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EVALUATING A PILOT SOCIAL SERVICE PROJECT FOR
WIDOWS: A CHRONICLE OF RESEARCH PROBLEMS

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The decade of the 70's has seen the appearance of a number of publications in the area of "evaluation research", the effort to systematically apply social science research methods to the evaluation of action programs set up for the purpose of helping to solve social problems. Evaluation research is thus one area in which social scientists can be of direct aid in setting public policy about social welfare services.

An excellent primer on the problems that are likely to arise in the course of an evaluation effort and the "conventional wisdom" that has been developed thus far is Carol Weiss' Evaluation Research: Methods of Assessing Program Effectiveness (1972). Had her work been available when the research reported here was designed, some of the problems encountered might have been foreseen and dealt with more wisely. There are also a number of readers which have appeared recently, including Caro's Readings in Evaluation Research (1971) and Weiss' Evaluating Action Programs (1972). As the fine 24 page bibliography in the latter volume shows, however, there is a lot more published material about the conceptual and methodological issues which arise in evaluation research, treated in the abstract, than there are case studies which illustrate the fact that evaluation research is often an essentially political process of conflict and bargaining among the researcher, the staff members whose program is under scrutiny, and the funding agencies. To paraphrase a famous aphorism, the sociologist who is not aware of previous research problems and mistakes is condemned to repeat them. This paper is an attempt to summarize some of the specific research procedures and research problems that arose in evaluating a three-year pilot social service for widows, related from the obviously biased position of the evaluator.

Background of the Project: Widowhood as a Social Problem

In 1972, there were 9.6 million widows in the United States, representing slightly more than 12% of all women over the age of 14. The majority of them lived alone. The same Current Population Survey shows that there were only 1.8 million widowed men (Bureau of the Census, 1972). This points out the fact that remarriage is not a likely solution to the problems widows must face, but that most will have to rebuild their lives as widows. The median age for the onset of widowhood is 56, at which point the average widow has a life expectancy of about twenty years. (Metropolitan Life, 1962) Although this is about as much time as a woman spends bearing and raising children, there is little or no preparation for it. All too many women spend this last period of their lives in poverty and bitterness; a personal tragedy and a societal waste.

Widowhood represents a social problem in the sense that a majority of widows are likely to be poverty-stricken, socially isolated, left

without a meaningful life pattern or social function, and psychologically or emotionally troubled. In addition to the grief within, they face sexism and agism from the society without. A similarly bleak picture of widowhood emerged from a study of the beneficiaries of its life insurance policies undertaken some years ago by the Prudential Insurance Company. Two prominent New York women, who might be termed "social work entrepreneurs", came across the report when they were searching for possible financial sponsors for their idea of a social service agency devoted to widows. The Prudential Board of Directors became convinced that it was their social responsibility to fund an effort to see what could be done to help widows other than handing them an insurance check. The Widows Consultation Center was funded by the Prudential as a three year pilot project, with the proviso that evaluation research be an integral part of the project design and budget.

Negotiating Research Procedures

The fundamental problem encountered was that of how to mesh the often conflicting demands of evaluation research and social service. If the evaluator set up a rigorous experimental research design which suited her purposes, the results might very well have been disgruntled staff and outraged clients, who felt that they were being used as "guinea pigs" rather than being helped. If the social workers were able to proceed completely in the manner they found most satisfying, it would exclude the systematic collection of data needed for evaluation and the potentially disruptive monitoring of their work with clients.

The basic design worked out for the evaluation was a "before" and "after" measure of the clients, with observation and monitoring of the various services that were developed. Specifically, the plan was for the caseworkers to administer an extensive set of questions to the widow about her problems as part of the intake interview. The same questions could be included in a follow-up interview with clients several months later, and the changes measured. The amounts and kinds of services received from the Center and the clients' assessments of their helpfulness could be used to assess the "cause" of any changes. Added to this would be direct observation of such things as group discussion sessions and intensive interviews with staff in order to observe what kinds of techniques seemed to "work." However, staff resistance to the kind of interference with their work implied by these plans precluded their complete implementation.

