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**DISSEMINATION OF RESEARCH REPORTS
AND OTHER PUBLICATIONS TO SOCIAL WORKERS**

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ABSTRACT

The author analyzes the response of social workers to a national materials dissemination effort. The publications advocated program innovations based on research and evaluation of a demonstration project. Questions addressed are: do social workers order material based on their occupational category, and are they more likely to order materials if they also receive personal contact in the form of workshops and consultation. Other findings related to this dissemination of materials effort are also described.

Dissemination of research to social work practitioners has become a subject of interest and study to the social work community. As practitioners of an applied science, social workers need the results of research from their own profession and others as a basis for making decisions on practice and program. There is little evidence, however, that research results as reported in the professional journals are read by those outside academia.¹

The dissemination of information to human service organizations to effect pro-

gram change requires special techniques and strategies. Several methods of dissemination have been tried, including demonstrations within the human service organization and various combinations of written materials, conferences, and on-site consultation.² Rothman (1980) conceptualized these approaches as being either "high-intensity" or "low-intensity" methods. The former involves personal contact between the disseminating agent and the practitioner, while the latter involves the provision of written materials to a targeted audience.³

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Publications are an important part of most dissemination efforts, either alone or in combination with other forms of dissemination. Materials distribution has several advantages as a dissemination technique. "For transmitting knowledge to all members of a profession or field, the written word has yet to be surpassed; it is easily disseminable, is privately retrievable for reference purposes, and can be absorbed at the individual user's own rate."⁴ In comparison to high intensity approaches, materials have been shown to result in a relatively high level of dissemination of the information they contain at about half the cost.⁵

The dissemination methods reported in the literature have tended to be highly structured efforts to package and distribute material considered appropriate for specific audiences by targeting mailings to particular groups.⁶ In contrast, the materials dissemination effort reported here attempted a different approach to distribution. This effort, the Permanency Planning Dissemination Project, made available information on project materials to large numbers of people in various professions and in every state over a four year period, from 1976 to 1980. The project operated on the principle that utilization would occur most readily if the information being disseminated was distributed widely. It was expected that in this way the processes of word-of-mouth diffusion would operate effectively. So the project did not try to predict potential audiences, and it did not limit access to materials to particular groups. The potential audience was large—all child welfare professionals in the country,

and, less directly, faculty and students of schools of social work, lawyers and other legal professionals, legislators, and interested citizens.⁷

The primary channels of communication used to inform prospective users about the availability of materials were project consultants and staff of the national and regional Children's Bureau offices, who were in contact regularly with staff of state child welfare agencies. Personal consultation, presentations and displays at conferences, and training sessions all served to advertise the availability of material. In addition, a Documents List, which listed all available material and information on costs and ordering, and a quarterly bulletin published by the project were mailed at intervals to 15,000 people who had identified themselves to the project as having an interest in child welfare. While information about the materials was widely broadcast, the materials themselves were available only on request. Those interested in receiving publications had to request them by using an order form, and a charge was made for nearly all materials commensurate with the costs of printing and mailing.⁸

This report describes the results of this approach to materials distribution. Two questions are addressed:

1. Given a wide choice of materials, are people apt to show preference for certain publications in accordance with their occupation? In other words, are program managers likely to order mater-

ials about program planning and management, practitioners about casework methods, etc.?

2. Are those people exposed to the project through workshops, conference presenta-

tions, consultation, and other forms of technical assistance, more apt to buy materials than people not receiving such "high intensity" dissemination approaches?

METHOD

The materials distribution component of the Dissemination Project was not conducted as a research study, and a formal evaluation was not within the scope of its work. In accordance with project goals, data collection and storage methods were arranged to maximize dissemination and only secondarily to facilitate research. This orientation of the project required that information on ordering materials be recorded in this way: there were as many orders recorded for a person as there were mailings made. If a person received five different publications, then there were five separate orders recorded, one for each publication. If, however, the person ordered multiple copies of the same publication in one mailing, that order would be recorded as only one. If a person who had already received a publication subsequently ordered additional copies, there would be as many orders recorded as there were separate mailings.

