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THE INFLUENCE OF THE AGENCY ENVIRONMENT
ON CLINICAL PRACTICE*

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ABSTRACT

In an in-depth, exploratory study of their perception of treatment in a family service agency, it was found that clients stressed the impact of the agency's social and physical environment on the helping process and its outcome. Workers, in contrast, took the environment for granted or had little to say about it. This paper discusses these findings and selected practice implications.

It has long been recognized that an agency's physical and social environment influences the nature and quality of services provided by its staff. Social work theorists with diverse orientations to practice have stressed that the agency setting should be viewed as an important part of the therapeutic process (cf. Hollis, 1972; Perlman, 1957; and Smalley, 1967). However, the

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specific nature and extent of these influences have not been clearly understood or considered fully. In particular, there has been limited exploration of clients' views regarding the impact of the agency environment on the service.

As we are increasingly realizing, feedback from clients can be useful in suggesting practice implications and issues for further investigation. In this paper I therefore discuss the views of clients and workers regarding the role of the agency environment in clinical practice. In so doing, I draw upon selected findings from an in-depth study of client and worker perception of treatment in a family service agency (Maluccio, 1979).

NATURE OF STUDY

The purpose of the overall study was to learn how clients and workers view their interaction, their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with it, and the factors influencing its course and outcome.

The study was carried out at a mid-sized sectarian, multi-function family service agency located in an urban area in the northeastern United States. The agency is comparable to most member agencies of the Family Service Association of America in respect to size, staff and programs. The research focused on its counseling program.

The study used an exploratory research design. Data were collected primarily in qualitative form through individual, in-depth interviews with a randomly selected sample of 33 adult clients (in 25 cases) and their social workers soon after termination of the service.¹

¹ Clients agreed to participate in the research in 25 of the 28 cases contacted. For details on sample selection and other aspects of the study's methodology, see Maluccio (1979:24-46).

The sample was representative of the client population at the agency. The majority of clients were white, married, Catholic women under the age of 40 who came from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and who had sought help with marital or parent-child problems. Most of them had completed at least high school, and nearly half had attended college. The duration of contact with the agency was less than six months for over two-thirds of the clients. The number of treatment interviews ranged from 1 to 45, with the average being 10.

Each of the 11 social workers who were active in the agency's counseling program participated in the study. All were employed by the agency on a full-time basis. All but one held M.S.W. degrees and had majored in casework. The exception was a B.A. level worker with extensive practice experience. As a group, the workers were highly experienced, with years of post-M.S.W. employment ranging from two to twenty.

The interviews with clients as well as practitioners were held soon after termination of the service. I conducted all of the interviews with clients and with practitioners, in their homes and offices respectively. I had no prior information about the client other than his or her name and address. First I interviewed the client and then, a few days later, his or her worker. By plan, I did not share with the worker anything that the client had told me, in order to maintain confidentiality as well as avoid influencing the workers' responses.

With clients as well as practitioners, I used an interview guide covering content areas related to each phase of the helping process and its outcome.² The interviews included both open-ended questions asked of all

²I employed the focused interview delineated by Merton, Fiske, and Kendall (1956). For full copies of the interview guides with clients and social workers, see Maluccio (1979:220-233).

respondents and specific questions probing into the client's or worker's views, impressions, feelings, and perceptions. Essentially the same questions were asked of clients and practitioners. Typical questions pertaining to the agency environment were:

"What did you think about the agency as a whole?"

"What did you think about the appearance of the agency?"

"What could be done to make people feel more comfortable in going to an agency such as this?"

All interviews were taped. Data were analyzed through the "inspection" procedure described by Blumer (1969) for use in qualitative research.³

SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Over two-thirds of the clients offered positive comments about the agency's social environment, that is, the agency's staff, social climate or atmosphere. Representative remarks were:

We got a very warm reception.
Everyone was friendly.
Very pleasant people.
They were all ready to help you.
The lady at the front desk was so pleasant.
They always seemed so glad to see me.
You didn't feel like a cog in a wheel.

³The essence of this procedure is the intensive, focused examination of the empirical material relating to the "analytical elements" or concepts and variables being studied.

