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Dorothy M. Jones
University of Alaska

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INTERAGENCY CONFLICT, POWER, AND SANCTIONING SYSTEMS:
AN ALASKAN EXAMPLE

Dorothy M. Jones
Associate Professor of Sociology
Institute of Social and Economic Research
University of Alaska

Abstract

The covert processes in the interagency system in Anchorage social services is the subject of this paper. The emphasis is on (1) conflicts between explicit goals of planning and rationality in social services and covert or hidden goals concerning protection of organizational jurisdiction; (2) the structure of interagency power; and (3) the socialization and regulation of member agencies' behavior. The data for the study derive from focused interviews with agency administrators and staff members and observations at community planning meetings. The major finding of the study is that the explicit goals of rationality, integration, and planning in social services are subverted by other hidden goals concerning member agencies' organizational survival interests. The domination of these hidden goals shapes the interagency power, control, and sanctioning system.

Introduction

Understanding the covert processes in the interagency system in social services is the issue of this paper. The interagency system refers here to both formal planning groups and informal but systematic interaction in the local social service community. The dominance of covert processes in the interagency system was revealed in the course of research on the impact of Anchorage social agencies on urban Alaska Natives (Eskimo, Indian, and Aleut).^{*} As part of that research, we examined the interagency system in terms of (1) conflicts between explicit goals of planning and rationality in social services and covert or hidden goals concerning protection of organizational jurisdictions; (2) the structure of power; and (3) socialization and regulation of members.

^{*}This paper is adapted from one section of a report on the impact of Anchorage social services on urban Natives (Jones, 1974). The Anchorage social service study was funded under the Community Service and Continuing Education Program, Title I, Higher Education Act of 1965.

Methods

Data for this paper, collected in Anchorage, Alaska in the summer of 1973, derive from observations of four community planning groups and interviews with thirty-three administrators and forty-six staff members, many of whom participated in these planning groups. The four planning groups are: Ad Hoc Committee on Child Abuse, Social Services Planning Group, Alcoholism Interagency Management Group, and Anchorage Manpower Planning Board. We used focused interviews which were intensive and in-depth, lasting from one to three hours; in some instances, informants were interviewed on two or more occasions.

Goal Conflicts

Agency administrators and social workers representing administration are the primary participants in interagency planning in Anchorage. Their actions in planning groups reflect the operation of two sets of values. On the one hand, they are committed to the professional goal of trying to increase the rationality and effectiveness of the social service system. This commitment prompts them to initiate or to join in interagency planning. On the other hand, they want to protect their own agency's jurisdiction. This interest frequently induces them to oppose efforts to make services more rational and effective. Individual participants usually resolve this ambivalence by placing highest priority on planning goals when their own agency jurisdictions are not threatened, and highest priority on organizational survival interests when their territories are endangered (Chetkow, 1967, 271-282, and Marris and Rein, 1969, note the powerful influence of jurisdictional interests in planning).

Participants' fear that planning activities threaten their own jurisdictions has a powerful influence on the planning process. It is common for planning groups to assess the adequacy of member agencies. But this very act poses a threat. Although members of an agency, let us say agency A, may be well aware of the inadequacies and limitations of their services, they fear public exposure for several reasons. First, public exposure carries the implication that workers delivering the services are inept. Second, repeated exposure could and has induced planning groups to recommend defunding a service. This occurred in both the Alcoholism Interagency Management Group and the Manpower Planning Board. Third, exposing inadequacies of a service could prompt planning groups to sponsor the establishment of a new agency for this purpose. The new agency may

perform the service better than agency A or it may assume responsibility for related services, in both cases, threatening to reduce agency A's jurisdiction. These threats engender conflict between and within individuals, reflecting the incompatibilities between the rational goals of planning and hidden goals regarding members' organizational survival interests.

The meetings of the Ad Hoc Committee on Child Abuse dramatically illustrate this conflict. The Committee was organized by persons concerned about gaps and inadequacies in the child protection unit in public welfare. The unit is so understaffed that workers must handle a substantial portion of their work by telephone. In addition, the unit suffers from a dearth of necessary resources. The Ad Hoc Committee identified an acute need to organize the following supplementary services: hot line for families in crisis, crisis nursery, emergency shelters, emergency foster homes, and parent aides to stay in clients' homes and help families over crises.