Operationally, an "order" is defined as follows: it is a request placed by an individual at one point in time for one or more copies of a single publication. An order is the unit of analysis for this study. Frequency data reported on groups of people ordering material, therefore, refer not to the total

number of individuals in the group, but rather to the total number of orders placed by all the members of the group. To the extent that people placed multiple orders, the findings inflate the number of people in the group.

Information on the occupation of those ordering the material was obtained by requesting those placing an order to state their occupation on the order form. No tests were done to validate how accurately people represented their position, but it is assumed that people were without motivation to misrepresent themselves.

The total number of orders, as defined above, placed with the project was 13,683. The results described below are based on a data analysis of a 10 percent random sample ($N = 1,351$).

Materials disseminated by the project varied widely in content.⁹ Although all were based to some extent on the research findings of the original demonstration project,¹⁰ the content of some was far removed from the original research. The concept being disseminated, the need for permanency planning for children in foster care, required, for example, a commitment to program change

from agency administrators, particularly in regard to case tracking and case monitoring. This requirement led in turn to the need for information on automated management information systems. In addition, the implementation of permanent planning required much more extensive use of lawyers and legal resources than is usual in social welfare agencies, so extensive materials on the legal aspects of permanency planning were needed. Materials addressing these and other needs were distributed by the project.

For the purpose of the present analysis, the thirty-three publications offered by the project have been grouped into six categories by their most prevalent content area: 1) materials on casework methods were intended to help practitioners actually put into practice the techniques of permanent planning. The content included legal information for practitioners, i.e., how to testify in court, how to prepare a petition, how to read case law and state statutes. Primarily, material in this category discussed methods of case-

work, such as working with parents, making and implementing plans for children, and conducting goal-oriented, time-limited casework. 2) Material of general interest included a brochure explaining the project and other introductory material intended for general audiences. 3) Material on aspects of foster care program management included screening instruments, information on costs and benefits of permanent planning in foster care, implementation strategies, and a non-technical report and description of the original permanent planning demonstration project on which the Dissemination Project was based. 4) Publications with a large amount of technical research content described the research and evaluation done on the original demonstration project and were intended for readers familiar with advanced statistical techniques. 5) Publications categorized as Other State Projects described the work of different states in implementing permanent planning. 6) The project offered three model statutes on termination of parental rights.

RESULTS

Table 1 displays the relative frequencies of information collected through orders.

Size of orders. Ninety-two percent of the orders placed were for single copies of publications. Apparently most people placed orders only for their personal use and not in bulk for an entire agency. Only .3% of the orders were for fifty or more copies. This distribution suggests the existence of profes-

sionalism in organizational settings, as people sought out their own information, not relying on agency hand-outs. The distribution pattern also suggests a commitment to the status quo, since agencies did not aggressively procure and distribute materials for their staff.

Price of materials. Prices of the publications ranged from free to \$6.00. Price, if

Table I¹

**Summary of Relative Frequencies of Selected Information
On Dissemination Project Orders**

Size of Orders		
Single copies		92%
2-3 copies		4%
4 or more copies		4%
Price of Materials		
Free		11.5%
\$.25 - \$.75		45.0%
\$1.00 - \$6.00		42.4%
Occupational Groups		
Social Workers		70.3%
Administrators	22.0%	
Program Managers	14.8%	
Direct Practitioners	33.5%	
Schools of Social Work		23.3%
Lawyers, Judges		1.0%
Other (legislators, psychologists, physicians, foster parents)		5.4%
Content of Materials		
Practice Methods (N of publications = 7)		34.9%
General Interest (N of publications = 6)		27.7%
Program Management (N of publications = 6)		23.3%
Technical Research Reports (N of publications = 5)		13.0%
Other State Projects (N of publications = 6)		6.3%
Model Termination of Parental Rights Statues (N of publications = 3)		4.8%

¹ N = 1,351 (a 10% random sample of 13,683 cases)

any, was determined by the cost of printing and mailing, so cost was associated with the size of the publication. The longer items cost more. Price did not affect people's decisions about what to order. Differences between the relative number of orders placed in each price range, including free publications, was insignificant. People were willing to pay the cost of materials they wanted.

