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DISCOURSE MANAGEMENT: KEY TO POLICY DEVELOPMENT*

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Abstract

Skills in discourse management are necessary in order for democratic policy-development groups to be productive. These skills, like other skills, are developed by practicing their utilization. A general cognitive framework, however, can assist one in this development. This paper develops and then describes the use of such a general framework.

Discourse management is a range of activities that give direction to the work of a policy-development group. Ideal discourse management facilitates the development and integration of descriptive and value premises with prescriptive conclusions (general policy statement). Failure to manage discourse frequently causes policy development groups to be unproductive. The resulting frustration may be blamed upon insufficient time or funds to collect data or on more subjective factors such as personality conflicts among group members. It is, likewise, not uncommon to hear planning group members blame their collective difficulties in developing policy statements on the ignorance of peers or an inherent inability of persons representing diverse professional and lay interests to work together. Little recognition exists regarding the importance of discourse management skills on the effectiveness of policy-development groups.

It is assumed that planning groups generally have, or have access to, a knowledge and value base that exceeds what they are able to functionally use in policy-making activities. The application of discourse management skills helps a group organize knowledge and values into premises that logically lead to policy statements. The thesis of this paper is that discourse management skills are important determinants of whether a democratic group can rationally develop policy. A general framework will be developed in the first part of the paper that will assist in the development of discourse management skills. Following this, the application of this framework with a Catholic Charities social planning group will be described.

Descriptive Premises, Value Premises and Prescriptive Conclusions

Ideal discourse management includes a range of activities that facilitate the development and integration of descriptive and value premises with prescriptive

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conclusions.¹ "Descriptive premises" are statements derived from observation and classification of empirical phenomena. Research findings or descriptions of a social context are examples of descriptive premises. "Value premises" are statements which communicate preference. For example, quality is preferable to quantity, or the opposite premise, quantity is preferable to quality. "Prescriptive conclusions" are statements derived from descriptive and value premises that designate what ought to be done in a specific situation. Principles developed for enactment in social programs are clear examples of prescriptive conclusions. Discourse that hinders the development of specific premises and conclusions impedes a policy-making group's productivity.

Failure to acknowledge the importance of value premises is a common shortcoming of policy-development groups. Such groups characteristically move from the development of descriptive premises to prescriptive conclusions without articulating and using value premises.² This omission which can effectively block policy development, is characteristically followed by repeated frustrated attempts to obtain "more valid" data. In fact, overemphasis upon the validity of data (descriptive premises) at the exclusion of articulating value premises can block policy development indefinitely.

Misconceptions regarding the importance of preferences exist which cause value premises to be ignored. The belief that reliable data (descriptive premises) are a sufficient source for deducing prescriptive conclusions is common, as is the belief that personal preferences should not influence policy development.³ This misconception means that if premises cannot be objectively verified by the scientific method, they are to be rejected from further consideration. Likewise, the social norm of avoiding discourse in areas where conflict over personal preferences is present causes many policy-making groups to avoid specifying value premises. Focusing upon descriptive premises, where agreement may be possible, is an effective but

¹The importance of values in social work practice is greater than providing an ill-defined philosophical base. Ideally, values are part of the instrumentality of determining direct practice activities and for directing social policy-development (Bitensky, 1973).

²Deriving prescriptive conclusions from only descriptive premises is known as the "naturalistic fallacy." One cannot logically move from a descriptive use of language to a prescriptive use of language without implying a set of value assumptions. Edward Best refers to this common misuse of language as an attempt to suppress value premises (Best, 1967).

³Joseph Vigilante claims that our treatment of values as sacrosanct religions, like beliefs, may have lowered their prestige. He goes on to say, "The difficulty of operationalizing values in our society has led to their being shelved, to their being revered from a distance, but kept separate from the daily business of succeeding. We sometimes become embarrassed by them: a perfect condition for searching out an escape through science... The scientific method has become the hallmark of validity. Logical positivism, the objective scrutiny of available facts pointing toward factually revealed conclusions, ... looks upon bonds as restraints, values as prejudices, customs as impositions, and the final absurdity emerges: it is only true if it is proven, and if it is proven, ~~it is true--truth is proof.~~" (1974: 107-116.)

costly⁴ way to avoid conflicts over value premises, where agreement may not be possible.