The central contest in the group was between representatives of welfare and those who pressed for the establishment of supplementary services sponsored by other agencies. A borough health department representative sought the Committee's approval for a child protection unit to be administered by the borough. It included a child protection coordinator, crisis nursery, and family aide program. A church-sponsored agency, Alaska Children's Services, solicited Committee approval for a crisis hot line to be accompanied by a mobile team that visited families in crisis on the spot.

The persistence with which representatives of welfare opposed these proposals suggests the force of organizational survival interests when threats to jurisdiction are perceived. Welfare representatives countered every proposal with commonly asserted objections -- new services would lead to a duplication of services, they would confuse clients about which service to call in an emergency, they would promote the use of untrained social workers (welfare workers themselves are not trained social workers). When these arguments failed to convince other members of the Committee, representatives of welfare fell back on their legal authority to handle child abuse cases, implying that the state would not grant authority to services not sponsored by the welfare department. This veiled threat also failed to convince proponents of new services. Finally, in a more direct assertion, representatives of welfare urged the Committee to adopt its goal of strengthening the existing welfare department rather than starting competing services. No one objected in principle to strengthening the existing welfare service, but years of experience convinced members that the need for adequate child protection services is so acute that it cannot await the outcome of

the long, arduous, and usually hopeless process of changing the rigid welfare system. The conflict between proponents of new child protection services and representatives of welfare was not resolved during the period of this research or for a relatively long period after it.

Conflict Containment

Conflicts such as the above are perceived as very threatening to group members, and they devote strenuous efforts to containing it, at least in its overt manifestations. Participants' efforts to contain the conflict take the form of avoiding issues that seriously threaten group cohesion, focusing instead on less controversial and less important issues. Bachrach and Baratz (1970) propose the concept, "the non-decision" to characterize this process. This pattern of conflict avoidance gives planning a ritualistic quality where members go through the motions of planning with little consequence to the existing organization and delivery of social services (Warren, 1973:361 makes a similar point).

In the four planning groups observed, if an issue threatened to disrupt the group, members tabled it or handled it under the table rather than to covertly confront it. Members generally inhibited expressions of hostility, treating each other with politeness and respect regardless of animosities that smoldered beneath the surface and that were confided during the research interviews. In some instances, the congeniality observed reflected long standing friendship ties between members. But more importantly, this style of consensus politics reflected the reality that participants are part of the same system and have to protect the same interests. If one agency's jurisdiction can be reduced or weakened, then so can any other's. So everyone tends to play the same political game for fear their turn is coming. Thus, planning becomes a ritual rather than a medium for reform.

The Structure of Power

Planning participants' complicity in maintaining consensus at the costs of the express goals of planning seems to reflect their recognition of the underlying realities of interagency power relations. While there is no formal, publically acknowledged power structure in the interagency system, there is an informal, implicit one stemming from the degree of dominance and subordination in agencies' relations to each other. All agencies are interdependent

in the sense that they rely on one another for continual flow of referrals (customers) which nurtures the entire social service industry. But there are also differences in degrees of dependence between agencies. Agencies with very limited resources are more dependent on agencies with large resources than vice versa. If the limited agency antagonizes an agency with larger resources, the latter can and does in some instances retaliate by refusing service to its referrals. This practice is suggested by the ubiquitous care with which administrators from small agencies avoid antagonizing those from more powerful ones even though they may claim, in private conversation, to abhor some of the practices of the more powerful agencies. There is also verbal testimony to this practice. For example, an aggressive program director in a recently established alcoholism facility who is also a member of a minority group charged complicity among some of the groups involved in alcohol treatment who refused service to his referrals. He believed this was due to his having antagonized members of the Alcoholism Interagency Management Group by playing an outspoken, truth-telling role, thereby challenging the style of consensus politics.

Agencies with large resources also exert control over other agencies through manipulation of funds and contracts. The Bureau of Indian Affairs and state welfare grant a number of contracts to other agencies. If these agencies with contracts antagonize their sponsors, they risk jeopardizing their funds. Negotiations at the Ad Hoc Committee's meetings reflected this implicit power relationship. Members could not afford to antagonize public welfare for three reasons. First, since most member agencies are small scale and frequently refer to welfare, the success of their efforts requires maintaining harmonious relations with welfare. Second, some of the member agencies are directly funded by state welfare. Third, the Committee depends for its very legitimacy on state welfare which has accorded it official status as the planning group for child protection. The recognition of this underlying power relationship profoundly shaped the outcome in Committee deliberations. Initial efforts to supplement welfare services in child protection were rather quickly dropped, and the planning group proceeded to deal with less threatening issues such as public information. Thus, consensus politics was achieved.

