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MAXIMIZING THE POTENTIAL OF THE SOCIAL WORK TEAM: SOME ORGANIZATIONAL AND PROFESSIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

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The effective use of different kinds and levels of personnel is a major concern of the social work profession at the present time. A 1974 policy statement of the National Association of Social Workers recognizes several levels of practitioner engaged in the provision of social services: (1) the social service aide who has no formal training; (2) the social service technician who has an associate degree in a social service field or a bachelor's degree in a field other than social work; (3) the social worker with a BSW degree; (4) the graduate social worker with an MSW degree; (5) the certified social worker who is a member of the Academy of Certified Social Workers (ACSW); and (6) the social work fellow who has a doctorate or substantial specialized experience beyond the ACSW.[1]

At the same time, the social milieu in which social work finds itself is changing rapidly so that the profession is being challenged to engage itself purposefully with problems that are completely new or that have been radically redefined. As social service roles in changing or new kinds of organizations become more complex and ambiguous, there is an urgent need to examine the ways that available kinds of social service personnel can best be involved in the provision of professional and preprofessional practice.

The team model of staff differentiation and service provision is gaining considerable support among social workers, primarily as a result of some limited but encouraging experimentation with it.[2] Findings from organization research suggest that, beyond its possibilities for making sense of social work's staff diffentiation problems, the team approach, if structured in a certain way, has great potential for making social agencies more responsive to community and client needs and more conducive to high staff morale and productivity.

The dysfunctional aspects of large complex organizations have been well documented[3] and are familiar to all who must deal with them in any capacity. The hierarchical form of organization which characterizes the

bureaucracy and which is typical of social agency structure was developed for the efficient accomplishment of tasks which had been determined by those at the apex of the structure. The bureaucratic organizational model is preoccupied with control and, consequently, has tended seriously to limit the flexibility and creativity of persons located in the lower ranks of the organization.[4] Social work has not escaped this problem and, as a profession which has its origin within organizational settings, it has been prone to overdependence upon and overidentification with these organizations, often to the detriment of client needs and community interests, and often seriously detracting from optimum professional functioning and worker satisfaction.[5]

The decentralization of control implicit in the team approach to human service provision would tend to mitigate some of the dysfunctional aspects of bureaucracy. Of course, the degree to which the team would be the locus of decision-making about service activities could vary tremendously among agencies, but it is fairly plain that some decentralization of control would inevitably result from the adoption of a team approach to manpower deployment.

If the team itself were to be organized on a horizontal rather than a vertical basis, this would further deemphasize control, enhance participative decision-making at the team level and promote greater responsiveness to client and community needs. Warren Bennis has suggested such a model of organizational structure as an alternative to the bureaucratic one. This model, which he calls "organic-adaptive", would be comprised of "task forces organized around problems-to-be-solved".[6] Problems would be solved by groups or teams comprised of individuals with diverse skills. The team would be based on "organic rather than mechanical models" and would respond to clearly identified problems rather than to programmed role expectations. Members of the team would be differentiated "not vertically, according to rank and role, but flexibly and functionally, according to skills and professional training".[7]

Although Bennis was concerned primarily with teams comprised of members of various professions, the model which he proposes could have equal utility for a team comprised of different kinds and levels of human service practitioners. The team members would possess a variety of areas of expertise, the exact mix depending on the nature of the practice setting and the overall function of the team. The team leader would coordinate and give direction to the activities of the team. The functional responsibility for the team's performance would ordinarily lie with the team leader, but this need not be so. One can envisage situations and settings where functional responsibility could be vested

in the team as a whole. Similarly, while the appointment of the team leader would normally be an administrative function, there might be situations where democratically-selected team leaders would be desirable and appropriate. These alternatives to traditional arrangements would certainly challenge administrative and professional ingenuity, but they should not be dismissed merely on that account.

Beyond the team leader's function, which can take various forms, an effort could be made to move away from the current tendency to view the skills and knowledge of the different team members in terms of a simple hierarchy of competence. Each team member could be viewed as possessing --and could be expected to develop--his own area or areas of special competence rather than being viewed as having a specific level of competence within a unidimensional view of that concept. The worker providing help to a client with intrapsychic conflict would not be regarded as providing a service of greater intrinsic value than the worker who helps a client deal with a recalcitrant landlord. The former function is relatively complex and abstract and would ordinarily be carried out by a worker with substantial formal preparation while the latter function is more simple and concrete (although not necessarily easier) and could probably be carried out by an agency-trained worker or community college graduate. However, each function can be carried out with greater or lesser degrees of competence and effectiveness and, besides, no one can say which activity is of greater value to any client or to clients in general.

