Social Workers' Attitudes toward Poverty and Social Action: 1968–1984

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Throughout social work history there has been concern about social workers' commitment to the poor and to social action on their behalf. This article compares the findings of surveys of professional social workers conducted in 1968 and 1984 to determine the changes, if any, in social workers' attitudes toward poverty, low-income clients, and activist goals and strategies for the profession. The implications of the data for the identity of the profession are explored.

Throughout social work history there has been concern about the erosion of workers' commitment to the poor and to social action on their behalf. Porter Lee, at the National Conference of Social Work in 1929, remarked that social work as a cause—that is, an emphasis on social justice through social action—was giving way to social work as a function—that is, an emphasis on the development of a professional knowledge base.¹

Since then, leaders in the profession have continued to exhort members to become more involved in social action. More recently, social action advocates and opponents have questioned whether social change strategies should be based on professional expertise or direct action,²
whether social work should devote most of its time and resources to the poor or to all social classes, and whether social work intervention should be directed toward client adaptation to his or her environment or to societal change.

The relationship between social work and social action is very much tied to the identity that the profession chooses for itself. For example, in 1977, Cooper labeled social work a "dissenting profession" and argued that social workers are "change agents" who are "uniquely capable of moving from a case to a cause." Soullée, however, labeled social work as an "acquiescing" profession. He based this description on the assumption that social workers are "pawns" of a social welfare system that does not serve the poor and oppressed. Thus, the question: Where is social work today in regard to the poor and social action?

A related question is whether social workers' attitudes about these issues have changed since the 1960s. That was a time of widespread social activism and of assault on the professions for their irrelevancy. Such social movements as welfare rights, women's rights, civil rights, and new careers forced the social work profession to examine its elitism, racism, sexism, and commitment to the poor and to social change. Professional journals called for increased social activism and a more social justice oriented curriculum in social work schools.

In the 1980s we have seen massive cutbacks in social services, economic crises, and a retreat of the federal government from its commitment to provide for the social welfare of its citizens. Some of the consequences for social work of this attack on the social services are job insecurity, concentration on management of cutbacks and defense of existing services, and increased numbers of social workers entering private practice. At the same time, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) has increased its commitment to political action by establishing a national legislative action network and supporting political candidates.

Conventional wisdom suggests that social workers in the 1980s are less activist than were those in the 1960s. To date, however, there are no empirical research studies comparing social workers' present attitudes with those of 20 years ago toward poverty, working with low-income clients, and toward activist goals and strategies for the profession.

National surveys, mostly conducted in the 1960s and early 1970s, provide a profile of popular beliefs about poverty and welfare. These studies do not report findings by profession. Thus, for this time period, it is possible only to determine beliefs of middle-class professionals in general, but not those of social workers in particular. A national survey conducted by Hendrickson and Axelson in 1985 did investigate attitudes of computer scientists, public defenders, and social workers toward poverty, the work ethic, and welfare. However, that study is severely limited in that the sample is very small, and although tentative conclusions were drawn about changes in attitudes of professionals toward
the poor by comparing these results with those of studies in the 1960s, the items used in the studies to measure attitudes toward poverty were different.

This article compares data based on a 1968 survey by Epstein of the background characteristics, attitudes toward poverty, professional attributes, and social activism of NASW members9 and a survey of NASW members by Reeser in 1984.10 The 1984 replication was conducted to assess the impact of the substantial changes in the sociopolitical climate and professionalization efforts on social workers’ social action attitudes and behaviors. More specifically, the article considers whether there have been changes since the 1960s in attitudes of social workers toward poverty, social action strategies, goals for the profession, and social class of clients. In comparing the findings of the two surveys, the following questions will be answered: (1) Is there a differential commitment to individualistic versus structural explanations of poverty? (2) Is there a differential commitment to professionals pursuing consensus or conflict strategies? (3) Are there changes in social workers’ attitudes toward individual versus social orientations to change and to the profession focusing on the poor versus all social classes? and (4) Has the client social class changed or have social workers’ preferences about client social class changed?

Method

Samples

Epstein sampled every third member of the New York City chapter of NASW, a total of 1,020 social workers. They were asked to respond to a self-administered questionnaire. After follow-ups were exhausted, the return rate was 65 percent. Epstein tested the representativeness of his sample by making comparisons between respondents and non-respondents on such characteristics as agency position, agency auspice, and field of service. No significant differences were found between respondents and non-respondents or between respondents and national NASW member characteristics.

