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MAXIMIZING THE IMPACT OF AN ALTERNATIVE AGENCY

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Introduction

In the late 1960's and early 1970's the energy for change generated by the civil rights, black power and women's movements strongly affected many professionals working in social welfare agencies. Individually or with others in agencies, caucuses and unions, these radical professionals began to question the services provided by their agencies, the social and political functions of those agencies, and the part they played in their agencies. They began to critique the social welfare system in the United States and to develop some perspectives on what social services could be like if the country were truly committed to improving human welfare. The values and goals espoused by these radicals set them apart from traditional professionals. Because of economic necessity and the unavailability of options, many radical professionals remained in traditional agencies, seeking out others like themselves and pushing for change where feasible. Others found the frustrations of working in traditional settings detrimental to their physical and mental health and joined with like-minded colleagues to develop alternative programs in their respective fields. In the past six to eight years alternative programs have been created in such service areas as health care, therapy, youth services, child care, legal services, housing and job counseling.

Feminists have been especially active during this time in establishing alternative services for women. For five years (four years as staff and currently as members of the Board of Directors), we were a part of one of the most successful of these programs, Women in Transition, Inc. (WIT), a counseling program in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, for separated and divorced women and victims of wife abuse. Those of us who created and maintained the program saw it as having two basic functions: (1) to provide a much needed service for women which was not being offered in established agencies, and (2) to use the information and counseling expertise we developed to influence the services being provided by established agencies. We have written elsewhere about the first of these two functions including a description of the service model we developed, an analysis of the type of woman who came for help, and the limitations found in traditional agencies which we hoped to avoid by creating our alternative program.¹ These earlier writings also include a discussion of the personal exhilaration of creating a service program which was free from the constraints of traditional agency structure and values as well as a discussion of the "burn out" experience which resulted from the responsibilities and pressures of maintaining that program.

In this paper we want to examine the second basic function of the Women

in Transition, Inc. program - our efforts to influence the services of traditional agencies. Those of us who created the program were aware from the beginning of two potentially serious political liabilities of alternative services. First, we were aware from our knowledge of other alternative programs that creating and maintaining a service program outside of the traditional social welfare structure can drain important resources and energy from the radicals who work for it. This drain comes in part from the insecurity about funding which plagues most alternative programs, and in part from the constant creativity needed to develop new service models and new relationships among workers. Second, an alternative program, although meaningful for its workers and hopefully for the people served, will be isolated from the rest of the social welfare structure and therefore not in a position to press for changes in that system unless considerable effort is made to the contrary. The very existence of an alternative program takes the pressure for change off established agencies because they can argue that the services are being handled elsewhere. In this paper we want to describe our efforts to make Women in Transition, Inc. an instrument for social change and to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of those efforts.

From the outset, we were clear about our expectations. We hoped that our presentations in agencies would stimulate them to create specialized services for separating and divorcing women. We knew that WIT could never meet the demands for service from women and wanted to urge agencies to fulfill their responsibility in this area. We thought we could change workers' attitudes about role stereotyping that has been so much a part of the mental health profession, especially concerning the woman's role in the family. We thought, with our help, that workers would make connections between women's individual problems and the way this society oppresses women. We expected that our presence at an agency's staff development meeting would facilitate the process of like-minded colleagues locating each other and then building internal support groups, instead of remaining isolated from each other. These were expectations that we felt could be met.

There were some areas in which we weren't sure just how much impact we could have. We wanted to impress people with the peer self-help model we were developing in our small groups, and encourage therapists to be more human, more sharing of themselves with their clients and not as distant as most of us had been trained to be. We also hoped to be able to change the funding patterns in the mental health community so that programs like ours could exist on a long-term basis.

