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# Analyzing Administrative Experiences: Feminist, Labor, and Organizational Culture Perspectives

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*A framework is offered for making organizational assessment for change using feminist, labor, and organizational culture perspectives. A vision of a humane work environment is important. The labor literature provides the critical analysis, the feminist perspective provides alternatives, and the concept of organizational culture provides the tool for assessment. Based on an exploratory study with women administrators, the authors look at how differences in values are reflected in the administration and structure of feminist and traditional agencies.*

## Conceptual Framework

*Feminist Literature* The literature on feminist organizational structure and service provision emphasizes a focus on women's needs and of women taking control of their lives. There is a recognition that the issues facing women as workers are the same as those affecting women as recipients of service. Feminist practitioners attempt to structure the workplace in such a manner as to promote worker control, autonomy and empowerment (Kravitz and Jones, 1988; Schwartz, Gottesman and Perlmutter, 1988). Weil (1988:71) identifies feminist organizational alternatives as including the following components: 1) flexible teams with leadership emerging from expertise on the specific issue being addressed, 2) mutual planning and problem solving during regularly scheduled staff meetings, 3) strong emphasis on consensual decision-making and process,

4) nonhierarchical staff relations and decision-making, 5) an empowerment focus which includes staff, self help groups and the use of volunteers. Hyde (1989) adds the centrality of women's values, lives and relationships which include the concepts of relatedness and connectedness. The importance of staff support and development is noted, as well as the need for establishing a work environment that reflects women's values of nurturing, self disclosure, use of emotions, support and mutual dependence. Another ingredient in creating a supportive alternative work environment is the provision of constructive and sympathetic supervision (Weil, 1988).

The modified consensus model developed from difficulties in consensus run organizations. While acknowledging that consensual decision-making promotes the most democratic form of organizational structure, it can also be inefficient and difficult to maintain. Rothchild and Whitt (1986) point out that consensual decision making takes time, is emotionally intense and is difficult to maintain in the face of political, economic and social pressures. In response to problems in implementing a consensus governed organization, modified consensus models are emerging which distinguish between routine and critical decisions.

All staff participate in critical decisions while small groups concerned with a particular issue or program make decisions that are considered routine. This level of decision-making carries with it additional authority and responsibility, but it does not reinforce traditional dominant-subordinate hierarchical, bureaucratic relationships (Ianello, 1992). Individual program coordinators are designated, but because this designation is based on expertise, all members have the opportunity to become coordinators as they develop expertise in a specialty or program area. Tasks are generally rotated with program coordinators changing in a deliberate effort to avoid hierarchical power relationships.

*Labor Literature* The labor literature, like the feminist literature, focuses on the nature of professional work, bureaucratization, specialization and the structural impact of external sources of funding (Fabricant, 1985; Braverman, 1974). Bureaucratic imperatives limit autonomy and decision-making while impinging on the use of clinical skills and professional

judgement. The techniques, scheduling, pace and evaluation of work are all subject to and based upon bureaucratic mandates reflecting such regulations and policies as DRG's, productivity quotas and billable hours. With this in mind, it is helpful to understand social workers as workers (as do feminists) with needs and pressures that are similar to other workers.

With the increase in bureaucratization and the changes in technology, processes of deprofessionalization and deskilling have been taking place. Deprofessionalization is a process in which organizational requirements and policies are impinging upon and eroding professional autonomy and decision-making (Arches, 1991). Deskilling is the systematic breakdown of the worker's knowledge and skills into smaller and smaller components. This disempowers the worker and leaves both client and worker disconnected and frequently isolated, seeing a myriad of separate equally isolated "helping" professionals. This is the workplace situation that feminist models about organizational structure address.

The basic qualities attributed to professionals (Greenwood, 1957): monopoly over knowledge, autonomy and service orientation are subordinated to the demands of the organization and its funding sources. While social workers are socialized for their roles as autonomous professionals, there is another harsher reality they are likely to encounter and for which they are not likely to be prepared. Administrators, as well as workers, experience alienation similar to that traditionally experienced by blue collar workers. The modified consensus model advocated by feminists may serve to "de-alienate," with its goal being to "humanize the workplace, to put meaning and values back into jobs in order to reconnect the worker with society" (Iannello, 1992:31).

