Introduction to Thematic Special Issue

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to
Thematic Special Issue

Currently technology is proliferating at a rate never before imagined. As a result, every facet of society has changed because of technological developments, including the delivery of social services. Although there is much debate over whether or not these changes are good or bad, they cannot be denied (Murphy and Pardeck, forthcoming). In fact, Jacques Ellul (1964: 127) has referred to modern society as a technological civilization. What he means by this designation is not only that society is dependent upon technology for its survival, but, more importantly, technological rationality has come to determine how persons view themselves and their environment. Due to the ubiquitous nature of this style of thinking, definitions of reality, sickness, and social competence have assumed a technological hue. Accordingly, those who are involved with the delivery of social services must understand how technology focuses their attention on techniques, thereby possibly obscuring the social nature of a client's problem. And if his type of insight is not fostered, no-one may benefit from the introduction of technology into social service programs.

The contributers to this issue define technology in a broad manner. However, two key characteristics can be distilled from their analyses. First, technology refers to new devices, both hardware and software, which are used to automate various aspects of social life. And second, the mode of reasoning which supports these techniques is also identified as a part of technology. This "underside" of technology includes such factors as the logic, conception of human nature, and management styles which make a "high-tech" society possible. Using this type of broad definition may not be as precise as some readers might like, yet it provides a novel view of technology and its possible social impact. In fact, the usual conception of technology which equates it with machinery is no longer considered viable by most scholars.

The aim of this thematic issue of the <u>Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare</u> is fourfold. First, the impact of technology on social service

delivery is examined from a variety of perspectives. A multi-disciplinary approach is essential in order to reveal the complex character of technology. With this in mind, papers by sociologists, psychologists, economists, political scientists, and social workers are included in this volume. It is hoped that this type of representation will expose the controversy surrounding the use of technology by social practitioners. Certainly contrasting opinions help illustrate the key arguments pertaining to this issue.

Second, macro and micro analyses are offered, as technology alters both the social system and social service programs. For example, as technology affects the nature of the workplace and other aspects of economic life, the type of problems present in a society may change. And in order to meet these emerging needs effectively, new methods for delivering social services may have to be devised. Additionally, when technology is adopted to plan and organize services, a practitioner's job description is affected. Articles were selected in a manner to insure that the impact technology has on both society and social service programs is addressed.

Third, technology is discussed in terms of both its "hard" and "soft" components. Most often persons equate technology with computers and their accompanying software packages. Nonetheless, it must be recognized that technology is underpinned by a philosophical position, sometimes called a "world-view," which regularly goes unnoticed, but which shapes a person's perception of reality. Specifically, technology is sustained by three ideas which form the cornerstone of technological rationality. These are: (a) empirical or objective characteristics are sufficient for defining a phenomenon; (b) mathematics (or quantification) is most appropriate for describing these traits; and (c) the laws of physics regulate all events (Murphy and Pardeck, 1985). These three tenets comprise the "soft" side of technology, and can transform the delivery of social services as much as the installation of a computer. Actually, this "underside" of technology may be more disruptive to a program than computerization, since the technological world-view is not well understood by most practitioners and mostly overlooked. Yet before the social impact of technology can be fully assessed, both its soft and hard aspects must be reviewed.

And fourth, the development of a "socially responsible" technology is discussed (Murphy and Pilotta, 1984). Usually critiques of technology

culminate in calling for its elimination, which is an alternative that is neither feasible nor appealing. The contributers to this volume, instead, offer various suggestions for placing technology in the service of humankind, thus making it socially responsible. These include philosophical, logistical, managerial, and political gambits which will enable technology to improve, instead of destroy, the human condition. Technology has the potential for facilitating the delivery of social services, yet this may never occur if practitioners do not examine the context in which it is used.

In sum, social practitioners must recognize that technology is not going to disappear, and thus must develop strategies for using it profitably. Furthermore, integrating technology into the delivery of social services is not simply a technical matter. In fact, technology may not be able to correct the problems which it creates, without assistance from non-technical sources. Accordingly, a context must be established which allows technology to unburden workers from having to perform mundane tasks, while fostering creativity and innovation. If this occurs, both practitioners and clients will benefit. Yet before the fruits of technology will ever be truly realized, difficult philosophical, political, and economic questions must be addressed, so that a proper social-technical interface can be constructed. This type of rapprochement is essential if technology is to enhance the planning and deployment of social service programs. Hopefully, the discussion inaugurated with this special issue will promote the proper utilization of technology.

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