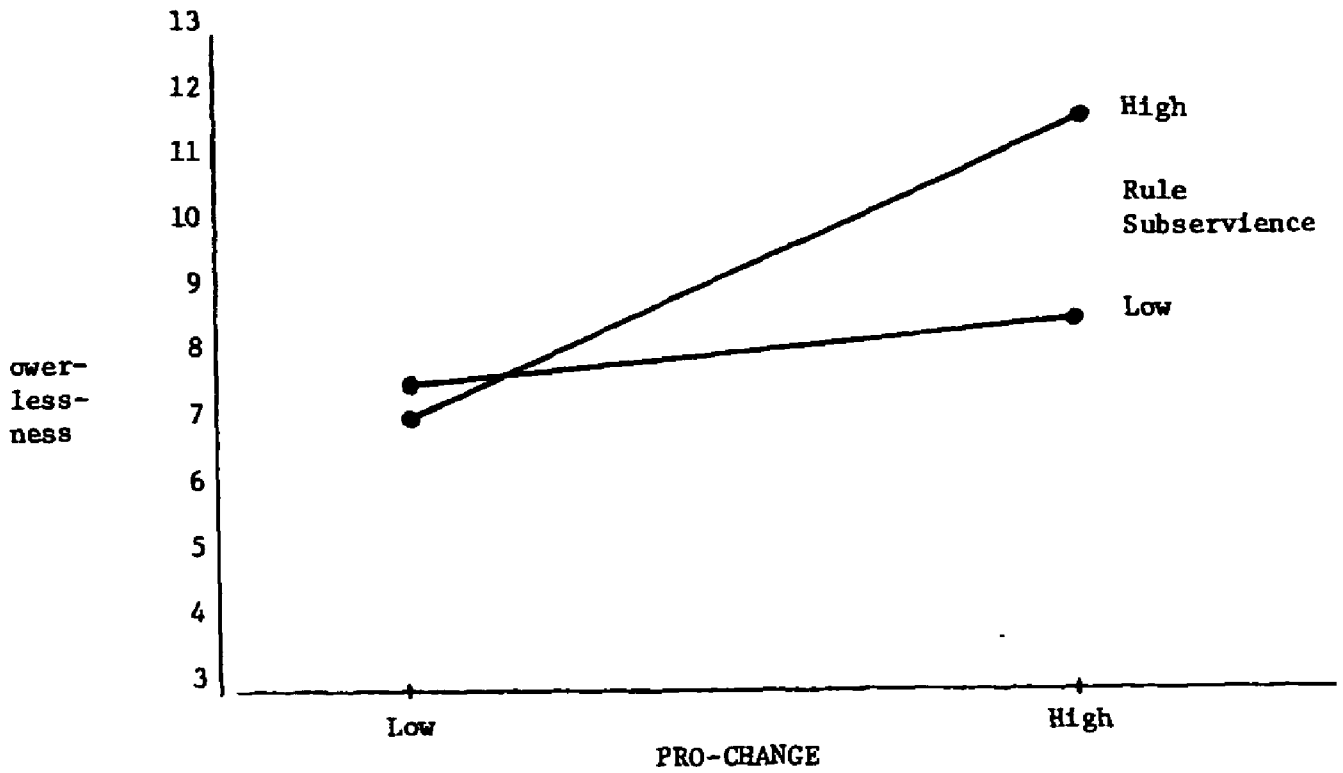


FIGURE 6: POWERLESSNESS BY RULE SUBSERVIENCE AND PRO-CHANGE

professional training ( $F < 1$ ) are supported by the data. Although, the rule subservience by professional activity interaction shows a pattern consistent with the hypothesis (see Figure 3). Among social workers exhibiting high professional activity, there is a tendency for those reporting high rule subservience to feel more powerless. This trend does not occur for social workers reporting low professional activity.

With the two attitudinal measures of professionalism (i.e., pro-change beliefs and idealism), the professional-bureaucratic conflict hypothesis is accorded some further support (Figures 5 and 6). An interaction effect between pro-change beliefs and work autonomy ( $F=4.42$ ,  $p < .05$ ) indicates that powerlessness is greatest where social workers have strong pro-change sentiment and low work autonomy (Figure 5). As predicted, this difference does not occur when social workers have a negative orientation toward change. Pro-change beliefs increase powerlessness only when the bureaucracy restricts the behavior of social workers. Such extra-organizational attitudinal commitments are incongruent with bureaucratic constraint. The predicted interaction between pro-change beliefs and rule subservience is not statistically significant ( $F=1.87$ , ns), but does show a pattern consistent with the hypothesis (Figure 6). The other attitudinal measure, idealism, does not interact with either work autonomy ( $F < 1$ ) or rule subservience ( $F < 1$ ), contrary to the hypotheses.