Several more detailed quotes from clients follow:

Miss Kraft: It was good the way they handled it. Well, you didn't have to go through a lot of rigmarole like in a hospital. You didn't have to talk to many different people ... fill out a thousand forms ... You didn't have to wait forever to see the counselor once you got there. They made you feel good ... They were paying attention just to you.

Miss Appel: In the beginning I wondered why they were always so nice to me ... why everyone I met in the hall smiled at me ... I thought that maybe they felt sorry for me ... but then I realized that they really liked me ...

Mrs. Donnelly: The waiting room when you first go in - I thought that was excellent ... They have things to do which is good - you know, it calmed people down a little bit before they went upstairs ...

They were very, very nice, especially the girl at the desk when you first go in ... She is a very, very likable person and she's just the receptionist. You see, right there, it's like they have an open door ... If I had gotten a cold feeling, I probably wouldn't have gone upstairs or never finished.

Even people who were dissatisfied with the service or its outcome had positive impressions of the agency as a whole. For example, one of the clients who dropped out said:

Mrs. Norton: They were very nice, not like other places I've been to. In my life I've been to a lot of welfare places and hospitals where you feel like they don't want to talk to you no-how ... Here they treat you like a real person ... like someone who has feelings ... They don't act like you're there just because it's free.

As seen in the above excerpts, clients expressed a variety of favorable comments about the agency's staff and climate. A recurring theme was comparison of the agency with other community systems such as hospitals and welfare agencies; clients contrasted the agency's warm climate with the impersonal or dehumanizing quality of larger bureaucratic organizations. Other key themes pertained to the friendliness of staff members, their readiness to be of help, and the feeling that clients were regarded as individuals.

Workers, on the other hand, had little to say about the agency's social environment, frequently indicating that they had not considered its meaning for clients or discussed it with them. The only exception was in relation to the receptionist: most workers brought out that she played a significant role with clients and that clients often commented positively about her.

ROLE OF THE RECEPTIONIST

As suggested in several quotes in the preceding section, most clients singled out the receptionist as a prominent member of the agency's staff. They pointed in particular to their pleasure in knowing her and their feeling comfortable with her. At the time of the study, the receptionist was a warm and caring person who related easily and spontaneously to people and who was very effective in meeting clients and making them feel at home. Her work area was located directly across from the waiting room, thus facilitating interaction between her and the clients while they were waiting for their appointments. Many clients reported that she was very interested in them and that they could talk easily with her about such matters as current events or, in some instances, about some of the changes and experiences in their lives from week to week. Several clients indicated that, as a result of the receptionist's encouragement, they decided to continue in treatment despite their ambivalence.

As these findings imply, the role played by the receptionist in the helping process demands further attention. It is obvious that, in entering a new system such as a social agency, an applicant or client forms initial impressions that can influence his or her attitudes toward the service. Yet, as various authors have suggested, receptionists at times are set up in such a way as to be barriers to service (cf. Cumming, 1968:115). Others have observed that the receptionist or secretary in a mental health setting is an essential part of the success or failure of the program:

... secretaries are forced by necessity to function as part of the therapeutic team in community health centers. They talk first with prospective patients, family, and interested members of the community on the phone ... The secretaries usually make and change appointments, handle fee dispositions, and transact with the patients and family in the waiting room ... (Nyman, Watson, and James, 1973:368).

Despite the significance accorded to the functions of the receptionist or secretary, very little research has been carried out in this area. In one of the few available studies, Hall (1974) analyzed the reception process in several British social agencies. He concluded that receptionists have a marked impact on the delivery of services, since they perform a variety of functions, including: (1) being the first point of contact with the agency at the time of the initial interview; (2) offering support and encouragement through their informal relationship with the client; and (3) acting as the client's advocate or controlling the client's access to the social work staff (pp. 124-218).

