

IMPLEMENTATION OF PROGRAM CHANGE IN COMMUNITY AGENCIES

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Little information is available on factors affecting the amount of program change in community welfare organizations. The greater portion of the available literature pertains not to social welfare agencies, but to organizations such as businesses, public bureaucracies, military organizations, hospitals, schools and prisons.^{1,2} Virtually no comparable data are available concerning the implementation of program change in community welfare agencies.³ This study⁴ attempts to fill that void by delineating the characteristics of those community social welfare agencies in Houston, Texas, which are associated with higher rates of organizational program innovation in contrast to those agencies which manifest little or no program change.

METHODOLOGY

To investigate the characteristics of community agencies which are associated with higher rates of program innovation four tasks were completed. These were 1. select a group of community agencies likely to be highly variable in rates of program innovation; 2. measure the amounts of program innovation in each agency (the dependent variable); 3. collect data on the agencies' characteristics believed to be related to rates of program innovation (the independent variable); and 4. describe the relationship between amount of program change and the independent variables.

The Study Group

The group studied consisted of 42 welfare agencies with membership in both the United Fund and the Community Council of Houston, and Harris County. These agencies differed in terms of the population they served and in regard to the nature and comprehensiveness of the services provided. Some of the agencies provided comprehensive services for the aged population (e.g. Sheltering Arms, Eliza Johnson Home) while others specifically oriented their services toward the care of children (Big Brothers, Child Guidance Center, Day Care Home). Some agencies performed specific activities related to health needs (Diabetes Association, Speech and Hearing Center, Riverside General Hospital, Mental Health Association, etc.) or recreational programs (Boy Scouts, Neighborhood Centers Association), and still others offered a wide range of services to the total family (Family and Children's Service Center, Jewish Family Service, etc.).

The Dependent Variable

The dependent variable—the amount of program change implemented in agencies over a ten-year period—was expressed in terms of the Implementation of Program Change Index (IPCI). The index was based on two standardized component scores: judgments of Community Council personnel as to the relative amount of program change experienced by each of the agencies over the preceding ten-year period, and the number of specific program changes within the agency over the same time period as described by the executive director of each agency. The specific program changes were highly variable in nature and included such items as the introduction of psychiatric social work programs, the provisions of legal aid, and the initiation of new recreational programs where they had not existed previously. In addition to the provision of new services, “program changes” included the extension of previously existing services to new segments of the population or geographic areas.

Two component scores were used to increase the validity of the measure of agency program change. Each component alone might

have reflected variables other than the amount of program change. For example, the evaluation of the Community Council staff members might have been a reflection of positive attitudes toward the agency resulting from the degree of agency cooperation with the Community Council. The identification of program changes by agency executive directors might have been, in part, a reflection of their knowledge of, or ability to recall, past program changes. By combining both "independent" measures, to the degree that the two measures were associated, the combined scores would presumably represent a true measure of program change rather than extraneous factors. A correlation of the two component scores yielded a coefficient of 0.58, suggesting a high relationship with a common factor—presumably true program change.

The Independent Variables

The selection of the independent variables (those variables which are hypothesized to be related to program innovation) was primarily guided by the decision to focus upon two organizational positions: 1. the professional executive director of the agency, and 2. an influential member of the agency's policy-making board of directors. This was because a major part of the activities associated with these positions is the initiation and change of programs which are carried out at lower levels in the organization.⁵

The executive director of the agency is in a particularly strategic position to influence program changes since he is a major source of information upon which decisions regarding program innovation are based.⁶ Furthermore, he can remain abreast of environmental changes and their relevance to the current agency program, stimulate suggestions for alternative ideas, develop these ideas and seek the resources and authorization necessary to implement the suggestions for program changes.⁷ The amount of program change experienced by an agency would, therefore, probably be related to the ability and willingness of the executive director to perform these activities.

Similarly, the board of directors of an agency must ordinarily approve any suggestions for program change and seek the necessary

resources to implement these suggestions.⁸ In view of the authority held by the board, such factors as the attitudes of its members toward program change and their willingness to approve of innovative activities on the part of the executive director would be expected to greatly influence the amount of program change within an agency.

Orienting the investigation around the behavior of the executive director and board members of the agency did not preclude examining variables not directly relevant to these organizational positions. Such factors as environmental changes, client attitudes, social philosophy, demographic characteristics and interagency relationships would have profound effects upon the implementation of program change. If these variables have consequences for program innovation, however, they must first affect the attitudes, perceptions, attributes and behavior of those most directly involved in the agency's decision-making processes—the executive director and board members.