As individuals, our orientation was not only feminist, but socialist as well. We understood the need for changes in the capitalist order, but we never raised this issue in our agency work. We felt we were threatening enough just by being feminists and were often written off as extremists. We wanted people to hear us as much as they could and therefore didn't extend our analysis to the connected issues of sexism and capitalism. Our effort was to broaden the impact of feminist thinking in the field of mental health services.

There was no question in our minds about the fact that the established agencies would remain hierarchical and male dominated for the most part, and

that our discussions of our structure and democratically organized procedures would not move them to make any changes in their own system.

It was with these thoughts in mind that we developed our seminars, in-service training programs and workshops in social service agencies.

Women in Transition, Inc.

Women in Transition, Inc. developed as a response to the many calls coming into the now-defunct Philadelphia Women's Liberation Center. Women needed help dealing with the tremendous upheaval in their lives which resulted from separation, divorce, raising children alone or being beaten by their husbands or boyfriends. They needed emotional support, legal help, employment counseling, housing, day care services -- the needs were endless and seemed overwhelming to staff members at the Center and to the women themselves. The Women in Transition, Inc. program was developed by women at the Center to help meet those needs and initially was able to obtain funding from local foundations and church groups. Its goal was to help women become independent, strong people who could survive the crisis and hopefully learn from it.

It would be helpful to mention that we provided two primary types of services: emotional support and legal help. The emotional support services included small discussion groups and a referral service to feminist therapists. The legal help included individual legal counseling and a pro se (for herself) divorce clinic where the women could obtain divorces without lawyers. In addition to providing services at the program offices, we offered both legal and emotional help in low-income and minority neighborhoods in the form of Outreach Workshops.

We organized the program to correct what we saw as the frustrating and oppressive aspects of traditional agencies. Our full-time paid staff, which increased from two to seven women after several years, worked collectively. This meant we shared responsibility for policy formulation and implementation and shared or rotated major and minor tasks. The staff consisted of women with and without professional training. We struggled to share skills and knowledge with each other -- the formalized skills of the professional women and the street wisdom of those women without credentials. When working with women in need (we never called them "clients," preferring to avoid labels whenever possible), we tried to maintain a balance of the perspective and objectivity which can be acquired through professional training and the warmth and openness which often characterizes self-help programs. We worked to demystify the helping process, sharing our own feelings with the women who came for help and encouraging the women, through the small group process, to be resources for each other rather than to depend on the staff. Finally, we were clear about the program's feminist orientation, although we were careful not to push a party line. Whenever appropriate, we encouraged the women in our groups to make the connection between their individual problems and the ways in which this society has created those problems for them.

Building Links with Traditional Agencies

The program began in the Fall of 1971. Within a few months we were

swamped with calls, at first from word-of-mouth referrals and later from agency workers as well. Early in our work it became clear that we could help only a small number of the women in the Philadelphia area who needed our service if we were to provide a high quality service and not exhaust ourselves. Before the program even opened we knew we wanted to develop close ties with traditional agencies in order to share our information and perspective about women's issues with them. We didn't think this would lead to a mass acceptance of feminist thinking on the part of mental health professionals, but we hoped it would sensitize at least some workers to the special needs of women in therapy. We soon realized that we also needed to build those agency ties in order to do our direct service work more effectively. There was resistance to this at first on the part of some WIT staff members, primarily because most of us had had frustrating or demeaning experiences with traditional agencies, either as clients or workers. We wanted to be as distant from them as possible and had some fear that our integrity would be violated and our newly developing service model negatively affected by outside influences if we did not work actively to prevent it. Such isolationist purity was not possible to maintain, however, for several reasons.

First, we needed to establish ourselves as a legitimate agency, not so much to receive referrals, which we hardly needed, but to be able to make referrals to other agencies and have them taken seriously. Second, there were many women who needed more in-depth counseling than we could provide, or needed additional services along with our emotional support groups. Most low-income women and many newly separated middle class women who were still dependent on their husbands' income could not afford the cost of private therapy, so we needed to identify sympathetic women workers in traditional agencies to whom we could refer. Third, the more we talked to women the more we heard reports about how they were treated shoddily at traditional agencies, often coming up against workers who had very rigid and conservative ideas about what constituted appropriate behavior for women. We felt strongly that we wanted to challenge this kind of thinking so that women would be given decent service wherever they went. We wanted this especially for separating and divorcing women whose need for help was great, as our calls indicated, but for whom there were no specialized services in the Philadelphia area at that time.

