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EMPOWERMENT THROUGH THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT
PROCESS (1)

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ABSTRACT

One of the most persistent issues in social welfare planning has been the relative roles of service provision and social change. They have often been conceived as dichotomous: the assumption is that one precludes the other, on both ideological and methodological grounds. However, this division may be more the product of turf wars and fuzzy thinking than any necessary dichotomy. In this article a rationale for viewing service delivery and social change as dimensions of a single process --empowerment -- is developed. Next the needs assessment is examined as a vehicle for implementing the process of empowerment. Finally, a case study of this use of needs assessment is presented and analyzed.

John S. Wodarski stated the matter directly: "the salient issue is whether (social welfare) should be based upon data or upon a philosophy of life" (1981: viii). On one side of this issue are those who see the field as a social movement, dedicated to strengthening the position of

the least well-off members of society. In its extreme form, those who take this position see themselves as contributing to "an organized movement for social change which is particularly concerned with building organizations and stimulating political debate so as to encourage collective action" (Pringle, 1981: 177). Seen as a social movement, social welfare is based in a philosophical and ideological conception of what "the good society" is, and how to achieve it (Friedmann, 1979).

On the other side are those who see social welfare as a nascent science in which interventions can be designed and carried out in ways that produce predictable outcomes. One of the most visible exponents of the scientific position, Joel Fischer (1981), feels a palpable "movement toward . . . scientifically based practice" (200; emphasis in original). Another advocate of scientific social welfare quotes Jacob Bronowski's observation that "science . . . asserts nothing which is outside observation" (Maas, 1977: 1184). This means, in effect, that scientific social welfare is incommensurate with social welfare as a social movement, since the latter is based in unobservable philosophical and ideological conceptions.

These seemingly dichotomous positions have led to divergent forms of practice. Understood as a social movement, social welfare is politics -- concerned with who gets what, where, when, and how. Its practice tends to take the form of community work and to emphasize issues of redistribution and social justice. Understood as science, social welfare is concerned with delivering services. Its practice tends to be clinical in nature and to focus on changing individual

behavior; it emphasizes issues of deviance and adjustment to societal norms. Social movement supporters see themselves as advocates for righteousness and a better society and see the scientific position as an implicit rationale for the -- in their view -- fundamentally unjust status quo. Supporters of the scientific position see themselves as the vanguard of a new, intellectually legitimate, demonstrably effective social welfare system and see the social movement position as an embarrassing anachronism.

All this places social welfare planners -- those responsible for designing policies and programs -- in a difficult position. If social change and service delivery are incommensurable, and social welfare organizations have to choose one or the other, where are the planners to put the emphasis? On what basis can they decide? A way out of this dilemma can be found by looking a bit further at the social movement and scientific positions. They are not so dichotomous as Wodarski and others believe. First, each has empowerment as the major goal for its clientele, providing clients with some added measure of control over their lives. Second, and most important from a planning perspective, both the social movement and scientific perspectives are based on the imputed expertise of professionals -- in the first instance, on philosophical and ideological expertise; in the second, on empirical expertise. Neither seeks the clients' perceptions of what is needed or how to proceed with regard to policy or program development.

Given the shared goal of empowerment, introducing clients' views into the social welfare planning process and blending them with the imputed expertise of professionals

can allow planners to avoid the either-or choice forced on them by proponents of the social movement and scientific perspectives. In this article I discuss the needs assessments process as a vehicle for doing so, and then describe and analyze an example of its use for this purpose.

QUALITATIVE NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Needs assessments are commonly understood to be on the cusp of politics and science. They bring public light onto what could otherwise easily be a completely political or completely technical planning process. "Assessment information helps to assure that there will be additional inputs to prevent sole reliance on professional formulations of service needs and/or to prevent overriding influence by the most vocal or powerful community groups . . ." (Siegel et al., 1978: 222). However, the "additional inputs" referred to are most often the products of applied social research; social indicators, surveys, and other hard data. Needs assessments are conceptualized as attempts to elicit the views of the public on whatever issues are of concern to the planning process. Bruce Gates, for example, sees needs assessments as "formal attempts to identify and quantify the levels of various needs . . . (and) as methods of generating information useful in program decision making" (1980: 101; cf. Rossi, Freeman, and Wright, 1979 and Mayer and Greenwood, 1980).

