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# (OCCASIONAL PAPERS



NUMBER 28

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THE ISSUE OF GROUP POWER  
FOR PROFESSIONAL EMPLOYEES

by Benjamin Solomon

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**Benjamin Solomon**

**Paper presented at a conference on "Collective Bargaining for Professional and Technical Employees," at the University of Illinois, May 20-21, 1965. Panel on "Collective Bargaining for Nonunionized Professionals."**

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Published by Industrial Relations Center, 1225 East 60th Street, Chicago, Illinois 60637

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## TEACHERS AND NURSES: THE ISSUE OF GROUP POWER FOR PROFESSIONAL EMPLOYEES

In opening our discussion, the chairman noted that speakers from academic quarters would deal with the more theoretical or abstract aspects of the problem. He did not mention metaphysics, but I may in some degree at least enter into this realm also. I shall endeavor to discuss what I think are certain key psychological, or perhaps better, ideological, aspects of the problem, particularly as they relate to the question of group power. In partial justification I point to the civil rights movement as a current reminder of the tremendous motivating force that ideology can be. Since this conference is made up mainly of people concerned with the organization of professional employees, I shall try to suggest positive approaches to the issue of group power. My references will be somewhat more to teaching than to professional nursing. Finally, my remarks will be arranged around three concepts--pluralism, professionalism, and power. While power is last on the list, it is, of course, deeply involved with the first two.

### PLURALISM

Clark Kerr, in his 1954 presidential address to the Industrial Relations Research Association, linked the role of organized occupations--unions in his context--to the maintenance of a pluralist society. He saw the function of these groups as protectors and enhancers of the economic and employment interests of their memberships.

The pluralist concept pictures society as a multiplicity of power centers, no one of which is dominant but among which all significant interests are represented in a general give-and-take process. However, the existence of a pluralist society does not by itself guarantee that all relevant interests will be adequately represented. For example, if it is true, and I think it is, that the teaching and nursing professions do not yet effectively represent their members' employment interests, then we can say that from the standpoint of the pluralist ideal they are not pulling their weight in society.

But I should like to go somewhat beyond the pluralist position on simple representation of economic and employment interests. The process of give-and-take among the power centers may bring about a balance of interests, but there is also a need for society to achieve a larger perspective which it can beneficially apply to a variety of problems. Here I think that professional groups such as nurses and teachers have a more-than-average responsibility to the body politic.

On one level, this responsibility arises as the education and health fields become more and more the centers of crucial social, economic, and political decisions. But there is an even broader

question to be considered. Somewhere in our society we need elements which will nourish the democratic-humanist tradition which is supposed to be its guiding force. However, as I look around, it appears to me that a powerful commercial logic, together with the dictates of technological and bureaucratic efficiency, may exert a much more pervasive influence on the values and behaviors of people.

The direct concern of teaching and nursing is the individual--his fruitful development and continuing well-being. To take education as an example, it should be a rich source of intellectual, cultural, and democratic values to leaven and counter influences emerging from the market place (a market place which now, via the television screen, includes home and family life in its boundaries). Public school teachers, however, play a rather small role. They are not ordinarily considered to be part of the intellectual community of our society and are not prominent in advancing the cultural life of our cities. Even our schools, the special realm of teachers, fall far short of realizing the aims of education, broadly conceived in the democratic-humanist tradition. This record must be understood to be in good part a consequence of weakness in the profession.

Nevertheless, professions such as nursing and teaching represent a great, even if still largely unrealized, potential resource of human values which this society badly needs. They directly serve human needs; the welfare and enlightenment of people are their goals, and for them people are not means to other ends. By the nature of their services, pressures develop within teaching and nursing to maintain standards of truth and integrity in work and in relationships with clients and colleagues. Moreover, they each have a tradition of responsible, democratic organization.

I am all too aware that we are still very far from the ideal. But I would stress the potential, and I would urge comparison with the dominant commercial sector. I believe we would be better off if these professional groups had greater strength and with it a wider vision of their roles in social life. Perhaps a sense of such a larger role would help turn their attention to the problem of attaining greater strength.

## PROFESSIONALISM

Our second concept is that much-abused term professionalism. This concept is analogous to that of patriotism in that it can be used to serve many purposes. However, deep within it there is a valid core--something that captures an important aspect of human experience--and if we discarded the word, we would soon have to invent another one to convey the same meaning.

