

FILLING THE RANKS: LESTER BLACKWELL GRANGER'S VISION OF THE SOCIAL WORK PROFESSION AS A TOOL FOR ACHIEVING RACIAL EQUALITY

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Before social work education embraced the idea that the social work profession had a significant contribution to make in the struggle for social and economic justice and against discrimination, Lester Blackwell Granger, longtime head of the National Urban League, pushed and prodded the profession to broaden its perspective. He had greater success, at the time, in convincing young Black students at Dillard University in New Orleans, Louisiana, to enter the profession and use the tools of social work to effect social change than he did in getting the profession of social work more involved in the struggle for civil rights. This narrative documents his vision of the potential of the profession and his influence on some who entered it.

Introduction

"Behind Him, A Trail of Opened Doors," was the headline of a close-up profile of Lester Blackwell Granger in the *New York Post, Sunday Magazine* (Eckman, 1960), the year before Granger retired as executive director of the National Urban League (NUL). Many social workers are aware of Whitney Young, the social worker who succeeded Granger as executive director of the NUL. Few are aware of Lester Blackwell Granger, who headed the NUL from 1941 to 1961. But, I am getting ahead of my story.

When I left home to attend college in 1961, I headed for New Orleans to attend Dillard University, a small historically Black liberal arts college. I had every intention of pursuing a degree in nursing; and I did, until the second semester of my sophomore year. By the time I completed my liberal arts courses and before I began any practical introductory courses in nursing, I knew my career path was not to be nursing. Oh, I had done well in the science courses required for nursing – microbiology, organic chemistry, physiology, and anatomy – it was the practical part of nursing that I knew in my heart would be my undoing when that part of my studies began. I don't know if I ever really wanted to be a nurse, but choosing that area of study gave me the reason I needed to attend Dillard University. It had the only college-level nursing program in Louisiana open to Blacks at that time. Although Dillard University started as

third on my list of United Negro College Fund (UNCF) Schools that I wanted to attend—I considered Howard University and Fisk University but did not get the level of financial assistance I needed—it eventually became in my mind the place I had to go, my destiny. With a small scholarship and little else, I left for Dillard in the fall of 1961, as my mother said "on a wing and a prayer," uncertain that I would be there come spring. I had turned down a scholarship at another college in Louisiana that would have covered most of my expenses. But it was a large state university (historically Black) and I did not think it would provide the kind of spiritual and intellectual nurturance I needed. It was a fateful decision to enroll at Dillard that fall, though I had no idea at the time how fateful it would prove to be.

Meeting a Social Work Leader in the Struggle for Racial Equality

The year 1961 was a pivotal year in another respect; it was the year that the newly retired Lester B. Granger, former head of the NUL, came to Dillard University as a distinguished visiting professor. He came for a year and stayed long past the four years I matriculated there. He came to Dillard as a famous "Negro leader," a champion of the race. Most of the students knew about the NUL but, sad to say, most of us knew little about Mr. Granger (we called him Dr. Granger; he had several honorary degrees).

He started his tenure with a series of lectures in the chapel followed by small discussion groups in the social room of Lawless Memorial Chapel. An articulate, affable, charismatic, and witty man, he quickly became the toast of the campus across the entire student body; budding sociologists, theologians, athletes, nurses, all came to appreciate his contribution to campus life. He was popular not because he was “a famous Negro leader” that we should pay homage to. Rather, he was challenging and argumentative, and he forced us to think and support our arguments with logic, not the muddled, pseudo-intellectual discourse common among most college freshmen. He sat in the cafeteria with students, played tennis with us, and patiently tried to move all of us to a new level of thinking. We tried hard to understand his position on the civil rights movement, for he was not as militant as we thought he should be. It was not until I changed my major from nursing to sociology and took his classes in urban sociology and social disorganization that I began to understand, but not necessarily agree with, his position on the politics of mass protest.

