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FROM ISOLATION TO ORGANIZATION: STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO CLIENT-INDUCED ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE HUMAN SERVICES

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ABSTRACT

Human service organizations form an environment which is both difficult for an individual to transverse and antagonistic to the organizing of clients. The structure of these organizational environments is not conducive to the emergence of client organizations. This issue forms the focus of this paper: the interaction between the structural dimensions of human service, organizational environments and the potential for human service clients to form organizations geared to obtaining accountability from human service agencies. The basic argument is that the structural dimensions of these organizational environments (i.e., the characteristics which affect the basic interrelationships among component parts) have a depressing effect upon the potential for isolated clients to come together in client organizations.

Lower class people can presumably interact with human service organizations as isolated individuals or in organized groups[1]. But in either case, they must make such organizations accountable; i.e., responsive to client needs and responsible to clients for their actions. The choice between individual or group pursuit of accountability, however, is pre-ordained. The organizational environment which these individuals and households must confront is not conducive to the formation of client organizations. Rather, for human service clients at the local level, the potential for the emergence of collective entities is decidedly weak. Except for a flurry of client activity in the Sixties, partially supported by the intervention of the federal government, few client organizations have formed within the human services to share in the governance of agencies and the formulation of agency policy[2].

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[1] As Lee Rainwater (1974:306) has written: "The most important issue here is whether from the perspective of lower class people the goal of a decent life is to be pursued mainly on an individual or group basis." His analysis causes him to conclude that lower class people favor the former.

[2] Certainly one can point to examples (Fainstein and Fainstein,1974)

This organizational environment, the human service sector at the local level, is comprised of a multitude of public and voluntary human service agencies whose client population, both actual and potential, shares a given geo-political area (usually a county) and which provides on a non-market basis goods and services to those in need(3). These sectors contain a wide variety of organizations. Public welfare agencies, job training organizations, mental health clinics, individual and family counseling agencies, planned parenthood associations, alcoholic detoxification units and physical rehabilitation agencies are just a few of the possibilities. But more importantly, these human service sectors constitute the organizational environments within which clients directly interact with human service agencies and attempt to obtain accountable services.

Such accountability may be achieved either through the participation of such client organizations in issues of agency policy and service delivery or through disruption and crisis which force national institutions toward more basic reforms(4). It is the former, and the conditions which allow it to occur, which forms the focus of this work. The degree to which face-to-face interaction among clients is encouraged, the perception of shared interests facilitated, client interests and dissatisfactions focused and freedom of choice expanded constitute the key factors in this analysis of the barriers to collective action posed by the human services and the susceptibility of such

of the emergence of such client organizations. A review of two social welfare journals, Social Service Review and Social Work, for the last twenty years unearthed no significant instances of the involvement of client organizations in agency policymaking. Schwartz and Chernin (1967) also conducted such a search and concluded that "(t)here are few examples of recipient participation in welfare 'casework' agencies at the administrative or policy-making levels."
3 The majority of human service agencies, both public and voluntary, confine their activity to a politically-defined, geographical area. At the local level this usually means a county but an agency's target area may be multi-county, metropolitan or citywide. Thus, although a core set of agencies can be identified as belonging within a given sector, some organizations overlap into other sectors. In addition, the definition of what constitutes the scope of the human services is intertwined with what one considers the boundaries of social policy. Frequent reference is made to the person-to-person nature of these services, their existence outside of normal market forces and their direct concern with human need; but no, one acceptable definition has emerged. For an introduction to these issues see Rein (1973:3-20).
4 This latter strategy is extensively discussed in Cloward and Piven (1974:67-170). See also Specht (1969).

organizations to client demands(5). While others (Brager and Specht, 1969; Fainstein and Fainstein, 1974; and Ohlin, 1969) have written on the process of organizing lower class individuals and using these organizations to confront those in power, this paper analyzes the organizational environment in which this organizing is to take place.