The present study drew a sample from the NASW list of approximately 90,000 members. Every seventieth name was selected until 1,333 names were generated. These social workers were asked to respond to a self-administered questionnaire consisting of many of Epstein’s items. After two follow-ups, the return rate was 57 percent. Unemployed, retired, and student social workers were eliminated, and thus the sample totaled 682 social workers. Respondents were compared with non-respondents using many of the same characteristics as in the Epstein study. As in the previous study, respondents and non-respondents were quite similar in regard to most demographic and organizational variables.
This sample and that in Epstein's study were compared to see how similar they are on the characteristics of agency position, field of service, agency auspice, gender, race, and religion. The samples were significantly different on all characteristics except gender, differences that are likely to be due to changes in the profession since 1968. For example, a greater proportion of social workers in the 1984 survey were employed in mental health and in private practice and were doing casework and a lesser proportion were employed in community-action agencies and settlement houses and were doing community organization than in the 1968 sample. Moreover, with samples as large as these, very small percentage differences are required to achieve levels of statistical significance.

Measures of Attitudes toward Poverty

In an attempt to measure conceptions of the causes of poverty, respondents were asked to indicate from a range of choices the "two most important reasons for the existence of poverty in the U.S." The choices given were reasons commonly found in discussions about poverty. One choice can be categorized as an individualistic explanation, which places the blame for poverty on the poor themselves. The item was: "poor people are not adequately motivated to take advantage of existing opportunities." Another explanation for poverty, a social structural one, places blame on social and economic conditions, and was represented in the following items: "powerful interests are fundamentally opposed to the solution of the problem of poverty," and "those people who are better off will never give up anything unless forced." The item "we do not possess the necessary knowledge and techniques" represented a technological explanation for poverty. Finally, there was an interest-group explanation which implies that groups must compete and negotiate with one another for resources and power to eliminate poverty. These items were "people representing different interests do not often enough sit down together to work out the problem," and "poor people have not been organized to demand better treatment by society."

Measures of Commitment to Activist Strategies

To measure their commitment to strategies of social change in behalf of the poor, respondents were asked to answer questions concerning their approval of various social action efforts to change the public welfare system. Public welfare was chosen because it represents a traditional target of social work reform efforts.

A series of social action strategies were listed and were classified according to whether they were institutionalized or noninstitutionalized and whether they involved the use of consensus or conflict. In the
initial study, Epstein defined institutionalized strategy as “the use of a formally organized, publicly sanctioned structure for processing pressures for social change” and “a non-institutionalized strategy operates outside formal and legitimated structures.”

On a seven-point, Likert-type scale, respondents were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with each of these strategies when used by a hypothetical group of professional social workers acting as “representatives of the profession” with the goal of obtaining “more government sponsored programs to help public welfare recipients.”

Measures of Commitment to Activist Goals

One can infer commitment to activist goals by looking at the conflict in priorities confronting the profession. Such conflicts are presented in two comment pieces written in a 1981 issue of Social Work. In the first piece, the author expressed concern over the profession’s focus on psychodynamics and neglect of social reform. In the second piece, the author decried the near abandonment of the poor by the social work profession. There followed in another issue a lively debate on the positions expressed by these two social workers.

Prior to but consistent with this debate, Epstein developed a typology of activist goals. He classified as the least activist those social workers who favor the professional goal of helping individuals in all social classes adjust to the environment. Those social workers committed to societal change on behalf of the poor were assumed to hold the most activist goal orientation. To measure commitment to activist goals, respondents in both surveys were asked to choose between the goals of individual adaptation versus social change and indicate whether “social work should devote most of its attention and resources” to the poor or to all social classes equally.

Measures of Clients’ Social Class

Respondents in both surveys were asked to indicate the social class category that “best describes the clientele” in their agency and were given the following choices: “predominantly middle class,” “predominantly lower class,” or “about equal representation of all social classes.” They were then asked to indicate from these same categories the client group with which they “prefer” to work. A comparison was then made between clients served and clients preferred in both samples.

