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INDIGENOUS AND NON-INDIGENOUS PARAPROFESSIONALS:
AN EMPIRICAL COMPARISON

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a comparative description of indigenous and non-indigenous paraprofessionals who were employed in a social service capacity in a large urban setting. Personal interviews were conducted with 88 paraprofessionals employed by the Fulton County Department of Family and Children Services (Atlanta, Ga.). The primary variables discussed include an assessment of the respondent's background, their present employment situation, experience with and attitudes toward welfare and general attitudinal measures. The results provide a basic demographic profile of the indigenous and non-indigenous paraprofessional and indicate their differing characteristics. Briefly, the indigenous respondents were less anomic, felt more efficacious in terms of helping clients, had a less favorable stance toward welfare, had less training and were considerably more more satisfied with their job than were their non-indigenous counterparts. Additionally, the implications of these findings and considerations which need to be explored in future research are discussed.

As a result of federal legislation, the use of paraprofessional personnel in social work has become a widespread phenomenon. The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 provided for the development of local community action programs and stated such programs were to be "developed, conducted, and administered with maximum feasible participation of residents of the areas and members of the groups to be served." The subsequent 1967 Social Security Amendment further explicated the Economic Opportunity Act by specifically requiring that states include subprofessionals on staffs of public welfare agencies.¹ The use of subprofessionals in social service agencies had a history prior to

becoming a legislative mandate. Levinson and Schiller (1966:95-101) and Epstein (1962:66-72), for example, have reported that nonprofessionals have been utilized in such diverse contexts as the Travellers' Aid Society, U.S. Army mental hygiene clinics, child welfare agencies and multi-service agencies for the aged. Our purpose here is to provide a comparative description of indigenous and non-indigenous paraprofessionals who were employed in a social service capacity in a large urban setting (Atlanta, Ga.). The continued utilization of paraprofessionals without examining their effectiveness, experiences, and qualifications is unwarranted. While little research of an evaluative nature has been forthcoming, a growing body of literature is available which documents the utilization of paraprofessionals.

INDIGENOUS PARAPROFESSIONALS

The indigenous paraprofessional is utilized because of the many characteristic attitudes he has gained through experiencing a life of poverty similar to that of the clients he is serving. He typically has a social history similar to that of the client, facilitating rapport and providing a valuable link between the client and the agency (Brager, 1965:34; Otis, 1965:14). Additionally, being a peer of the client allows the indigenous worker to circumvent the interclass role distance difficulties that often arise between the middle class oriented social worker and lower class clients (Riessman, 1965:28). Furthermore, an ability to communicate with the client as a peer allows the indigenous worker to serve as a bridge between the client and the service agency and provides an increased awareness of the problems and needs of the poor (Hardcastle, 1971:57; Otis, 1965:14).

It has also been reported that those special inherent qualities possessed by indigenous personnel can expedite the functions of penetration and co-optation. Brager and Otis have found that welfare recipients are willing to provide personal information to indigenous workers that is not readily obtained by professionals (Brager, 1965:37; Otis, 1965:14). Brager (1965:38) and Hardcastle (1971:56) also suggest that community militancy may be "cooled off" by utilizing the special skills possessed by indigenous workers.

Indigenous paraprofessionals also provide a valuable source of manpower sorely needed in the field of social work. They demand and receive less pay and can perform certain menial and technical tasks that have been forced upon professionals due to personnel shortages (Gartner, 1971:58-9).

NON-INDIGENOUS PARAPROFESSIONALS

The utilization of non-indigenous paraprofessionals resulted primarily from a serious manpower shortage experienced by most social welfare agencies during the 1960s (Heyman, 1961:36; Weed & Denham, 1961:29;

Farrar and Hemmy, 1965:44). These employees function as auxiliary personnel providing manpower to accomplish tasks which do not normally require the skills of a trained professional social worker. Typically these paraprofessionals aid the professional social worker by performing routine, non-complex and visible tasks which have well-defined parameters. Also they handle assignments where the problem is specific and the service concrete (Epstein, 1962:71). For example, paraprofessionals routinely determine AFDC continuing eligibility, based on specific identified guidelines as contrasted with the more complex and judgmental initial eligibility determination which is performed by the professional social worker. Within this framework, the paraprofessionals serve less vulnerable clients and perform their duties with less autonomy than their professional supervisors (Richan, 1961:28).