The organizational structure of these human service sectors permits only individual, and not group, action. As a result, human service organizations are seldom made accountable through group pressure on the part of clients. Individuals may utilize the human services for individual gain, but client organizations find it difficult even to become established. Thus it is the organizational environments in which lower class individuals are embedded which will determine whether the democratic option of organization and participation will be allowed them and, in turn, whether human service agencies will become accountable to their clients. The thesis of this paper is that certain structural dimensions of local, human service sectors make them hostile environments for the organizing of clients and their subsequent collective actions.

Structural Dimensions of Human Service Environments

A human service sector, as mentioned above, is composed of a diverse collection of human service agencies. These relatively specialized entities usually concentrate their organizational resources on a single facet of human need, despite the fact that client problems are not so easily categorized. The discrepancy between this agency specialization and client problems coupled with the concentration of funding sources within human service sectors gives rise to a large number and wide variety of relationships among agencies. Thus the human service sector is characterized both by specialized agencies and functional interrelationships. These two characteristics, plus the interaction between organizations within the sector and bureaucracies and organizations external to it, constitute the three major structural dimensions of human service sectors(6). In addition, the basic mode of service delivery--the client-social worker relationship--

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5 This notion of conditions basic to the emergence of organized entities has been dominated by the Marxian analysis of the transformation of common property position into class consciousness. For discussion of these issues see Anderson (1971:66-7), Fainstein and Fainstein (1974:237-60) and Feuer (1959:246-60).

6 An extended analysis of these structural dimensions of human service sectors can be found in Beauregard (1975:24-35, 162-96).

must also be considered. All these factors affect the potential for indigenous client organizing and the subsequent success of either administrative participation or service disruption.

Agency Specialization(7). The specialization of organizations within human service sectors mitigates against the emergence of client organizations and against actions designed to confront local agencies. By treating problems in ways which correspond to professional definitions rather than the holistic needs of individuals and families,clients are isolated from one another and the interests of clients are dispersed among a variety of agencies rather than focused on a single one(8). For example, the human service client might receive an income grant from the public welfare agency, psychiatric counseling at a mental health clinic, housing assistance from a housing authority and job counseling from the public employment bureau. This fragments the focus of client interests and results in the dissipation of their dissatisfaction among numerous agencies. Not only does this have an adverse effect upon the dynamics of dissatisfaction but it also makes confrontation of human service agencies problematic for those clients who do become organized.

The fact that clients must confront a wide variety of agencies in order both to state their grievances and to obtain satisfaction makes joint action that much more difficult than if agencies were less specialized. Multi-functional agencies which bring together a variety of services would facilitate interaction with clients on the basis of an interrelated set of dissatisfactions and demands. Specialized agencies force clients to disaggregate their grievances and diffuse their resources when confronting agencies. This strains client capabilities and makes both their participation and the development of effective strategies that much more difficult. The alternative, of course, is for clients to focus only on their specialized grievances with individual agencies. But, this ignores the interdependent nature of client needs. While solving one of an interrelated

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7 This notion of specialization corresponds to the concept of differentiation between social entities. Emile Durkheim (1933) discusses specialization in a variety of dimensions and subsumes it under the concept of division of labor while Herbert Spencer (Timascheff, 1957:30-42) gives it a prominent role in his organic and evolutionary perspective on society.
8 For a further discussion of this issue see Rein (1973:107). This is a primary reason why client confrontation of individual organizations is not heavily emphasized within this paper. Fauri (1973) discusses consumer participation from this intra-organizational perspective.

set of human needs is beneficial, the overall impact is seldom to move
the individual or family out of its vunerable condition. Those
involved in providing housing for the poor are well aware of this
issue (Rainwater, 1970).

In addition, agency specialization limits client choice by de-
creasing the number of duplicative agencies from which clients might
receive assistance. Contrary to many analyses of the human services,
duplication of programs and organizations is not widespread--just the
opposite(9). There is little choice open to the client if she or he
wishes mental health counseling or planned parenthood services or job
training or any of a host of human services. The result is that
protest is easily squashed, if not dissipated, before it occurs. If
clients organize and confront those agencies not meeting their needs,
services may be denied them. And, they have virtually no alternative
source of assistance within the community. The client can not easily
take his or her need elsewhere.