There is a crucial difference between the type of specialization represented by the technician and the type of specialization which I am suggesting can be productively utilized in the social service team. While the former is based upon a routinized division of labor determined in isolation from the person who will actually perform the task, the latter is based upon maximization of the special skills or knowledge which the person brings to the job.[8] Furthermore, these special skills and knowledge would be increments to the general base of competence which would be expected, including the ability to form helping relationships with people. Each member of a particular human service team would be expected to have the general knowledge, skills and values which would enable him to use himself in the provision of a helping service to people. However, each would also be expected to have or to develop knowledge or skill in a specific field of activity or in the provision of a specific service. One might be the member of the team who has the greatest knowledge of the jobs which are available to clients and he might be the most skillful team member in helping clients take advantage of available job opportunities. Another might be the team member who has the greatest understanding of the problems of the ghetto youngster.

Whatever it is, the team member would have his own area of expertise which would be his special contribution to the team's service functions.

What is being suggested here is an extension of the generic-specific concept of practice which has a long history in social work.[9] Each practitioner operates from a generic base which serves as a unifying and integrating force in his practice which is specific to the particular setting or service in which he operates. In any social service setting which is at all complex, there will be a variety of specific functions calling for multiple specific competencies. These required specific competencies will be possessed to greater or lesser degrees by particular workers, with no necessary direct relationship to levels of educational preparation.

While the particular talents and competencies of individuals are almost certainly already being recognized and utilized in many settings with varying degrees of formality, it is suggested here that individual potential is probably not being fully maximized at present on account of our tendency to take a unidimensional view of what constitutes practice competence. At any rate, that is the impression which is given by the literature on social service manpower differentiation.

While nobody likes to perform narrow routine tasks, most people like to feel that they have some unique talent or ability. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that organization research reveals that division of labor based upon task specification lowers worker morale while specialized division of labor in which workers are assigned to those functions in which they feel they have particular expertise seems to increase worker morale.[10] However, it is not suggested here that individual jobs in the human services be created out of single roles which a worker may be best able to carry. This would tend to lead toward overspecialization and consequent fragmentation of services to clients. Nearly all jobs in the social services should be a blend of what have been called "functional roles".[11] The blending of roles and their priorities in particular settings would have to be determined by each organization on the basis of actual client needs.

Debureaucratization of the Human Services

Lloyd Setleis has observed that the manner in which a social work agency is organized "reflects its values, defines relationships and determines the nature of its activity". He asserts that a hierarchical structure "limits an agency's ability to be responsive to itself, to the community and to the client group" and "by its positioning of personnel creates antagonisms that are inherent in the

positioning, rather than in the functional roles they have". Lest we envisage a form of organizational anarchy resulting from the abandonment of hierarchical control, Setleis assures us that a horizontally-structured organization does not eliminate functional responsibility, it merely alters the manner in which it is carried out.[12] Douglas McGregor is unequivocal on this matter of responsibility. He asserts that the participative principle, in giving recognition to people as human beings and in bringing dignity and meaning to their work, "offers par excellence a way to develop genuine personal responsibility among the members of the organization".[13]

Herman Stein is less sanguine than either Setleis or McGregor about the ease with which complex organizations can be de-bureaucratized. He warns that making organizations too loose in structure can militate against client interests. Observing that "there can be a price paid for too drastic debureaucratization", he nevertheless concludes that "it is an attempt that should be constantly made".[14] The critical question is the degree to which the social service agency can give up some direct control of its members without abdicating its responsibility for the quality of service which it provides. Unless the power to make decisions and to act upon them is distributed throughout the organization, the model of practice which is proposed here cannot be operationalized. In this regard, it is useful to bear in mind John Child's differentiation between the locus of decision-making and the source of authority within an organization.[15] An organization may manifest a high degree of decentralization of decision-making without necessarily giving up its authority to hold organization members accountable for their actions.

Assuming a broader societal perspective, Bradford, Gibb and Benne have warned that denial of opportunities for "collaboration in decision-making tends to deepen the fragmentation of an already dangerously fragmented society".[16] This is a truism which needs little amplification for social workers. Bradford and his associates note that, although democratic values are widely honored on a verbal level, they are seldom operationalized in important decision-making processes. More frequently "they are rejected as impractical or as threatening to power relations in the status quo". In their view, commitments to and mechanisms for rational collaboration in problem definition and solution are "obviously scientific in mood and temper, and they are also requirements of a democratic morality".

If, within the team, we include members of the community or client group which the organization seeks to serve, and if such team members are regarded as full members of the team, with their own areas of expertise, the democratization and responsiveness of the organization will

tend to be further enhanced. In a social service team which includes representatives of client groups in service-giving roles and which adopts a horizontal organizational structure, with each person defined as an "expert" in a particular area of practice, professional definitions of client needs would be unlikely to go unchallenged if they were perceived to be inaccurate by other members of the team. This does not mean that professional judgments would actually be 'wrong', simply that they would be subject to examination within the team, just as nonprofessionals' perceptions of client needs and social service activity would be open to joint assessment. Particular perspectives would simply have to validate themselves in the process of actually providing service to clients.