Findings

Attitudes toward Poverty

Table 1 shows respondents’ opinions in 1968 and 1984 about the reasons for poverty. The differences between the two samples were
Table 1

OPINIONS IN 1968 AND 1984 ABOUT THE REASONS FOR POVERTY (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>1968</th>
<th>1984</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individualistic:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor lack motivation</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social structural:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power interests opposed</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper classes must be forced</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technological:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack knowledge and techniques</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest group:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groups do not work out the problem</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor must organize</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note.—All percentage differences are significant by \( \chi^2 (p < .001) \). N's range from 980 to 989 in 1968 and from 671 to 678 in 1984.

Statistically significant but in a direction quite opposite that which conventional wisdom had predicted. Thus, for example, a greater proportion of respondents in 1984 chose social structural reasons for the existence of poverty than did those in 1968. In 1984, 53 percent of social workers indicated that a primary reason for poverty is that powerful interests are opposed to eradicating poverty, as compared with 40 percent in 1968. In 1984, 25 percent agreed that force is necessary to get the middle and upper classes to redistribute resources, while only 12 percent agreed in 1968. Alternatively, a greater proportion of respondents in 1968 than in 1984 chose an individualistic explanation for the existence of poverty (26% vs. 10%) and believed that poverty was the result of lack of knowledge and techniques (29% vs. 18%). Further, in 1968, more social workers espoused an interest-group explanation.

Two other items in the surveys tapped respondents' attitudes toward poverty. Respondents were asked to indicate on a Likert-type scale whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statements: "The only way to do away with poverty is to make basic changes in our political and economic system," and "the poor are in the best position to decide what services they need."

Table 2 indicates the percentage of respondents in 1968 and 1984 agreeing with these beliefs about poverty and the poor. The differences between the samples were statistically significant and consistent with the previous comparisons. Thus, respondents in 1984 were again more likely than those in 1968 to agree with a social structural explanation of poverty that basic changes must be made in the political and economic system (81% vs. 61%) and more likely to believe in self-determination for the poor (51% vs. 35%).
Table 2

PERCENTAGE IN 1968 AND 1984 AGREEING WITH EACH BELIEF ABOUT POVERTY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Beliefs</th>
<th>1968</th>
<th>1984</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Make basic changes in system</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor decide what they need</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note.—All percentage differences are significant by $\chi^2$ ($p < .001$). N’s range from 1,010 to 1,020 in 1968 and from 675 to 680 in 1984.

The finding in this study that in 1968 respondents were more likely than those in 1984 to attribute poverty to lack of effort on the part of the poor is supported by other public opinion research. Alston and Dean, using data collected by Gallup and Associates, in 1964 found that 34 percent of middle-class professionals placed the blame for poverty on the poor and favored restrictive requirements for welfare assistance.\(^{17}\) Feagin reported in a national survey on poverty in 1969 that 50 percent of middle-income respondents endorsed individualistic explanations for poverty.\(^{18}\) In 1985, however, Hendrickson and Axelson found in their national survey of the membership of three professional organizations that only 15.9 percent of the respondents attributed poverty to characteristics of the poor, whereas 55.9 percent attributed the causes of poverty to the economic system.\(^{19}\)

One possible explanation for the apparent change in perceptions about the reasons for poverty over the last two decades is that the middle class has become more sensitized to structural inequities in the socioeconomic system. In the 1960s, in the context of a “War on Poverty,” it may have been easier to attribute poverty to the poor not taking advantage of opportunities to help themselves. Moreover, the focus of most of the programs was on rehabilitating the poor. In 1984, a time of high unemployment, media reports of middle-class people losing their jobs through no fault of their own, and major cuts in social programs, it is hard not to be aware of the systemic causes of poverty.

Social workers in 1984 were less likely to believe that more professional knowledge and techniques are needed to eliminate poverty but more likely to believe that the poor know best what they need. It may be that social workers have become skeptical over time because the application of social work expertise has not solved the problem of poverty.