The roles of the receptionist and other staff members such as secretaries should therefore be examined and developed more systematically. For example, an agency may consider how to enrich the reception process and maximize its potentially positive impact. Training programs may be introduced to facilitate the integration

of receptionists or secretaries into the therapeutic team (cf. Benitez, 1979; Nyman, Watson, and James, 1973). Ways may be found to enhance the roles of the cadre of clerical and maintenance staff, which is often an under-used resource in various agencies.⁴

IMPACT OF AGENCY'S SECTARIAN AFFILIATION

Another important component of the agency's social environment was its sectarian affiliation. Nearly half of the clients referred to this aspect through comments such as:

I went there because it's part of the Church.
They helped me even though I'm not Catholic.
They're guided by religion.
It was better to be in a place that's Catholic.
They understand better because they're a
Catholic organization.

Most of these comments reflected a positive view of the agency as an extension of the church. The agency's religious affiliation was thus another factor that influenced some people to become involved with it, to use the service, and to have positive expectations from it. For instance, some clients indicated that they chose this particular agency specifically because they felt more comfortable in a Catholic setting. As implied in some of the above quotes, these persons expected that in such an environment they would be better understood and more effectively helped.

For some of the clients, their identification of the agency and the worker as members of their reference

⁴Benitez (1979) describes an interesting training program for clerical staff that has helped to enhance the therapeutic environment in a family service agency.

group facilitated their becoming engaged in treatment:

Mrs. Mosca: At first I wasn't clear why she [the worker] was asking some of these questions about our life together ... Not that they were strange questions ... Well, they were private matters between me and my husband ... But I didn't mind so much, being that this was a Catholic place ... I figured they know what they're doing.

The clients' comments about the meaning of the agency's religious affiliation support Jerome Frank's (1974) thesis that people bring to the helping situation a variety of expectations and attitudes which may be mobilized in the process of healing. This is particularly true when the helping person is viewed by the client as a member of his or her reference group:

Despite the stubbornness of maladaptive attitudes, the psychotherapist, as a socially sanctioned expert and healer and a member of the patients' reference groups, may be able to mobilize forces sufficiently powerful to produce beneficial changes in them (Frank, 1974:45 - Italics added).

In other cases, the agency's religious affiliation or the client's related expectations interfered with the helping process. Mrs. Talcott, for example, had gone there wanting to "save my marriage at all costs" and was shocked when the worker mentioned the possibility of a divorce in joing sessions with her and her husband. She soon withdrew. In the research interview, she expressed her firm conviction that a Catholic agency should help couples to reconcile by emphasizing that divorce is contrary to church teachings. Mrs. Talcott could not understand why the worker not only did not try to do this but also in the course of treatment presented separation or divorce as alternatives for consideration. The discrepancy between Mrs. Talcott's expectations and the worker's

response contributed to their mutual frustration and her premature withdrawal from the service.

In contrast to the clients, practitioners rarely referred to the agency's religious affiliation and its potential impact on client expectations and the course and outcome of treatment. It is likely that workers did not attribute special significance to the sectarian component partly because the agency serves persons of all denominations; in accordance with stated agency policy, workers are expected to practice their profession freely and to avoid imposing their own values on clients.

The clients' responses suggest, however, that the agency's sectarian affiliation did have a special meaning for them that may have affected the helping process. In this agency setting as in others, the sponsorship under which an organization operates should be appreciated as one of factors influencing the client's use of treatment as well as the worker's involvement. Perhaps the most crucial point here is that an agency's affiliation or sponsorship can have different ramifications for different clients. Furthermore, a client's image or expectations of an agency may be quite different from those of the worker. By being attuned to the particular meaning of the setting and its sponsorship for a given client, practitioners are better able to deal with the client's expectations and values and their influence on the helping process (cf. Turner, 1978).

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

As practitioners and theorists have noted (cf. Germain, 1976; Seabury, 1971; and Turner, 1978), the agency's physical environment is another feature that may affect client-worker interaction.

In giving their impressions of the agency as a whole, at least two-thirds of the clients in fact offered remarks about the physical setting. Most of these were negative comments about the location and physical appearance of the agency, the size and condition of the waiting

room and offices, and the lack of parking. These comments came from satisfied as well as dissatisfied respondents. It may be that some persons found it easier to criticize the physical environment rather than the workers or other staff members with whom they had developed a personal relationship.