Human service professionals put themselves in an obscure position when they assert that they do not wish to influence other participants in their field of endeavor to adopt the values which they hold. According to Milton Rokeach, if "you claim to have a 'value' and you do not want to influence anyone else under the sun to have it, too, the chances are it is not a value".[17] One presumes that social work professionals have values and that they will, in fact, try to influence others--particularly other social service workers--to adopt these values; but, again, the consequences of holding particular values are more likely to be critically examined if one is functioning in a team relationship with others who may not wholly subscribe to one's values. While the professional social worker may need to retain final authority over the service activities of the team, this does not mean that he is immune to the influence of other members of the team. Such an assumption would imply a high degree of insensitivity on the part of the professional and/or a remarkable docility on the part of the other members of the team.

The particular interpretation of the team approach to social work personnel utilization which has been presented here has certain implications for the social work profession. It has been suggested that such an approach could lead to a decentralization of organizational control and decision-making. What are its implications for professional authority? Barker and Briggs are quite emphatic that the team would always be headed by an MSW who would be responsible for professional judgment about deployment of team resources.[18] Henry Meyer, presenting a sociological perspective on the utilization of nonprofessionals in the human services, concludes that, from the point of view of any profession, the nonprofessional must inevitably be "placed and held within some definition of competitor or auxiliary participant in an enterprise where the professional must lay claim to dominance".[19] However, it is clear that an emphasis upon exclusiveness and control

by the profession rather than inclusiveness and leadership based on demonstrated knowledge, skills and values and a willingness to share these with new entrants will not only limit many of the potential benefits of the team approach to service provision, it will be contrary to fundamental values of the profession and, conceivably, could affect its ability to carry out its mandate.

In her study of nonprofessionals in the mental health field, Francine Sobey found among professional workers "a radical change in attitudes toward the use of nonprofessionals for functions which were previously the exclusive prerogative of professionals". Comments by directors of mental health services led her to conclude that "the trend is toward much greater sharing of knowledge for use between professionals and nonprofessionals".[20]

Bertram Beck has asserted that there is room in social work for all who have the capacity for growth, regardless of formal academic credentials. He places responsibility squarely on the profession for helping all who enter the social service field, regardless of formal preparation, to gain maximum command of social work knowledge and skill. Noting social work's value commitment and its historical identity as a social movement as well as a profession, he calls on social work to desert the traditional pattern of growth of a profession which he characterizes as the definition of a knowledge base and the achievement of a professional monopoly over the acts that spring from that base. Beck concludes that:

> If...we can welcome new recruits into the social work fellowship and help them gain maximum competence through a variety of life experiences, then we may not only ease our manpower problem but also make an enormously valuable contribution to an open and free society.[21]

Social service organizations and the social work profession alike are accountable for the services which they provide and they have a responsibility for deciding who can competently carry which roles or functions. Here I am talking about the more general concept of competence (usually referred to as professional competence) which relates to such factors as the ability to exercise professional judgment, the degree of internalization of professional values and the extent to which professional knowledge, values and methods have been developed and integrated into a coherent whole rather than the types of special competencies to which I referred earlier.

Differentiation of the functions of different levels of human

service workers, according to SREB, can be based on variables which are either extrinsic or intrinsic to the service to be performed.[22]

Human service agencies often have to make decisions about manpower utilization on the basis of factors which are essentially extrinsic to client needs and any ideal conception of appropriate service activity. For example, the degree of prescription or discretion associated with specific job positions is sometimes legally defined or formalized on a quasi-legal fashion. Other extrinsic variables which will affect decisions about staff utilization are the standards and scope of service which an agency seeks to provide and, associated with these variables, the question of demand for services in relation to supply of resources.[23]

Intrinsic variables would include the complexity or difficulty of a problem and the risk dimension to the client involved in the work to be performed. The difficulty with these kinds of variables is to design a system which insures that client needs or problems which are highly complex or difficult or which involve substantial risk are properly identified and brought to the attention of persons who are qualified to assume direct or indirect responsibility for such cases or who can reassign them to suitably qualified personnel. This is not a new problem in the social service field where the levels and kinds of competence shown by professionals, nonprofessionals and students have always been quite diverse in any agency. The problem has traditionally been handled through relatively crude efforts at case differentiation and a supervisory structure designed to insure indirect professional control over the quality of service provided.