To develop our connections with established agencies, we made major efforts to reach out to sympathetic women working in them. Through our personal contacts, speaking at conferences and meetings, describing our services in feminist and professional publications and through the popular media, we gradually made ourselves known in the community. We usually found one or two responsive women in an agency, met with them to talk about their frustrations on the job and ideas for change, and offered to lead a workshop free of charge for their staff about what we were learning about separation, divorce and the changing concepts of women and mental health. Sometimes these women had difficulty even scheduling a workshop to be led by a group which sounded vaguely dangerous and definitely unprofessional. When they succeeded, it was often by appealing to the curiosity or politeness of their supervisors. Our colleagues on the "inside" were motivated in many cases by their own isolation. They often kept their feminist thinking to themselves, having experienced hostility or ridicule when they spoke out. They were delighted to discover that there was an entire program which was putting into practice

what they believed. By conducting an in-house workshop, we provided them with legitimacy in the eyes of their co-workers, which they badly wanted and needed; we gave them support to be who they were. Our initial ventures into agencies, then, were mutually beneficial; feminists inside and outside of the system were working together to support each other.

Over time we were able to establish ourselves not only as a legitimate social service agency but as a unique one. As our reputation grew, we became an important resource for the mental health community and were recognized for our special skills. Agency workers began referring clients to us. Rather than having to push our way into agencies, we were soon in demand as consultants.

The format of our staff training sessions varied depending on the needs of the particular agency. We worked with many types of agencies, including community mental health centers, family service agencies, youth service agencies, and drug counseling programs. Some agencies wanted to sensitize their workers to the new concepts of women and mental health which were being developed by the women's movement; others wanted concrete suggestions about the practice implications of the new thinking. Some wanted to train their personnel in the use of our small group counseling mode, a training program which usually extended over several sessions. Still others wanted legal information which they could share with the separated and divorced women who came to them, especially low-income women. The workers recognized that it is difficult to help a woman sort out her emotional needs when she is trying to collect child support or when struggling with an unscrupulous lawyer who is sapping all her strength. Our literature,² which we made available to all agencies, seemed to fill a large gap in the agency workers' resources for helping separated and divorced women in a concrete way.

Although our format varied, we stressed some key issues with every agency. At that time it was not widely accepted that women could want more in life than the stereotyped wife and mother role, so we worked hard at educating agency workers about changes in women's lives and thinking. This was especially important when discussing separated and divorced women, since many mental health professionals assumed that a divorced woman was a failure and needed to find another man in order to lead a fulfilled life. We shared our belief that this was not necessarily the case, that it was acceptable to us and in fact mentally healthier for a woman to develop her emotional strength and independence whether she remained alone or entered into a new relationship. We were able to give examples from our groups of how this approach was useful in helping women cope with the crisis of separation and divorce.

We described the non-hierarchical structure of our program and the ways in which we felt this structure improved the quality of our service. Sometimes both credentialed and non-credentialed staff from WIT conducted a workshop, and while the non-credentialed women sometimes felt intimidated when facing a room full of professionals (the professional women from our staff were not immune to this either), it was important for the agency workers to hear the perspective brought to the discussion by the non-credentialed women, who were usually from low-income backgrounds.

We shared our model of emotional support groups and stressed the need to provide an experience for women where they could be supportive to one

another and develop a community of sharing and caring. The notion of peer self-help groups as opposed to individual therapy as a preferable mode of treatment was a new idea to many professionals. We talked about how we saw the therapist not as all-powerful, all-knowledgeable but as a facilitator who shared her or his own life experiences when appropriate. It was our conviction that a therapist with this view of her or himself was more able to encourage a woman's independence and resourcefulness than a traditional therapist.