This is admittedly a step forward in bringing the public's views into the social welfare planning process, but it does little to help planners avoid the either/or choice discussed above. To accomplish the latter it is necessary to understand the needs assessment process as "an opportunity for citizens to participate in the

decisions that will affect the conditions of their lives, . . . (as) a tool with which citizens together with public officials may make (informed) decisions about their social environment" (League of California Cities, 1975: 13-14).

To see the needs assessment as interactive citizen participation it is helpful to think of it as an exchange, in the economic sense, between the citizens and the social welfare organization (MacNair, 1981). In needs assessment an effective exchange requires representation of all sectors of the community with a potential interest in influencing program decisions and the maintenance of a balance in which each participant receives value.

The value exchanged in a truly interactive needs assessment is information and understanding. The best theoretical formulation of this is probably John Friedmann's concept of mutual learning (1973; cf. 7). The two sets of actors involved, professionals and community members, have different but equally important kinds of knowledge. Professionals have scientific-technical knowledge about the problems and issues facing the community. Community members have direct experience with these problems and issues. When a mutual exchange between these two sets of actors occurs, empowerment is advanced in that:

1. the direct experience of community members with community problems and issues becomes an explicit part of the decision-making process for allocation of resources to social change and/or service delivery efforts; and
2. community members gain scientific-technical knowledge about their

situation.

This knowledge exchange or mutual learning requires needs assessment technologies that are unstructured so that exchanges can be wide-ranging, but systematic to assure coverage of specified areas of concern. Such technologies fall into the social science tradition called phenomenology: they seek to understand social reality not in the objective sense of the scientific view of social welfare, nor in the philosophical/ideological sense of the social movement view; rather, they seek to understand social reality from the frame of reference of the subject being studied, in this case the community members (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975).

Key informant research can be readily adapted to this purpose. Key informant research is commonly used in conducting needs assessments. "Key informants are people who are particularly knowledgeable and articulate, people whose insights can prove particularly useful in helping an observer understand what is happening" (Patton, 1980). However, informants are most often drawn from the ranks of service providers and community influentials (Siegel et al., 1978). Such people may not be in a position to accurately reflect the community members' frame of reference and in any case do not have the community members' direct experience with community problems and issues. Moreover, the process of empowerment of community members will certainly not occur if informants are limited to service providers and influentials. Informants must therefore be drawn from the "grass roots". In addition, the interaction must be a genuine two-way exchange rather than the more typical one-way passage of information from informant to professional in the traditional use of

key informants.

To summarize, the object of this type of needs assessment is to structure meaningful passage of information from the community to the social welfare institution, information useful for the planning of services which have meaning from the community members' perspective; and meaningful passage of information from the social welfare organization to the community, information useful for social change/community development from the community members' perspective. In this way, planning for both service delivery and social change can occur within the context of client empowerment. This process is most easily seen in the context of a case example.

NEEDS ASSESSMENT IN ONE CAA

Setting (2)

From their inception in the middle 1960's, Community Action Agencies were mandated to provide opportunities for participation by their constituents in CAA decision-making. The nature and extent of this participation changed over time as the mission of the CAA's changed in response to the ebb and flow of national politics. Originally conceived (at least by some) as social change agencies, under the Nixon administration the CAA's became primarily service delivery agencies operating in a manner not unlike any other social service provider. Many of the CAA's made good faith efforts to involve their clientele in service planning, using various face-to-face needs assessment techniques. Under the Carter administration the CAA's were pushed in the direction of community

development. This meant an expansion in emphasis from provision of services into the promotion of self-help and economic development.

The double emphasis on service delivery and community development presented the CAA's with both a problem and an opportunity. They were forced to face in an operational sense the classic dilemma of social welfare, social change vs. scientific service delivery. In doing so they had to re-examine the meaning of public participation in CAA decision-making. Does being a respondent in a traditional needs assessment for program planning, or sitting on an advisory board, constitute meaningful participation; or are there other, more useful forms of input for clients? Some CAA's responded by redefining their roles, organizing and working with client groups on community change projects as well as meeting social service needs.

One CAA, which for purposes of this paper will be called Social and Economic Opportunities (SEO) responded to this challenge by re-thinking its approach to planning. SEO served a rural, conservative area of California and probably retreated further from its original social action orientation than some of its urban counterpart agencies during the Nixon years. Moreover, the agency had suffered through a series of damaging internal political struggles during the early seventies. It emerged from this turmoil as the quintessential social service agency, providing a broad range of valuable, albeit traditional, programming in its service area, and doing little which could be characterized as innovative or developmental.