Some typical remarks about the physical setting were:

<u>Location</u>	<u>Appearance</u>	<u>Office</u>
I was leery about going there.	An old building.	Tiny offices ... I felt closed in.
Parking very bad.	Looks like it needs a coat of paint.	Office looked cold; no rug or pictures.
Didn't like going to that area.	Physical surroundings bad.	Office too small.
Hard to get there.	Looked run-down.	Office seemed empty.
Location very poor.		

All of these comments pertained to the main office of the agency, which was located in an area awaiting re-development. The location was more accessible to city residents than to suburban residents, who constituted a substantial proportion of the clientele. At the time of the study, several buildings around the agency's office had been torn down. The clients' negative evaluation of the physical surroundings was not exaggerated. The building was indeed in poor shape. Since the agency was due to move eventually to another location, the administration was reluctant to invest in extensive maintenance or renovation.

While declaring their dissatisfaction with the quality of the physical environment, over one-third of the clients also proceeded to explain it as something that they had expected in view of the agency's non-profit status and its identity as a charitable organization.

Some representative remarks follow:

Mrs. Mosca: It was poorly kept, an old building ... but that's what you can expect for this type of agency ... You know, a charitable agency. They can't have a fancy place or location.

Mrs. Gates: As a subsidized agency, it's always working on a minimal budget. They can't afford really adequate facilities.

Mrs. Crompton: The building isn't too appealing ... It's very plain ... Well, you know, they can't do much about that, since the fact of the matter is that most people who go there are poor, elderly, or on welfare ... They couldn't afford to pay for anything more elaborate.

One wonders how the helping process was influenced by the client's negative views about the physical environment of the agency or perception of it as an organization for the poor or those on welfare. The clients in the three excerpts above were middle-class persons who indicated that they had selected this agency at least partly because they could not afford more expensive treatment from other sources such as private practitioners. In general, they reported that they were satisfied with the service and its outcome. While these clients were concerned about inadequacies in the agency's physical environment, in the long run this factor did not seem to matter to them enough to affect the outcome. For one thing, as with most other middle-class respondents, they tended to disassociate themselves from the charity cases which they perceived as constituting the bulk of the clientele. Mrs. Lodano, for instance, was one of the suburban residents who questioned whether she belonged in this particular agency, even though she and her husband had found the service to be very helpful:

Well, oh ... Someone from the suburbs usually wouldn't go there ... We couldn't afford anything else at the time ... Oh, I felt a little

odd whenever we met someone who was obviously poor in the waiting room ... My husband felt like me ... We didn't really belong there. Those people had more serious problems ... They were really poor.

I asked Mrs. Lodano and other clients why they continued with the service and why they found it effective despite their strong negative feelings regarding the physical setting. In response, they generally referred to their strong attachment to their worker and conviction that he or she was helpful. It appeared thus that other variables, such as the worker's competence and the strength of the client-worker relationship, counteracted the potentially negative influence of the agency's physical environment.

Other clients, from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, felt even more strongly about the environment and noted ways in which it affected the helping process. For example, after expressing his understanding that the agency realistically had limited resources, Mr. Mosca stressed the significance of adequate facilities:

I don't know if they can afford it, but they should do something about the physical surroundings. The only thing I could hope for would be to have the facility in a decent location ... The physical setup makes an impression on people ... I think they could do a better job if the facilities are improved... People would feel better about going there ... Well, maybe the counselors themselves would feel better.

Some respondents suggested that certain qualities of the physical environment affected the way they felt about themselves:

Miss Becker: I liked the location because it was close to my job ... but the building was something else. They should do something

about it ... fix it up a little bit ... You know, it made me feel worse about myself, because I couldn't afford anything better. If they changed it, maybe the social workers would like it better.

Over one-fourth of the clients were especially critical of the size or appearance of the worker's office:

Mrs. Donnelly: It feels good when you first meet her [the worker] ... She shakes your hand or she shows some sign of affection ... Then you go to her office and the room is completely different from what she's showing you. You know, it's cold and it looks empty ... It was kind of hard, but I felt, well, they didn't have the money because it was an association ... It was connected with the church ... That's why I overlooked it.