Furthermore, confronting these agencies may not, in a monopoly
situation where one agency dominates the provision of a particular
good or service, have any impact (Hirschman, 1970:55-61). There is
little incentive for the service provider to upgrade the quality of
the service or good. Since clients need that good or service regard-
less of its quality, such behavior would probably not yield compara-
ble returns to the agency in the form of an increased client popula-
tion and thus a strengthened justification for agency existence. Com-
pounding the dilemma is the fact that the ability of clients to dis-
engage themselves from the human service agency or to leave the
community is severely limited. They can neither stifle their demand
for the human service nor remove themselves to another organizational
environment. The social costs are prohibitive and thus the 'exit
option' is denied them(10). In these ways, the specialization of
human service agencies has a depressing effect upon client organizing

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9 Although the accusation of duplication is frequently hurled at
human service sectors, little empirical evidence exists. Such posi-
tions are usually based upon isolated cases. An investigation of
duplication within a human service sector in upstate New York found
that of the cases brought to the attention of the investigators, all
were easily situations in which services were similar but either
client population, philosophy or eligibility criteria were dissimilar.
(Cayuga County Planning Board, 1973:14-6).
10 Hirschman(1970:4) defines the exit option as the ability of
buyers to cease purchasing the firm's products or of members to leave
an organization. The voice option involves the firm's customers
expressing their dissatisfaction directly to management or organiza-
tional members making a general protest to the source of their
grievance.

and any activities which might be undertaken.

   Functional Interdependence(11). The second structural dimension
of human service sectors involves the widespread functional interde-
pendence of agencies. Human service agencies, being relatively
specialized, need to interact with one another in order to treat the
holistic needs of clients. The primary source of this agency inter-
action is the interpersonal communication of caseworkers and direct
service personnel. Formal relationships based upon contractual
agreements are much less prevalent relative to ad hoc and personal
relations(12).

   Functional interdependence, however, is not equal for all agencies
within the sector. Some agencies (e.g., the local Department of
Social Services and Health Department) interact with a large number
and wide variety of other organizations, while others (e.g., Alcoholics
Anonymous) are virtually isolated. In addition, interactions are
affected by the type of services which organizations provide. Job
training agencies are likely to have frequent contacts with the
public employment office and local vocational education schools but
not to have much contact with the planned parenthood agency. The
result is that agencies are 'clustered' within a given human service
sector; that is, they interact with a limited number of other agencies
and maintain those interactions with that organizational set over
time (Cayuga County Planning Board, 1973 and Cumming, 1969). Whereas
agency specialization has a dispersing effect, clustering has a collec-
ting effect upon clients and increases their potential interaction.
In this way, the negative impacts of specialization are somewhat
counteracted.

   If clients do organize, functional interdependence may also be
important when confronting other human service agencies. On the one
hand, clustering provides a stronger organizational and resource
base for human service agencies than they would have individually.
They can use this, in conjunction with the lack of service options
available to clients, to resist client demands(13). Given that most

   11 This notion should be related to the concept of functional inte-
gration. Durkheim's corresponding concept is solidarity, while Spen-
cer uses the label interdependence. Blau (1974) posits both differen-
tiation and integration as major parameters of social structure.
   12 For an intensive analysis of such relationships between and
among human service agencies see Cumming (1968) and Beauregard
(1975:177-94).
   13 Brager and Specht (1969:227) discuss the negative relationship
between highly interlocked directorates of human service agencies and
the propensity of agencies to become aligned with protest organiza-
tions.

agency interactions are of the ad hoc and interpersonal variety, how-
ever, interrelationships may be tenuous and the cluster may fragment
when clients organize and disrupt the prevailing equilibrium. On the
other hand, each agency within the cluster depends upon others for
funding, the referral and subsequent provision of services to their
clients and possibly even access to information and expertise. Con-
frontation and either disruption of or involvement in one agency by
a client organization may reverberate throughout the cluster and
have a multiplier effect. Depending upon the response of agencies,
this may either help or exacerbate the plight of clients.