Finally, it may be that social workers in 1984 are less likely to accept the pluralistic perspective that poverty will be eliminated if the poor organize into interest groups and negotiate for resources. Given the lack of acknowledgment by the present administration that elimination of poverty is a high-priority item on the national agenda, this pessimism is understandable.
Approval of Activist Strategies

Table 3 shows the percentage of the respondents in 1968 and 1984 who approved of the profession endorsing each of a series of change strategies to secure more public programs for welfare recipients. The findings indicate that in 1968 and in 1984 there was overwhelming acceptance within the profession of consensus strategies, both institutionalized (e.g., expert testimony) and noninstitutionalized (e.g., personal communication with public officials). In both periods, over 80 percent of the social workers approved of consensus strategies. There were no significant differences in approval between the samples except in the areas of conducting studies and giving expert testimony (95% in 1968 vs. 90% in 1984) and providing direct services (90% in 1968 vs. 84% in 1984). As for approval of institutionalized conflict strategies, a majority, or 86 percent, of social workers in both samples approved of encouraging welfare recipients to file complaints through formal channels. Fewer social workers, although still a majority, approved of the conflict strategy of campaigning for political candidates or working through political parties (78% in 1984 vs. 68% in 1968). These differences were statistically significant. By contrast, however, considerable disapproval was found among respondents over support for professionals' involvement in noninstitutionalized conflict strategies such as social protest. Thus, over one-half of the social workers rejected the idea of the profession offering support to protest groups or actively organizing protest demonstrations. Nevertheless, there were statistically significant differences between the samples in regard to approving of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>1968</th>
<th>1984</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institutionalized consensus:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studies and expert testimony</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordination and consensus</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noninstitutionalized consensus:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication with public officials</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct service-giving</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutionalized conflict:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filing formal complaints</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political campaigning</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noninstitutionalized conflict:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting protest groups</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizing protest groups</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note.—All percentage differences are significant by \( \chi^2 (p < .001) \). N's range from 1,010 to 1,020 in 1968 and from 675 to 680 in 1984.
the most controversial strategy—organizing protest actions (41% in 1984 vs. 28% in 1968).

Social workers in 1984 may be less likely than those in 1968 to endorse the change strategies of conducting studies and giving expert testimony, and direct service giving, because the abundance of existing studies and services currently provided to welfare recipients have not been successful in securing more programs. The finding that social workers today are more supportive of political campaigning to bring about social change is not surprising, considering NASW support of social workers’ involvement in political action. For example, in the 1984 presidential election, the NASW sponsored voter registration drives, as well as publicly endorsing a candidate for president for the first time in its history. A possible explanation for the finding that a greater proportion of social workers in 1984 approved of organizing protest actions may be that demonstrations have become more legitimized in the profession. Evidence for this view is found in reports in NASW News that social workers have officially represented NASW at civil rights and antiapartheid protest marches.20

Commitment to Activist Goals

Table 4 shows the percentage of respondents in 1968 and 1984 who approved of more or less activist goals for the profession. The findings show that over one-half the respondents in 1968 approved the professional goals of emphasis on societal change, as compared with 37 percent in 1984. Likewise, over half of the 1968 respondents favored devoting social work’s resources to the problems of the poor, compared with 23 percent in 1984. These differences were statistically significant.

Thus, despite their more liberal conception of the causes of poverty, contemporary social workers are less committed to an activist goal orientation for the profession than their 1968 predecessors. It is a seeming paradox that the 1968 respondents were less likely than those in 1984 to attribute poverty to structural causes and were more likely to support social change and commitment to the poor as priorities for social work.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>1968</th>
<th>1984</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Societal change</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention and resources to the poor</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note.—All percentage differences are significant by χ² (p < .001). N’s range from 1,000 to 1,020 in 1968 and from 667 to 675 in 1984.
This shift in goal orientation for the profession in 1984 to greater emphasis on individual adaptation and commitment to all social classes may possibly be attributed to the ascendancy of casework or psychotherapy as the primary social work method. The number of private practitioners continues to increase, and the majority of social work students concentrate in social treatment rather than policy, planning, administration, or community organization. In support of this explanation, casework has received criticism for its goal of helping individuals adapt to the environment rather than engaging in broader processes of social change\textsuperscript{21} and for developing technologies that discriminate against the poor.\textsuperscript{22} However, it may be that there has been a shift in professional goals because there is a good fit between the psychotherapeutic technologies of social work and the problems and capacities of the middle class. Alternatively, it may also be that social workers feel a sense of futility about involvement in social change because of the current administration’s lack of commitment to providing for the needs of the poor.

