

ASSESSING SOCIAL AGENCY FUNCTIONS: A MODEL

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Abstract:

The assessment of general agency functions is the focus of this manuscript. Initially inventories that may be utilized in the assessment of the relevance and quality of services provided are reviewed. Next, cost benefit analysis is addressed in terms of helping social workers estimate the cost of services provided. The manuscript concludes with a discussion of the issues involved in general agency assessment.

Article:

In the recent decade, substantial attention has been paid to the effectiveness of social work services. Research in this area has centered mostly around the effectiveness of casework (Fischer, 1973; Wodarski Bagarozzi, 1979). With the growing emphasis on agency accountability, administrators are becoming increasingly concerned about documenting the quality of overall agency function. Thus, while the controversy about the effectiveness of casework continues in academic circles and in journals, agencies are shifting the focus of their concerns to program and overall agency evaluation. Many agencies, as a result, are becoming "self-evaluating," that is, agencies are taking the initiative in developing and carrying through on evaluation efforts which provide administrators and staff with information on efficiency and effectiveness in meeting stated goals.

Comprehensive agency evaluation is multifaceted, necessitating the inclusion of data from a variety of sources. Certainly the specification and measurement of program objectives is of primary concern, and this issue has been widely addressed in the literature (Brody & Krallo, 1978; Wodarski, 1981). Performance appraisal of staff is also important for overall agency evaluation and is receiving increasing attention (Wiehe 1980). Specific worker procedures that can be evaluated have been ascertained (Wodarski, 1980). There has also been increasing interest in evaluating organizational climate and staff opinion about various aspects of the agency.

Two pertinent aspects of agency evaluation, consumer perceptions of services and cost analyses necessary for both planning and evaluative purposes, have not received as much attention. Traditionally, consumer evaluation of services has frequently been neglected, although this data source becomes more important as clients or potential clients are added to agency boards and planning committees (Prager, 1980). Likewise, another aspect of evaluation which has become increasingly important during the 1980's but which is often overlooked relates to the cost of services. With shrinking budgets and reductions in staff it is essential that services be delivered as efficiently and effectively as possible.

The purpose of this article is to stimulate thinking on the part of agency administrators and evaluators about how consumer evaluation and cost analysis strategies can be used in their agencies to improve the quality of services offered clients. Specific approaches to consumer evaluation and cost analysis are described as is the importance of this information to the self-evaluating agency.

CONSUMER EVALUATION

Most human service organizations recognize the need for and benefit of receiving feedback from consumers of

their services. Social work as a profession has tended to emphasize the importance of client input into the treatment process (Warfel, Maloney, & Blase, 1981). Nevertheless, such direct feedback is often considered "soft" data and the use of client self-reports have been quite controversial in assessing actual impact of treatment.

In the area of overall agency function, client perceptions are quite important. Even clients who are not able to accurately describe the effect of agency intervention in terms of behaviors changed or improved can testify as to how helpful they felt staff to be, how they felt they were treated, and whether or not they were satisfied with the services received. The incongruence, however, between staff and client perceptions of the impact of services has been well documented (Damkot, Pandiani, & Gordon, 1983; Giordano, 1977; Prager, 1980). In the face of the wide gap in perceptions, it is important that information from clients be used to modify agency and staff practices which have a negative impact on clients. Warfel, Maloney and Blase (1981) describe general guidelines for developing an effective and practical feedback system. Recognizing the potential problems of low reliability and validity of such measures, they differentiate between the use of consumer evaluation for purposes of evaluating services versus the use of such information sources for conducting research. Interestingly, these authors cite a companion study which indicates that scores on their consumer evaluation report were related to more objective measures of program effectiveness.

Several inventories have been developed which assess general agency functioning from a consumer perspective. The inventories described here were chosen because they are efficient, i.e., they are not overly time-consuming in terms of administrative, financial or human costs, and they can be used as is or easily modified for use in any human service agency.

Inventories

Reid and Gundlach (1983) developed a 34-item "Consumer Satisfaction Scale" to assess client attitudes toward three aspects of service delivery. The "relevance" scale (11 items) determines the extent to which a service corresponds to the client's perception of his or her problem or need; the "impact" scale (10 items) addresses the extent to which the service reduces the problem as experienced by the client; and the "gratification" scale (13 items) measures the extent to which the service process enhances the client's self-esteem and contributes to a sense of power and integrity. The "Consumer Satisfaction Scale" may be utilized with clients of adolescent age and older.

