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A SERENDIPITOUS RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THEORY
MODIFICATION AND A STUDY OF STAFF DEVELOPMENT

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There are instances in which the guiding impetus to a study is a very practical problem, the answers to which are expected to have immediate applicability. Although the practical purpose is accomplished, at the study's end comes the recognition that perhaps the most important contribution of the investigation had been the uncovering of theoretical implications.

The above serendipitous process is applicable to the following report of a limited study of staff development in a new youth serving agency. The study is presented in detail so that the main elements associated with the validation and elaboration of a conceptualization of organizational behavior can be traced.

Study Background

The need for staff development in such a time-honored endeavor within the helping professions, that it rarely is explicated in program objectives. Although not stated, most administrators of new agencies show a recognition of the need to develop their staff by either instituting one-to-one supervisory sessions, peer group sessions under the direction of supervisory staff, or a combination of the two. The goal of such efforts and the objectives to which it gives rise can be specified. The goal is that staff development become one of the steps leading to the achievement of service objectives. The need to move toward this goal is recognized in service delivery programs manned by experienced professionals.¹ Thus, the need would seem to be even greater for programs manned by non-professionals and/or inexperienced personnel.

The staff development efforts studied were directed toward non-professional and/or inexperienced staff. Colored by the developmental needs of an embryonic counseling staff were the objectives that flowed from the above stated goal: 1) exposure to and acceptance of the values and norms of social work, 2) providing an ongoing opportunity to synthesize professional knowledge and skills, 3) providing information regarding the communities in which clients resided, and 4) providing information about the community of social agencies.

¹For a discussion of the need for staff development see, Supervision and Staff Development. New York: Family Service Association of America, 1966 and Purvine, Margaret (ed.). Educating MSW Students to Work With Other Social Welfare Personnel. New York: Council on Social Work Education, 1966.

This study was concerned with one type of staff development--peer groups sessions under the direction of professional social work administrative staff. The general purpose was concerned with not only the reaching of the aforementioned objectives, but also the elements associated with movement toward attaining them. Some of these elements were thought to be a) counselor reactions to the meetings, b) administrative versus professional agendas, c) administrative versus counselor participation, d) verbal activity in the meetings, and e) number of counselors in attendance.

Underlying the study were two major assumptions. It was assumed that the staff development process is a dynamic endeavor toward reaching a goal that never can be actualized. As broad steps toward the goal are mastered both administrative and direct service staff expect that new and more intricate steps will be added. Thus, the specific purpose of the research had to be the study of elements associated with the movement toward the goal, rather than whether the goal was attained. A further assumption was that changes over time in the reaction to the meetings naturally would occur.

Methodology

This was a time series study of the movement toward the objectives of staff development. Data were collected during and following all but one weekly session.² During each session, observations were made of the process of the meetings; whereas, following the meetings, staff reactions to them were collected. With respect to the use of an observational technique, it was recognized that the method implies certain limitations. For instance, observations can cover the continuum between disciplined subjectivity to undisciplined idiosyncrasy. The perceived observations resulting from the latter may be valid, but they are not necessarily reproducible by another observer. That is, observer # 1 may perceive X; while observer # 2 of the same phenomenon may perceive Y. In order to curtail such unreliability, two devices were used: the observation schedule which contained the items upon which to focus and the pre-training sessions of observers in the use of the schedule. These devices were particularly important when there were changes in observers. When this occurred, the new observer was trained in the use of the schedule by the principal researcher, as well as by the prior observer. Thus, each observer not only knew which pieces of the process to note, but also knew the previous interpretations of certain pieces of behavior that had been made by the previous observer.

Complementing the observation schedule, a post-reaction questionnaire was disseminated to each staff member present at the meetings in order to learn their perceptions of the sessions.

As indicated, there were two samples. One sample consisted of 24 meetings held during the period of April 26 to November 16, 1973. The

²This study was one of five comprising the evaluation of this agency.

other sample consisted of the reported post-reactions of all counselors present at these meetings.