*Organizational Culture* The organizational culture model by Schein (1985) provides a framework for assessment of an organization for change activities. It supplements the political economy (Hasenfeld, 1983), force field analysis (Brager and Holloway, 1978), and changing-organizations-from-within models (Resnick and Patti, 1980) that comprise the social work organizational literature. The concept of culture is familiar to social workers and administrators, especially those with social

science backgrounds (Schneider, 1992). It also coincides well with a feminist perspective because it is concerned with the subjective experience—the impact of members' feeling and thinking about a range of organizational situations. Knowledge of the culture provides important data in a discourse that social work administrators and direct service workers can apply as they contemplate organizational change activities.

Proponents of organizational culture suggest examination of three levels from which one can determine its content: artifacts and symbols, espoused and revealed values, and underlying assumptions. The artifacts and symbols essentially reveal the values. Underlying assumptions are the shared understanding or expectations which members at various levels in the hierarchy have in common, and these can be discovered through hearing ideas about the organization and the way things are done from the organization's participants.

### Methodology

Using a cultural perspective, we searched for the "patterns of basic assumptions—invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with problems of external adaptation and internal integration—that have worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems" (Schein, 1990: 111).

In gathering the data, we made use of in-depth qualitative interviews with women administrators to determine the symbols, values and underlying assumptions Schein (1991) presents as a means for analyzing an organization's culture.

The purpose of the interviews was to determine whether there were differences in the way an agency was experienced, administered, and structured in women-directed agencies when the agency espoused a feminist philosophy in comparison with agencies that had a traditional mission. Our assumption was that there are always difficult organizational situations with which administrators are expected to cope. We hoped to understand more about whether the ways of administering agencies managed by women differ if the agency embraces a feminist

philosophy or if it does not. The findings would be of significance for understanding workplace experiences.

Female administrators were interviewed from 10 organizations that were formed around 15 years ago, had approximately the same number of staff (between 7 and 11 workers) and employed social workers. The organizations included traditional social service agencies, those that referred to themselves as feminist and had mission statements affirming their commitment to feminism, and locals of unions with male and female members employed in both private and public sector social service organizations.

Of the feminist agencies selected, two were involved with providing services for battered women (one agency was primarily involved in running a shelter while the other provided extensive outreach and support programs for women and children), and two were concerned with mental health problems (one provided out-patient psychotherapy and the other was a residential program). The traditional agencies included family service, mental health, an employee assistance program and an outreach program for pregnant teens.

Both authors conducted the interviews which were held with either one or two administrators of the ten organizations. The responses to the following questions were tape recorded:

1. What are the history and goals of the agency?
2. What do you see as the accomplishments of the agency?
3. What are some of the problems you may have in meeting the goals?
4. Please tell us about your organizational structure and functioning?
5. How do you deal with accountability and evaluation?
6. What kind of education and professional socialization would your staff need to be prepared to work and effect change in your agency?

### Findings

The concept of power emerged as a theme in all of the interviews. This included relations with boards, supervisors, other workers, funders, the community and clients. Shared power,

as opposed to power to dominate, is an espoused value in the feminist agencies. The feminist agencies clearly articulated their attempts to incorporate into their structure the feminist concept of power. Feminists view power as infinite, thereby rejecting zero/sum assumptions of who should have it. They rely on the belief that power can be shared.

The second concept that consistently emerged in our quest for understanding the values of the agency administrators whom we interviewed was what we are calling "connectedness". It is consistent with the women's literature, whether one is exploring women's emotional development and associated clinical concepts (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, and Surrey, 1991), cognitive development (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule, 1986) or our understanding of our relationship to bureaucracies (Ferguson, 1984). The sub-headings or values that are associated with this concept in the feminist literature are growth in relation, nurturing, caregiving, use of emotions, and empathy.

### Feminist Agencies

1. *The histories.* Each of them developed in response to women's need for support and empowerment in their various roles. No other existing agency was addressing the specific problems that accompanied the powerlessness and paucity of resources that those particular women were experiencing. One agency emerged from mothers who had their children in the same day care facility and would get together to discuss child rearing. When it was discovered that several of them had been battered and needed help in determining how to deal with their feelings and change their lives, they developed services to meet these needs. The activities were developed as social change as well as individual change strategies and included outreach and community involvement, housing, employment, child care and emotional support. Another goal was to mitigate the emotional problems associated with sexual abuse and alcoholism.

