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Dilemmas of Planning and Self-Determination

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ABSTRACT

Self-determination is examined as the premier
social work value. It is argued in this paper that
the positive or negative impact of planning is
dependent on who is planning what for whom, and
that not planning may be a more serious threat to
self-determination than planning.

This paper examines social planning in an advanced industrial society
and its consequences for self-determination. There has been a recurring
concern that the individual's self-determination is threatened by: 1)
powerful, elitest, economic, and political groups who influence decisions
on the basis of self-interest (see Mills, 1969; Auerbach, 1969); and
2) bureaucracies where important decisions are made on the basis of insti-
tutional need (see Newman, 1952; Cohn, 1965). In more recent years one
finds in the professional literature, as well as in the political dialogue
of the American people, a fear of elitest professional planning groups who
make decisions based on knowledge of the planning process, knowledge of the
service system, or on social science evidence (see Moynihan, 1969; Gyarfas,
1969; Agnew, 1972). The publication of B. F. Skinner's Beyond Freedom and
Dignity (1972) enlivened this discussion. This paper will examine self-
determination in the context of social work practice and the impact of
social planning on self-determination.

SELF-DETERMINATION AND SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Origin: Self-determination originated in social casework literature and has
continued as a central value in that area of practice. An examination of
the social group work literature reveals rare reference to the concept, and
its complete absence as a central theme. The recent community organization
literature has included the concept as a central theme, although its use is
usually attached to a community, an organization, a race, or a social class,
rather than the individual as in the social case work literature.

Self-determination was first mentioned in the literature in the 1930's (Perlman, 1965:411). Its appearance in the literature at that time has been attributed by Perlman (1965:411) to:1) the liberating force of Freudian psychology, 2) the progressive education movement as influenced by John Dewey, and 3) the rise of totalitarian governments. While it may first have appeared in the literature in the 1930's, the concept is grounded in the unique American experiment with classic liberal economic theory. While social worker's motivating values of "helping one's fellow man" etc. are rooted in the Judea-Christian tradition, self-determination as a value has its origins in the the parallel birth of Calvinism and capitalism. The placement of self-determination as the premier social work value is part and parcel of the frontier's "rugged individualism" (see Kahn, 1969, Chapter 1).

Definition: A major problem with the use of the term self-determination is that it is sufficiently abstract to be used in a variety of ways for a variety of purposes without communicating specific meaning. As such, it is difficult to operationalize into precise practice behaviors. Perlman (1965), who has written a thought provoking paper on self-determination, defined the concept in the context of a "realistic view of freedom". "Freedom, in essence, is the inner capacity and outer opportunity to make reasoned choices among possible, socially acceptable alternatives" (Perlman, 1965:421).

This definition is useful for the purposes of this paper in that it qualifies self-determination within the reality limits of the individual and the society. Until recently, such consideration of the society as a qualifier of self-determination was unique in casework literature. Neither the self-determination limitations of the individual nor the society are considered in much of the community organization literature.

Limitations: Self-determination has had at least two distinct consequences from the perspective of social work practice: 1) that in direct client intervention social workers should not determine client outcome, and 2) that clients should have the social and economic opportunities required in order to be and do exactly what they want to be and do. In the extreme form of each, the first suggests a value free form of intervention while the latter suggests equality and an increasingly complete form of social control.

Neither complete equality, nor value free judgments create an ideal condition for assuring individual choices. Social goals and a system of social control that protects the right of each individual to maximize his ability to determine his destiny is required. "The guarantees of civil liberties that are built into democratic political systems...are essential to the achievement of positive freedom but are a form of social control" (Faunce, 1968:157). The dilemma is described by John Stuart Mill as, "the practical question /is/ where to place the limit--how to make the adjustment between individual independence and social control" (Quoted in Faunce, 1968:157).

Self-determination in contemporary American society is very limited. Perlman (1972:210) states, "I believe self-determination is nine-tenths illusion, one-tenth reality." An individual's self-determination in any society is limited by the established laws, mores, prejudices, social customs, economic systems, and social institutions and structures of that society. In this advanced industrial society, it is also limited by dramatic technological and social changes and increasing complexity. The changes might be summarized as the process of technologicalization, institutionalization, nationalization, industrialization, urbanization, bureaucratization, secularization, centralization and internatinalization.

Other limitations of self-determination in this society that specifically effect poor people (and which, to a degree, also effect Blacks and women), include 1) a long history of prejudice which seems to have changed only in its subtlety during the last 100 years, 2) the market place as the central distribution center of rights, privileges, goods, and services coinciding with a lack of equal opportunity for all people to compete in that market place. The additional impact of planning on the above indicated encroachments must be evaluated.

SOCIAL PLANNING IN A COMPLEX INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY: THREAT OR OPPORTUNITY?