While it is assumed that some form of supervisory structure will continue to serve a useful purpose in the indirect monitoring of worker activities and client needs, as well as providing a structure by which the relatively inexperienced worker can be given help in developing his skills, it is not enough simply to prescribe more of the same for the most inexperienced worker. This point is especially salient when we consider that there seems to be a negative relationship between close supervision and the productivity of workers. A study of the work behavior of office workers carried out by Katz, Maccoby and Morse revealed that the closer the supervision which they experienced, the lower was their productivity. Close supervision was defined in that study as "the degree to which the supervisor checks up on his employees frequently, gives them detailed and frequent instructions and, in general, limits the employees' freedom to work in their own way".[24]

In the team approach to social service staff differentiation, it

becomes the responsibility of the team leader to decide which member can most appropriately be given responsibility for what Barker and Briggs call an "episode-of-service". This requires sound professional judgment and an intimate knowledge of the capabilities of each of the members of the team.

Confronted with the need to make judgments about client needs and the most appropriate way or ways of meeting them, the professional team leader, in collaboration with other members of the team, undertakes the following assessment process:

1. He analyzes the situation in order to understand the factors and forces which are at work;

2. He identifies those factors and the relationships between them which appear to be most important;

3. He considers the alternative courses of social service activity which are open to him and his associates; and

4. He decides on the general course of action to be pursued and who are the most appropriate persons to be involved in this action and what functions each should carry.

There are a number of dimensions of general competence, as opposed to those which relate primarily to special skills and knowledge, along which social service workers will vary and upon which the team leader can make judgments about the allocation of service functions. These include:

1. The amount of responsibility a particular worker is able to carry in relation to service activity; that is, the degree of autonomy which he should have in making decisions about service activities and the potential consequences of decisions in the specific instance.

2. The degree of complexity of function which the worker is capable of handling.

3. The degree of development of the worker's disciplined "use of the self". (Situations vary in the demands that they place upon this aspect of the social service worker.)

4. The degree of commitment to professional values and attitudes. (Again, different situations place varying demands

upon or present different tests of the worker's commitment to these aspects of professional service.)

These variables, in combination with those associated with workers' areas of special knowledge and skill, form a nexus of factors which the team leader must take into account in his decisions about the deployment of the resources of the human service team to meet specific client needs for service.

The suggestion that the decisions about the allocation of service activities among different kinds and levels of social service worker should be based solely upon the professional judgment of a team leader may appear to be an avoidance of the responsibility to develop more precise means of differentiation. This is not the intent. However, in the absence of criteria for differentiation which take account of the multiplicity of variables which reflect the competencies of individual workers, it seems best to rely upon a professional worker's assessment of each individual's strengths rather than to rely upon arbitrary distinctions devised in isolation from actual worker performance. If professional workers--supervisors and team leaders in particular--can be helped to make decisions based on an awareness of the many dimensions of competence, substantial progress will have been made toward more effective use of different kinds of personnel. As more and more practice is gained in differentiating between workers along specific dimensions of competence, it should be possible to identify what criteria team leaders actually use in making their decisions and, conceivably, these criteria can be incorporated into a refined conceptual framework of social service staff differentiation.

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3. For a brief but incisive review of the dysfunctional aspects of bureaucracy, with particular relevance for social work, see Robert K. Merton, "Bureaucratic Structure and Personality" in Herman D. Stein and Richard A. Cloward, eds., Social Perspectives on Behavior (New York: The Free Press, 1958), pp. 577-584.

4. Noting the preoccupation with control which has characterized Western industrial administrative science and practice, Victor Thompson contends that such an approach is not appropriate for situations which manifest constant change and the need for adaptive administrative practices. He proposes an approach which he calls "development administration" which would have the following characteristics:

> ...an innovative atmosphere; the operationalization and sharing of goals; the combining of planning (thinking) and acting (doing); the minimization of parochialism; the diffusion of influence; the increasing of toleration of interdependence; and the avoidance of bureau pathology.

Victor A. Thompson, "Administrative Objectives of Development Administration", Administrative Science Quarterly (June 1964), p. 91.

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20. Francine Sobey, The Nonprofessional Revolution in Mental Health (New York: Columbia University Press), p. 105.

21. Bertram M. Beck, "Nonprofessional Social Work Personnel" in Grosser, Henry and Kelly, Nonprofessionals, pp. 76-77.

22. SREB, Roles and Functions, pp. 35-40.

23. Alvin Schorr has observed that "standards are not absolute qualities; rather, they represent a judgment that a specified level of knowledge and skill have become attainable. The level that is specified represents a balance point between ideal professional preparation, whatever that may be and the resources available". Alvin S. Schorr, "Editorial", Social Work, 11:4 (October 1966), 2, 121.

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25. Barker and Briggs, Differential Use..., p. 168.