Mr. Granger eschewed anything he perceived as mob psychology or following the pack. One of his favorite books was Le Bon's, *The Crowd*. Reflected in his philosophy for social change was his work for many years with the NUL and a commitment to “scientific social work,” which emphasized rational education and persuasion as the way to effect change; and he remained committed to this method when many inside and outside the NUL had embraced the tactics and strategies of direct social action and mass protest as the tools for struggle against racial inequality and for social justice and civil rights (Moore as cited in Brown, 1991). Of course, as young Black students, we were drawn to the politics of confrontation. He did not try to stop us from becoming actively involved in the civil rights movement, participating in

protest marches or freedom rides. He just made us think about what we planned to do and the cost to us and to our families if we decided to “join the movement.” He didn't think everybody had to do the same thing or to use the same tactics in the struggle for racial equality. He wanted us to think of other ways we could contribute to the civil rights movement – participating in leadership councils, teaching in universities, managing social service organizations. Mr. Granger really worked to get us to think about going to schools of social work – to equip our minds for the struggle. Despite his grumbling about the shortcomings of social work, he really believed the profession had the potential to make a significant contribution in the area of racial, social, and economic justice. Some years later, in research for an article I was writing on Mr. Granger, I came across one that he had written that seemed to capture the vision of social work he tried to impart to us:

What is required . . . is that the social worker shall join the battle against social injustice, shall help to remake or eliminate those forces that have twisted and blighted the lives of millions of Americans in our own generation. No one is better qualified than the social worker to bring to such planning a shrewd analysis of the individual and family needs of the community: no one is more responsible for devising ways of serving these needs.
(Granger, 1940)

Mr. Granger's philosophy reflected the tenets of the NUL, the organization that he headed for twenty years. From its inception, the NUL was “an interracial organization committed to constructive and preventive social work among Blacks. It sought to improve the social and economic conditions under which they lived, to secure and train Black social workers, and to provide research

and information on urban conditions that could influence existing policies and create new policy initiatives in response to the needs of urban Black Americans" (Moore as cited in Brown, 1991, p. 270).

I did not know anything about social work as a profession. Coming from a small town in central Louisiana and shaped by the prevailing social conditions of segregation at the time, the professions I knew to be open to Blacks were teaching, law, medicine, preaching, and mortuary science, all of which you could do with minimal contact with the White community. Mr. Granger himself was the only one of six brothers who did not pursue a career in medicine. I had had exposure to a county caseworker through my uncle and aunt's adoption of a child after realizing that my parents would not follow the custom of one or two children from a large family going to live with childless relatives. There were nine of us, but my parents insisted that we had to be kept together in the same household. Our home was evaluated because my mother agreed to provide childcare for my uncle's adopted son. The caseworker was White, and there was nothing on the horizon to indicate that a Black person in Alexandria, Louisiana, could ever get that kind of a job. Therefore, I was not inspired by this contact to pursue a career in social work.

But when I arrived at Dillard University, there was change in the air and a sense of anticipation of better things to come. Suddenly at the end of my undergraduate matriculation, those of us who had barely been able to afford a baccalaureate degree were considering graduate school. And for more than a few students, the choice of study for graduate school was social work. If any of us had Lester Granger in any of our sociology classes, he introduced us to the social work profession as one compatible with the struggle for racial equality. He believed that the profession should be more involved in civil rights issues because of the many opportunities

for "intelligent, planned, collective efforts... He had little patience with the voices in social work councils that dismissed racial problems as political or ideological and therefore outside the realm of professional social work. He argued instead that the patience, courage, and skill required to do social work were the characteristics needed to solve the racial problems of American society" (Brown, 1991, p. 276). He encouraged a number of students to pursue careers in social work, so much so, that in private correspondence to the author in 1966, he admitted that one of his colleagues at Dillard was worried that too many of the best students were choosing to do graduate studies in social work instead of sociology, history, or political science. He said he told the person that "that was just too bad, that social work needed first-class minds too" (L. Granger, personal communication, April 8, 1966). He was not unmindful of social work's reluctance to assume the role he envisioned for it and spoke candidly of its failings that he described as "many and sometimes serious." Yet, he thought social workers of intelligence, training, and experience had much to offer in the development, implementation, and delivery of national social programs and in addressing issues related to racial inequality. He thought sociologists tended to regard social work as a vocation; he envisioned social work as a discipline on the cutting edge of social change (Brown, 1991).