When value premises are avoided in policy-development discourse, they will likely become conflicting underlying agendas that effectively block progress. The behavior that reflects these conflicting underlying group agendas is frequently referred to as "personality conflicts" of members. To the extent this common misnomer is accepted, justification for not being able to work together effectively is accepted. Helping a policy-making group articulate value premises diminishes the source of conflicting underlying agendas and contributes to effective discourse and its results.

A helpful formula to keep in mind as one attempts to develop discourse management skills is: descriptive premises (DP) plus value premises (VP) equals prescriptive conclusions (DP + VP = PC).⁵ Facilitating planning-group discourse in each of these three areas is vital to sound policy formulation. This formula is no more than an abbreviated way to show relationships among important parts of a whole. It can help keep discourse focused; focused upon areas that are important but incomplete. It also reveals clearly that the best research data or other descriptive premises will not, without value premises, permit the logical development of prescriptive conclusions. And conversely, failure to develop principles for enactment does not necessarily mean that "more valid" data are needed, a judgment that is often rendered.

Developing prescriptive conclusions may be perceived to be the most difficult task of the policy development process. This is a misperception. Specifying principles for enactment is a relatively simple, enjoyable, time-limited task when sufficient development of descriptive and value premises has taken place. It is much more difficult to determine the scope and focus of relevant descriptive and value premises and to complete their development than it is to deduce prescriptive conclusions from well-formulated descriptive and value premises. Nevertheless, each group planning activity benefits from the application of well-developed discourse management skills.

⁴Different world views of planning group members become evident when social policy development takes place. Each view has its own paramount values, philosophical assumptions, historical traditions, and implications for social policy (Steiner, 1975).

⁵Quotations taken from social work literature reveal that the basic idea of combining descriptive and value premises to develop practice behaviors is not new to social workers. "The limits of social work practice are derived jointly from social workers' value base (what is wanted for people) and from knowledge (what is known about people) and how the two will fit together." (Arkava, 1967:13). "A revised working definition should include 'knowledge,' a wide range of propositions with respect to their degree of verification, but should also include all assumptive propositions that are governed by preference rather than necessity." (Gordon, 1962:7). "Although we have identified social work practice as a preeminence of values, most of our sparse research efforts have been directed at knowledge and skill components." (Vigilante, 1974:105).

Application of Discourse Management Skills

The utilization of discourse management skills to facilitate the deliberations of a specific planning group will be described in this section. Special attention will be given to the activities that enabled this group to articulate value premises, since this is the discourse area that is most frequently underdeveloped in policy-making efforts.

Background

The Catholic Charities Residential Child Care Planning Committee of Onondaga County was established in response to the concerns that, first, agencies sponsored by Catholic Charities were providing unneeded residential services; second, existing residential care facilities were not fully utilized, thus leading to serious deficit spending; and third, uncoordinate separate planning efforts within the three agencies were found to be ineffective (see 1974 Residential Child Care Study for more detailed information). The composition of this committee consisted of the Director of Catholic Charities in Onondaga County, twelve staff and board members from the three sponsored agencies providing residential care for young people, a parish priest who was closely associated with area residential services for children, and a planning coordinator who was hired to facilitate the planning process.

The general purpose of this planning group was to determine what types of residential care for young people should be sponsored in the county by Catholic Charities and to complete a preliminary task force report⁶ in three months. In addition, this report was to specify how an ideal Catholic Charities sponsored residential care program would relate itself to family life and the more general area of prevention.

The planning task involved the completion of three distinct but interrelated processes, each of which was dependent upon discourse management skills. The first process, which was clearly anticipated, consisted of completing a community need⁷ assessment (developing descriptive premises). The second process, which was not clearly anticipated, consisted of articulating value premises.⁸ The third process consisted of using information from processes one and two to develop operating principles (prescriptive conclusions) for a residential child care system sponsored by Catholic Charities.

⁶The preliminary task force report was to include findings of the committee (descriptive and value premises) and recommendations (prescriptive conclusions) for enactment in a Catholic Charities Residential Child Care System. Following the completion of this report, planning activities continued which focused upon operationalizing the recommendations of the preliminary report.