The stability and unity of purpose brought about by putting SEO into the service delivery mold were important to an administration and staff that had experienced several years of turbulence. The one area of concern felt by SEO was the lack of public participation in their planning efforts. The usual face-to-face techniques such as surveys and public meetings produced too little participation and/or were too costly. A planning consultant (3) was brought in to try to improve participation. Coincidentally, the community development mandate was being considered by the SEO staff at the same time, and the consultant was asked for input in this area as well.

In discussions among the administration, planning staff, and consultant, it became apparent that the problem of participation could be defined as a community development issue and conversely that the community development question could be defined as a participation issue. The common link, as discussed above, is empowerment. Meaningful participation in the planning of services is a form of empowerment: through participation, community members can shape the services available in their community. Community development can also be a form of empowerment if it involves community members in community change projects. The problem for the consultant and SEO planning staff became development of a planning strategy that would promote empowerment -- through both the planning of services and community development.

Use of the Key Informant Technique

After reviewing past agency experiences with face-to-face techniques and informally assessing the political position of SEO in

the community, the consultant and planning staff developed a plan for implementing an interactive needs assessment, based on mutual learning and the key informant technique. The conservative nature of the SEO service area, the internal turmoil that had plagued SEO, and the lack of participation in recent needs assessment efforts combined to produce the sense of a politically weak agency. There was concern that well-informed community members might be reluctant to be closely identified with SEO. The first step therefore consisted of developing a group of informants. These people would meet with agency planning staff, administrators, and board members on an informal basis -- for example over coffee, lunch, or a couple of beers -- to share perceptions of SEO programs, of community issues and concerns, of possible new directions for SEO to take. Once a group of informants was in place they were to be organized into information exchange networks, based on geography and interest. These networks would be a vehicle for community people to inform SEO of their needs and wants and obtain necessary technical assistance for grassroots community change efforts.

Initially, the service area was divided into four natural geographic areas: the somewhat isolated north coastal area; the cattle and grain producing inland valley in the northern part of the county; the vegetable growing southern county; and the county seat and its immediate environs. The six major constituent groups in the service area were also identified; seniors, the disabled, farm workers, single-parent families, the un/underemployed, and racial/ethnic minorities. It was hoped that two informants from each group could be found in each of the geographic areas, making a total for forty-eight. It was

believed that these numbers would connect SEO with a solid cross-section of its clientele.

The SEO administration approved the use of key informants for the federally mandated public participation in program planning, giving the project some legitimacy and validity within the organization and among its constituency. The planning staff was assigned the task of finding informants as a part of the preparation of the SEO annual plan, a federally mandated activity.

Potential informants were identified in a variety of ways. Inquiries were made of service providers and organized client groups. Planning staff spent time at community meetings, in social agency waiting rooms, and in coffee shops, laundromats, and taverns, speaking informally with people. Staff identified themselves at the outset as being from SEO. They sought individuals in each of the categories mentioned above who seemed to have potential as informants: Those who were well-informed about community concerns, were articulate, and seemed to be well-known in the community though not occupying formal leadership positions. The project was described to them and their participation solicited. No formal designation of key informants were made at this time. Rather, those who showed promise and expressed interest were contacted regularly but informally by the planning staff and their views sought.

The major problem encountered in finding informants was suspicion on the part of community people who were approached. Those who were well-informed about community concerns knew the reputation of SEO and doubted that their

participation in an SEO project would produce anything meaningful. Three months of part-time effort by the planning staff were required before a breakthrough occurred. The effort to identify potential informants had made the planning staff aware of a group of tenants -- including two potential informants -- who were involved in a dispute with a local housing authority. SEO was able to arrange legal counsel for the tenants and as a result the two potential informants agreed to participate in the project.

By demonstrating tangibly SEO's concern with empowerment, the planning staff was able to get the project off the ground. People began to respond more positively to requests for participation. However, at the end of nine months the full complement of forty-eight informants was far from realized. Only one of the geographic areas had twelve informants, and one had only two informant. In total, only twenty-six informants, slightly more than half the planned number, had been recruited. This was partly the result of over-optimism by the consultant and planning staff. The amount of time and effort required to recruit informants was underestimated and the amount of time planning staff would be able to devote to the project was overestimated, resulting in unrealistic target figures.