Three somewhat briefer instruments also address consumer satisfaction. The "Client Follow-Up Questionnaire" (24 items) measures the extent to which clients perceive services received from an agency as helpful or not (Beck 6: Jones, 1973). The 8-item "Client Satisfaction Questionnaire" (Larsen, Attkisson, & Hargreaves, 1978) also measures client perceptions of the helpfulness of services received from the agency. "Tell-It-Like-It-Was" (Tillman, cited in Hagedorn, Beck, Neubert, Werlin, 1976) is also an adequate, short (9 item) questionnaire focusing on overall client satisfaction with the agency and with treatment by staff. This instrument includes a client self-assessment of changes resulting from treatment. Each of these three questionnaires can be used with males and females ranging in age from adolescent through adult. In addition to using these questionnaires individually to assess perceptions of specific clients, responses from groups of clients can be tabulated and analyzed to determine overall client perceptions of the agency.

Another method for determining client perceptions of changes as a result of treatment is to collect data before and after treatment. Millar, Hatry and Koss (1977) have developed an illustrative set of questions for monitoring outcomes from mental health clients. This 10-part questionnaire is intended to measure indicators of client attributes before and after receipt of social services. It is designed to be used in a structured interview with a representative sample of clients drawn on a yearly basis. The instrument would be administered at or near the time service begins for a client and again at some point after the client has received service. The authors do not consider the questionnaire to be in final form and recommend modification by users. The questionnaire can be used by trained interviewers (preferably not direct service workers who know the individual client) with any client, male or female, age adolescent through adult. If modified for use in a mail survey, only clients who can

read will be able to respond. Not all 10 parts of the questionnaire are necessarily applicable for every agency or client. Areas reviewed are economic self-support (18 items), physical health (5 items), mental stress (18 items), alcohol and drug abuse (12 items), family strength (23 items), child problems (18 items), client satisfaction (12 items), and amenities of care in institutions (18 items).

One indicator of the effectiveness of agency function is the extent to which other human service providers in the community are aware of and value the agency's services. While other service providers are not direct consumers of services, they may be thought of as indirect consumers since they are often responsible for referrals and for working with the same clients. Windle (1979) cites a 14-item questionnaire that was developed to be used in interviews with personnel in various community agencies to assess their awareness of and satisfaction with the agency conducting the survey. This instrument is designed specifically for community mental health centers and would have to be modified slightly to fit other human service agencies.

This questionnaire can be used in interviews with staff at all levels of human service programs. The interview schedule can be tabulated and analyzed to identify patterns of community awareness and satisfaction with particular aspects of the agency and related to the overall function of the agency.

A major concern of the self-evaluating agency is the extent to which it adequately reaches citizens who are in need of its services. One approach to obtaining this information is to conduct a community survey of unmet needs. Millar, Hatry and Koss (1977) have designed a 17-item questionnaire which will provide estimates on the number of citizens who perceive themselves as having a social service related problem, but who have either not sought help or have sought help and not received it, especially for reasons that the state, county, or agency has at least partial responsibility for trying to alleviate. It is suggested that such a survey be conducted on an annual basis. If administered in a personal interview, the questionnaire can be used by trained interviewers with any citizen of the appropriate governmental or catchment area, male or female, age adolescent to adult. If used in a mail survey, only those citizens who can read will be able to respond.

A scoring code is provided in the "Answer Module" which will enable the evaluator to tabulate results either by hand or by computer. The resulting information will indicate areas of unmet needs for social services within the community or area studied (Millar, Hatry, & Koss, 1977). Due to the cost and complexity of conducting this type of survey, it may be more efficient to modify the instrument to address a range of problems identified by more than one agency. If this is done, costs and staff time can be shared by all agencies involved.

In addition to concern for consumer and community perceptions of the agency and its functions, the self-evaluating human service agency must also be concerned with program costs.

COST ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL WELFARE PROGRAMS

Cost analysis has gained increasing attention as an important aspect of program evaluation. In addition to being concerned with the extent to which social service programs define and meet measurable objectives, evaluators must also be concerned with the costs of such programs. Even before the current economic recession, there was increased pressure on social work administrators to be "accountable". Gross describes two elements of accountability as the need for social workers to "exhibit that what they do is effective, i.e. that social workers are able to achieve socially valued' goals, and that these goals are realized efficiently, i.e., in the cheapest way possible" (1980, p. 31).