Overall, these data offer substantial support to the professional-bureaucratic conflict hypothesis. Work autonomy is clearly important to professionalized social workers, as indicated by the significant interaction effects of work autonomy with professional training, professional activity, and pro-change beliefs. Greater professional activity and pro-change sentiments increase powerlessness among social workers only when the bureaucracy limits their work autonomy. When the organization provides high work autonomy to its social workers, such professional characteristics do not enhance felt powerlessness. Moreover, greater professional training reduces powerlessness, primarily when the organization grants social workers high work autonomy. With low work autonomy, professional training has lower integrative effects. Among the four professional characteristics incorporated into this research, only idealism departs from the predictions.

Support for the professional-bureaucratic conflict hypothesis is less impressive when rule subservience is the indicator of bureaucratic constraint. None of the predicted interactions with rule subservience are statistically significant, although the predicted pattern emerges with professional activity and pro-change sentiments (Figures 3 and 6). Rules may simply not obstruct the role behavior of social workers. Some research (e.g., Meyer, 1968a) suggests that formal rules actually serve as substitutes for centralized authority, rather than manifesting such a power concentration. The delegation of power inherent in hierarchical, as opposed to horizontal structures, increases the stress upon rules as coordinative mechanisms while actually decreasing centralization. Rules provide a substitute for centralized authority and close supervision (Meyer, 1968a). In the present research, work autonomy may more adequately reflect centralized authority and close supervision. Rule subservience, following Meyer's (1968a) reasoning, may

signify less centralization and may not substantially constrain the activities of social workers. Rules may be less imposing than centralized authority simply because they can often be reinterpreted, evaded, or subverted.

### CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates the impact of professionalism on intra-organizational powerlessness among social workers. Active involvement in professional affairs and commitments to social change increase powerlessness; formal professional training decreases powerlessness. Social work training evidently acclimatizes social workers to welfare bureaucracies. Yet, social workers who become actively dedicated to the profession, itself, and committed to social reform find it relatively difficult to function in highly bureaucratized settings.

A test of the professional-bureaucratic conflict notion reveals that the effect of professionalism on powerlessness varies as a function of bureaucratic constraint. Bureaucratic limitations on work autonomy accentuate powerlessness among professionalized social workers, but not among less professional social workers. Only professionalized social workers respond negatively to bureaucratic impediments to their autonomy. Consistent with prior theory and research (Blau and Scott, 1962; Hall, 1969; Hage, 1969; Segal, 1969; Engel, 1970; Scott, 1969), this study suggests that professionalism enhances the value attached to work autonomy, and that work autonomy is an important basis for professional-bureaucratic discord.

These results also have some implications for the alleviation of agency-social worker conflict. An agency can structurally adapt to professionalized social workers by granting them greater autonomy and discretion over their work activities. Such agency recognition of and support for professional commitments will not only minimize dissension, but may actually serve to enhance the integration of social workers into the bureaucracy. This is supported by the fact that professional training and professional activity decrease felt powerlessness under conditions of high work autonomy. Expanding caseworker autonomy may actually generate positive consequences for the agency beyond the mere avoidance of deleterious conflict. There is, however, a noteworthy complication. Prior research indicates that social workers display considerable variation regarding professionalism (Scott, 1969; Epstein, 1970a), and the present research suggests that low professionalism may signify a rejection of work autonomy and preference for bureaucratic guidance. Social workers with low professionalism tend to express higher levels of powerlessness when accorded high work autonomy. Consequently, if social workers evince low professionalism, providing greater autonomy may backfire and engender greater dissatisfaction and agency-social worker conflict.

Although this research offers support to the professional-bureaucratic conflict hypothesis, it has investigated only one profession, social work, and one consequence, powerlessness. Further explicit tests of this hypothesis should investigate different professions, other responses to professional-bureaucratic conflict, and determine whether issues other than work autonomy are important structural sources of the conflict.

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