In view of these considerations, information on the independent variables was collected by extensive personal interviews with the executive director and an influential board member (nominated by the executive director) of each agency. The independent variables, in general, were judgments by the agency director and board member of the degree to which descriptive statements about the behavior and attributes of agency personnel were characteristic of their own agency. For example, the executive director and board member indicated the degree⁹ to which the following statements describe the actual behavior of the agency's executive director: accepts full responsibility for the actions of his subordinates; leaves initiative for suggesting program changes to the board; tries to be well informed on modern welfare practices. Similarly, the executive director and board member indicated the degree to which the following statements describe the board of directors of the agency: seeks or accepts financial support from agency of the federal government; protects the executive director from community pressures; gives major consideration to the expressed desires of the client population in considering program change.

The responses to a large number of such descriptive statements

were the major factor in grouping the independent variables—those variables which were believed to be related to the amount of program change occurring in community agencies.

Analysis

The analysis of the data proceeded in two stages. First, each independent variable was correlated with the IPCI index. Second, since the independent variables which correlated significantly with the IPCI index also showed moderate degrees of intercorrelation, those variables were submitted to factor analysis to determine the independent sources of variation. The factors derived by this process were the new set of independent variables. Each factor was correlated with the IPCI scores to determine its relative contribution in predicting the amount of program change in the 42 agencies.¹⁰

RESULTS

The procedure described above yielded nine factors which accounted for 74 per cent of the variance in program implementation (IPCI). A combined factor score based on these nine statistically independent factors showed a correlation of .86 with the agencies' IPCI scores. In the remainder of this section the factors¹¹ which were associated with the measure of program implementation are described. The parenthetical numbers are the coefficients of correlation between the factor in question and the IPCI scores of the agencies.¹²

The nine factors may be divided into three groups: the factors which relate to the characteristics and role behavior of the agency's executive director; the factors which relate to the characteristics of the agency's board of directors; and the factors which relate to the organization's members in general.

The Executive Director

This is the most significant factor in the variability in program innovation in community agencies. Agencies are more likely to have high rates of innovation in their operating programs if their professional directors have the following characteristics:

1. Higher levels of professional training ($r = .44$). This characteristic is associated with program innovation for a number of reasons. First, highly trained executive directors tend to be positively oriented toward their professional groups and are likely to have a weaker commitment to the organization and to local community values. Consequently, they are motivated to initiate program innovations of which they become aware in the course of their professional training. At the same time, they lack strong motivation to maintain current agency programs simply out of loyalty to their organization or conformity to the prevailing values of their community. Second, professionally oriented executive directors tend to be recruited by the boards for the purpose of introducing new policies and procedures. Thus, in conforming to the expectations of their boards, the executive directors initiate a greater number of program innovations. Third, because of their high level of professional training, they are usually regarded as having expert qualifications and, therefore, are awarded broad decision-making powers by their boards, and may effectively exercise these powers in implementing program changes.

2. Psychological flexibility ($r = .26$). Executive directors with this trait are particularly well suited to jobs requiring innovation because they respond freely to new experiences and adapt to changing conditions. Their psychological counterparts, rigid executive directors, are more fitted to jobs requiring attention to systematic routine and perseverance as opposed to those requiring innovation. The latter apparently exhibit a strong need to routinize their activity and tend to resist adaptation to changing conditions.

3. Acceptance of responsibility for the actions of subordinates ($r = .24$). Subordinate members of the professional staff of an agency are in a position to make on-the-spot judgments about the pressing or immediate requirements of the client population. The willingness to accept responsibility for the actions of subordinates appears to stimulate them to introduce solutions to the problems which they perceive. On the other hand, in agencies in which the executive director refuses to accept responsibility for the actions of subordinates, the latter are less likely to take the risk of deviating from established rules.

4. Awareness of alternative programs ($r = .23$). The rate of innova-

tion is probably a function of the degree of exposure to alternative ideas. Executive directors who are aware of alternative programs, whether such awareness stems from knowledge of the professional literature, their participation in conferences, or their visits to other agencies in their own and other communities, are more likely to evaluate their current programs and to introduce new programs in their own agencies.

5. Willingness to exercise discretionary judgment ($r = .17$). The willingness of the executive director to exercise discretionary judgment, or initiative, is important to the amount of innovation experienced by an organization for at least two reasons. First, community welfare agencies, like other organizations, experience the functional problem of how to divide authority between administrative and policy-making bodies. Various case studies have shown that administrative decisions involving the incorporation of new patterns of behavior have a profound effect upon policy-making decisions in that, once an innovation is stabilized, policy decisions may be brought in line with the existing patterns of behavior. Thus, approval of innovations by policy-making bodies is often the consequence of prior introduction of the innovation by administrators. Second, an even more obvious link between the exercise of discretionary judgment and the implementation of program change is that, once the initiation of change has been authorized by a policy-making body, the executive director must make the final decisions to execute the plan. Hence, the actual implementation of the proposed innovation depends on his initiative in this regard.¹³