Findings

Movement toward the four above stated objectives was documented. The counselors readily adopted many of the values and norms of social work. Some of these were "confidentiality," "acceptance of the client," "establishing a contract with the client."

The fact that there had been weekly staff development meetings meant that the second objective had been approached. The opportunity to synthesize professional knowledge and skills had been provided. However, this particular study did not focus upon the extent of staff's profiting from this opportunity.³

Minimal information was provided about the communities in which clients resided. This movement toward the third objective, however, was never a planned agenda item of the meetings. Rather, such information was received incidental to having joint meetings with representatives from other social agencies. In the course of such meetings, members of these other social agencies often would inform youth serving agency counselors about the communities from which the juveniles came. Although the counselors seemed quite interested in receiving information about the communities in which their clients resided, this fact still did not prod administration staff to include information about these communities on the agendas. Instead, objective four, providing information about the community of social agencies, seemed to be their main concern. There were at least six meetings in which members from several different social agencies were present. Thus, to some degree the last objective was approached.

Counselor Reactions to Meetings

It had been assumed that participation in staff development sessions would directly correlate with line-staff's motivation to reach toward the objectives of staff development. Thus, satisfaction was seen as one measure of at least some degree of movement toward the objectives.

Staff Satisfaction: The first item on the post-reaction questionnaire elicited a global satisfaction rating of the meeting. An eight point scale was used: 8 = totally satisfied, 7 = very satisfied, 6 = moderately satisfied, 5 = more satisfied than dissatisfied, 4 = more dissatisfied than satisfied, 3 = moderately dissatisfied, 2 = very dissatisfied, and 1 = totally dissatisfied. Mean scores for each of the sessions were computed, as well as a mean score for all of the sessions.⁴ These scores were then related to the five elements mentioned above.

³This study was one of five comprising the evaluation of this agency.

⁴The mean score for satisfaction with all 24 meetings will be referred to as the 'norm.'

The satisfaction scores ranged between 3.0 (moderately dissatisfied) to 7.7 (almost totally satisfied). When the scores from all 24 meetings were computed, it was found that the counselors were moderately satisfied (6.3) with the meetings. Nine sessions fell below this norm and 15 sessions rose above the norm.

Administrative versus Professional Agendas: After data had been collected on four to six sessions, an interim report would be presented to the project administrators. These reports indicated consistently that the counselors were more satisfied with meetings having a professional agenda than those having an administrative agenda. The satisfaction ratings dramatically indicated the preference for a professional agenda. For instance, after the tenth session observed, the direct service staff registered its lowest satisfaction with a mean score of 3.0 (moderately dissatisfied). The agenda for that meeting covered only administrative matters. However, after the twenty-first session, counselors registered their highest satisfaction with a mean score of 7.7 (nearly totally satisfied). This meeting was concerned only with professional matters.

Although a meeting having professional content seemed to be rated more highly than a meeting with administrative content, having a professional agenda did not always assure a high satisfaction rating from the direct service staff. Two of the nine sessions rated below (4.8 and 6.2) the norm had professional content. Also, having mainly administrative content in a meeting did not assure a lack of satisfaction. One of the meetings rated above (6.8) the norm had only administrative content. On the other hand, the findings demonstrated that meetings which had both a professional and an administrative agenda were favored by the counseling staff. Nine of the eighteen meetings that were above the norm were of both administrative and professional subject matter. In addition, all meetings having members of community agencies were rated above the norm, whether the agenda was occupied with administrative, professional, or a combination of these two topics.

Number of Counseling Staff Present: Attendance ranged between four and eight counselors. On staff, were eight counselors. However, the modal average of counselors present at a staff development session was six. Although having six in attendance was associated with the highest level of satisfaction, it was associated also with the greatest variation in satisfaction ratings. The range in mean satisfaction when having six counselors present was 4.8 to 7.7. That is, direct service staff were nearly more satisfied than dissatisfied to being almost totally satisfied.