⁷Community need is the discrepancy between the needs of persons, numbers and types, and the services available to meet these collective needs. Personal needs are the discrepancies between behavioral expectations and the resources which make achievement of these expectations likely.

⁸Processes one and two are not sequential. Either can be completed first or both processes can be developed concurrently.

Discourse Management Activities

The Director of Catholic Charities initiated the planning activity by talking with agency executives and contacting persons to be in the planning group. With their approval, he hired the planning coordinator who was to work full-time for three months to help complete the preliminary planning task. The planning coordinator, who had recently moved into the area, met with each member of the planning group prior to the first general planning session. This increased familiarity between the planning coordinator and group members, and enabled him to hear the range of impressions group members had regarding the projected purpose, method, and scope of the policy development effort.

At the first group planning session, background material related to the committee's task was reviewed, the roles of the planning coordinator and group members were clarified, and the purpose, method and scope of the planning process were discussed. The group decided that the planning coordinator, rather than other members of the group, was to gather and organize data (descriptive premises) regarding the number and types of young people needing residential services and the number and types of residential services being planned and currently supplied to area young people. This decision was made because the planning coordinator was thought to be impartial and to have no vested interests in maintaining existing residential programs. Group members made suggestions regarding who the planning coordinator should interview, and they helped refine the scope of information needed to complete the planning task.

Before the first planning session ended, the planning coordinator asked the group to begin the work of articulating preferences (value premises). The belief that this could be done prior to or concurrent with the time during which descriptive premises were being developed was a shock to some group members. Several said things which indicated they found it difficult, if not impossible, to communicate what they preferred prior to the time they saw the findings of the community study. Others seemed puzzled, and yet amazed, by the expectation that they do this. The planning coordinator stressed the importance of this discourse activity. He referred to local examples of planning groups that worked hard gathering data but were unable to complete their planning task within appropriate time limits, because they did not specify value premises and come to some consensus regarding values.

Resistance to this discourse activity vanished, but the apprehension associated with it lingered. All members of the planning group agreed to meet with one of four sub-groups. Each sub-group was expected to develop and submit to the next general planning session value premises associated with one of the following general areas: needs of children, progressive attitudes of child care, Catholic beliefs as they relate to residential care, and resources of Catholic Charities. They were asked to develop these premises using the format "Other things being equal, A is preferable to B"⁹ (for example, maintaining children in their own homes is preferable to removing them from their homes).

⁹This condition-anti-condition format helps bring somewhat vague, all encompassing values into sharper clarity. Clarity of values and, to a certain extent, their collective acceptance is necessary for a social planning group to logically develop policy statements.

The planning coordinator met with each sub-group and reintroduced the format to begin recording value premises. The reactions in each sub-group were similar. At first, members found it hard to contribute. This type of discourse was new to them. General examples were given. It became obvious that members were reluctant to specify value premises that would not be met with complete approval. The planning coordinator suggested that they specify value premises whether or not others agreed in order to practice this discourse skill.¹⁰ Before long, these sub-groups became prolific in articulating value premises. As this occurred, more attention was given to those value premises that were accepted with some degree of consensus.

Each sub-group met between the first and second and second and third group planning session. As sub-groups reported to the group planning sessions it became obvious to all that a philosophy of care was emerging. Many value premises from one sub-group were similar to or complemented those of other sub-groups. Several of these were distinctively different from the implied value premises that guided previous planning efforts. The desire to make quality of services preferable to quantity of services and to complement rather than duplicate other community services represented major belief shifts from the time when a wide range of Protestant, Catholic, and nonsectarian residential services were duplicated in this area.