It is worth mentioning a number of its questionable uses. Some people--who evidently worry about middle-class respectability--seem to think it implies a genteel, afternoon tea party kind of behavior. Then there is the admonition addressed to those trying to use group bargaining processes: "It is not the professional thing to do." The term can be used to justify the acceptance of paternalism in employment relationships or to convey a romanticized and self-defeating kind of dedication. For

certain fee-practicing groups, it seems to mean a license for extracting high incomes and rejecting new arrangements for supplying services.

However, no concerned organization of professional employees has much option--it would be well advised to hoist its own professional banner and try to make its interpretation the ruling one within the occupation. Indeed, the power conflicts which center around professional organization involve to a considerable extent different interpretations of the term. But what can we ask of a definition of professionalism?

1. It should contain a valid core of the idea.
2. It should face up to the serious and hard implications of responsibility and of autonomous power, particularly as these arise out of the fact that the professionals are employees in a bureaucratic structure.
3. It should convey a sense of development from a less to a more advanced stage.
4. It should appeal to the capacity and need for idealism and suggest a meaningful direction which commitment can take.

I do not believe that there is any rigid model of professionalism that needs to be followed exactly or any existing profession that should be copied. The starting point I should like to suggest is the potential of an occupation to be professional. A specific occupation should be looked at as a dynamism, i. e., as being a process of realizing--or not realizing--the implications of this potential.

The question of potential is not a clear-cut one, primarily because it involves an arbitrary element. The arbitrary element is the judgment of society and of the members of the occupation as to the significance of their services. Occupations which assert that they are professional are, one might say, putting their claim to test in the social world.

In any case, logic and experience suggest that this claim rests on whether or not the occupational service is acknowledged to be of unique social significance, that is, whether or not it is a service concerned with, or required for, the higher development, functioning, welfare, or progress of human beings or society. We do not wish to belittle everyday occupations, most of which perform useful or even vital services. We simply wish to suggest that some occupations have more profound implications--or society thinks they have--than others. For example, we do not need to belabor the crucial social significance of the task of teaching the young or of responsible nursing for the ill.

It seems often to happen that occupations which have this potential in the general judgment of society possess other attributes--and perhaps this is no accident. To perform their tasks adequately, they usually call for intellectual attainments of a substantial nature, as well as for highly developed techniques requiring the use of individual judgment and discipline in their application. Also the nature and aims of the service are such that the need exists for a high level of integrity in key relationships, such as those with clients and colleagues.

Two further general implications follow with respect to occupations with the potential to be professional:



First, to society, the profession is responsible for the effective provision of its services. This responsibility entails a variety of important functions, and it cannot be fulfilled unless it is accepted by members of the occupation as a corporate concern and one which they possess the group power to implement.

Second, to the individual, a profession holds out the prospect of fulfillment far beyond that of many other vocations. A professional person has a chance to lead a more far-ranging life, one with a larger commitment to society and to the individual's personal development and with greater satisfaction in accomplishment. The implications of professional work include, of course, appropriate compensation and working conditions.

I believe that on the issue of the definition of a profession and professional behavior there is the possibility of a reversal of Gresham's Law. That is, I believe the good definition can drive out the motley crew of bad definitions. This suggests that serious-minded professional groups should not only reject distorted or superficial images but that they should also vigorously espouse a genuine and significant interpretation. Ultimately, any approach which attempts to gloss over the hard issues will find itself out of touch with reality.

## POWER

We now come to the third concept, power. It is meaningless to talk about the responsibility of a profession unless it possesses commensurate group power. And without responsibility there cannot be a profession. Power is an unavoidable issue.

To clarify my approach, let me make two statements on the location of power in the case of a profession:

1. The location of power in the organized profession should be at the bedrock level, i. e., primarily in the hands of the rank-and-file practitioners who directly provide services to the clientele.
2. Group power, if it is to attain its potential strength and accomplish its purposes, must be rooted in the workplace and must express itself first and foremost in connection with employment conditions and job processes that are immediately experienced by the professionals themselves. Thus the basis of strength and autonomy must be at the local level--the faculty body at each school or the professional nursing staff at each hospital.