Filling the Ranks

I wish I knew exactly how many students from Dillard University actually pursued a graduate degree in social work because of contact with Mr. Granger. It was probably too many as far as the chair of the social science department was concerned. But Mr. Granger did not just persuade students to consider social work as a profession; he identified schools, wrote letters of recommendation, and assisted students in

applying for financial assistance. He was thoroughly respected in the social work communities, both education and practice, national and international. He used his network of contacts to recommend students to schools of social work—University of Denver, Atlanta University, Washington University in St. Louis, Columbia University – and visited the students once they were in the programs to see how they were faring and to provide moral support. I was the recipient of one of those visits while attending The George Warren Brown School of Social Work at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri. I was one of only a handful of Black students in the school of social work in 1965. It was a source of comfort and pride to think of myself as part of a group of students mentored by Mr. Granger and sent forth from the South to attend graduate schools in far and distant places. Fortunately for me, I had worked summers at private camps (Mr. Granger provided recommendations and encouragement) that hired college students as staff for work-study programs. The study topics reflected the times and were usually about race and the civil rights movement even though there were only a few Blacks in the programs. These experiences were invaluable and gave me a comfort level that assisted me in my adjustment at Washington University. I did not have to deal with the culture shock of transition from a predominately Black environment to one with very few people of color, and my education at Dillard University had prepared me for the rigor of the MSW program. Mr. Granger's emphasis on "scientific social work" (perhaps a precursor of evidenced-based practice, but that is another article), critical thinking, and analysis gave me a sense of intellectual security and confidence in my ability to survive. Whenever I had doubts or felt lonely, I could go to the library and get the proceedings of the 1952 National Conference on Social Welfare, see

Mr. Granger's picture, read his speech, and know that I belonged where I was at that time.

There were other students at Dillard who did not choose to get a graduate degree in social work, but were influenced by Mr. Granger, and used their undergraduate sociology or political science degree to enter some of the new jobs opening up for Blacks in community development and community action programs in Louisiana and elsewhere in the country. The fervor of the times, the intellectual stimulation of the learning environment at Dillard University, and the coming of Mr. Granger to campus at that time all combined to produce a group of students with a worldview dramatically different from the one they had when they entered college. We transitioned from the parochial constraints of our mostly segregated upbringing to viewing ourselves as citizens of the world with unlimited opportunities. The irony was not lost on me a few years ago when I heard that one of my classmates from Dillard was president of the Louisiana chapter of the National Association of Social Work (NASW). She did not graduate from Dillard but had married and moved to California and completed her education there. Her exposure to Dr. Granger remained with her, and years later she earned a Master of Social Work Degree at Northwestern University in Louisiana, a school we could not have attended without a fight in the mid-1960s.

Another incident that forced me to recall how I chose social work as a career was my experience as a delegate to the NASW Delegate Assembly in 2002. Mark G. Battle, executive director of NASW from 1984 to 1992, was the recipient of a Lifetime Achievement Award at that assembly. The award was to honor a lifetime of accomplishments and to recognize demonstrations of social work values during a career that spanned 50 years. I was stunned when, in his acceptance speech, Mr. Battle mentioned Lester Blackwell Granger as

someone who had greatly influenced his life and the trajectory of his career. He had been a student of Mr. Granger's at the Manual Training School for Colored Boys in Bordentown, New Jersey. In one of the crowning moments of his professional career, surrounded by his peers, Mr. Battle paid homage to Mr. Granger. What a tribute to the influence of someone who is barely remembered today. In a subsequent telephone conversation I had with Mr. Battle, he reiterated his admiration for Mr. Granger and his influence on him. He described Mr. Granger as "a giant whose size and impact has not been fully realized" (Battle personal communication, December 5, 2003).