Nobody Loves an Evaluator: Strategies of Non-cooperation

At one point in the project, the evaluator came to the conclusion that a book entitled Nobody Loves an Evaluator would summarize completely the experiences to that point. At times, analogies to the Vietnam war, as a protracted and unpopular conflict, came to mind. Suffice it to say that in putting an evaluation plan into operation there is more call for political acumen than for methodological expertise.

The founders of the Center were quite willing to grant a broad evaluation research mandate as a condition for funding. It seems, however, that they neglected to inform the Director of these plans before hiring her. What happened was that the Director was so opposed to the whole

effort that she threw roadblocks in the way at every stage of the research, and discouraged, rather than encouraged, the rest of the staff from cooperating with the evaluator.

In retrospect, the evaluator should have insisted on interviewing prospective directors, familiarizing the candidates with the research plans, and vetoing any who were not sympathetic to the effort. Put in the situation of a fait accompli, it was unwise to go ahead with the thought that the Director could be "won over" at a later stage. The evaluator, after failing to convince the Director that the idea of evaluation research was at least acceptable, should have resigned at that point and declared that the research project could not be done adequately without minimal support from the administrator of the Center.

As other evaluators imply, much resistance probably would have occurred anyway, even with good will and understanding at the outset. There is always a good deal of stress and strain when professionals from different fields must cooperate in a joint research undertaking, and the difference in values between social workers, oriented toward service, and a sociologist, oriented toward research, are inevitably going to result in clashes over priorities. As Mann (1971) notes about such evaluations, "The institute staff tend to consider the researcher as a necessary evil, who must be tolerated for a time, but whose prime function seems to be to make their difficult life even more complex by giving them more forms to fill out...."

A semantic difficulty complicated matters. "Evaluation" is used very loosely in our society to mean everything from a single on-site visit in which impressions are gathered, to a completely experimental design in which the research itself is the main purpose of the project.

Resistance to the extensive data demands made for the evaluation may be summarized as a series of "strategies of non-cooperation":

- 1) Attack the validity of the proposed research. However, steadfastly refuse to offer any constructive suggestions.
- 2) Claim ethical considerations that make the research impossible.
- 3) Attack the researcher's credentials, ability, personal characteristics, or anything else that might stop the research.
- 4) Having lost the battle over whether there is to be any evaluation research, limit access of the researcher to staff and data. (Assume that the evaluator is the enemy and let the staff know this.) If the delays and frustrations are great enough, maybe the evaluator will give up!

These difficulties definitely affected the amount and quality of data collected through the case histories and the interviews with staff members. Generally speaking, the staff of the Center accepted the evaluation research as a necessary inconvenience at best, only because the grant to the Center by the Prudential had specified that such evaluation be done. This "big stick" was especially effective because the grant was made in quarterly installments and could be withheld if cooperation stopped.

Troubles began with the design of a case history form. From the point of view of the evaluator, several standardized questions on the

severity of various problems were desired, with the idea of repeating these same questions in a follow-up interview. The staff of the Center found this totally unacceptable on the grounds that it would interfere with their ability to help clients. Here is an account of a visit to the Center during its first month of operation, July 1970, when the evaluator discovered that the interview guide which had been designed for use during a client's first visit was not being used at all. (This account was written immediately after the discussion, with the omissions and simplifications that such recall always involves.)

Evaluator: Why don't you even try to use the interview guide?

Caseworker: I will cooperate with your research only if it does not interfere with the service I can offer my clients. After an hour and a half or so of talking with me about their problems, you cannot expect the client to answer all of these questions.

Evaluator: When do you think you could fit these questions in?

Caseworker: I brought this up with one woman I have seen, and I really don't know. Perhaps, after we have seen the client and helped her, we could ask her if she wouldn't be willing to come to the Center some day and help us by completing a short questionnaire?

Evaluator: No, no, this is totally unacceptable. I've told you that we need to get a survey of the woman's problems and feelings before you have helped her. And it must be done for all clients, not just for those who feel grateful enough to make a special trip to the Center to fill out a questionnaire.

Caseworker: I have heard all that before.

Evaluator: (pleading) Please, won't you try to incorporate the questions into the initial long interview?