2. *Empowerment and equality: women as workers and clients.* The nonhierarchical social structure of the agency, mutual decision-making, attempts to equalize salaries, and power sharing all emerged as values in the feminist agency interviews.

It was clear that in the majority of the agencies, the staff had a history of struggling to redefine power relationships. They had sought to make their agency a workplace where they saw themselves as workers, and as female workers who traditionally were disempowered, as opposed to professional workers who had become empowered at the expense of other staff and clients.

One worker responded to the question of what she would change if she had a chance by saying: "We have the power; things here are the way we want them. If we want something changed, then we make it happen."

Another interviewee from a mental health agency put it this way: "Power is the prism through which we see everything. . . . The structure enables us to get away from setting certain people up as experts and it reduces the hierarchy." This worker also explained how her agency had historically avoided taking on student interns as they were unable to figure out a way to eliminate the exploitation built into that role.

At agencies which made use of the shared administrative model (similar to the modified consensus model), we were told that the "shared administrators" have the power to change the structure if it is not responsive to the needs of workers and consumers. And, in fact, in all of the agencies that made use of this or a collective model, the structure had changed over the 15 years or more of their existence. The shared administrative model allowed them the flexibility to change the structure as the needs of the organization, its members and their development necessitated such changes. This model was described by a shared administrator at a residential mental health facility in the following conversation:

You get out of school and you think you're going to change the world. Then you get into an agency that has no ideas about changing. You get into an agency and don't even realize that there are alternatives. The shared administrative model is a microcosm. It's an empowerment model where each person is held accountable to the group and is responsible for her own piece of work. It would be ridiculous for us to talk about empowerment for clients and have a hierarchical staff. It seems more natural for us to treat consumers and staff the same way.



In all but one agency, professional staff had actively worked to eliminate any hierarchical structure and consciously attempted to equalize salaries in an effort to change traditional power relationships. Educational degrees and licenses did not merit special treatment. In one agency there was no designation of director, rather titles reflected the program in which they worked and these had been rotated. Workers participated in several different aspects of the organization during their employment.

3. *Mutual planning, staff connectedness and decision making.* Knowledge of many aspects of the agency's function provides a mutual framework around which staff has a great deal in common and can coalesce. This agency eschewed status associated with professional identifications in case assignments and setting of fees. We were told that the entire staff shares responsibility for cases rather than each client-therapist interaction being autonomous.

The shared administrative model assumes that people will do specific tasks but that the whole staff will come together for major decisions. Each of us has a set of particular tasks but we all need to get feedback from each other. As a fundraiser I need to speak to the others so I know what's going on. Everybody needs to know all aspects of the agency. (Interviewee at a residential mental health setting)

In one agency that used the shared administrative model, any change comes before the shared administrative group which meets weekly. The agenda contains an administrative piece, direct services and money issues. Everyone has the opportunity to add to the agenda. The chair and note-taking responsibilities rotate each week.

A worker in a battered women's program pointed out that all the programs were initiated in a bottom up manner with a need being identified by consumers. Depending on the agency, workers, board members, volunteers as well as consumers figure out a program to meet that need. In another agency, teams became informed about particular issues relative to programming and then decided what small policies and procedures

should be implemented. If the policy was more complicated or involved a large expenditure, it would be brought to the entire staff for discussion.

The workers using the collective and shared administrative model felt they had power over their lives and actively worked to promote programs for empowering consumers. This was reflected in the words of one worker who put it this way:

In most agencies there's a lot of going back to the consumer with information rather than having the person sitting next to you make her own decisions. A lot of agencies spend a lot of time and energy trying to figure out what is good for the consumer, not what the client wants . . . In school you don't learn about letting people decide what they want to do.

Reflecting on the planning process we were told, "Traditionally the grunts do the direct service work and the administrators do the policy work. Here we wear both hats. It means a lot more planning."

The use of space was symbolic of nurturing and intimacy in all of the feminist agencies. The only totally private offices that were visible were in the out-patient mental health center in which individual psychotherapy as well as group therapy were conducted. There were large areas for staff meetings or group meetings in that agency. This and three other agencies had their meeting rooms near obviously well-used kitchens. We were offered coffee and cake. We witnessed warm, familiar interactions among staff members with some laughter.