Social planning has the potential for both limiting and enhancing self-determination. Increased social planning in our society is assumed[1] which provides the opportunity for the social work establishment to: 1) try and combat it, 2) be neutral to it, or 3) participate in it and therefore influence its process and method.

Social planning potentially limits the individual's control over his own life and forces him to conform to the dictates of others. However, simultaneously it also potentially benefits and greatly expands the scope of choices open to people. National old-age "insurance" programs, public school education, equal opportunity laws and policies, income security programs all limit certain individual freedoms while at the same time providing additional opportunities.

Rousseau's distinction between "natural liberty" and "civil liberty" would perhaps be useful here. The "body politic" forms a "social compact".

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[1] This paper assumes increased social planning. Considerable discussion has occurred regarding the contribution of social science to planning. The advocacy of planning must be tempered with the basic fact that we now have limited knowledge to utilize in the planning process. Evaluation of the results of social provision in this country should make social planners extremely humble. However, planning does exist and is having increasing impact on our society. (See for example; Kahn, 1969: Chapter 1; papers written in response to Moynihan, 1970 in Zurcher and Bonjean, 1970; Haveman and Margolis, 1970.)

This "social compact" creates the state. Rousseau saw this "social compact"
as ultimately not taking away from individuals but as an advantageous
exchange. The exchange is "natural liberty" for "civil liberty"; the "power
to harm others" for "security for ourselves". What a man loses by the
social compact is his "natural liberty", and an unlimited right to every-
thing he tries to get and succeeds in getting. What he gains is "civil
liberty" which is limited by the "general will" (Rousseau, 1946). By sur-
rendering certain individual privileges, new opportunities are made avail-
able and the individual can gain much more in available choices (Olsen,
1968:346). To generate "civil liberty", societies develop laws that limit
"natural liberty". Is it therefore good to give up "natural liberty" for
"civil liberty"? Is it appropriate to support planning that may be
restrictive, yet provides people with additional choices? It depends. It
depends on the trade off...what is given up for what pay off. In addition,
in a democratic society it depends on who is planning what for whom and with
what kind of sanction. Social planning's impact on self-determination is
neither positive nor negative in and of itself. Therefore, it may be appro-
priate to object to some social planning endeavors, while being neutral or
supportive of others.

Planning Versus No Planning: The rejection of planning in a contemporary
industrialized state would suggest a grim prognosis for its citizens. In
the face of the irresistible forces of modern technology and industrializa-
tion, bureaucratization, specialization, complexity, sheer growth in size,
and interdependence, the dangers of not planning are critical. Not planning
implies that individuals accept consequences of these inevitable forces.
Robert Heibroner (1976) has recently argued that economic planning is not
only necessary, it is the only option we have. While he recognizes the
dangers that planning carries such as constriction of freedom as the conse-
quence of a reckless proliferation of controls, he argues that it would be
"foolish to ignore the risks associated" with a refusal to plan. These
risks include an inability to limit inflation, an absence of energy, dan-
gerous atmospheric pollution, or a rush to political extremism as a conse-
quence of economic frustration or failure. Individual self-determination
is greatly hindered by unemployment, chaotic urban public education, racial
and sexual discrimination, and being old and poor simultaneously.

    Man now has increasing capacity to transform social structures and
institutions, rather than accommodate to or merely protest, the social struc-
ture he encounters. Amitai Etzioni has argued that earlier barriers that
blocked man's quest for self-mastery and social mastery have been tumbling
down. New discoveries in the social sciences provide man with new options
and freedom to choose his destiny (Etzioni, 1968). As the technology of
knowledge increases in power and influence, planning based on this knowledge
will increase. Rather than destroying human choice, the use of social
science knowledge can be used in planning to create new social structures
to maximize the potential for a self directed society. The social work
profession can participate in the leadership for this planning through the

further development of planning as a social work method, and the introduc-
tion of the concept into all aspects of social work practice.

The Problem of Legitimacy: As planning increases in our society, the
problem of legitimacy will also increase in significance. There is minimal
literature on appropriate criteria for evaluating legitimate social planning.
Criteria implicit in the logic of his paper would be based on the value of
a self-directed society. It would include an evaluation of the trade-off
of giving up individual rights for additional individual choices. In
addition, a particular planning endeavor should be evaluated as to the self-
determination cost and benefit in the context of the cost and benefit of
planning versus no planning. Legitimate planning is based on issues of who
plans what for whom, under what sanction, and with what resources. As
dependence on rational thought and empirical evidence increases and as we
become more self-conscious of the kind of society we have, we can plan the
kind of society we prefer.

Summary: A self-directed society is desirable and can be achieved through
the development of social structures supportive of such a society. Not
planning may be a more serious threat to self-determination than planning.
If the profession of social work does not respond to the planning possibili-
ties before it, someone else will. Non-involvement increases the capacity
for contemporary social, economic and technological phenomena to control
man. Collaborative involvement can increase the capacity of planning
technologies to extend freedom and maximize the capacity of man to control
his destiny.

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