Caseworker: It isn't a matter of trying; I would be embarrassed to ask these questions. I do not intend to ruin the reputation of the Center by subjecting widows to questions that they might not think are applicable to them. What is discussed by the widows must come from them; must be what they want to talk about. The Center must not try to impose questions on its clients that they do not bring up of their own accord in the course of an interview.

A meeting was called at which the staff and the evaluator went over the whole form, question by question. Such a meeting among all interested parties is recommended to others as a way of dealing with apparent impasses between researcher and practitioners. It produces a group consensus of one sort or another, which then does not seem to be "imposed" on the staff by the outside evaluators. Although the idea of a consensus-seeking meeting seems to be a good one for restoring the momentum of an evaluation effort, unfortunately the result of the lengthy bargaining process turned out in practice to be a very unsatisfactory compromise. The case history form settled upon was time consuming and annoying to the caseworkers, and also unsatisfactory to the evaluator, because it included no questions with standardized wording. Future evaluators would do well to establish regular (perhaps bi-monthly) meetings with all staff to review the progress of the evaluation effort and to revise procedures which do not work out well.

There was also some resentment of the interviews with the staff members, as being time consuming and useless. These feelings were verbalized by the Director during one visit to the Center in October 1971

for the purpose of interviewing a caseworker:

You can't just make an appointment to see one of my workers. You must get my permission first. Why do you want to talk to the social workers? I do not know why you want to do this and see no need for it. If you want to know anything, you should ask me, not the social workers.

Resistance to the Follow-up Interviews

The most serious of the charges and resistance points encountered involved the opposition of the professional staff of the Center to having their clients contacted for follow-up interviews, on the grounds that release of their names to interviewers would be a breach of confidentiality and that being interviewed could be emotionally distressing.

To satisfy the first of these objections, elaborate steps were taken to protect the clients' right to privacy. Before any names of clients were released, each widow received a letter explaining the nature of the study and enclosing a postcard form on which she could check, "I do not wish to be interviewed." In that case, her name was not released by the Center at all. The steps taken to protect the confidentiality of information given by those widows who agreed to be interviewed were unveiled by the Center's staff like a precious gem. The name and address of the client was to appear only on a separate top sheet. Before the interview was coded or could be seen by anyone other than the interviewer and myself, this identifying information was to be physically removed by the personnel at the Center and replaced with the case history number.

The staff of the Center were also concerned that even though they had tried to screen out the most emotionally fragile clients, the interview might reactivate feelings of grief and distress for many clients, especially if not handled with great sensitivity. These concerns were formally expressed in a letter to the evaluator by the founders, who had become Chairman and President of the WCC:

In the interests of arriving at a sound evaluation, of good public relations, and above all, our profound concern with the feelings of already traumatized individuals, we would emphasize the importance of selecting skilled interviewers, sensitive to the fact that these are women who have, in most cases, not yet recovered from a devastating experience.

Only experienced, mature interviewers were recruited for the project. This was accomplished by offering a rate of pay considerably above the market. Pretests and some of the interviewing was done by the author. The other three interviewers were a social worker experienced in individual casework, and two professional interviewers trained and employed by NORC. Despite the assurances that the interviewers would be capable and closely supervised, the Center's staff continued to vent their fears and objections. The evaluator was left in the uncomfortable position of simply insisting that with the sensitive and well-trained interviewers

that would be used, the interview experience would generally be a cathartic one for the widows. There was no evidence that could be found to "prove" this to the satisfaction of the staff, and a crisis point was reached with vaguely veiled threats traded of resignation by the professional staff and a cut-off of funds by the sponsor. The matter was left to "stew" for a few weeks, and eventually the first list of client names was released by the Center.

The interviews were carefully monitored to make sure that the experience was not turning out to be a distressing one for the widows, by having the evaluator personally conduct the initial set, and then by having the interviewers return all completed interviews immediately and complete a report form on the interviewing experience. Based on the information on the "interviewer report forms" filled in for each interview and on the scarcity of complaints to the Center or to the evaluator, one can conclude that the reaction of the clients was generally favorable toward the interview experience. Ninety-two per cent of the widows interviewed were reported by the interviewers to be completely cooperative. Most widows found the interview enjoyable because it provided them with a sympathetic ear. They seemed to view it as an extension of the service of the Center, a chance to talk freely and confidentially about problems.