With cutbacks in federal funds for social services and the shift of responsibility for many programs to the states, agency administrators will increasingly be concerned with issues of cost in order to begin new programs, to maintain existing levels of funding, and in many cases, to retain any level of funding at all. Administrators need information related to program costs as well as program outcomes in order to compete successfully for scarce resources. They also need such information in order to make hard decisions about internal programming, that is, what programs to retain and which to terminate or modify. Cost benefit analysis, a tool which has been adapted from the fields of business and economics, has been cited as useful in facilitating such decision making (Levin,

1983).

Cost benefit analysis is a process through which program costs and effects (benefits) are identified and quantified. Both costs and benefits are expressed in dollar amounts and then compared. If benefits exceed costs the program is considered worthy of funding, assuming no limitation of funds. Where there is a limitation of funds, a cost benefit analysis can indicate where the most impact can be gotten for the dollar. Thus, cost benefit analysis can be used to establish funding priorities. According to Stokey and Zeckhauser the fundamental rule of cost benefit criteria is "In any choice situation select the alternative that produces the greatest net benefit" (1978, P. 137). Thus cost benefit analysis is concerned with maximizing marginal gain for marginal input.

Cost benefit analysis procedures were originally developed for use in decision making regarding defense expenditures and other government programs, e.g., land use and construction of dams. Therefore, the procedures are based on assumptions that are not necessarily valid when applied to social service programs. Cost benefit analysis assumes that all costs and benefits of a program can be identified and, once identified, that monetary values can then be assigned. The difficulty of assigning dollar values to social service program outcomes, such as reduced child abuse, reduced recidivism for juvenile offenders, and improved quality of life for the elderly, is obvious. Social service programs often attempt to create changes which are not amenable to measurement by existing technology. One method of valuing benefits is to assign a value based on what the benefit would bring on the open market or what people would be willing to pay for such a service (Andrieu, 1977). These techniques are not universally applicable to benefits of social service programs, however, since there is no open market commodity equivalent to many social services benefits. Certain benefits are associated with services related to social control functions (e.g., protective services, court services) which involve clients who often are involuntary and would be unwilling to pay anything for a service they do not want in the first place. The true consumers of such social control functions are members of the community at large. Trying to determine a value based on the open market or the communities' willingness to pay for such services is a difficult task.

While there is general agreement about the difficulty of assigning monetary value to the benefits of social programs, Gross (1980) finds that program costs may also be difficult to identify and evaluate in monetary terms. McKay and Baxter (1980) describe the difficulties involved in trying to identify all costs associated with clients served by Titles XIX, II, and IV-A programs. Such difficulties arise from unavailability of necessary cost data and the tendency for individual agencies or programs to identify only costs borne specifically by their organizations. Thus the absence of a good data base and the prevalence of overlapping program jurisdictions and services create difficulties in accurately identifying and quantifying all related costs. Because of problems inherent in the application of cost benefit analysis procedures to social service programs, a related technique, cost effectiveness analysis, has been developed and used much more prevalently.

Cost effectiveness analysis differs from cost benefit analysis in that it requires that monetary value be assigned to program costs but not to program impacts or benefits. The assumption behind this approach is that program objectives are based on society's willingness or desire to achieve certain goals. Thus decision-making is focused, not on which objective to work toward, but on identifying which program alternative will help meet the already identified objective in the most efficient way. Cost effectiveness analysis cannot help establish program priorities but can help "find the most efficient way of obtaining priorities established by some other means" (Buxbaum, 1981). Benefits, while not measured in dollar terms, are specified in some nonmonetary unit, i.e., number of foster care children returned to their biological families, recidivism rates. Cost effectiveness analysis allows one to determine how many units of benefits are associated with alternative program approaches to reaching the same objectives.

While cost effectiveness analysis does solve the problem of assigning monetary value to intangible benefits such as emotional well-being, changed behavior, and quality of life, there remain many unresolved methodological issues which complicate the cost effectiveness analysis process. The necessity of determining all relevant costs is a problem for agencies or programs which are not currently keeping records on staff

utilization and program expenditures in ways that correspond to program objectives. Even if all cost data were available, there remains a controversy over the most appropriate method of comparing the costs of different program alternatives. While this is not necessarily an issue in an after-the-fact program evaluation, it is a critical issue for planning. Another critical issue is how to choose between programs with differential secondary impacts. If two programs meet a socially desirable objective, and one costs less than the other, yet the more expensive program has additional positive aspects when compared with the effects of the less expensive program, which program does the decision-maker choose to fund?

