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SOCIAL WELFARE AGENCIES AND SOCIAL REFORM MOVEMENTS:  
THE CASE OF THE SINGLE PARENT FAMILY

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Abstract

To a greater extent than before, social welfare agencies are emphasizing social change over direct services. A social reform movement is a mechanism by which societal and institutional change may be accomplished. The relationship between social welfare organizations and social movements has not been clearly defined. The sociological theories of Smelser, Turner, Killian and others on collective behavior and social movements provide a useful knowledge base for welfare organizations and professionals espousing social reform goals. The single parent family population is discussed as a group with the potential to generate into a social reform movement.

Today many social welfare agencies have reemphasized social reform and institutional change as their major organizational goals. Agencies that formerly stressed direct service activities and individual case objectives now focus on social change activities and broader system-oriented objectives. A social reform movement is one way by which institutional change may be accomplished. However, the connection between social reform movements and social welfare organizations and the professionals employed in such organizations has not been studied explicitly. In the following paper, this relationship will be considered, first through a summary statement on the theory of social movements, and second through an examination of the strengths and limitations of social agencies in instigating a social movement and in assisting the movement once it is underway.

Knowledge of this sort would have been useful in describing how social welfare organizations could have provided a greater amount of assistance to national and local Welfare Rights Organizations a few years ago. Social welfare professionals were involved in assisting the Welfare Rights Movement, particularly in linking local welfare rights organizations to the national unit. Although the Welfare Rights Movement has dissipated today, other social issues will undoubtedly continue to trigger the collective concern which leads to social reform movements. A single parent family movement is one such possibility.

As a group, single parents have a constellation of problems: economic, employment, social, child care, and housing. The reported differential in need between one and two parent families in these areas<sup>1</sup> suggests a need for broad institutional changes. The diversity and scope of need for this group would diminish the effectiveness of a purely direct service approach. If a large scale social movement of single parents can be instigated and proves to be an effective vehicle for improving the overall social conditions of single parents, an organizational structure would be established. One parent families could use that organization from that point on, to implement more specific sociological changes (e.g., the Women's Movement can be mobilized for specific issues such as improved day care or increased educational opportunities for women in a relatively short period of time).

Vattano has described how a general movement such as the power-to-the people movement has caused greater consumer participation in the social services and the emergence of nonprofessional self-help groups.<sup>2</sup> In this paper, we narrow the focus to a very specific movement and reverse the casual process by examining the role that individual self-help groups could play in a single parent family movement. We assume that self-help groups of single parents acting together could lead to a recognition of the need for societal system changes and the beginning of a single parent family movement.

It may seem ironic to some that social agencies faced with implementing social reform goals are participating in direct service activities such as assisting in the development of self-help groups. However, we must be clear at the outset that direct service activities per se do not lead to social movements. Certain conditions must be met before direct service group processes can be defined as self-help group processes and before self-help groups link together to initiate a social movement. Furthermore, there is the more basic question of whether there is any proper role for the social service agency and the human service professional in self-help groups. Self-help groups derive much of their power from the interest of members in assisting one another and continued professional involvement might usurp the self-help power base.<sup>3</sup> In addition, we will raise question about the proper role of the social service agency in a social movement.

Our interest in defining the one parent family phenomenon as a social reform movement was instigated by developments in England and in Canada. In England, voluntary associations of local self-help groups such as Mothers in Action and Gingerbread have brought attention to the common disadvantages of the single parent status.<sup>4</sup> The writings of social policy professionals such as Wynn<sup>5</sup> and Marsden<sup>6</sup> recorded the common needs of one parent families and, as a result, the Finer Commission was established to study the socio-legal conditions of the one parent family and make family policy recommendations.<sup>7</sup> Single parent associations have exerted their influence to see that the recommendations of the Finer Commission are implemented.

In Canada, voluntary associations of single parent families such as Toronto Single Parents Associated or the Vancouver Single Parents Association have been organized. A number of studies have been conducted to publicize the social conditions confronting single parents.<sup>8</sup> As far as we can determine, these single parent organizations developed from self-help groups of single parents acting together to change social conditions for the single parent family.

In the United States, the closest thing to a national voluntary association of single parents is Parents Without Partners; however, this organization has often been criticized for emphasizing social activities over social change activities.<sup>9</sup> The one parent phenomenon has not been defined by Parents Without Partners as a social movement. Other than a recent study on the economic conditions of female headed families,<sup>10</sup> no national policy research has been undertaken on the single parent phenomenon in this country.

All indications suggest that social issues related to the single parent family could be defined in terms of a social reform movement. The question under study in this paper is "Can a social agency instigate a social reform movement?; or, "Are there certain activities a social agency might perform after the movement has developed which might add to its success?"