Discussion between planning staff and several of the informants indicated a more basic problem, however. As the agency was organized, planning was an administrative function. The Planning Director was supervised by the Executive Director and the planning office was seen as having staff rather than line functions. Organizationally as well as practically the planning office was limited to providing

data and analysis for the agency's service programs. The incident of arranging legal counsel clearly fell outside the purview of the planning office as it ordinarily functioned. The informants of course did not understand this from an administrative science perspective. They simply saw that the planning office's job was defined as internal administration and could not understand how community empowerment could be a part of that function.

At that point the SEO made clear its commitment to the key informant needs assessment process. Despite the limited success (in terms of numbers) in recruiting informants, they agreed to incorporate the informants' insights into the one-year plan. The Executive Director was most impressed with the critique of the agency's organization that had emerged from staff-informant interaction, and a reorganization was written into the plan. The planning office was given line responsibility for the programming of services and a community development component was established within the planning office. It was hoped that these changes would make community empowerment a central function of planning and increase the likelihood of success of the project.

At this point some minor but significant modifications were made in the project. Instead of dividing the service area into natural geographic units it was divided into five political units corresponding with the county's supervisorial (commissioners) districts. This was done to make it possible to organize the information networks along political lines. That is, in addition to providing planning information to SEO, the networks could work with other agencies to improve services and serve as focal points

for community-based activities. Organizing along political unit boundaries made it clear that these were constituent groups not only of SEO but of public agencies and elected officials.

At this writing SEO is in the early stages of developing these networks of key informants, but it is possible to draw a number of inferences for social welfare planning from this case.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The first observation to be made about this case is the clear tradeoff - exchange - that occurred when SEO responded to the informants' critique of the agency's organizational structure. By following the critique, SEO relinquished some of its power, some of its control over its own affairs. However, in doing so it gained credibility among its constituency. The agency was behaving as a part of the community by responding to the perceptive analysis of community members. It is important to keep in mind that this is not community control; the reorganization occurred as a result of mutual learning, not non-negotiable demands.

The ideal of a social welfare organization as a part of the community it serves is more often honored in the breach than in the doing. This is so in good measure because of the issue of power. Despite the feeling that it is a self-evident good to be a part of the community, agencies are reluctant to relinquish meaningful control to the community. his discussion of the SEO case is organized

around the theme of control. I will first consider questions of organizational and administrative behavior, then some programmatic issues, and finally offer a few remarks about the ideology of social welfare vis-a-vis this case.

Organizational/Administrative Behavior

The key informant needs assessment would never have been initiated without a high level of commitment on the part of SEO administration and planning staff. All those involved believed in the value of a balanced partnership between the agency and its constituents, on both a theoretical and a practical level. They were willing to risk some loss of control because they saw the idea of a balanced partnership as good in principle. More pragmatically, they knew the history of the agency and saw the project as an opportunity to rebuild the constituency support that had been lost over the years. The project offered at least two ways for this to occur. First, the key informants -- if handled sensitively -- could become credible spokespersons for SEO. They must not be co-opted, lest they lose community support; nor must they be allowed to take control of the agency, lest the kind of political infighting recur that had caused so many problems in the past. The necessity to maintain a balance between co-optation and community control made the mutual learning idea extremely attractive. Second, SEO had been doing planning for the past several years with little community input. As a result, the agency was unsure of the degree to which it was responding to its constituents' needs. The key informant project could build constituency support simply by giving SEO information that would allow it to respond purposively.

SEO administration and planning staff were willing to offer an exchange, then. At the cost of some loss of control over the agency they would gain community support and a better fix on whether or not their activities were responding to community needs.

Programmatic Issues

It is at the program level that an agency has its major impacts on a community. It is also at this level that professional prerogatives are most jealously guarded. Thus, the major payoffs and the major problems in the question of control occur here.

The presumed advantages gained by the key informant process include: increased responsiveness of services, because mutual learning allows them to be focused more precisely on community needs than do other techniques; greater efficiency, because mutual learning allows more accurate identification of those services most appropriate to community needs; and -- most important -- mutual learning provides the opportunity for meaningful technical assistance because it is a balanced (two-way) exchange between the agency and community.