Mr. Crompton: The office was small and very crowded. You know, whenever my wife and I went in together, it was hard even to move around ... Well, we laughed about it ... I don't think that the office has a lot to do with counseling, but I felt strange in there ... Oh, I kept thinking that maybe I should go somewhere with better offices ... Sometimes we wasted time talking or thinking about the office.

Miss Moore: The room was very small - just a desk and some chairs. The social worker put in some plants and tried to make it homey ... but it was still an office ... The room looked empty like I felt for quite a while ... Sometimes, well, it made it hard to get going.

In light of the many negative remarks about the office, workers should be more sensitive to its meaning for particular clients. At the same time, administrators as well as practitioners should consider ways of improving the office and the messages that it conveys to clients. One of the clients made some suggestions along these lines:

Mrs. Donnelly: Um, I think I would change the room, the colors, you know, put things on the wall to make it feel like it could be a house. Or, maybe, a lamp or something which you would see in a house. Um ... I would make it not so cold.

While these suggestions are rather obvious, social workers seem hesitant to implement them. It appears that "we ... fail to make use of the information available from others on the effects of color, lighting, furniture arrangement, and amenities on providing the kind of setting that is desired" (Turner, 1978:193).

Our reluctance in this area may be due to more than the realistic factor of limited financial resources. Before making substantial improvement in regard to the office or other features of the agency's physical environment, we may need to change some of our underlying attitudes. For example, since most social agencies historically have been developed to meet the needs of the poor, we as social workers may still be preoccupied with the value of parsimony and ambivalent about providing comfortable physical facilities for our clients - and for ourselves. Furthermore, we may not fully appreciate the impact of the physical setting on the helping process, because of our traditional emphasis on other components such as the client-worker relationship.

The findings discussed thus far in this section were drawn from the majority of clients who were satisfied with the service. The indication is that the physical setting has a differential impact on them, depending on such factors as their personality and expectations,

the quality of the client-worker relationship, and the degree of satisfaction with the service. This is also evident in the views of dissatisfied clients. Several did not say anything about the environment or indicated that they paid little attention to it:

Mrs. Cain: I don't know about the agency's setting ... Well, it's not easy to be aware of your surroundings when there are other things on your mind that are so paramount ... Maybe now if I went in there I might see things or react to the place differently but I don't think that I was really looking for that kind of thing at that time.

Mrs. Norton: I never paid much attention to the agency ... You know, I was more concerned with my problems.

Other dissatisfied clients, like the following, had strong feelings about the physical environment:

Mrs. Bates: Oh, I have nothing to say about the people ... You know, the people were all very polite from the time I called and so on ... Oh, the location and the agency itself ... It's in a very bad section of town where we had evening appointments and you are leery of going there - of going in and out of the building at night ...

The building itself, like I say ... the first impression - it is a very dreary building and it does give you a kind of creepy feeling when you're already creepy when you're going for help, you know ... You're leery, wondering what to expect and when that is what you're confronted with - a dreary place - I think it has a little bit of effect on you.

For some of these persons, the physical environment apparently was another source of dissatisfaction that rein-

forced their negative attitudes toward the service, the worker, or the agency. These clients' negative perception of the value of the agency may have hastened their premature or unplanned termination.

Workers were aware that clients might have feelings about the agency's physical environment, particularly its location. In general, however, they noted that they rarely discussed this topic in treatment sessions and that it was something about which they were not likely to get feedback. Several practitioners suggested that they were so accustomed to the agency's physical condition that they paid little attention to it. Others said that they were tolerating the poor physical facilities in anticipation of the agency's move to better quarters. In addition, some workers' comments reflected their conviction that the physical environment is not as important as the personal relationship with the worker. As one of them put it:

As with most people, Joyce didn't think about the agency but about me as the worker. Well, ... maybe the physical environment made some impression on her initially - but, as we went on, there was no indication that it mattered to her.