Board of Directors

The characteristics of policy-making bodies are significant for the amount of program change implemented in the agencies for at least two reasons. First, the board is the ultimate official arbiter of which program changes, if any, will be implemented. Second, the way in which the agency director perceives his board as operating will affect his own behavior regarding suggestions for program change. Analysis has revealed that community agencies are more likely to implement program change if their boards of directors have the following characteristics:

1. Independence of local community values and sanctions ($r = .29$). The association between this factor and the implementation of program change can be accounted for in the following terms. First, policy-making bodies which act independently of local community values and sanctions tend to have a weaker commitment to current agency goals and patterns of behavior and, thus, are more flexible with regard to alternative suggestions in these matters. Second, these bodies, since they apparently do not perceive extreme pressure from the external community (or at least do not conform to its demands), are less likely to erect administrative defenses which would result in scrupulous observance of existing policies and response patterns. Finally, these boards of directors are less likely to prematurely reject suggestions for program innovation because of their anticipation of negative community response.

2. Approval of the innovative activity by the executive director ($r = .26$). The responses of the board of directors to the activities of the administrator will profoundly affect the ways in which the latter's role is structured. Board member approval of innovative activity by the executive director will likely lead to two results. First, such approval will have the effect of legitimatizing the innovative aspects of the executive director's role. That is, suggesting program changes, influencing program expansion and engaging in long-term planning are regarded by the board as appropriate activities for the executive director. In effect, the board gives to the executive director the authority to pursue these activities. Second, a probable result of board approval of innovation will be a search by the boards for executive directors who have the necessary abilities for effective functioning in such a role. The executive director, therefore, will have not only the authority vested in the position itself, but also the authority based on his personal abilities, to pursue innovative goals. In both cases the likelihood of program change occurring is increased.

Characteristics Related to Agency Personnel in General

Two other factors were found to be related to the rates of program innovation in community agencies which did not refer to specific categories of agency personnel. Community agencies which had the following characteristics were significantly more likely to exhibit

more program changes than agencies lacking these characteristics.

1. Response to broad stimulus fields ($r = .35$). This characteristic refers to the tendencies of agency personnel to consider alternative suggestions for program change from sources outside of the organization rather than only from those within the agencies, and to the responses of agency personnel to anticipated conditions (expressed through long-range program planning) rather than only to stimuli which are part of the present situation. Agencies which respond to a broader range of stimuli are more likely to become aware of the expressed needs of their client population, gaps in their own programs, alternative responses to the needs which are perceived, barriers to the implementation of program changes and facilities which are provided by their environment which might aid in implementing suggestions for program innovation.

2. Numerous suggestions for program change ($r = .25$). The observed association between the number of program changes suggested and the number of innovations actually implemented may be accounted for in at least three ways. First, an obvious prerequisite to planned organizational innovation is the offering of suggestions for program changes. Second, in addition to increasing the probability of program implementation, the number of suggestions for program changes probably reflects previous favorable experience with such innovations. Where change might previously have been resisted, the implementation of a few changes might evoke such favorable responses by organizational participants that future changes are facilitated. The third explanation is based upon the observation that organizational patterns are functionally interrelated. That is, they are so interdependent that changes in certain of these patterns would of necessity lead to changes in others. Thus, agencies which had previous experience with change would also tend to have more subsequent experience with organizational change.

DISCUSSION

From one point of view, the characteristics of a population, such as its level of health, average income, housing accommodations or degree of "social isolation," do not objectively represent social problems or needs. Only when these conditions are evaluated as

“bad,” “degrading” or “maladaptive” (whether they are so judged by members of the population itself or by some group or agency external to the population), do they represent needs or ills. Once these judgments have been made a problem is presented to those who define these conditions as needs (or who accept the judgments of others in this regard)—that of planning and implementing action programs to alleviate these needs. One of the major media through which such programs are implemented is the voluntary community welfare organization.

This study was not concerned with the appropriateness or effectiveness of the action programs in alleviating these felt needs, and was concerned only in part with the process by which certain conditions of the population (or segments of it) are defined as social problems requiring resolution. Rather, this study was based upon the observation that community agencies were highly variable in their willingness to define certain conditions as “needs” worthy of resolution, to plan programs to alleviate these problems and to implement the programs.¹⁴ This investigation was undertaken in an attempt to “explain” this variability.

The study of a large group of community agencies revealed nine factors which account for almost 75 per cent of the variation in program innovation. Although these results do not indicate what the unfulfilled needs of the population are, or whether the programs of the individual agencies are appropriate to the felt needs of the segments of the population which they serve, they do have certain implications for action-taking in the community.