Socialization and Regulation of Members

Up to this point, we have discussed goal conflicts and inter-agency power relations in formal planning groups. The socialization and regulation of members is apparent not only in formal planning

groups but also in informal but systematic interactions in the social service community, which we consider part of the inter-agency system.

While members of established agencies seem to accept the political realities of the interagency system, representatives of newer agencies, such as the program director in the alcohol treatment facility, sometimes challenge them. The very existence of the newer agencies bespeaks challenge; for example, Native-run social agencies are in business precisely to redistribute social service resources. Regulation of this challenge becomes a central task of the interagency system.

The interagency system's efforts to socialize new members involves transmittal of three expectations. New members are expected to accept (1) their limited jurisdictions without trying to expand them in ways that further impinge on other's territories, (2) the existing power structure in social services, and (3) the prevalent leadership style of consensus politics.

The processes by which expectations are transmitted is subtle and frequently invisible. It becomes highly visible, however, when sanctions are invoked against new agencies that fail to become properly socialized. The most striking illustration of this process is a Native-run social agency's relations in the interagency system, both in planning groups and in the larger social service community.

Challenge to the Interagency System

In 1970, encouraged by Nixon's policy statement on Indian self-determination and the Bureau of Indian Affairs' policy regarding contracting Bureau services to Indian groups, Cook Inlet Native Association, the largest Native organization in the state, sought to establish itself as a provider of social services for Natives. To this end, it applied for a contract to operate the Bureau's general relief program and later, for the Bureau's employment assistance program. Neither of these contracts was awarded. But in 1972, the now defunct Anchorage Community Action Agency funded Cook Inlet Native Association to operate an urban Native center. The Urban Native Center subsequently received a Bureau contract to operate a transportation service for enrollees in a manpower training program and an Indian Health Service contract to administer the health aide program in the Cook Inlet region. With these contracts and with funds from the Community Action Agency which enabled it to establish social service, manpower and airport assistance programs as well as a craft shop and recreation center, Urban Native Center was in business. But the Center was not satisfied with this narrow juris-

diction. Conceiving itself as a comprehensive social service, it sought additional funds and contracts for providing more services regardless of the extant distribution of service domains.

The Center posed a strong challenge to the existing power structure in the social service community when it assumed leadership for organizing a planning council without consulting recognized and established agency leaders. Shortly after this effort by the Center, established agencies joined forces and organized a competitive group, the Social Service Planning Group, which ultimately absorbed the one started by the Center. Center representatives' activity in the new group continued to challenge the status quo. For instance, Center representatives demanded the establishment of a low income board. Since the new group was established in part to ward off control by low income groups such as the Center, it was not likely to support the proposal for a low income board. Nevertheless, because it is unpopular to oppose participation by the poor, members of the new group did not openly reject the proposal. Instead, they covertly subverted it by failing to follow through on the plan for each member to bring low income persons to subsequent meetings.

The Center challenged the status quo in interagency power in other ways. At the same time that it held a Bureau contract, the Center's regional corporation filed a suit against the Bureau's parent organization, Department of the Interior, regarding a land claims suit. Center leaders thought this act may have seriously alienated the Bureau.

The Center's conflicts were not confined to older established agencies; they also occurred with more recent agencies such as the Community Action Agency. The latter had also been a "have-not" agency, but at the time of this study, having gained some acceptance by the established social service community, it tended to behave similarly to it when dealing with the Native Center. Although Community Action was only one of the Center's funding sources, it insisted on having the authoritative role. The Center objected to this. One conflict between the two groups centered around firing prerogatives. Both groups insisted on having the final authority to hire and fire Center personnel. Another conflict concerned the composition of the Center's Board of Directors. Ironically, at the same time that the Center was agitating the Social Service Planning Group to establish a low income board, the Community Action Agency was demanding greater representation by the poor on the Center's Board. The Center considered its all-Native board about as representative of Alaskan poor as a board can be; the Community Action Agency, however, required the Center board to have 51 percent poor instead of the usual one-third poor, and to have actual poor instead of the usual requirement for representatives of the poor.