But the issue of the impact of the physical environment on the helping process and its outcome should not be glossed over. Most clients remarked about it, although their responses reflected a variety of views. Moreover, it is noteworthy that for many clients the poor quality of the physical environment accentuated the stigma of going to this particular agency, which they already perceived as a setting for poor or lower-class clients. This evidence supports the assertion that "space, design and decoration in our agency settings communicate messages about their status and worth to users of service and affect self-esteem and psychic comfort" (Germain, 1976: 20).

In view of these results, it is surprising to find that little attention has been devoted to this matter

through research or writing within social work. There has been limited consideration of the agency's physical environment in basic social work texts (cf. Hollis, 1972; Siporin, 1975). Yet, the findings of environmental psychologists and others demonstrate that the physical environment is a significant determinant of human behavior. Through his naturalistic research, Barker (1968) has highlighted the unique properties of "behavior settings" -such as a social agency- and their influence on the functioning of human beings operating within them. Moos (1976) has imaginatively analyzed a range of environmental determinants of behavior, including physical space, building design, and social climate. Ittelson, Proshansky, and Rivlin (1970) have shown that the physical setting is one of the major variables contributing to the effectiveness of therapeutic programs in a psychiatric hospital. Germain (1978) has examined the importance of space as an ecological variable in social work practice.

In one of the few pertinent studies conducted by social workers, Seabury (1971) analyzed the physical setting in six different social work agencies ranging from a private practitioner's office to a large public welfare center. He found that there were different space arrangements in such areas as waiting rooms and interviewing offices. The various physical patterns conveyed different messages to clients. For example, while both the family service agency and the public welfare center were large, bureaucratic organizations, the latter had a distant and dehumanizing atmosphere, while the former conveyed a sense of cheerfulness, comfort, and warmth. Similarly, the hospital social service department presented a most unpleasant appearance, while private offices and private agencies seemed most comfortable.

Seabury (1971) concluded that the optimal arrangements of the physical setting in any agency should be based on its functions and the needs of its clients. At the present time, however, there are few guidelines to assist agencies in this effort. Consequently, it has been proposed that social workers collaborate with other professionals such as architects, as a means of improving

service delivery (cf. Wittman and Wittman, 1976). In addition, further research in this area is essential, to clarify the specific role that the environment of an agency may play in treatment and to devise ways of maximizing the positive impact of the physical setting.

CONCLUSION

It is not appropriate to draw definitive generalizations on the basis of data derived from an exploratory study such as the present one. However, it is interesting to note the markedly different views of clients and social workers concerning the impact of the agency environment on the helping process and its outcome.

Practitioners had little to say about either the social or physical environment of the agency or took it for granted. As I have reported elsewhere (Maluccio, 1979:115-140), they attributed greater significance to the role of the client-worker relationship. Perhaps workers are more conscious of their investment in the helping relationship and understandably need to emphasize its importance.

From the perspective of clients, however, the findings suggest that an agency's environment is an important component in the process of a person's becoming engaged with the worker and using the service. It is noteworthy in fact that the clients' impressions of the agency persisted to the point of the research interview, which occurred after the termination of the service and thus in many cases long after they had initially been exposed to it.

Obviously, client-worker interaction occurs within a broader context that includes the agency with all of its physical, social, and operational features. As Lennard and Bernstein have pointed out (1969:205), "the adequacy or inadequacy of treatment environments is not independent of the larger context of which they are a part."

Consequently, an essential task in clinical practice is to evaluate the quality of an agency's environment as a salient force in the life spaces of clients and workers and as a critical component of the helping system. This means, first of all, that a practitioner needs to evaluate the quality and meaning of the environment for each client. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, numerous questions should be asked at a broader level, such as the following:

Does the setting give a first appearance of concern, competence, comfort, of a place where an individual, family or group will find the kind of understanding and wise help that is sought? Or does the setting give the message of incompetence, lack of respect, lack of privacy, lack of comfort that could well deter persons? (Turner, 1978:191).

On the basis of the answers to such questions, an agency's staff and administration should be better able to effect necessary changes making the environment more attractive and supportive to both clients and practitioners.

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