## THEORY OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

### Collective Behavior

In sociological theory, a social movement is located in the class of social actions broadly categorized under the term collective behavior. We will discuss definitions of collective behavior and then identify the distinctive characteristics of a social movement as a special type of collective behavior.

Collective behavior has been defined as "mobilization on the basis of a belief which redefines social action."<sup>11</sup> Collective behavior encompasses a wide range of events including a panic, a riot or a social movement. The discussion of the theories of collective behavior in this paper will center on two major theorists, Smelser and Turner.

Smelser views collective behavior as the outgrowth of a popular desire to do something about a situation that has created stress for a number of individuals. He feels that structural strain is the underlying condition of an episode of collective behavior. Generalized beliefs are present and facilitate the collective understanding of the condition. This eventually leads to social action in response to the strain. Other conditions he identifies as contributing to particular episodes of collective behavior include: a precipitating incident that confirms the belief; the mobilization of participants for action; and, finally the collective action itself.<sup>12</sup>

Turner notes that episodes of collective behavior appear when conventional norms fail or weaken in an ambiguous situation that provides an opportunity for individuals to interact.<sup>13</sup> A situation leading to the establishment of a new norm and a new definition of the situation to which the norm is applied can arise only when conventional norms are neutralized. The "emergent norm" develops as part of the new interaction and it determines the direction and intensity of crowd behavior. Turner's theory assumes that individuals experience social pressure to conform to the emergent norm.

There are several general concepts which are common to both Smelser and Turner's discussions of collective behavior. First, a strain of some sort or another is a necessary condition that determines episodes of collective behavior. Second, the process of communication under conditions of strain is important. Third, collective behavior is not seen as the behavior of aggregates of unrelated individuals but the behavior of collectivities.

Each theorist sees the determinants of collective behavior somewhat differently. The theoretical emphasis differs in that Smelser's theory is from a cultural perspective while Turner's theoretical emphasis is social structure. Smelser and Turner each began with a different initial focus. Smelser's theory looks to explain social movement, the most structured form of collective behavior. Turner began by explaining the activities of the crowd, a less formally organized type of behavior.

### Social Movements

A social movement is a distinctive and more highly developed form of collective behavior. The distinguishing characteristics of social movements include: (1) a sense of group identity among participants; (2) sustained enthusiasm; (3) a considerable degree of organization and division of labor; (4) members' activities which are disciplined rather than chiefly impulsive; (5) a conscious effort to bring about the new social and cultural forms.<sup>14</sup> Social movement is defined as "a collectivity acting with some continuity to promote or resist a change in the society or group of which it is a part."<sup>15</sup>

A social movement has consequences for the larger social system. To be successful a social movement must result in significant social change.

significant social change initially may become social movements later on. A movement may contribute to social change through "forcing the established structure of the society to come to terms with it and its values."<sup>16</sup> The larger social system may eventually respond by incorporating some features of its program into the existing institutions."<sup>17</sup>

There are many theories which attempt to account for the emergence of a social movement. The common elements of each theory will be presented in this paper. A social movement is usually studied as a developmental process. Elementary episodes of collective behavior develop into social movements under certain conditions. Social strain is a necessary precondition for the development of a social movement; but, social strain alone is not a sufficient cause of a social movement. Social change activities must develop.

If the social order fails to meet the individual's needs or provide a stable framework from which to carry on activities, the individual will seek to challenge the social order. If the individual's dissatisfaction is shared by others in the society a social movement may develop. Further, there must be a "vision, a belief in the possibility of a different state of affairs."<sup>18</sup> Thus, strain within the social structure must exist and be a common experience for many individuals, who are willing to act toward change.

Rush and Denisoff also identify strain within the social structure and a willingness to act for change as the essential elements in the development of a social movement. For a temporarily organized public to develop into a social movement the necessary elements are: (1) a consciousness of dysfunction related to a social problem, and (2) the mobilization of action to ameliorate the problem.<sup>19</sup>

As another necessary determinant of a social movement, the generalized belief of collective behavior must develop into shared values. Abel separates values into two dimensions, "the issue" and "the ideology."<sup>20</sup> The issue is the groundwork upon which individuals may organize some collective program, but if such action is to become a social movement, concerned opposition is not sufficient. A collective plan, an ideology, must be developed, for without the ideology, action cannot be maintained.

Jackson<sup>21</sup> suggests that even if the above conditions of social strain, social change activities, and shared values are present, a substantial social movement may still not develop. For progression of an organized social movement there must be an effective linking of like-minded people over an extended area into one group whose image and action can be effectively coordinated. There must be leadership which will be followed by individuals from a variety of local areas and as formal organizations that can operate from a communitywide rather than a local base. The ideology and program must be suitable for rallying the protestors and need to be widely disseminated through channels of communication. The public image of the movement must gain substantial and growing strength, promising tangible accomplishments in the near future.<sup>22</sup>

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES FOR  
THE SOCIAL AGENCY

Having briefly outlined the characteristics of collective behavior and social movements, we return to our original question. Is it possible for a social welfare agency to instigate a social movement?