In addition to challenging the power structure in the inter-agency system, the Native Center also violated the prevailing style of consensus politics by playing a defiant, truth-teller role. Although Community Action Agency staff frequently played a similar role, its leadership was unwilling to accept defiance from its delegate agency, expecting Center representatives to be appreciative supplicants. When Center representatives charged the Community Action Agency with imposing impossible standards regarding a low income board and subjecting them to undue harrassment, a Community Action Agency official asked them how they dared defy him when he controlled the purse strings. "We'll give it a darn good try," a Center official replied. In recounting this incident to me, the Community Action Agency official cast out his arms in a gesture of despair, saying:

"How can they be so foolish as to bite the hand that feeds them? It would be irresponsible for me to continue funding people who don't know how to get along in this world. I think I'll freeze their funds."

And forthwith, he did just that.

Clearly, the Native Center was not behaving in conformity with the roles prescribed for it. It would not accept a role as supplicant, appreciative of the limited jurisdiction it had gained. It challenged the existing power structure in the interagency system. And it would not accept the prevailing leadership style of pretending a harmony that did not exist.

Interagency Sanctioning System

In response to this socialization failure, the interagency system invoked sanctions against the Center. While it is difficult to prove that a particular outcome is due to a specific sanction, the combined effects of agency responses to the Center in 1973 were to threaten its very survival.

The most potent sanction, of course, is defunding. After freezing, then restoring, then threatening defunding for 1973, the Community Action Agency finally gave the Center reduced funding, eliminating the Center's social service program, representatives of which were among the most outspoken challengers of the interagency status quo.

The Native Center also lost its Bureau of Indian Affairs contract for transportation services, and according to a letter the Center received from the Bureau in 1973, its applications for con-

tracts to operaté Bureau employment assistance and general relief programs were not to be granted. After explaining that the Bureau contracts office was understaffed and unable to process contracts, the letter states:

...you must certainly be aware of the nature and volume of work generated by the contract process... in your interests and ours, we have no wish to initiate an enterprise destined to failure (Bureau of Indian Affairs Juneau Area Office to Anchorage Urban Native Center, July 6, 1973).

Further, all seventeen proposals for services submitted by the Center to funding agencies were rejected. Speculating about the reasons for the uniform rejections, a Center official said, "I think our troubles began after our regional corporation filed a legal suit against the Department of Interior."

Defunding and rejection of proposals are not the only sanctions applied against the Center. A campaign of gossip to discredit the Center was widespread within social service circles. Although charges against the Center concerned events that are common in all agencies, they were presented as uncontroverted evidence of the Center's incompetence. When asked about the Center, many administrators and staff rejoined with accusations against it. Said one administrator:

"They're sick, they're devious. It's because they are so insecure. They're not trained, you know, and that makes them supersensitive and defensive."

Lack of training and incompetence were common charges against the Center staff, yet the majority of people implementing social services in Anchorage are not trained social workers. Agencies seem to have little trouble accepting untrained personnel in their own agencies, and incompetence has not become an issue in those agencies. Another charge against the Center focused on conflict between Center administrators and a Center staff member. This conflict was a major topic of conversation in social service circles and was treated as a unique phenomenon, yet I encountered no agencies that were free of internal conflict.

This discrediting tactic against the Native Center proved very effective. Few agencies referred clients there. When asked about their reasons for failing to refer clients to the Center, respondents invoked the standard criticism of incompetence and lack of training (few had ever visited the Center). In effect, then, a boycott was

imposed against the Center, weakening its potential for attracting new funds and contracts.

Later, after the research for this study was completed, the local sanctions against the Native Center became ineffective because of federal policies. The growing federal emphasis on Indian self-determination proved a more powerful factor than the local inter-agency system, and funds from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Indian Health Services, and other federal agencies became available to the Native Center. Without these federal policies, the Native Center would not likely have survived.

In sum, the sanctioning system in the Anchorage interagency system operates both formally and informally, and the two modes are closely intertwined and complementary. Funding and contractor agencies impaired the Center's functioning by withdrawing or refusing funds, and the informal interagency system further undermined the Center by a discrediting tactic that stigmatized the Center and excluded it from the interagency referral system.

The Anchorage interagency system, in both formal planning and informal agency relations, is engaged in a very active process of regulating behavior of member agencies. This regulation serves to protect the interests of established agencies in the community more than to promote the express goals of planning -- integrating and rationalizing social services. Planning tends to assume the form of a ritual not because bureaucrats have a special inclination for ceremonies but because of the predominance of their interests in protecting their domains and the interorganizational status quo. The social service community operates as an interagency system in socializing members to the realities of interagency power and the norms of consensus politics, and regulates behavior by imposing sanctions against recalcitrant or rebellious members.

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