Group power is very often a difficult concept for teachers and nurses to grasp or discuss. Generally, teachers and nurses are imbued with middle-class sensitivities. The idea of power, and the visions of conflict it engenders, creates anxiety and even fear. The thought of concerted action, with its challenge to legitimate authority, its prospects for openly unpleasant relations with administrators, and its associations with unions and working-class behavior, runs counter to the desire for responsibility.

The wave of unrest among teachers and, on a lesser scale, among nurses in recent years does seem to indicate a growing readiness to think and act in terms of group strength. Such historic events as the emergence of a strong teachers' organization in New York City under Local 2 of the AFT, the unprecedented statewide struggle of the Utah Education Association, and the adoption of collective bargaining by professional nurses in Minnesota and a few other states are probably the most effective educational devices for bringing about changes in traditional orientations. Yet there is undoubtedly still a long way to go. Perhaps a major task of professional leaders is to help their occupations gain an adequate concept of group power, one which is relevant to their positions and responsibilities and with which they can feel comfortable.

Robert S. Lynd has noted that power is a difficult concept to discuss in American society:

The traditional identification of power with dominance . . . renders public reference to organized power in a society professing democratic values furtive and its use awkward.

In contrast, Lynd poses another view of power:

. . . power in a genuine democracy may be a human resource which can be used for the enlargement of human freedom. \*

Lynd's positive view of power as a "human" or "social" resource which in a democracy makes possible the achievement of democratic goals is suggestive of the reorientation in outlook which would be helpful to teachers and nurses. Given the responsibilities of these occupations, which extend from the work level to participation in key decisions of the society as a whole, their members need to gain a sense of legitimacy and confidence in dealing with the issues that confront them.

In a sense, the issue of power or autonomy for professional employees was settled at an early period by the fact of the hierarchical organization of the work structures through which professional services are provided. This settled the question--power was centralized at the top and delegated downward.

Teachers and nurses, on their part, have in the main not been sophisticated about their work structures and the power processes these contain. They know a lot about them, of course, but they lack the capacity to analyze them, to generalize from the implications of this analysis, and to conceive of alternatives or modifications which might be put into effect. By and large, the centralized administrative system is a fact which they take as given.

We should dwell on this a little. The environment of work relationships--which I like to call the socio-political framework--is certainly of vital significance to a professional occupation. Is it not strange that such major occupations as teaching and nursing have not given more critical consideration to the nature of their respective frameworks? I do not say that every teacher or nurse must

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\* "Power in American Society as Resource and Problem," in Problems of Power in American Democracy, ed. Arthur Kornhauser (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1959), p. 5.

be an expert on bureaucratic organization. But it seems to me that there can be a much higher level of understanding than presently exists about these work structures, their implications for professional work and people, and possible options. The professional organization can generate discussion in a more analytical framework; it can investigate and report; and it can help its members to generalize from their everyday experience. The ability to reflect and to generalize is, after all, an important condition of the power to act.

Hierarchical work structures are vulnerable to critical analysis. The fact that they emerge historically does not in any way prove that they are the best option or that they are especially compatible with the professional work processes they are supposed to facilitate. The analysis of work structures should start from a consideration of the nature of the work process and goals that the structures are supposed to serve--not from some preconceived notion of administration.

This is no place for a detailed analysis of structure, but I should like to make a few observations, confining my remarks to education (which is a somewhat clearer case than that presented by nurses and hospitals).

The substance and dynamic of the educational process is the commitment of intellect and emotion by the professional staff in its interaction with students. In a process which centers around the human element, certain broad questions may be raised. These questions stem from the fact that a work structure is essentially a set of power relationships, and these are likely to have a very strong influence, one way or another, on the sensitive human elements involved in a work process such as education. On the one hand, one might ask, does the system have a negative and inhibiting effect on the personnel involved? Does it induce cautious and conformist behavior, a limiting of horizons and a drawing inward into a defensive shell, the forming of only weak bonds among colleagues and dependence on the vertical line of authority? On the other hand, is the pattern of relationships conducive to development and maturing of the individual, to eliciting of a larger contribution, to cultivating a sense of responsibility, and to the emergence of a colleague group which gives a supportive and demanding context for a larger participation?

There are many specific avenues of inquiry which can help teachers gain a deeper insight into their environment. I would like to set forth briefly one which I think is of considerable significance.