It appeared that counselor satisfaction was not related to the number in attendance. When only four counselors were present at the first session observed, the meeting still was rated 5.3; that is, more satisfactory than dissatisfactory. When eight members were present at the twenty-second session, the rating was much higher (6.4), but not higher than the twenty-first session in which six participants were present (7.7). Also, the tenth session in which there were five members present, rated lower (3.0) than the one in which only four were present (5.3). It must be noted that all of these sessions which rated above the norm had an agency representative present.

Administrative versus Counselor Participation: There had been the expectation that if counselors were more verbally active in the sessions than administrators, counselor satisfaction would be high. Conversely, if administrators were more verbally active than counselors, counselor satisfaction would be low.

The first six meetings observed bore out this expectation. The average participation for these meetings was 17% counselors and 83% administrators. All of these meetings, except the sixth one, were rated below the norm of 6.3. An interim research report to the agency administrators indicated the relationship between counselor satisfaction and counselor participation in the meetings. Following this report, line-staff participation expanded. The seventh meeting had line-staff participating 48.5% of the time. This participation grew to 77.3% during the sixteenth session. It was only during the twenty-second meeting that counselor participation was below 50%. At that meeting, their participation was 38.1%. However, their satisfaction was still above the norm.

It appears that after the first six meetings in which there was lower counselor participation as compared to administrator participation, there was no longer association between participation and satisfaction.

Verbal Activity: Even the liveliness of the sessions, as measured by the total number of contributions by both administrators and counselors did not seem to be associated highly with the degree of satisfaction. The liveliest meetings were the thirteenth, fifteenth, and seventh respectively. Satisfaction ratings for two of these meetings were quite high--6.7 and 7.0. However, the fifteenth meeting rated slightly below the norm with a mean of 6.2. Also, when the participation was very low, the satisfaction rating could still be quite high. When the verbal activity was composed of only 22 contributions in the eighth session the rating was 6.7. Also, in the sixteenth session, when the number of contributions was again only 22, the rating was 7.0. Thus, neither verbal activity in the meetings nor the rate of counselor participation as compared to administrator participation seemed associated, over time, with counselor satisfaction.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

As stated in the beginning of this paper, the reason for reporting a study on staff development was to illustrate its contribution to theory validation and elaboration. The referred to theory of organizational behavior began with one of Merton's hypotheses--a certain amount of deviancy is necessary for the maintenance of a group's stability. Gouldner treated this hypothesis as a triggering device with which to explode a new conceptualization, that of Reciprocities Multiplier.⁵ The essential meaning of his theory seems to be captured in the following statement: "For our analysis suggests that a sequence of identical conforming actions undergoes

⁵Gouldner, Alvin W. "Organizational Analysis," Social Science Theory and Social Work Research. New York: National Association of Social Workers, 1960, pp. 59-61.

an inflationary spiral and that later conforming actions are worth less than earlier ones, in terms of the reward or propensity to reciprocate which they elicit."⁶

When the study findings are scrutinized under the lens, 'reciprocities multiplier,' the message that takes shape is that the elements which were singled out to be charted over less than a year's time could not be expected to be associated consistently with the 'reciprocal' action of high satisfaction. Furthermore, it can be expected that satisfaction with all of the elements eventually would regress towards the mean level of satisfaction for all meetings. For example, the satisfaction ratings of the first five sessions indicated a trend toward the normative rating for all sessions studied. The norm or mean score for all sessions was 6.3. The first five sessions elicited satisfaction mean ratings of 5.3, 5.7, 6.2, 6.2, and again 6.2. The satisfaction of staff was beginning to level off. This lack of movement in satisfaction supports Gouldner's observation that the providing of the same factors that initially were greeted with an expression of gratification, eventually would no longer be met with a growing degree of positive expression. Those elements will come to be expected and perhaps, even treated as a right.