The evaluation process is another example of a more egalitarian way of relating. Three of the feminist agencies had mutual evaluations. The staff are asked to say how they feel that the organization can support them in their goals as well as a supervisor saying what the staff person needs to do to maintain her working well with the organization. Or, there is a peer supervisory process.

4. *Boundaries.* The social distance between clients and workers is not as great in the feminist agencies as one is socialized to expect in traditional social worker-client relationships. Workers in three out of the four women's agencies who have

experienced battering or mental illness will refer to it as they work with the clients. In fact, their experience of having "been in the same boat" is a positive criterion in their being hired as is being a person of color or bilingual in two of the four. One of the administrators said:

You use your own life experience to make a connection. It's important to let the person know that you're really there for them. You have to be there for them emotionally. Even if you haven't had exactly the same experience, you may have had a piece of an emotional response to a situation that will help your connection with them.

It is important not to make assumptions that other people feel the same way as you do. The women's diverse cultural backgrounds will mean that they will have a different response to battering than, perhaps, we do and the advocates have to be able to understand and connect with that. For example, the Cambodian women will not want to leave their husbands, so we have to provide and support outreach for them for a long time.

One of the leaders of the mental health residential facility explained that their workers do not think of themselves as rescuing the clients but in a peer-like way helping them to make the choices that will best coincide with what they want for themselves. The workers are not set up to be the experts, thus the tendency to exacerbate a dominant-subordinate relationship that is more likely to exist in a traditional agency is diminished. All of the feminist agencies had the theme of working closely with women to help them cultivate skills for taking care of themselves, but not taking over.

In the feminist agencies, there is a conscious effort to help women overcome dependency. In this way, programs contribute to liberation as opposed to social control. There is an active effort to include consumers in decision making positions at every level. Shared responsibility and mutual support stand out as striking features most clearly defined in collective, shared administrative models presented.

In summary, the feminist agencies tended to redefine power relationships by eliminating the hierarchical structure, reducing the division of labor and specialization, sharing programmatic

decision making, equalizing salaries, and focusing on a model that empowered themselves and their clients. Most of the agencies had former consumers on staff and/or the board. The staff felt supported by the board, attended board meetings and sat on board committees with power being shared. The intensity of the mutual task orientation resulted in enhancing the connectedness that women so frequently seek.

### Traditional Agencies

In the traditional agencies the directors clearly had the power over their staffs but tended to use that power to generally nurture and support as well as to make policy. These administrators also had a board, or another organizational level to which they were held accountable and who ultimately held power over them.

While the administrators wanted to create a work environment in which their workers were shown respect and where consideration was given to their input, the hierarchical structure in these agencies limited the extent of staff's participation. One administrator explained that there was gross inequality between the workers on her unit and workers in the rest of the agency, and while she strongly supported her workers advocating for higher salaries she knew that given the financial situation, the person in power was not about to make any changes. She herself felt powerless to do anything about this. As much as the administrator wanted to foster empowerment of her staff there were certain structural limitations which she felt could not be changed. The team was not involved in programmatic decisions. This particular administrator tried to work within the hierarchy to push the limits of worker empowerment through the organizational culture. If they could not control programmatic and salary decisions made by those above them, they could at least have control over their space in the hierarchy.

This was a theme that was consistent for the other traditional agencies as well. In one agency the workers challenged a very stuffy organizational culture when they painted and reupholstered the furnishings in their offices and significantly altered the ambiance of their work environment.

When I came here morale was crawling on the floor. There was a great deal of ill will. All the office doors were closed. Another social worker and I opened the office doors and started painting them—we chose pink paint. We were laughing a lot in the process and pretty soon people came to see what was going on and we were initiating a much more open door policy. I use a team approach and bring in all the staff who have anything to do with the clients. If the workers are going to be relating to families in a constructive, positive, warm way I think that it is important that we relate to each other in those ways too. The team meeting can be an in-service education time or just a time for people to be together. If you don't set aside time for that and sanction it, you can't get people together. We use every opportunity we can find for celebrations—birthdays, holidays.