A question which should be asked with respect to the present administrative organization of education is to what extent it tends to produce a fragmentation of the education process and of the goals of education. Whitehead, in his Aims of Education, said:

. . . You cannot postpone its life [of the mind] until you have sharpened it. Whatever interest attaches to your subject-matter must be evoked here and now; whatever powers you are strengthening in the pupil, must be exercised here and now; whatever possibilities of mental life your teaching should impart, must be exhibited here and now.\*

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\* (New York: Mentor Books, 1949), p. 18.

Thus, performance in education depends very much on the degree to which the goals of education, in their most far-reaching sense, are operative in each classroom. To be operative, they must be incorporated in the apprehension of each teacher. It is my impression that all too often teachers are isolated from each other and from any meaningful connection with the over-all process of goal formation (assuming that there even is such a process). The result is a virtual fragmentation of goals. In practice, the teacher often finds himself apprehending and following limited aims, such as the imparting of a standardized dose of knowledge, with only an extremely vague notion of the bearing of what he is doing on the over-all goal of producing an educated person. The mechanism is lacking, by and large, by which the teacher could effectively relate his work to the over-all process and presumably therefore to the larger aims of education.

Subjects like this, which dig into the inner workings of the administrative structure and the teaching-learning process and consider how compatible these are, should be active topics of critical discussion by teachers and their organizations. In a 1959 article in the American Sociological Review, Melvin Seeman discussed five alternative meanings of alienation that he had identified in the literature: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness (anomie), isolation, and self-estrangement. What would we discover, I wonder, if we tried to find to what extent these various processes of alienation are operative in some of our school systems? I seem to run into teachers often enough who in telling about their work appear to reflect one or more of these aspects of alienation.

I think the problems of power, autonomy, and participation reside and need to be resolved primarily at the local level. Professional organizations should, therefore, place much more emphasis on workplace organization and activity. Here can be developed both the vital bonds of cohesion among professional colleagues and the basic machinery of autonomous power. And here is where professional employees can shape the context which makes possible group and individual participation in both employee and professional issues.

What is the solution? Do we need a basic change in work structure? The answer will come as organized bodies of teachers gain a sense of group strength in the context of their immediate work situations and as their perspectives broaden as to their professional roles and responsibilities. Personally, I am of the opinion that there is no pressing need for the centralized work structure in education, that there can be more than one power center which, with new norms, new divisions of functions and responsibility, and new relationships, will elicit the potential of the professional staff more effectively than is the case with the present structure.

## SUMMARY

I would like to sum up in a number of points:

1. Most of us know that it is difficult to put ideas across or generate discussion among teachers or nurses when using such concepts as power or conflict or generally sociological types of jargon. This almost certainly is in part a matter of terminology which can be corrected. But to an important extent it may be a result of different frames of references for viewing the same phenomena. An important problem is how to bridge these differences in terminology and viewpoint.

2. Nevertheless, it is important that professional employees such as teachers and nurses shake loose from habitual modes of thought concerning the legitimacy of the present work structure, the nature of professionalism, the question of power, and the use of collective action. Thus the purpose of challenging discussions on the autonomy question, on bureaucratic structure, on professionalism, and on larger role in society is to help unsettle minds and create openness to new ideas. The problem of organizational effectiveness would look very different if a supportive outlook emerged which incorporated the notion of a larger, more responsible role and which legitimized behavior required to secure and act the role.

3. Collective bargaining is a process which can take many forms and has many possibilities. It entails the use of group power and the prospect of conflict. I do not think these matters can be glossed over, though there may be different ways of interpreting them to groups. I think a theory of natural harmony or lack of different interests between employees and executives is incorrect, unrealistic, and probably as unfair to administrators as to employees.

4. Group power for professional employees will undoubtedly develop first around economic and employment issues. But the approach as well as ultimate aim of professional groups should be much broader so as to include participation in determining relevant aspects of the work process. The broader approach will facilitate acceptance of the idea of collective bargaining as an instrument to be used by professional groups.

5. Much of the focus in collective bargaining is on negotiations at the top. However, viewed in its fullest sense, the front line of the collective relationship is in the local workplace, in the interaction among professional workers and immediate supervisors. If there is little change of experience at the working level, then one may question the ultimate significance of the process at the top.

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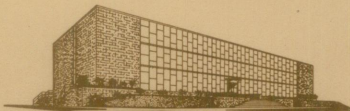
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