The interviewers were instructed to go out of their way to make the interview a supportive, pleasant experience for the widow, even though this might mean listening to a person "ramble on" about a problem that was bothering her, far beyond the direct response to a question which would be codable for purposes of the study. On the other hand, the interviewers were directed not to give advice, even if asked, but to suggest that the widow might call the Center.

Occasionally, the interviewer stumbled into a crisis situation, which could not be referred to the Center. Here is an example of an interviewer's report on the type of situation in which a helping role combined with the research role:

Mrs. D. was periodically confused and preoccupied during the interview... Finally, in response to her last two answers I asked again what was the matter... She then opened up. She apparently had been feeling dreadful the last two days. She wanted to go to the hospital... I encouraged Mrs. D. to call her daughter... helped her to plan the call, find the number, plan how to get to the hospital... I then spent half an hour helping her to get ready to go to the hospital, dress warmly, find the \$20 she had misplaced, etc.

To summarize, a purely research interview would be concerned with getting "facts" and leaving. During the first pretests, I found that widows tended to view the interviewer in the role of a kind of "extension service" from the Center. What had to be done in this interview situation was to make sure that the interviewers would be supportive and helpful whenever possible, but not take on a counselling role for which they might not be trained. It is probable that evaluation research involving interviews with clients of any type of social service might encounter similar types of problem situations and similar

opportunities to serve as a liaison with the caseworkers when a client seems to need more help.

Results of the Research

What did all this painfully negotiated evaluation effort come to? After three years of research effort, the computer outputs from the case histories and follow-up interviews and the hundreds of pages of transcripts of interviews with staff presented a veritable mountain of data. The data were presented in a lengthy report which concluded that the Center was an effective source of support and help for recent widows. However, those who were footing the bill looked at the same data and concluded that the service was not worth the cost.

A procedure which could possibly have averted the negative decision by the funder would have been to negotiate detailed "goals" for the pilot project ahead of time, in very precise terms. In this case, an agreement could conceivably have been reached before the follow-up interviews on exactly what constituted a "client"; what percentage of clients saying the service had been a "great deal of help" would constitute "success"; and exactly what kinds of costs and client flow levels would be considered acceptable. This would have gotten the quite different expectations of the professional social workers and the corporate philanthropists out into the open at a point at which no money was immediately involved, and eventual agreement might have been reached. As soon as the research instruments have been designed, these negotiations might be made by evaluators for future projects.

Although the evaluation did not result in its primary purpose from the agency's point of view, of motivating continued support from the sponsor, it was useful in other ways. Feedback from the evaluation resulted in several changes in and additions to the agency's services, which proved popular with clients and satisfying to the social workers. The existence of complete tapes of group discussion sessions, for instance, had the unanticipated consequence of facilitating transfer of the therapeutic discussion groups to new leaders when this became necessary. In addition, a summary of the findings was utilized to obtain support for the Center in the future from a combination of sources, including private insurance companies, foundations, and the Greater New York Fund. Currently, the Center not only continues to function in New York but has inspired efforts to establish similar services in Winnipeg, Canada and in Hartford, Connecticut. The evaluation report, with its documentation of the problems and successes of the first three years efforts of the Widows Consultation Center, can help launch these programs by enabling them to build upon the experience of the pilot program.

Conclusion

Once having identified the existence of structurally induced misery and poverty among widows, the "rational social scientist" model of action would seem to dictate the generation of institutionalized means of dealing with the problem, and a careful evaluation of the effectiveness of the attempt at social engineering. Multiple difficulties beset this effort in the case of the Widows Consultation Center, however. At the present stage of development of evaluation research, the resistance to research on their clients among social workers and the ethical questions

raised by the establishment of control groups meant that the data collected were incomplete in many respects. The lack of existence of any standards of comparison for "success rates" among similar kinds of service agencies make it difficult to conclude whether this institutional innovation is doing a relatively good or bad job in helping its clients to restructure their lives. Nevertheless, with great patience, it is possible to negotiate research procedures which are acceptable to social workers; to interview clients about very personal and troublesome matters without damaging their emotional balance or their relationship with their caseworker; and to produce data which can be useful to the agency.

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