In addition to providing auxiliary manpower, these positions provide entry-level jobs from which one can gain valuable working experience and, given certain qualifications, the non-indigenous worker can be promoted to a higher job classification. As these positions are filled with persons having an undergraduate degree and in some cases with persons having only two years of college, it follows that agency expenditures for these persons are far less than if professional social workers were employed.²

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

In response to the 1967 Social Security Amendment legislation, Fulton County (Atlanta, Georgia) initiated a program in July, 1969 to employ paraprofessional personnel. During the spring of 1973, 88 of the 91 paraprofessionals employed by the Fulton County Department of Family and Children Services were interviewed. A 45 minute personal interview was conducted at the respondent's office and included an assessment of the respondent's background, his (her) present employment situation, experience with and attitudes toward welfare and general attitudinal measures. The respondents were classified into four positions: community worker (N=8), home service aid (N=17), casework intern (N=12), and casework aid (N=51). To facilitate this evaluation and to generate comparative data, the respondents were divided into two groups for analytical purposes: (1) Indigenous paraprofessionals--those persons holding the job title of community worker or home service aid. These individuals were recruited directly from the target neighborhood and no qualifying examination or educational level of attainment was required. (2) Non-indigenous paraprofessionals--those persons holding the job title of casework intern or casework aid. They were required to score satisfactorily on a qualifying examination; the interns were college graduates while the aids had attended at least two years of college.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 indicates that the indigenous and non-indigenous paraprofessionals differ rather markedly across all of the characteristics summarized. The indigenous paraprofessionals can be characterized as persons who have, at some time, lived under similar conditions as those experienced by their clients. To a great extent the indigenous paraprofessionals are still closely associated with the environment of poverty due to their income, social contacts with clients and residence in low income neighborhoods. A brief characterization of the indigenous paraprofessional is that of a black female, 32 years of age, who has completed eleven or twelve years of education and must support three to four dependents on a low salary. On the other hand, the non-indigenous paraprofessional can be characterized as a white female who has completed at least two years of college, 24 years of age and has only herself to support. Very few of the non-indigenous paraprofessionals have received welfare benefits and an analysis of additional information not presented in Table 1 also revealed that few live in low income neighborhoods or have social contact with the client.

Further examination of Table 1 indicates that the non-indigenous personnel exhibited a slightly more favorable stance toward welfare than the indigenous respondents.³ While such a finding may seem contradictory, it is consistent with other studies in this area. That is, if we assume that the non-indigenous subjects more closely hold the views of the general public than do the indigenous subjects, we would expect the latter to have an orientation similar to welfare recipients. Kallen and Miller, for example, interviewed 300 non-welfare respondents in Baltimore and reported a weak approval of welfare with the majority expressing ambivalence (Kallen & Miller, 1971:87). A further study of the general public conducted in California concluded that "the most significant finding was that support for public welfare--both as a concept and a program in abstract and concrete terms--far outweighed opposition (Ogren, 1973:107). Moreover, Scott Briar's (1966:370-85) study of California welfare recipients found the respondents to be conservative and generally anti-welfare. Comparing the attitude toward welfare scale distribution of the Atlanta paraprofessionals as a whole with a sample of 570 Atlanta welfare recipients (Elifson et al., 1975:186-98), one is able to discern a tendency for the paraprofessionals to indicate slightly more intense pro-welfare statements than the recipients themselves.⁴ One plausible explanation for this result is that paraprofessional workers as a group may be more sympathetic with the problems of those persons receiving welfare and, therefore, tend to respond favorably to some aspects of the welfare program to which even the respondents themselves would object.