The problem with mutual learning is that it is subject to being construed by service providers as undermining their professional expertise. The notion that it is helpful to blend the processed knowledge of professionals with the personal knowledge of their clientele in the development of agency programs seems to be persuasive in principle to most human service professionals, but in the SEO experience it has been difficult to implement.

The community development component, being within the planning office, presented few problems. Nor was the assignment of line responsibility for the programming of services met with resistance. Moreover, service providers were eager to discuss programs and community concerns with informants and planning staff. However, they were simply unable to engage in the kind of dialogue necessary for mutual learning. There seemed to be a second-order failure to communicate: the service providers didn't understand that they didn't understand. What informants saw as insensitivity or worse -- racism, for example -- on the part of program staff, service providers saw as proper professional demeanor; what informants saw as bureaucratic obfuscation, service providers saw as priority setting.

It may be unfair to place the onus completely on the service providers, but the tentative analysis of the planning staff and consultant is that the former have been unable to even partially relinquish control of their programs to the community. Again, this can be explained in terms of exchange. There is little direct gain to be had by service providers if they give up some control. The advantage to SEO as a whole is clear enough, but it is not clear how having a more responsive or appropriate program would help service providers. On the contrary, there is potential for harm, from their point of view. If the mutual learning process produces an understanding that a given service is inappropriate or unresponsive it might be phased out, or service providers placed at risk in some other way. In this situation, then, the best strategy for service providers might very well be second-order failure to communicate.

The Ideology of Social Welfare

The SEO project enables us to draw some interesting inferences about the present state of social welfare. This article began by arguing that the goal of empowerment links the views of social welfare as a social movement and as a science. The key informant needs assessment was presented as an example of that linkage. Beginning with twin commitments to social change at the community level and to use of the social science concept of phenomenology -- trying to understand social reality from the frame of reference of community members, SEO devised a way for a modern formal social welfare agency to respond directly to constituent concerns. Evidence that the agency did respond is found in the reorganization and the creation of a community development component.

On the other hand, if the views of social welfare as a social movement and as a science have been successfully combined here, under the rubric of empowerment, how is the response of the service delivery staff to be explained? There would seem to be a basic conflict between the commitment to empowerment and the prevailing concept of professionalism, a conflict that runs through social welfare generally -- whether viewed as a social movement or as a science. The key informant needs assessment has highlighted this conflict but provides little help in resolving it.

Client empowerment is a "basic truth" of social welfare. The purpose of social welfare is to help "individuals, groups or communities to enhance their capacity for social functioning and to create societal

conditions favorable to their goals" (National Association of Social Workers, 1973: 4-5). To accomplish this, practitioners must be willing to share control of their scientific-technical knowledge. As a profession, social welfare is generally practiced under the auspices of formal organizations; service providers have shown no qualms about sharing control of professional practice with these formal organizations. To the extent that there is concern, it appears to be because agencies are seen to oppress clients (e.g., Cloward and Piven, 1975). However, service providers have shown little inclination toward an analogous sharing of control of professional practice with clients. In the case of SEO service providers, any suggestion that the informants might have something important to say about what kinds of services should be offered, how they should be structured, or under what conditions they should be available, was taken as a threat to professional autonomy. This occurred despite the willingness of the organization as a whole to share control, and despite the agreement in principle of the service delivery staff with the notion of empowerment.

There is an apparent conflict, then, between the ideal of empowerment and the ideal of professional autonomy as it relates to practitioner-client relations that even an agency as open as SEO, using a process of balanced exchange such as mutual learning, cannot overcome. Social welfare will do well to give attention to this ideological dilemma if it intends to take empowerment seriously.

NOTES

- (1) This is a revised version of a paper presented at the 108th Annual Forum,

National Conference on Social Welfare, San Francisco, June 8, 1981

- (2) In keeping with the tradition of case-study social science, I have chosen to mask the identity of the agency under discussion. At the risk of sacrificing some credibility and verisimilitude, I prefer to spare the subjects discussed in this article any possibility of discomfort or embarrassment. I have intruded on their "common sense world" with an alternative vision which I hope is useful to the field of social welfare.
- (3) The author of this article is the planning consultant involved. For stylistic reasons it seemed better to place the consultant in the third person. All observations and conclusions reported are those of the author, acting as consultant to SEO on this project.

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