Granger on the Role of Social Work

The social work profession embraced Granger even though it did not fully accept his view of a role for social work in the struggle for racial equality. In 1952, he became the first Black person to be elected president of the National Conference on Social Welfare (NCSW), one of the precursors of NASW; he was chairman of the United States Committee of the International Conference of Social Welfare (ICSW) and in that position led delegations to India in 1952 and Toronto in 1954. In 1956, he was elected vice-president of ICSW and in 1961, he was elected to the presidency of that organization. Granger was the first U.S. representative to serve as president of ICSW. He was elected honorary president of that organization in 1964 "amidst expressions of acclaim and affection" (Pettiss, 1965, p.78).

Mr. Granger had an undergraduate degree in economics from Dartmouth College and completed one year of social work education at the New York School for Social Work. He operated at the highest levels in the profession, and he worked to ensure that there would be other Black social workers to fill the ranks when he was no longer on the scene, that there would be others to carry

forth a broader vision of social work, similar to that which he expressed in a speech in 1950:

What about the nature, as distinguished from the practice of social work? Are our services to be deftly palliative, or boldly remedial? . . . Are we handmaidens of the public interest or partners in a great enterprise? . . . Social work can be – and if it is to fulfill its function, must be – a dynamic force keeping man's progress along this road.... Such an interpretation of the responsibility of social work is a long step away from the original concept of our calling as noblesse oblige. There was always "something strongly condescending" in that early concept, and faint traces of condescension must continue to linger as long as we concentrate on the needs of the disadvantaged to the exclusion of social and economic forces creating those needs. (Granger, 1951)

Granger was committed to the social reform tradition of social work because he saw that stream of the profession as an important tool in combating discrimination and inequity. He recruited Black students to enter the field of social work because he wanted to make sure that Blacks would have the opportunity to help shape the direction of the profession through education and practice.

Conclusion

As I have had occasion to study the accreditation standards of the Council on Social Work Education, the accrediting body for schools of social work, I see standards that mandate curriculum content on human diversity and social and economic justice, where social policy is firmly rooted in foundation content. On the NASW website, we can find a statement on affirmative action. Social work education and practice are

reaching out to the international community as the changing demographics of our own country have brought the people of the world to our cities and towns. Social work is concerned not just with the provision of services to populations at risk, but in changing the policies that negatively affect those populations. One of the purposes of the social work profession as discussed in the *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards of the Council on Social Work Education* (CSWE, 2003) is: "To pursue policies, services, and resources through advocacy and social or political actions that promote social and economic justice" (p. 31). We sometimes forget that the knowledge content now included in education for social work practice was not always so inclusive, sensitive to issues of race and ethnicity, cultural competency, or populations at risk. The social work profession is not yet leading the struggle for social justice, but its schools are preparing social work practitioners to think critically, to understand the impact of social forces on individual problems and the need for change at the systems level as well as the individual level. I am reminded of a letter from Mr. Granger written in March 1969 when he was teaching at Park College in Parkville, Missouri (according to him, he had "temporarily integrated the faculty"), that expressed some of his frustration with the profession.

I speak next week - the 19th - at the closing luncheon of the Kansas State Welfare Conference in Wichita, to the theme "Social Welfare and Social Policy." Of course I'll tell 'em that the only relationship is coincidental so far as N.A.S.W. is concerned - that welfare administrators will have to establish a rationale and a method, if a significant (not "meaningful") relationship is to be established. How to win audiences and lose speaking invitations, you say? And you are

right, but I'm tired . . . of hearing social work conferees chirping about "Social Welfare and Social Policy" when the bulk of them really don't know what involves social policy in their own towns. L. B. Granger (personal communication, March 14, 1969)

I think the social work profession is slowly embracing for itself the vision that Mr. Granger championed for it so long ago - a role in shaping social policy and in the struggle for racial equality, social and economic justice, and civil rights. And what would he think? Well, I think he's probably smiling up there in social work heaven, shaking his head and saying, "It's about time."

References

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Lester Blackwell Granger at the Royal Embassy of Greece with Ambassador Alekas Matzas conferring the medal of rank of Commander, Royal Order of the Phoenix, in the name of King Constantine (September 8, 1966).

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