Ten examples of value premises that were accepted with a relatively high degree of consensus include the following. One, it is preferable for a young person to be an end in-and-of himself/herself rather than a means to some other end. Two, serving both sexes is preferable to serving either males or females exclusively. Three, a wide range of domiciliary and auxiliary services that change as a child's needs change is preferable to a predetermined cluster of services that change little during the time a child is in residential care. Four, continuity of care with professional personnel is preferable to lack of such continuity when changes in domiciliary services (e.g., going from a group home to a foster home) takes place. Five, a family-centered emphasis stressing normalization in small units is preferable to an organizational efficiency emphasis stressing institutionalization in large domiciliary units. Six, serving those from the immediate geographical area is preferable to serving young people from great distances. Seven, serving those in need of short-term, goal specific services is preferable to serving those with long-term needs for residential care. Eight, it is preferable to make admission decisions on the basis of behavioral goals which are likely to be achieved with services that can be made available rather than on the basis of general diagnostic labels a young person has been given. Nine, to the extent resources are limited, it is preferable to stress personnel and program resources rather than resources associated with physical facilities. And ten, it is preferable for residential child care staff to be involved with, rather than isolated from, more comprehensive community planning activities. These premises are not mutually exclusive, and additional premises that were developed and accepted overlapped even more

¹⁰It is important to allow persons to practice a new skill free of the fear they will be criticized, since initial attempts to exercise a skill are frequently accompanied by feelings of awkwardness. The qualifying phrase "other things being equal" seemed to help free members to generate value premises.

as a philosophy of care emerged.

Value premises that were generally accepted also helped the planning coordinator focus his fact-finding tasks more precisely. For example, the planning group specified, "other things being equal, it is preferable to serve those young people who do not have organized constituency groups advocating for them versus those young people who are represented by such groups." The planning consultant then spent more of his time collecting and verifying data about abused, neglected, and delinquent young people who were not represented by adversary groups than he did about blind, deaf, or mentally retarded young people who were so represented. Focusing fact-finding efforts based upon the emerging value premises did not mean other data were ignored. Rather, more precise data and its verification was sought in areas that responded more directly to the emerging philosophy of care.

This planning group managed discourse well. Special attention was given to gathering relevant data (developing descriptive premises), specifying value premises that evolved into a philosophy of care, and making recommendations (prescriptive conclusions) that were logically linked to the descriptive and value premises. They worked effectively within realistic time limits.

Practice Implications and Suggestions for Further Exploration

Social work practice activities can be developed and analyzed like prescriptive conclusions in that they are logically linked to premises. These premises are often referred to as the social work knowledge and value base. Too little has been done to specify specific descriptive and value premises associated with specific practice behaviors. Failure to communicate premises upon which practice is based hinders the development of social work. When premises for one's practice are private or hidden, scrutiny by peers and further refinement of practice is thwarted. Many social workers in educational roles are not adequately prepared to specify and utilize descriptive and value premises for formulating practice activities. Equally important, many skilled practitioners have not developed the capacity to articulate specific practice behaviors and then to verbalize or record descriptive and value premises that logically justify such behavior. By individually and collectively developing these discourse skills, social work and social workers can become more effective.

Further study would be helpful to assess how well the discourse management formula presented earlier, could assist in a variety of social work activities. What is the scope of its applicability? Is it equally useful in developing broad social policy, policy within an organization, or intervention policy as it relates to a family or person?

The tendency of social workers, like others in the helping professions, to suppress the premises upon which their practice behaviors are based also has interesting implications upon which to base further explorations. How often are statements that were made with a purely descriptive intention in educational seminars or supervisory conferences interpreted as overt prescriptions? How often do clients give a prescriptive interpretation to a worker's comments that were made with only a descriptive intention? How often do social workers suppress value

premises in order to avoid controversy that would be forthcoming if their audience knew the premises upon which their practice is based?

In Conclusion

Skills in discourse management are necessary in order for democratic policy-development groups to be productive. Ideal discourse management includes a range of activities that facilitate the development and logical integration of descriptive and value premises with prescriptive conclusions. Discourse in each of these three areas is vital to sound policy development.

A common shortcoming of policy-making groups is their failure to acknowledge the importance of value premises. When these premises are avoided in policy-making discourse, they frequently become conflicting underlying agendas that effectively block progress. The resulting frustration may cause planning group members to search for "more valid" data or to blame their difficulties upon "personality conflicts" within the planning group.

The Catholic Charities Residential Child Care Planning Committee effectively developed a residential child-care policy. A unique attribute of this group was the way discourse was managed. Special attention was given to developing and communicating knowledge and values from which a residential child care policy statement was deduced.

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