The Response

In the staff training sessions some of our ideas were met with hostility, especially by men. This was the early 1970's and the values and ideas of the women's movement, especially as they related to mental health services for women, were not acceptable to most professionals in the field. Some men, including those who have learned to pay lip service to feminist principles, at that time were quite open about their disapproval. Heated discussion usually followed our statement of policy that at Women in Transition, Inc. we only referred women to women therapists. We thought it was important for women to begin using each other as role models, to see women as competent professionals, to share our intimate lives with other women, and to break the patterns of dependency on men. Many professional men were directly threatened by this concept and tried to minimize our influence on their staff. Some men were supportive of these ideas, but not many.

The responses from women staff members were mixed. Some women, often older workers, were quite threatened by us. They were as vocal as the men in criticizing the structure of the program and our approach to helping women. Other women were silent. They either said nothing in training sessions or, if pressed to contribute, were non-committal. Sometimes after a session one of them would approach us and say she had been stimulated by our presentation, but it appeared that she could not take the risk of speaking out publicly.

Other women, however, responded very positively to us during the sessions. As we mentioned earlier, our presence validated the thinking of many women workers who had previously felt isolated. Many felt dissatisfied with their training and the roles they were expected to play in their agencies. Our presence in staff development sessions gave them an opportunity to talk about this openly for the first time and to recognize colleagues sharing similar ideas. Employee support groups developed in several agencies where we had been consultants. As a result of the information and expertise we provided about working with women in small groups, several community mental health centers and social service agencies adopted the WIT small group model and began offering similar emotional support groups.

For women who worked in agencies where there were no like-minded souls, contact with the WIT program was still very meaningful. We developed a support system for women therapists throughout the city and brought them together at the program offices. They felt they were no longer isolated and could work on common issues with sympathetic colleagues. We gave them a chance to work out, or at least discuss, their own feelings of inadequacy and craziness which resulted from being the only one on the job who was sensitive to women's needs and wanted to work on them in a new or more concrete way. Out of these meetings came several feminist therapist groups, including the Feminist Therapy Collective in Philadelphia, which is entering its fourth year of service.

The Growth of Women in Transition, Inc.

Over time our connection with traditional agencies became important to us in ways other than we had originally expected. We still used the agencies to handle women's problems which fell outside the scope of our program and to refer women who needed more in-depth help than we could provide. In addition, we found that the support and validation of our work by workers in traditional agencies was valuable to our own growth. This validation came in several forms; referring women to us, inviting us for consultation and training, referring news media people to us for our opinions on separation, divorce and women's mental health, and suggesting us as speakers for classes at colleges and universities. It lent us prestige with funding sources to be able to say that we worked with the more established agencies in the city. From time to time agency workers were able to give us feedback on our small group model which helped us improve it. We sharpened our thinking by having to respond to hard questions by people whose values we may not have shared but who were in many ways our peers. Agency workers often knew about special programs and services available in the area and were able to help us wind our way through the various social service bureaucracies in the city.

As our reputation grew and the quality of our services improved, we found ourselves struggling with the classic problems faced by many alternative agencies. Some of the same agency workers who had been skeptical about referring anyone to a new and obviously non-traditional agency were soon sending us referrals in what seemed like wholesale lots. We found ourselves a dumping ground for many agencies in the Philadelphia area. Although we tried to make it clear whenever we described the program that we focused primarily on emotional support and legal help, some of these referrals were women with problems which were clearly inappropriate for our service. Although we referred these women to places where they could get help, it took a lot of our time to do it carefully. The legal component of our program was especially flooded, because legal problems are often intertwined with emotional problems in separation and divorce situations. The agencies referring to us, however, were dealing only with women's emotional needs and letting the legal needs go unmet. Our program filled a gap because legal services were prohibitively expensive for middle-income women and unavailable or agonizingly slow for low-income women.

