

Commentary

Settlement Women and Bureau Men: Did They Share a Usable Past?

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In "Settlement Women and Bureau Men: Constructing a Usable Past for Public Administration" Stivers (1995) highlights the important role that substantive as opposed to procedural concerns played in the emergence of public administration as a field of inquiry. To increase contemporary knowledge about the field's origins she advocates including the work of turn-of-the-century settlement women in public administration history because they strove to expand government programs for the poor unlike research bureau men, whose primary concerns were procedural.

Stivers does the field a service in highlighting the substantive aims of Progressive reform. Her work on the settlement movement shows that both genders gave the field progenitors. But her use of New York's Bureau of Municipal Research as a foil for her argument is totally misplaced.

From the time that William Allen and Frederick Cleveland planned the bureau in 1905 until its 1914 reorganization a prime goal of the bureau was to increase the scope of government action for the poor. Allen's opinion on expanding the role of the state emerges quite clearly in a bit of doggerel he penned to counter arguments that private efforts on infant mortality were sufficient:

"Won't you move a little faster?" said the baby to the state.

"I keep right on a-dying, and its getting pretty late;

All sorts of folks are working hard to give me half a chance

But their work is worse than wasted

until you join the dance." (Allen, 1911, 201)

That this view on private philanthropy dovetails with the settlement philosophy stems, in part, from Allen's social work background. From 1903 to 1905 he was general agent for the New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, an organization dedicated to pressuring the state to assume new obligations to poor people. The association developed the first vacation schools as a charity endeavor and then worked successfully to have them incorporated into the budget of the New York City Board of Education. In 1905 Allen fought hard to keep the board from slashing funds for this service the association had invented and institutionalized in an approach to reform similar to that Stivers identifies as the settlement movement's strategy (New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, 1905).

Bureau personnel shared a community of discourse with settlement workers. Articles written by people working in both spheres appeared in *Charities and the Commons*, a reform social work periodical; both Jane Addams and Frank Tucker, a bureau trustee, sat on the journal's publication committee.

In 1907 Allen spoke at a National Conference on Charities. Another speaker was Florence Kelley, identified as a social policy advocate by Stivers. The director of the Bureau of Municipal Research chaired a session on increasing programs for the poor in the health field; the settlement woman spoke on child labor legislation. Both reformers pushed a substantive agenda ("The Minneapolis Conference," 1907).

The original prospectus of the bureau indicates that part of its mission was to bring scientific management to public agencies and part was to research "the extent and cause of remediable conditions that indicate governmental responsibility for the physical deterioration of children. . . for preventable disease; for pauperism; for crime" (Cleveland, 1905). Once incorporated, the bureau worked to meet both of its goals. It pressured city and state governments to alleviate the conditions responsible for poverty and disease and spearheaded

projects to improve accounting and budgeting in public agencies.

Although modern writers sometimes score the bureau for a concern with economy, many of its proposals actually required outlay of public money. The bureau fought to open a child hygiene section in the city health department (Gulick, 1928); campaigned against reducing New York's tenement department budget (Bureau of Municipal Research, 1909); and championed free dental clinics in public schools (Bureau of Municipal Research, 1911, 6).

The bureau's surveys of city agencies across the country were not mere fact-gathering expeditions. One on St. Paul's health department advocated that the city spend more on health protection and education (Bureau of Municipal Research and Training School for Public Service, 1913, 3). Another on Pittsburgh's Department of Public Health pushed tenement inspection from the tenant's point of view (Bureau of Municipal Research, 1913).

Stivers asserts that even sympathetic contemporaries saw economy rather than service as the bureau's paramount concern, but her earliest citation for this view is Crane (1923). The bureau underwent significant reorganization in 1914 under pressure from John D. Rockefeller, Sr., its premier contributor. The aim of the reorganization was to stop the bureau from promoting its concept of active citizenship, particularly in educational politics where it favored school systems with large, heterogeneous, powerful boards of education rather than small, elite boards that delegated control to professionals (Schachter, 1995). Stivers's citations come from people whose primary acquaintance with the Bureau of Municipal Research occurred years after its heyday as a substantively oriented organization. Publications in the second decade of the 20th century identify the bureau's proposals as likely to raise city expenses and highlight the need for government action to help the poor. This attitude predominates whether the writers are basically sympathetic to the bureau (e.g., Howe, 1915, 330-331 and Cerf, 1913) or antagonistic (Flexner, 1914). At professional conferences before 1914 school administrators arguing for increased medical services cited

bureau research to bolster their case (e.g., Bingham, 1913). These contemporaries saw the organization as an ally for service expansion. Stivers will find few writers from this era who accept her view of the bureau. The pressure of donor reaction caused settlement houses also to avoid some controversies (Trolander, 1987, 20). The ability of donors to pervert the original course of reform organizations is a topic deserving more study than it has yet received in our field.

As Stivers notes, males were the major executives of the bureau and its premier donors. However, women did contribute to the organization at all other levels. They donated money for specific causes such as starting a training school at the bureau and for publicizing school children's health problems (Denison, 1912, 33). They served on the bureau's staff and lectured as experts to male and female students at its training school. The bureau worked with women's reform groups on public service issues (Beard, 1915).

Elsa Denison, who graduated from Bryn Mawr College in 1910, is an interesting example of a person who fits the ascriptive profile of Stivers's settlement women but who chose to make her contribution at the

Bureau of Municipal Research. Like the settlement women she participated in the battle to get government money to remedy social ills, campaigning for increased expenditures for school nurses, medical examinations, and open air classes. Her publications (1912, 1913) are similar in style and content to those of bureau director Allen (1911). Both authors had a primary concern with alleviating the harsh lot of the poor.

In addition Denison urged women to take a bigger role in school politics. She prodded women to run for school board positions—at a time when they did not have the right to vote! Possessing an inclusive vision she lauded the work of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, believing they attacked problems “with a persistence that might be emulated by similar groups of white women” (1912, 193). Denison drafted a good bit of the bureau's school work that so infuriated the Rockefeller interests.

Correcting Stivers's picture of the Bureau of Municipal Research is important for two reasons. First, an expanded picture of the bureau helps to bring out of the shadows additional female progenitors of a substantively oriented public administration. Denison is only one of the now forgotten bureau

women who helped shape the nature of modern public programs. It is a pleasure to celebrate her work along with that of her settlement sisters.

Second, understanding the bureau's early stance reinforces Stivers's point that public administration as a field of inquiry did not emerge from procedural preoccupations. It shows that her account actually understates the paramount nature of substance. Concern for government's substantive role held sway not only among settlement women whose deeds she celebrates so well but also among the men and women working before 1914 at the New York Bureau of Municipal Research.

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