Anomie was assessed with the five item Srole anomie scale and reflects an individual's feelings of efficacy or inefficacy in his attempts to cope with his social environment.⁵ The items are constructed in such a way that the higher the score on the composite scale, the more intense are a person's feelings of powerlessness and pessimism. These

feelings are often regarded as consequences of a disfunction between means and goals available to the individual attempting to deal with his life circumstances. The inapplicability of available means to sought after goals often exists as a structural condition affecting certain segments of the society and is thought to be especially prevalent among low income individuals (Bullough, 1967:469-78). Table 1 surprisingly indicates that the non-indigenous personnel are considerably more anomic than the indigenous sample. We had hypothesized the opposite, but the benefit of hindsight and information concerning the job situation of the respective groups allows us to better understand the finding. Indeed, having considered Table 2, we would contend that the extent of anomie apparent among the non-indigenous employees may partially reflect a general disenchantment with their job situation.

Examining Table 2 more systematically, we find that nearly all (92%) of the indigenous respondents had been employed in their present positions over one year, whereas only 41 percent of the non-indigenous workers had been employed a similar period of time. Furthermore, a majority of all the paraprofessionals (not shown) indicated that they sought employment with the Department of Family and Children's Services (DFCS) after accidentally learning of a job opening. Only a few respondents indicated they had purposefully sought out a job with their present employer. Respondents who sought specific assignments with DFCS were persons who desired particular social work job experience or persons who had related experience with another agency.

Less than half (44%) of the indigenous subjects reported having received training in conjunction with their job, while 81 percent of the non-indigenous workers received training. Hypothetically, both groups were to have attended staff development programs. When asked to evaluate the training relative to the tasks actually performed in conjunction with their job, 51.3 percent of the casework aids and 27.3 percent of the interns who received training rated their training as either inadequate or very inadequate (not shown). On the other hand, respondents identified as community workers or home service aids who received training all considered the training adequate or very adequate.

The remaining items summarized in Table 2 are strikingly consistent for each respective group. The indigenous workers had overwhelmingly positive attitudes toward their value to the client and agency and are very satisfied with their jobs. In contrast the non-indigenous respondents are not nearly as positive in their evaluation of these topics. To explicate this disparity the "helper" therapy principle will be considered (Riessman, 1965:28). Briefly stated, this principle proposes that people with a problem help other people who have the same problem in a more severe form (e.g., Alcoholics Anonymous and Synanon). Riessman (1965:28) points out that often in this type of therapeutic process it is the dispenser of help who shows marked improvement rather than the recipients. More specifically, a variant of this principle is found in

the work of indigenous paraprofessionals. Since most of the indigenous workers are either former or present welfare recipients, it is quite likely that placing them in a helping role can provide a rehabilitative function. Engaging in a helping occupation enhances the self-image of low-income persons; it provides them with psychological support, and they themselves report considerable satisfaction in their jobs (Brager, 1965:33). Additionally, as the indigenous workers benefit from their new helping roles, they may actually become more effective workers and thus provide more help to others at a new level (Riessman, 1965:28). From this discussion it seems plausible that an enhanced self-concept and a feeling of productivity and purpose, resulting from the helping role, can help explain the indigenous paraprofessionals' belief in their efficacy to client and agency. Concomitant with this belief is the overwhelming positive attitude toward satisfaction with their job as reflected by the last two items in Table 2.

On the other hand, the consistently lower attitudinal scores of the non-indigenous workers may be seen as resulting from an interaction of several variables. These employees are generally from a higher socio-economic background than their indigenous counterparts and this important difference may preclude the functioning of the helper therapy principle. An important premise of this principle is that a person with a problem, here defined as poverty, helps others who have the same problem in a more severe form. Since the non-indigenous employees have not experienced poverty at all, or to the same extent as their clients, it is probable that they would not benefit from the helping role in the same sense as the indigenous worker. Also, as the non-indigenous workers have a different socio-economic history and its resultant life expectations, it is likely their job has a social meaning quite different from the indigenous workers. For the non-indigenous person, the paraprofessional position may represent an intervening step in their overall career plans or it may simply be "just another job." In contrast, the indigenous paraprofessional's job probably has a more immediate and pragmatic meaning. It has been suggested that positive attitudes toward their job most likely reflects an appreciation of being off the unemployment or welfare rolls and having the opportunity to be trained for a new career (Ahearn, 1969:673).