Whereas the first five sessions supported Gouldner's theory that there would be a leveling off of satisfaction with the same elements, the variation in satisfaction ratings thereafter, supports the remainder of his conceptualization. The example that he offers clarifies the essence of this second part of his theory. "For example, we would expect workers to feel less gratified when their employer pays them their regular weekly wage than when he does something for them that they do not take for granted, such as providing an unexpected bonus."⁷ The variations in satisfaction registered by the staff follows this aspect of the theory. When the unexpected (a bonus) was given, such as meetings with different community agency representatives, the staff satisfaction registered was always above the norm. Each time a meeting was held with community agency representatives, there was something new--either a different physical setting for the meetings or a new agency about which to learn and from which to learn. These findings further validate Gouldner's theory.

Elaborations upon his theory are furnished also by certain findings. If it can be assumed that line-staff did come to think of the elements associated with their staff development sessions as 'rights,' one could hypothesize that the absence of one of these 'rights' would be met with dissatisfaction. Yet, the study shows that the presence or the absence of some elements were not associated consistently with staff satisfaction or dissatisfaction. For example, the number of peers in attendance was related to such variation in satisfaction with the sessions that the variable, number of peers in attendance, seemed to be an unimportant factor with respect to satisfaction ratings. This finding suggests that another dimension to Gouldner's theory be added--the amount of time allowed for

⁶Ibid., p. 60.

⁷Ibid.

the fulfillment of the expected 'right.' That is, when line-staff of an organization considers the factor to be an expected right, line-staff also may believe that in time the right will be fulfilled.

Assuming that dissatisfaction will be expressed eventually, another consideration to be added to the dimension of time is which level in the organizational hierarchy will be granted an extension of time before dissatisfaction will be registered. The study found that when line-staff members were the withholders of an expected right (attendance at meetings) other line-staff were willing to forgo the registering of dissatisfaction. Yet, when administrators were guilty of withholding an expected right (failing to provide professional instead of administrative content) line-staff quickly indicated their dissatisfaction. The only exception to this was a meeting in which the administrative item occupying the total agenda concerned the counseling staff's need for further explanation of a new reporting procedure necessitated by the installation of an information system. Subsequent to this session, an agenda structured totally around administrative matters again received disapproval ratings from line-staff. Indicated by these findings is the following hypothesis: The greater affinity ego feels with alter, the less ego expects from alter and therefore, the less dissatisfied ego feels when alter does not meet ego's expectation. Conversely, the less affinity ego feels with alter, the more ego expects from alter and therefore, the more dissatisfied ego feels when alter does not meet ego's expectation.

The above discussion of elaborations on Gouldner's theory has been predicated on the assumption that having full attendance at a staff development meeting was an exception of line-staff. However, it is quite possible that line-staff never had the opportunity to expect full attendance. The findings showed that the degree of satisfaction seemed unrelated to numbers in attendance. Yet, they also showed that attendance, itself, varied considerably. As a matter of fact, only once was there full attendance. This finding opens the door to a different interpretation. If staff did not regard having all of their numbers present as a 'right,' it could still be expected that when they received the 'bonus' of full attendance, they would register higher satisfaction than when they did not have full attendance. The fact that this was not the case suggests that there may be a hierarchy to the 'bonuses' that will elicit heightened satisfaction. That is, all unexpected events will not be greeted with the same degree of approval. Furthermore, it is possible that the hierarchy of bonuses correspond to the degree of regard that ego holds for alter, the bonus-giver. In the case of this agency's line-staff regard possibly was given to the administrators and to representatives of other community agencies to a greater extent than to their peers.

Although Gouldner's conceptualization of organizational behavior was validated by findings and further elaborated by other findings of this study, it is suggested that additional refinement of his theory can be made by subsequent perusals of study results that are related to organizational behavior.