Another type of caregiving was expressed by an administrator who is protective of the social workers' time. She explained that board members would like social workers to attend board meetings but the social workers do not want to because it means attending work related meetings on their own time. The director would prefer that the social workers only have to use "off hours" for the clients' benefits eg. being on call.

All the administrators expressed support for their staff and acknowledged the importance of their input for their own clinical decisions. Only one specifically mentioned that if staff wanted a new program, they could bring it up in a staff meeting and it would be brought to the board for discussion and possible approval. This director, as did the others, saw herself as a mediator and advocate for her staff with the board.

The vehicle for staff input in all the agencies was the team meeting. There was an active attempt to make this a place where issues of work could be discussed in a supportive environment. The content tended to be limited to sharing administrative information and discussion of clinical issues. One administrator shared an example of worker input in which her staff had been annoyed that she answered the phone and the door during supervision and thereby was giving her workers less than her full attention. When one supervisee finally mentioned this to her in private, she followed up by acknowledging her insensitivity

to this issue in a staff meeting and assured the group she would work to change. For her birthday the staff bought her a *DO NOT DISTURB* sign for her door, which she proudly uses. The problem was resolved amicably.

Another director described her meetings with staff in which she asks their opinions and gets feedback about how procedures should be implemented. She also uses the opportunity to give them as much positive feedback as possible verbally as well as in "well deserved" time off when they have special situations. She helps them find the areas in which they excel and consciously tries to contribute to their individual professional goals as she supervises them individually.

The traditional social worker-client relationships, relative to connectedness, prevail in each of these agencies. However, the emphasis on home visits in three of these agencies led to inevitable reduction in role distinctions that accompanies visiting of clients in their own settings rather than the agency.

### Discussion

The relationship between organizational structure, work conditions and organizational values is clear, especially as it relates to power and connectedness. The organizational culture perspective helps reveal the symbols, values and assumptions to assess their impact on the structure and administration of the organization, and, can shed light on problems of the organization and its potential for change.

In the feminist agencies, the shared power models provided administrators with concrete opportunities for empowerment through mutual decision-making and sharing of responsibility. The feminist agencies tried to redefine power relationships by acknowledging the impact of bureaucratization, addressed in the labor literature, and by eliminating the hierarchical structure, reducing the division of labor and specialization, sharing programmatic decision making, equalizing salaries, and focusing on a model that empowered themselves and their clients. Three of the agencies had former consumers on staff and/or the board. The staff felt supported by the board, attended board

meetings and sat on board committees with power being shared. This contributed to feelings of empowerment, connectedness and well-being that made up for their low salaries.

The traditional agencies, because of structural aspects of bureaucracies, such as boards of directors, hierarchy, and the division of labor differed significantly relative to worker participation and decision-making. Their administrators demonstrated concerns about aspects of the agency vis a vis worker cohesion and connectedness but the tension between what could be done and their feelings of powerlessness was expressed and felt. The administrators carried much more responsibility for the well-being of the programs and for "their" workers. The analysis of the workplace, from a labor perspective, explains the structural limitations exerted on these administrators.

In both feminist and traditional agencies, it was revealed, an awareness of who makes decisions and how, strengthens the workers' ability to intervene at the system's level where they are most likely to be most effective. Workers can benefit from the knowledge of organizational analysis and assessment based on the criteria discussed e.g. knowledge of the hierarchy, division of labor, connectedness, decision-making, history, the mission statement, supervision and evaluation. Familiarity with the mission statement of an organization can be a way to hold the organization accountable and assess its potential for change. Assessing the board and being able to intervene "where the board is at" is a skill that in some agencies will open the door to organizational change. It was clear from the interviews that workers need to go to board meetings and have a direct working relationship with their boards. At these meetings participation in critical decision-making might include economic issues, finances of the agency and sources of funding. Such meetings can serve to underscore areas of agreement and to define mutually necessary organizational tasks and goals as well as to provide an ongoing forum to discuss areas of discord and change.

This research began as an endeavor to discover if there were differences in values and administration in women administrators in feminist and traditional agencies. What we did learn was that the shared administrative model helped administrators, and seemed to promote "de-alienation" (Ianello, 1992). The

laughing, statements of power and symbols of connectedness were outstanding compared to the statements of frustration, isolation and resignation echoed by the traditional administrators.

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