Occupational groups. The range of occupations of those ordering materials was wide, though most of those ordering were in the human services professions. Together, social workers and faculty and students of schools of social work comprised almost 94% of the orders placed. Even though the information being disseminated by the project would impact strongly on the legal community as well as social workers, it did not capture the attention of lawyers to a significant extent. Project consultation, workshops, and other dissemination activities were directed almost exclusively to social workers, indicating perhaps that these activities had a major effect on the decision of people to order materials from the project. On the other hand, the large number of orders placed by faculty and students of schools of social work is somewhat surprising, since little project activity was directed to this group. Their heavy representation is perhaps explained by the relative readiness of those in academia to seek out information in written form.

Content of materials. Table I displays the relative frequencies of orders for the material in the different content groups.

The seven publications dealing with practice methods captured the largest percentage of orders. The audience for model termination statutes was probably the most limited, consisting of legislators, lawyers, and program administrators in states interested in amending their child dependency statutes. The relatively low demand for these materials may also reflect the project's inability to reach the legal community despite the presence of lawyers on staff.

Changes in content of materials ordered over time. Over the four year life of the project (November 1976 to October 1980), the relative frequency with which different categories of materials were ordered changed. Orders for research reports on the original demonstration comprised 33% of all orders placed during the first project year, but declined to 7% during the last project year. The relative frequency of orders for model statutes on termination of parental rights also declined, from 11% to 5%. The research and statutory material was technical, of interest to limited, specialized audiences. Apparently, the demand of these professionals for specialized information was met early on.

Conversely, material of a more general nature found an expanding market. Works accessible to a more general audience were more frequently ordered over time relative to orders for technical material. The relative frequency of orders for materials on casework methods increased from 17% to 34% over the four year period, introductory and general publications increased from 7%

of 21%, and publications on other state projects increased from 6% to 10%. These changes in kinds of materials ordered over time indicate that as the project progressed, and more and more states began to implement features of the program, the amount of state-to-state sharing increased. Social workers began to rely less on the research based on the original demonstration, and more on the experiences of those who were putting the result of the research into practice.

Distribution of materials among occupational groups. To discover what relationship existed between people's occupation and the kinds of materials they ordered, the four occupational categories placing the most orders were cross-tabulated with the four groups of most frequently ordered materials (94% and 89% of the total, respectively). See Table II.

Table II¹
Relative Frequencies of Content of Materials Ordered by Occupation²

Materials	Occupation			
	Direct Practitioners	Program Managers	Administrators	Schools of Social Work
General Interest	21.7%	27.8%	23.5%	12.6%
Practice Methods	43.5%	29.1%	36.4%	40.2%
Program Management	22.9%	30.4%	25.9%	35.8%
Research	<u>11.9%</u>	<u>12.7%</u>	<u>14.2%</u>	<u>11.4%</u>
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

¹ N = 1,351 (a 10% random sample of 13,683 cases)

² $\chi^2(9) = 30.83$ $p < 0.0005$

People's preferences for ordering were fairly independent of their occupational rank. Their preferences were more nearly correlated with the content of the various materials being offered, and these preferences cut across occupational categories. Direct practitioners showed the most variation among content categories: only 12% of their orders were for research materials, while 44% were for publications about practice methods. Program managers sampled the materials more evenly; they placed a sizeable number of orders in each category. However, it is interesting that they did not order a larger percentage of the materials designed to help program managers actually implement the program innovations in their agency. They ordered relatively more materials intended for practitioners or general audiences, indicating perhaps that they saw their role as disseminators of information to others, rather than as agents of change.

Overall, the most central finding of this portion of the analysis was that the preference for material on practice methods was pronounced in every occupational group. It was the most frequently ordered category of material.