As with any formal organization, a social agency has a pattern of activities for which it is accountable. As described in the sociological literature, a movement itself is a very complex phenomenon. Therefore, predicting the emergence of a social movement is a tenuous proposition. A social agency could not guarantee the initiation of a particular movement and does not have ultimate control over whether or not the movement develops. Rather, the agency would need to pursue a number of social issues which could develop into reform movements. However, a welfare agency has a well established structure which tends to limit its flexibility. This hinders the ability of the agency to quickly shift direction, for example, from issues related to welfare rights to issues related to the single parent family. Agency professionals on staff who are experts in welfare rights could not immediately become experts on the single parent family.

For an agency to help instigate a movement, agency professionals or board members must support an emerging norm at an early stage of development—the stage of generalized belief. To lend assistance in initiation of a movement requires some risks board members and staff may be unwilling to take. In the formative stages of a movement, the agency might need to help in planning and instigating precipitating incidents (mass demonstrations, public rallies, etc.) A welfare agency charged with representing some general population of people would most likely support such activities only if a new norm were emerging quickly and becoming readily accepted.

Assuming the new norm did become readily accepted, social service professionals who are especially skilled at organizing and mobilizing consumer groups could prove useful to the leaders of the emerging movement, even in its initial stages. However, if the identified groups were to establish an obvious and open dependence on social welfare organizations, the initial trust of the movement might be dissipated. This is especially true as reform movements of interest to social agencies would be those movements which attack the existing social service structure. The social welfare agency, of course, has vested interests and could benefit from co-opting the movement early on, for instance, by suggesting incremental changes within the social service structure when more dramatic and comprehensive changes are called for.

After the incipient movement develops, a social agency is more likely to be of assistance. As the movement establishes its own formal organization and division of labor, the movement becomes more structurally consistent with the social welfare agency. At that point, agency professionals would be more likely to participate. The following are three examples of how a social agency might share channels of

communication, resources or leadership training with members of the movement.

Social agencies have accumulated experience and expertise in using a variety of communication channels. They frequently issue press releases, have facilities to print materials, and can get news coverage or radio time. The social movement literature indicates accessibility to communication is an important criterion in the success of the movement. This would enable a social agency to gain public attention to the needs of the group, make members of the group aware of the activities and engage their support, enable them to easily reach large numbers for particular events, i.e., mass rally, planning sessions, and so forth.

Social agencies have at their disposal financial resources and thus can provide, at least initially, needed funds. Funds are often difficult for those engaged in a movement to secure and much energy would need to be exerted by the members of the movement. Unsuccessful attempts at fund raising could detract from the success of the movement. Resources would enhance the image of the movement and give the impression of a successful rather than a floundering endeavor. Immediate resources would enable the movement to establish a formal organization headquarters, obtain telephones, send out mail, and so forth.

Effective leadership is vital to the birth and development of a social movement. Effective leadership helps to structure and coordinate activities of the collectivity, and this is a key element in determining if a social movement has arrived. Although it often appears that the leadership is directed by one person, more often it may be a group of individuals acting together. Leadership requires various skills and attitudes which would be nearly impossible for one person to assume. Killian identifies three types of leadership: the charismatic leader, who creates the movement and its ideas and whose personal qualities draw support from others; the administrative leader, who is concerned with developing a practical strategy for the attainment of the goals; and the intellectual leader, who elaborates and justifies the values of the movement.<sup>23</sup> Social agencies could train individuals to assume some of the necessary administrative and intellectual leadership roles. A social agency could also identify a charismatic individual in the community. Agency training might also be appropriate in this case, provided it does not interfere with the development of the individual's charismatic qualities.

In addition to structural consistency between the movement and the agency, there is some functional consistency between the goals of a social agency and a movement. Social agencies have a history of involvement with social reform issues. The "new" social agency should provide leadership and direction for efforts aimed at social and legislative change. Agency involvement may be appropriate in spelling out the policy changes which are needed. However, social movements often call for radical social change. Those participating in the movement sometimes engage in illegal or violent activities. And so, even at a later stage in the development of social reform, participation may present a dilemma



for the agency. Agency involvement depends upon the degree to which radical social change is sought. In the social welfare sector, this means to what degree the existing social service structure and the practice assumptions of social service professionals are challenged. It is easiest to illustrate this by returning to the example of a single parent family movement.