There were several easily predictable results of this inundation; the staff became overworked, waiting lists for the small groups developed where there had been none before, the quality of the legal counseling declined, and the staff became extremely frustrated about its inability to do the job. We spent considerable time shuffling and re-shuffling our priorities and work assignments trying to develop some sensible way to cope with the work load or reduce it. There were no easy answers.

We recognized fairly quickly that we were doing a job which the larger, more securely funded agencies should have been doing. However, solving that problem was not as easy as identifying it. We were caught in a financial bind common to many alternative programs. The private foundations who gave us seed money ceased to do so after the initial two, three, or four year period, expecting us to have developed long-term support by that time. By this time also, our budget was about \$100,000 a year. Small grants from private foundations could no longer support the full extent of our work.

We needed secure, ongoing funds and lots of them. The federal agencies we approached told us they primarily funded research and suggested we secure funds through the local community mental health program. The local community mental health program initially argued that the needs of women clients were being met through existing programs and that no specialized programs were necessary. They said this despite the fact that agency workers all over the city knew of the importance of our work and referred clients to us regularly. Charging fees, which we had not done, would have brought in only a portion of the amount needed to support the program, since most of the women who came to us were low-income or middle-class women who were de facto low income.

Affiliation with the Community Mental Health Center

At the point that the program was about to go out of existence, we received an emergency six-month grant from the city office of mental health and mental retardation. This was in part a response to pressure exerted by consumers of our service and by mental health professionals, and in part to the city's nervousness about increasing pressure on them for affirmative action programming. That grant period drew to a close, the staff began collecting unemployment compensation for the third time in the program's existence, and many of us felt tired of struggling with the issues that working in an alternative agency presented. We did continue, however, to pressure the city for funding. After considerable negotiations, the city informed us that they would give the program enough funding to pay for two staff people (the staff then consisted of seven women) and would require WIT to affiliate with a local community mental health center (CMHC) which would have an unspecified degree of control over program and expenditures.

One would think that at this point a lot of discussion would have taken place as to the advantages and disadvantages of this arrangement. Questions of autonomy, restrictions on our program, working within a system with which we were in basic disagreement, adopting a hierarchical administrative structure and pay scale to adhere to the CMHC's system, were some of the issues this raised. However, it wasn't talked about much. Five staff members, including us, felt we had given as much as we could to WIT and had made a decision to leave our jobs on a personal basis. Even if "pure" money had come along, we probably would have ended our work with WIT. Thus it was left that the two staff members who wanted to continue the work of WIT would accept the city's offer of funding and the affiliation with the CMHC. Several staff members agreed to serve as advisors. The rest of us began to look for other work, return to school and/or spend time collecting unemployment compensation.

The results of this shift are still unfolding. We are now members of the Board of Directors and are not on the staff. Our observations are not based on day to day workings, but rather what is reported and discussed at board meetings. It is hard to evaluate where things stand right now. Yes, some changes have been made, but some, such as fee for service, was one we were moving toward adopting anyhow. Others, such as more paper work, would not have been a priority of ours but seems a small price to pay for the continuing existence of WIT. Staff training sessions that WIT leads for CMHC personnel seem to be a more formalized part of agency operations and hopefully has a greater commitment on the part of agency administrators.

There are several advantages of this affiliation to the CMHC. In addition to being able to offer a specialized service to their separating and divorcing clients, the CMHC can claim a feminist program as its own which provides credibility for them with the Philadelphia mental health community and the affirmative action investigators. The CMHC is also able to claim as its own a program they are not totally funding, since part of WIT's budget still comes from private foundations. Without these additional grants, the program could not meet its operational costs.

What Does It All Mean?