External Relationships(14). The third structural dimension of
these human service sectors, the external relationships of local
agencies, also has implications for the emergence of client organiza-
tions and their subsequent activities. Still, not all human service
sectors enjoy equal access to external organizations, including both
governmental agencies at the state and federal levels and national
associations such as the United Way of America or the National Associ-
ation of Retired Persons. The extent of extra-local involvement re-
flects the amount of communication the sector has with the outside
world and, in turn, allows access to the community by national organi-
zations.

These channels of communication can serve to mitigate the isola-
tion of clients in a number of ways. First, they can serve as paths
along which external organizations become aware of local needs and
enter that community for the purpose of organizing citizens. An
example of this is the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) program
whose presence within a community was predicated upon communication
between some local group and the federal government. One thrust of
the community action agencies which emerged in communities which
could establish such lines of communication was the organizing of low-
income peoples for the purpose of obtaining agency accountability
(Clark and Hopkins, 1970 and Marris and Rein, 1969). Second, with
such ties to the outside world, it is more likely that symbolic and
concrete assistance might be provided to emerging client groups at
the time when they most need support. To a great extent, this is
what George Wiley provided with his Poverty Rights/Action Center
(Cloward and Piven, 1974:127-40; Piven and Cloward, 1971:320-40;
and Steiner, 1971:280-313). Many local welfare groups were aided and

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14 This idea has been presented in a variety of forms. Roland
Warren (1963) has written about the vertical patterns of relationships
wich communities develop, Frank W. Young (1970) discusses relative
centrality (the degree to which the system recognizes the subsystem)
and numerous references occur in the interorganizational literature
(Litwak, 1970).

stabilized through the assistance of his organization and the support it provided.

In addition, such external relationships may contain a multiplier effect for local action. Confrontation of a local chapter of the American Red Cross or local comprehensive employment and training agency should reverberate to their national counterparts. It is national policy which is being implemented at the local level and bringing the activities of the local agency into question reflects upon national decisions. Local organizations cannot be abandoned nor can local programs be ignored if national policy is to remain credible. Some response must, after a certain level of participation or disruption is reached, be forthcoming. The issue, problematic at best, is always whether the response will be repressive or reformist.

Client-Social Worker Interaction(15). The way in which services are delivered to clients also has an impact upon the potential for client organizations to emerge. Most services are received by clients through the boundary personnel of human service agencies; i.e., some type of social worker. These social workers are the gatekeepers of the human services and seldom conceive of clients as needing to be organized or having the potential for becoming organized. Rather, clients are perceived as highly unorganized with only their 'need' in common. Instead of focusing upon the commonalities among human service clients, it is their singularities which are emphasized. This is merely the individualistic humanism of social work. More specifically, the prime concern of social workers is that aspect of the client's life situation which prevents his, her or their (in the case of a family) independent functioning(16). The mode of service delivery is one of client-social worker interaction.

The particularistic treatment of clients results in their isolation from one another. As a result, the sharing of grievances is

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15 This factor is definitely of a different level of analysis than agency specialization, functional interdependence and external relationships. In the sense that this dyadic relationship controls the interaction of clients and agencies it has structural implications. Because of the major role client-social worker interaction performs in service delivery, its inclusion is a conceptual necessity when discussing the intersection of clients with the human service organizational environment.
16 Warren (1971) discusses this 'individual deficiency' approach which characterizes the human services and contrasts it with the 'dysfunctional social structure' approach. Ryan (1971) elaborates on this in terms of fixing the blame for social problems.

hindered and basic knowledge about people in similar circumstances with similar complaints is prevented. Communication among clients is seriously impaired and the involvement of clients in the interpretation of agency policy and delivery of services is avoided. To allow their participation would erode the professional authority (Friedson, 1968) of the social worker and blur the distinction between those who give and those who receive. Thus at a critical point in the delivery of services a barrier exists to the organization of clients.