State cohorts. Analysis of ordering frequencies among occupational groups suggested that those groups who also received "high intensity" forms of technical assistance (face-to-face contact with project staff) ordered more materials than those who did not. To further test the hypothesis that personal contact in the form of training, con-

sultation, and conference presentations was related to a high frequency of ordering, states were grouped into cohorts according to the year that they first began receiving high intensity forms of technical assistance. In the project, a number of new states were invited to participate each year; once having joined, the state continued to receive technical assistance for the duration of the project. It was expected that those states receiving technical assistance the longest would also have the highest frequency of orders. Since the number of states in each cohort varied, an average number of orders per state was computed for each cohort.

States that joined during the first project year, from November 1976 to October 1977, placed an average of 29 orders per state.¹¹ States joining between November 1977 and October 1978 placed an average of 35 orders. After that, the average number of orders per state tapered off. States joining between November 1978 and October 1979 had an average number of orders of 24, and states receiving technical assistance only during the last year of the project, from November 1979 to October 1980, had an average number of orders per state of 18. Seven states received no technical assistance. They placed an average of 12 orders per state.

In general, the states joining earlier did place more orders than those joining later, although those joining in year two had a higher average order per state than any other cohort. A partial explanation for this discrepancy is that a certain amount of start up

time was required during the project's first year. It is very likely that information about the availability of materials was not widely disseminated even to those states receiving

technical assistance during many months of that first year. Only four percent of the total number of orders placed with the project was made during that first project year.

DISCUSSION

Somewhat surprisingly, the findings showed that people did not order those materials from the range available that seemed to fit most closely with their occupational concerns. Staff of human service organizations at all levels preferred to approach the new program ideas being disseminated through practical material that showed how the program would work at the line level.

This finding is supported by a similar finding in an evaluation of the project's technical assistance effort.¹² That evaluation found that program managers rated training more highly than other forms of personal contact assistance, such as consultation and conference presentations. The project consultants found that training workshops, intended for line staff, were often attended by high level agency personnel. Thus, the transmittal of practical information that explained how to put the concepts being disseminated into practice was highly valued by the consumers of the dissemination effort.

It is possible that this preference is explained in part at least by the nature of the particular program concepts being disseminated. Perhaps "permanency planning" methods fill a void in the methodology of foster care, and the high value of training

and practice material is related specifically to the state of knowledge in the foster care field.

It is also true, however, that the findings reported here are consistent with other studies that report rather moderate use of research reports by social workers. Although requests for research reports comprised 13% of the total orders placed, a considerable figure for works of this genre, still most social workers preferred material in a different format. Social workers may, in fact, be more apt to respond to practice changes suggested by research if the research is reinterpreted in a way that appears relevant to the concerns of the practitioner and agency administrator. Those involved in social work research, particularly if implementation of the research findings requires program changes in large human service organizations, should consider undertaking the additional step of translating research findings into a more accessible format before implementation will readily occur.

The finding that the presence of technical assistance in a state is positively associated with high frequency of orders from people in the state for materials is in accord with common sense expectations. Those occupational groups that received the most

technical assistance also placed the most orders for materials. Likewise, those states receiving assistance for a longer time ordered more materials than those receiving such assistance for a shorter time. It would appear that materials distribution is most successful as a form of dissemination when accompanied by personal contact forms of technical assistance.

To what extent the act of ordering material is associated with implementation of the ideas and methods being disseminated is a question not addressed by this study.

Ordering and paying for materials are, however, acts that are very likely indicative of interest and perhaps acceptance of the matter being disseminated. The findings described here have two implications for future dissemination efforts: materials are most likely to be preferred if they are seen as practical and are in a form accessible to the reader; and materials are more likely to be ordered by consumers if accompanied by other dissemination strategies that involve personal contact and assistance.

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9 A list of all project publications is available from the project site: Regional Research Institute for Human Services, Portland State University, Box 751, Portland, Oregon, 97207.

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11 The reader is reminded that the figures provided on average number of orders placed are based on a 10% random sample. Thus, the total average number of orders placed among states joining in the first year, for example, is approximately 290.

12 Downs, op. cit.