#### A SINGLE PARENT FAMILY MOVEMENT

The characteristics of a single parent family movement have been evident in England where self-help groups of single parents have organized into voluntary associations calling for social reform. Assuming the initiation of a one parent family movement in this country, could a social agency assist in the initial development of such a movement? This depends upon two interrelated factors: 1) the degree to which the existing social service structure and practice assumptions of social welfare professionals are being challenged; and 2) how quickly the new norms of the movement are becoming accepted.

Part of the ideological core of a single parent movement directly challenges the assumptions of social welfare professionals and social scientists, namely, that one parent families are "disorganized", "unstable" or "broken" families. In England, single parents in the movement report they were reluctant to even seek social services for fear of being judged as abnormal or unstable by social service professionals.

...the social service system (is) ingrained with a patronizing complacency that the individual is psychologically inadequate--not the system...<sup>24</sup>

The social service worker is often the embodiment of professional distance and callousness that has led single parent self-help groups to emphasize personal interaction and subjective experience. Self-help groups generate their own power from portraying the service they provide as an alternative to traditional social services. A close relationship between the self-help group and the social agency could lead to a reduction in the self-help power base and the co-optation of the self-help leadership. Although both the self-help group and the human service professional may be needed in an integrated human service network, the day when they can both function in a spirit of close cooperation may never come.

If social welfare professionals participate with members of the social movement in formulating position papers and policy statements, professional values may move the ideological core of the movement to a more conservative position. For instance, when the Finer Commission reported the inadequacy of social services for single parents, it recommended a traditional remedy--greater coordination of social welfare services,<sup>25</sup> rather than a basic re-thinking of the rationale upon which social services to single parents are based. Also, while the Finer Commission recommended that single parents did not need specialized services for fear

of developing fragmented services,<sup>26</sup> it might be useful politically if members of a single parent movement took a separatist stance and argued for specialized service structures tailored to their unique family status.

For social agencies that have recently shifted from clinical to social change goals, the clinical orientation of social welfare professionals can also present problems in linking with the movement. Social service professionals may be tempted to offer single parents direct service or access to services as part of the negotiation process. Agency professionals may emphasize self-help groups which focus on personal problem-solving or therapeutic goals rather than groups which emphasize social advocacy and social change goals. This "method lag" in agencies that now emphasize social reform can be problematic as agencies attempt to provide assistance to social movements.

Assuming greater acceptance of the norm and if basic social services assumptions are not under attack, there are many areas of agency and professional expertise and power that would be useful to leaders of a single parent movement. Knowledge about group development, identification of self-help members who would make good leaders, and the use of agency facilities may be needed and shared after the movement has developed. Interrelationships are much more problematic in the earlier stages of social reform.

### CONCLUSION

In this paper we have briefly explored the theoretical dimensions of social movements and the possible consistency between these dimensions and the characteristics of social welfare agencies. We have found that the more obvious advantages of an agency's interrelationship with a social movement exist after the movement had gained a degree of social acceptance rather than in the initial stages of social reform. Furthermore, participation by social service professionals depends upon the degree to which traditional social service assumptions and practices come under attack.

In the initial stages of a movement, the social agency professional must be a sensitive diagnostician of social processes and be able to recognize a willingness on the part of potential members of the movement to participate in substantial social change. Since it is impossible to predict the beginning of a social movement with any certainty, the service professional should be allowed to pursue a number of social issues which could conceivably develop into reform movements. The social agency must maintain a low profile in laying the foundation for the later development of a connection between the agency and the movement. Assuming this is possible, staff of the agency can assist in the organization of consumer groups and in the planning and documentation of incidents and events that call attention to the movement and the unequal societal treatment given to its members. Agency board members and professional staff would most likely offer more support under conditions of rapid

societal change as the generalized beliefs of the movement gain acceptance and develop into an emerging norm and when basic assumptions of social work practice are not being challenged.

After a social movement gets off the ground, service professionals will find members of the reform movement engaging in some familiar processes such as building a formal organization and establishing some division of labor among its membership. Members of the movement might be advised to seek agency expertise, provided that staff of the welfare organization recognize how the organizational structure of a reform movement differs from the structure of a traditional social agency. Bureaucratization would interfere with the need for rapid social change. Social agency staff could also provide the movement with needed community support, introduce the members of the movement to the use of mass media, assist in the development of value statements and action platforms, and provide leadership training.

On the other hand, we wonder if social welfare organizations which often pride themselves on rational social planning and planned social change can participate with flexibility and freedom in a social process that is more art than science. Traditional social agencies may not be willing to risk radical social change, participation in violent or illegal social action, or the questioning of basic assumptions of social work practice. Human service professionals who are more expert at diagnosing client rather than system problems would be less effective at advancing a particular cause. However, we must recognize that the burden of overcoming these incongruities between social agencies and social reform movements should rest with the social work profession and the social service agencies. After all, it is the profession and the agencies, not the membership of social reform movements, who have recently reemphasized social action and social reform goals.

## NOTES

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