Furthermore, these social workers control the functional interdependence among human service agencies. As stated above, most agency interrelationships are of an ad hoc and informal nature and take place at the direct service rather than administrative level. Thus not only do these social workers control the interaction between clients and the agency's services, but they also control, to a great extent, the movement of clients from one agency to the next for treatment purposes. Referral patterns are regulated by social workers and for a client to bypass this procedure is to entail large costs in terms of time wasted and effort spent in gaining entry to the next human service agency. Clients are thus constrained in their knowledge of the services provided by different agencies and shielded from involvement with administrators. And, by being guided in their movement from agency to agency, clients are further deprived of choice and thus of the potential to collectively assert their needs.

Conclusions and Alternative Perspectives

The combined impact of agency specialization, functional interdependence, external relationships and client-social worker relations upon the potential for indigenous organizing of human service clients is difficult to precisely discern. In general, the potential for client organization is decreased by these factors. The fragmentation of attention and grievances, the interdependencies of agencies which makes them more difficult to confront and the overall impact of social workers in controlling the process of human service delivery seem to more than counteract the tendencies of functional interdependence to bring clients together and the ability of external relationships to be exploited for purposes of organizing groups and developing strategies.

Functional interdependence might make clients more aware of their shared grievances, but such potential for consciousness is far from the actual existence of functioning organizations. And, even though outside groups may be of assistance, unless they are supported by the federal government they are likely to stay in the community for only a short duration and may even stifle the indigenous leadership which might have emerged. From a structural perspective, then, it is readily understandable why so few client organizations have arisen to demand and achieve accountability from human service agencies.

There are other sides to this issue, however: one having to do with the bureaucratic need which human service agencies have for clients and the other with the distinction between constituents as clients and constituents as citizens. It could be argued that there are ample reasons why any human service agency should encourage its clientele to both grow in size and to establish some collective ability. Such an organized client constituency could be very helpful in bringing administrative and political pressure to bear upon legislative and executive decision-making. Bureaucracies perpetuate themselves in part through the support of their clients (Rourke, 1969).

In the human services, agencies concerned with the aged have benefitted from organizing senior citizens, usually through discount purchasing programs and recreation clubs. When budgetary decisions are being made, this large and easily identifiable and quantifiable group serves as a strong rationale for continued and increased support. And certainly the support of organized youth services (such as the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts) has positive benefits for local United Ways. This being the case, an organized clientele could seemingly be a bene- fit to all human service agencies.

Such logic is belied by the infrequency of such behavior on the part of human service agencies. Human service clients do not have the wherewithal to expend time and resources in the formation of or- ganizations. Even if they did, the structural barriers inherent in human service organizational environments would deter them from doing so. Thus it is left to the agency to do the actual organizing. This, however, involves staff time and resources which are seldom available for such activities, while coalitions of clients and professionals may be intrinsically unstable entities due to their different interests in the human services. In addition, clients organized directly by an agency are likely to have less legitimacy in the eyes of decision- makers than clients who organize themselves. So again, the initiative is placed with the clients and they must overcome these barriers with- out assistance.

Another rejoinder to what I have proposed here is that to limit a person's interaction with human service agencies to that of client casts that person in a subservient relationship to agency profession- als(17). Participation should instead be viewed as principally an issue of citizens--'the constituency of responsibility to which the agency has obligations'--demanding the accountability which is their right as citizens. Potentially, this is a larger, more useful and

17 This was suggested to me by Roland Warren in a personal correspon- dence concerning an earlier draft of this paper.

more powerful role than the constraining and demeaning one of client.
But for this to become reality the citizen role within the human
services must be buttressed by the larger environment in which such
participation takes place. Organizations, inclusive of both actual
and potential clients, must be formed to champion this role thus
committing organized interests to and increasing the probability of
accountability. This can only occur, however, if the structure of
human service sectors is conducive to the formation of such collec-
tive entities.

    In a society densely populated and widely controlled by organi-
zations, to be unorganized is to be powerless. Only by concerting
resources and acting in an organized and persistent fashion can
accountability from institutions be achieved. For the clients of
human service agencies this involves moving from a position of iso-
lation to one of organization. But until the human service, organi-
zational environment is restructured, this will occur only on a
sporadic basis.

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