A variety of official and voluntary agencies at the national, state and local levels which are concerned with the health and welfare of the general population, or specific segments thereof, do, in fact, regard certain conditions of the population as problems worthy of resolution.¹⁵ Fortunately, these agencies emphasize the conditions under which the characteristics of the various population segments will be perceived and defined as problems, solutions offered to these problems, and programs implemented based on these problems. The major implication of this study is that, for the group of voluntary community agencies, this situation is most likely

to obtain when the nine conditions described above are present. To the extent that these conditions are introduced into the health and welfare agencies of the community the amount of program innovation can be expected to increase.¹⁶

REFERENCES

¹ See, for example, March, James G. and Simon, Herbert A., ORGANIZATIONS, New York, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1959; Etzioni, Amitai, A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF COMPLEX ORGANIZATIONS, New York, Free Press of Glencoe, Inc., 1961; Bennis, Warren G., Benne, Kenneth D. and Chin, Robert (Editors), THE PLANNING OF CHANGE: READINGS IN THE APPLIED BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES, New York, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc., 1962; Etzioni, Amitai (Editor), COMPLEX ORGANIZATIONS: A SOCIOLOGICAL READER, New York, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc., 1961.

² Reviews of this literature are conveniently provided in March, James G., HANDBOOK OF ORGANIZATIONS, Chicago, Rand McNally & Co., 1965, Chapters 17-25.

³ The available literature is confined in general to case histories and broad discussions based on several case histories. See, for example, Sorenson, Roy and Dimock, Hedley S., DESIGNING EDUCATION IN VALUES, New York, Association Press, 1955; Lippitt, Ronald, Watson, Jeanne and Westley, Bruce, THE DYNAMICS OF PLANNED CHANGE, New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1958.

The lack of large scale studies of program innovation in voluntary welfare agencies is unfortunate since, in their absence, it is not possible to determine 1. the extent to which factors reported to be associated with organizational innovation in other types of associations are similarly related to program innovation in community welfare agencies, and 2. whether unique features in the situation of welfare agencies account, to some degree, for variability in program implementation.

⁴ Space limitations permit only a relatively brief discussion of the method and results of this study. The methodological details and extensive discussions of the results are presented in Kaplan, Howard B., IMPLEMENTATION OF PROGRAM CHANGE IN COMMUNITY AGENCIES: STUDIES OF ORGANIZATIONAL INNOVATION, Houston, Community Council of Houston and Harris County, 1966.

⁵ March and Simon, *op. cit.*, p. 150; Peabody, Robert L. and Rourke, Francis E., Public Bureaucracies, in March, *op. cit.*, p. 806.

⁶ March and Simon, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

⁷ Johns, Ray, CONFRONTING ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE, New York, Association Press, 1963, p. 31.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁹ The judgments were made along a five-point scale ranging from "almost always" to "practically never."

¹⁰ A useful discussion of the technique of factor analysis may be found in Cattell, Raymond B., *FACTOR ANALYSIS*, New York, Harper & Row, Publishers, 1952, pp. 14-18.

¹¹ By the nature of the procedure by which these factors were derived, they represent general indices which are composed of several more specific variables. In this section only the more general phenomena which these indices represent will be identified. The reader is referred to Kaplan, *op cit.*, pp. 104-148, for presentation of the component items of each index.

¹² A coefficient of correlation is significantly different from zero at the .05 level if the value is .257 or higher (one-tail test). Of the nine factors derived, six were related to the IPCI scores at a statistically significant level. The remaining three (of which two approximated the .05 level of confidence) are presented to indicate trends worthy of investigation in future research.

¹³ These arguments are developed at greater length in Kaplan, *op. cit.*, pp. 184-188.

¹⁴ Johns, *op. cit.*, p. 28; Kahn, Robert L., *et al.*, *ORGANIZATIONAL STRESS: STUDIES IN ROLE CONFLICT AND AMBIGUITY*, New York, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1964, pp. 125-126.

¹⁵ Conditions defined as problems and the priorities assigned to the various needs, of course, vary greatly in accordance with the particular agency which views the population, the segment of the population emphasized and the system of values of the agencies. These problems are only partly relevant to the present task.

¹⁶ The present studies identified factors associated with implementation of program change in community agencies. The "action" implication is that such characteristics should be introduced into agencies for optimum program innovation. The means by which such characteristics could be introduced into these organizations, however, is not reported. Additional analyses of the data are in progress in an attempt to gain further understanding of the processes involved in the genesis of these factors. Further research is also being planned on other groupings of agencies toward this same end—comprehension of the processes through which characteristics associated with program innovation are institutionalized in community organizations.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The financial support for this project was provided by a grant from the Ford Foundation to the Community Council of Houston and Harris County. Much of the computer analysis was accomplished at the Common Research Computer Facility of the Texas Medical Center, Houston, operated under Grant NIH FR-00254.