While it is important to realize the limitations of cost effectiveness analysis of social welfare programs, there is nevertheless value in following such a procedure when planning or evaluating programs. Stokey and Zeckhauser believe that even when it is impossible to carry out a detailed quantitative analysis, "thinking about the way such an analysis might be carried out forces policy makers to think hard about categories of benefits and costs, to define their expectations about outputs, and to pay attention to the tradeoffs that are explicit in their decision" (1978, p. 135). With increasing competition for scarce dollars for social welfare programs, the information provided by cost effective analysis can be useful to administrators both in their own decision-making as well as in their efforts to influence the legislative process.

DISCUSSION

An assessment of how well an agency functions will be influenced, if not largely determined, by who performs the assessment and its focus. Many social agency evaluations are primarily concerned with numbers of service units delivered, numbers of clients served, dollars spent, and other data which are both objective and easily quantifiable. Such data sources, while important, do not tell the entire story.

A self-evaluating agency that wants a comprehensive picture of how effectively the agency is meeting its goals must attend to many different perspectives when conducting an overall agency evaluation, not just one or two perspectives. One must look at how the agency is viewed by clients, staff, other community service providers, and key community members. One must look at costs. One must look at service effectiveness.

Consumer opinions about effectiveness of service can be used in conjunction with other data to modify programs. Feedback about client perceptions of treatment by agency staff can be used to alter practices or procedures which create negative feelings. To fail to take into account consumer perspectives is to perpetuate a paternalistic view that the agency knows what is best for clients regardless of what they think, or even worse, that the agency really does not care what clients think. Client opinions are important to the agency for more than one reason. How the client views the agency can have an effect on worker-client relationships and on service outcomes. Dissatisfaction of clients can result in the creation of a negative public image of the agency as clients talk with friends, family, service providers, and other key people in the community.

Perhaps at the other end of the assessment spectrum is the focus on cost effectiveness. Even the most positive consumer evaluation will not ensure an agency's survival if it is not attuned to cost factors. While some services are mandated and must be delivered regardless of the cost benefit ratio (if one could actually be computed), recognition of high service costs can lead to a search for new ways to improve efficiency without sacrificing effectiveness. An example of how this has been done in recent years is the increasing use of groups as a method to provide some services which were previously delivered on an individual basis. Many social workers are very uncomfortable with cost analysis and see it as a way for administrators or "finance people" to justify instituting less expensive services which are not necessarily as effective as those which cost more. Certainly this is a potential hazard of cost analysis. High cost services will be scrutinized more closely than more low cost services. Despite this hazard, cost analysis can provide valuable information when it is used as a part of a comprehensive agency evaluation which also looks at other data.

Evaluation of service effectiveness has been an ongoing problem for social agencies. Criteria for assessment of service effectiveness are difficult to establish. Such criteria are often tied to theories of human behavior which are either explicitly or implicitly used as a rationale for various intervention approaches and programs. Many of

these theories have yet to be systematically evaluated as to their relationship to practice effectiveness. Perhaps the one criteria which can be used universally is the extent to which utilization of a specific theory and its practice implications produces desired outcomes in client behaviors (Fischer, 1971, 1978; Wodarski, 1979; Wodarski & Feldman, 1973). However, even when such a criteria can be specified, problems of measurement arise.

Efforts have been made to develop measures to assess client outcomes which may be related to service provision (i.e., Hudson, 1982). While many practitioners are using these and similar measures on an individual basis with clients, few agencies have instituted such procedures as a means of evaluating overall agency effectiveness. This area of agency effectiveness as measured by outcomes of service provision will require continuing attention and additional research in the future. Without such documentation, it will be difficult for administrators to justify high cost programs or services in times of resource scarcity.

Increasing emphasis on agency evaluation will necessitate that schools of social work develop curricula which address multiple aspects of agency assessment from a practical point of view. Evaluation skills must be taught which will enable future graduates to develop and implement various types of assessment. Continuing education and in-service training programs can be developed which will develop these competencies in persons already occupying agency positions.

A comprehensive agency evaluation must encompass many different perspectives and foci. It must also utilize data from various sources including consumers, workers, community service providers, as well as information from the accounting department. The agency which engages in these differing types of assessment can, over a period of time, develop a holistic view of overall agency functioning, which identifies both areas of weakness and strength.

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