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

While the need for continued utilization of paraprofessionals within social service agencies is generally accepted, few efforts have been made to examine their participation systematically. The findings in this paper are far from conclusive and limited in generalizability; however, we do believe that they should be carefully considered when evaluating paraprofessionals. The authors have sought to provide a comparative examination of the indigenous and non-indigenous paraprofessional in a large urban setting. First, we have presented baseline empirical data on

the general demographic characteristics of both groups and found them to differ markedly. A basic profile was developed and proved useful in analyzing the additional differences between the two groups with respect to selected social psychological attitudes and their assessment of the context in which they worked. Briefly, the indigenous respondents were less anomic, felt more efficacious in terms of helping clients, had a less favorable stance toward welfare, had less training, and were considerably more satisfied with their job than were their non-indigenous counterparts. The most important and striking finding was the overwhelming positive attitude toward their job by the indigenous personnel. Several explanations were considered which were linked both to the characteristics of the respective paraprofessional and to the nature of the work context.

Our findings suggest several considerations which need to be explored in future research. First, does the significantly higher job satisfaction exhibited by the indigenous workers in this Atlanta sample necessarily imply that they are more effective than the non-indigenous workers? That is, what role does job satisfaction play in a paraprofessional's ability to effectively serve the client and agency? Second, it has been suggested that certain job contexts are more compatible with one type of paraprofessional than the other; however, little empirical research has been conducted. Or is one type of paraprofessional unilaterally more effective than the other across all contexts? For social service administrators to utilize the various paraprofessionals' particular skills in the most productive manner, an evaluation of their respective strengths and weaknesses is warranted. Furthermore, such an inquiry must consider the differing background characteristics within the indigenous or non-indigenous categories. In short, we must begin to carefully match the unique contributions each can make to agency efforts to more effectively serve the client population.

FOOTNOTES

- * Partial support for this research was provided by Social and Rehabilitation Services Contract OS-R-4-72-21 with the Atlanta Urban League, Inc.
- 1. Social Security Amendment of 1967, Title 45, Chapter II, Part 220, Subpart 220.6 and 220.7.
- 2. The creation of the intern position appears to be an attempt to alter the racial composition of the agency through opening job opportunities to minorities.
- 3. The Kallen and Miller attitude toward welfare scale contains 11 items with a possible range of 11 (unfavorable) to 55 (favorable). The

- indigenous scores ranged from 17 to 39 while the non-indigenous scores ranged from 26 to 42. See Kallen and Miller (1971:86).
4. The welfare recipients and paraprofessionals discussed above were included in a larger study of the welfare system in Atlanta conducted by the Atlanta Urban League.
 5. The Srole anomie scale contains five items with a possible range of 5 (low anomie) to 25 (high anomie). The indigenous scores ranged from 6 to 19 and the non-indigenous scores ranged from 7 to 22. See Srole (1956:712-13).

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TABLE 1
 Characteristics of Indigenous and Non-Indigenous
 Paraprofessionals^a

	Indigenous (N=25)	Non-Indigenous (N=63)
Percent Female	100.0%	74.6%
Percent Black	100.0%	31.7%
Median Age	32.3	24.0
Median Years of Education	11.6	15.6
Median Number of Dependents	3.4	1.2
Median Family Income	\$4850.00	\$9100.00
Percent Previously on Welfare	72.0%	6.3%
Percent Presently on Welfare	60.0%	0.0%
Median Attitude Toward Welfare Score ^b	29.7	34.3
Median Srole Anomie Score	10.0	16.1

^aTests of significance are not reported as 96.7 percent of the individuals in the sampling frame were interviewed, thus, the sample is assumed to be essentially equivalent to the population.

^b(Kallen, D. J., and D. Miller, 1971:86).

^c(Srole, L., 1956:712-13).

TABLE 2
 Employment Characteristics of Indigenous and
 Non-Indigenous Paraprofessionals

	Indigenous (N=25)	Non-Indigenous (N=63)
Percent employed in present position over one year	92.0%	41.3%
Percent who received training	44.0%	81.0%
Percent believing they have power to assist clients	95.6%	67.7%
Percent believing they are important in obtaining agency's goals	91.0%	52.6%
Percent enjoying their present job more than their previous job	93.3% ^a	61.5% ^a
Percent satisfied with their present job	100.0%	38.1%

^aThese percentages are based on 15 and 39 cases, respectively, as a sizeable proportion of the sample had no previous full-time work experience.