At the beginning of this paper we described two liabilities of alternative services which we hoped to avoid at WIT. How well did we succeed? The energy and commitment of several of the staff members, ourselves included, were drained by working at WIT. The constant insecurity about funding, the inadequate resources to meet the overwhelming demands for service, the painful struggle to develop a non-hierarchical working model, and the insufficient psychological supports from the left community and the community at large all contributed to the "burn-out" phenomenon. Some ex-staff are discouraged about the idea of working collectively or in an all-women's program. Others, including the two of us, are ready for a change of pace and are working in more traditional agencies, trying to bring about changes there. Most past and present staff members, however, are agreed that the experience at WIT has been a crucial one in our own political development.³

The second problem with alternative services is that of isolation. Working in an alternative program is usually exciting for the staff, who have the opportunity to experiment with new working models and provide service in a human, supportive setting. And if the program is run well, more than likely the people who come for help, usually a small number compared to those being served by traditional agencies, receive a high quality service which is provided in a sensitive, caring way. But unless those connected with the program work hard to influence the existing social service structure, their potential contribution to the improvement of human services is lost and the work of the program takes on a self-indulgent quality. WIT seems to have been very successful at avoiding that isolation. The program has clearly had an impact on some parts of the social service community of Philadelphia. Specialized groups for separating and divorcing women exist in traditional agencies where none did before. However, our expectation that these services would become institutionalized did not happen. Rather, a group for women formed largely because of the interest of one female worker. When that worker left the agency, the service was discontinued. It remains to be seen whether the affiliation with the CMHC will lead to a more formalized service for women within that agency. Staff members from a variety of agencies have been sensitized to the special needs and problems of all women, especially those going through transitional periods in their lives. We don't know the extent to which our efforts at asking professionals to re-think their values and assumptions about women and therapy has been successful. We do know that it was part of the overall struggle in which WIT participated to challenge traditional views about women, and to that extent we were successful. Through the efforts of the WIT staff the general public is now more aware that separation and divorce need not be a stigma for anyone, especially women, and can in fact contribute

to a person's emotional growth.

The question of whether WIT successfully pressured established agencies to change their funding patterns is again difficult to evaluate. Receiving funds from the city office of mental health and mental retardation and later affiliating with the CMHC was a recognition that the work of WIT is useful and should be incorporated into the existing mental health framework. That in itself is an important precedent for women's service programs in Philadelphia and elsewhere. However, the fact that the program was funded at such a low level after the first emergency grant, forcing it to cut back drastically, indicates that the mental health establishment is more interested in a token program than a thorough revision of its programs in light of the changes urged by feminists. Despite the fact that individual agency workers and administrators use WIT's services and recognize the program's value, it appears that the people with the power are not willing to make the monetary commitment necessary to allow the work of WIT to spread.

We do not have a sharp sense of our overall impact. In our opinion, the decision to become part of the CMHC rather than close the program appears to have been the right one. The presence of Women in Transition, Inc. continues to have great meaning to the women coming for services. The program continues, although under great duress at times, to stimulate and challenge the mental health establishment of the city. And by its existence, Women in Transition, Inc. continues to provide a feminist orientation and political philosophy that is rare among social service agencies.

FOOTNOTES

1. See Women in Transition, Women in Transition: A Feminist Handbook on Separation and Divorce (Scribner's, 1975) and Miriam Galper and Carolyn Kott Washburne, "A Women's Self-Help Program in Action," Social Policy, March/April, 1976, pp. 46-52.
2. In addition to Women in Transition: A Feminist Handbook on Separation and Divorce and its forerunner, the Women's Survival Manual, we offered the "Survival Skills Packet," "Group Skills for Women's Groups," "What to Look for in a Lawyer," and the Therapy Information Packet for Women. The last two are available from KNOW, Inc., P.O. Box 86031, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15221.
3. This issue is discussed in greater depth in "A Women's Self-Help Program in Action," op. cit.