**Clients’ Social Class**

Table 5 describes the social class of respondents’ clientele and the preferred social class of clients in 1968 and 1984. Differences between the samples on both dimensions were statistically significant. Thus, although respondents in both studies served about the same proportion of middle-class clients (23\% in 1968 vs. 27\% in 1984), more social workers in 1968 served lower-class clients (50\% in 1968 and 42\% in 1984), and a greater proportion of social workers in 1984 served an equal distribution of all social classes (32\% in 1984 vs. 18\% in 1968). The majority of respondents in both samples preferred an equal representation of all income groups as their client preference (68\% in 1984 vs. 50\% in 1968). A minority of respondents preferred predominantly lower- or middle-class clients. However, a greater proportion of social workers in 1968 preferred predominantly lower-class clients (23\% in 1968 vs. 14\% in 1984), and a greater proportion of social workers in 1984 preferred middle-class clientele (19\% in 1984 vs. 9\% in 1968).

It appears that social workers in the 1960s were more likely to serve predominantly low-income clients and more likely to prefer to do so than their colleagues in the 1980s. The expressed preference for serving all social class groups may be a response to the increasing demands of the middle class for social services. It may also indicate a more socially acceptable way of expressing a preference for middle-class clients. Social workers may prefer working with middle-class clients because they have had more success. In contrast, the nature of the problems among the lower classes (e.g., poverty, delinquency, addiction)
Table 5

SOCIAL CLASS OF ACTUAL AND PREFERRED AGENCY CLIENTS IN 1968 AND 1984

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SOCIAL CLASS</th>
<th>AGENCY CLIENTS 1968</th>
<th>AGENCY CLIENTS 1984</th>
<th>PREFERRED CLIENTS 1968</th>
<th>PREFERRED CLIENTS 1984</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower class</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All classes</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE.—All percentage differences are significant by $\chi^2 (p < .001)$. N's range from 857 to 928 in 1968 and from 640 to 668 in 1984.

has proved to be more intractable to the expertise of the profession. The decline in commitment to serving the poor probably reflects the greater emphasis on clinical practice in the private sector and the fewer social workers employed in the public sector serving primarily low-income clients. In the Epstein study, 5 percent of the respondents worked in public assistance, compared to 2 percent in the present study. In response to this decline, a recent conference addressed the problems of recruitment and retention of professionally trained social workers in public child welfare services.23

Social workers in the 1980s may be more inclined to prefer serving all social classes rather than the poor because of efforts to enhance the status of the profession and gain greater public acceptance through association with higher-status clients. Walsh and Elling empirically demonstrated that members of occupational groups who were actively striving to gain higher status were more negative in their orientation toward lower-income clients than were members of occupations who were less active.24

Conclusions

The findings in this study suggest significant changes in social workers' social action attitudes, conceptions of goals for the profession, and attitudes toward poverty and the poor since the 1960s. Social workers in 1968 seemed more committed to the profession's involvement in social change and serving the poor and thus revealed their approval of an activist goal orientation for social work. However, contrary to expectations, they held more conservative notions of the causes of poverty (e.g., lack of motivation of the poor and lack of knowledge and expertise), and they were not primarily invested in serving poor clients in their agencies. Even at that time, the majority preferred to serve all income groups equally. Moreover, social workers in the 1960s did not endorse conflict strategies for the profession, and they gave little approval to the strategies of direct-action protest.
In contrast, the social workers in 1984 were more likely to endorse structural explanations for the existence of poverty. While they are more likely than those in 1968 to approve of the use of protest for the profession, they still preferred consensus strategies for social change on behalf of the poor. In addition, they are less likely to want to serve the poor primarily or to endorse an activist goal orientation for the profession than their predecessors in the 1960s. Thus, despite their attribution of poverty to systemic causes, social workers in the 1980s apparently do not regard the elimination of poverty as a priority of the profession. Instead, they view the role of social work as helping individuals of all social classes to adapt to the environment.

These findings suggest that the majority of the social workers of today view social work as a “consenting” profession supportive of the social class system. On the other hand, social workers in the 1960s viewed social work as a “dissenting” profession involved in broad social change and the elimination of poverty. These differences, however, should not obscure the fact that both groups preferred noncontroversial change strategies and work with a mixed clientele. Further understanding of the similarities and differences between social workers of the 1960s and those of the 1980s requires analysis of their respective social action behavior patterns.

Notes

12. Ibid., p. 49.
13. Miller (n. 4 above).
14. Stewart (n. 3 above).
17. Alston and Dean, p. 15.
22. Cloward and Epstein (n. 3 above).