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The Pitfalls Of Needs Assessments

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This report is based on an array of experiences transpiring mainly in the 1970s. Federal legislation of the previous decade introduced much of rural America to categorical programs and their ties to needs assessments. The basic premise of the paper is that collection of valid data is extremely difficult and marked by a complex pattern of flawed assumptions, with social-political issues present at every stage of the needs-goals continuum. A warning is offered that a "rural turnaround" is bringing new residents, often with different expectations and experiences, to regions where their desires for services may clash with priorities already established. Local jurisdictions can thus become vulnerable to demands emerging from unexpected sources.

Programs launched by the "Great Society" legislation of 1965 introduced the concept of needs assessments to many rural officials. In recent years state and regional education agencies have continued to press similar demands on local jurisdictions, with other realms of social services, such as mental health, provisions for the handicapped, and day care also confronted by mandates to provide data which can substantiate program proposals.

During the 1970s, in particular, the author was involved in several efforts identified with needs assessments. It is the purpose of this paper to address problems encountered in conducting needs assessments and their implications for policy makers.

Basic Assumption

One of the implicit assumptions underlying needs assessments is the belief that action will be taken on the basis of data collected, i.e., "something" will happen: existing financial support will be continued, a new program funded; or responses to an existing condition will emerge. Needs assessments, in common with most attempts to collect information, raise expections. In that sense, they represent on intervention into the setting where the study is conducted. All too frequently this point is unduly minimized.

Research by Stake [10] has underscored the importance of differentiating between the need of a condition and the need for correcting that same condition, stressing the latter calls for different questions than are usually asked. An illustration of Stake's concern is found in a report emanating from a statewide evaluation of Title III, ESEA, projects in Illinois by Denny and Hoke (1969). They [1] concluded that penetrating questions could easily offend local residents, largely because such inquires suggested that problem definition and solution rested in the hands of external forces (p. 16).

In short, transactions linking needs assessments to eventual programs of action are tenuous and fragile. Some of the factors affecting the needs–goals relationship are discussed below.

Definitions and Description

Richard Kaufman's [5] remarks of 1968 still offer the most fitting and realistic guidelines for conducting needs assessments. He defined need as "...any difference between the way things are and the way things should be, regardless of whether that difference is a matter of fact, observation, or opinion" (p. 415).

In a report prepared for a mental health board in a rural county of Illinois, Hoke and Dawson [3] pointed to the lack of accuracy in analyzing respondents' distinctions between "alcoholism" and "excessive drinking." "In clinical and programmatic terms, " they continued, "the difference can be truly significant" (p. 2).

The limitation cited in their work was explored in greater depth by House et al. [4] in 1972.

> Although (this) instrument is not valid for domains it does not cover, there is little question that it is more valid than most of its kind. First, public hearings were held. Second, the hearings were summarized by a citizens group. Third, the instrument was tried out with known respondents. However, even this elaborate process does not mean all important segments of public opinion are represented.
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> It may be that many attitudes were not represented in the public hearings; that, like Wallace supporters, the witnesses could not express their precise feelings; or that the group drafting the document excluded many of the feelings. There is no way of telling why or exactly what important domains of public feeling are missed by the instrument. However, this deficiency can be corrected by supplementing the instrument with some interviews.
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> The second limitation of the instrument is related to the first limitation. Words like 'work' and 'venture capital' do not mean the same thing to all social groups in this country. No doubt the goal expressions are strongly biased by the language of the highly educated. Both the citizen drafters of the document and the instrument developers represent this middle-class, educated bias. We know that it is there; we do not know how much it impedes communication (p. 29).

Interpretations

Apparent consensus about needs does not guarantee agreement relative to establishment of new procedures

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and programs. Quantitative statistics often convey an unwarranted sense of precision while the interpretation of such data is extremely delicate and ridden with social and political implications.

The late Sam M. Miller [7] wrote in 1962 that many of our efforts were ill-conceived and poorly designed for collecting accurate information at all levels of society. In a speech addressing the needs of working-class adolescents, he said:

> I think that in social research we have been too prone to accept at face value solicited answers to deceptively simple questions; we have been willing to accept reliable scale-values and have paid much less attention to the problems of validity (p. 361).

Less than a decade after Miller's presentation, the pollster Samuel Lubbell [6], who relied on in-depth interviews conducted within a handful of carefully selected settings and repeated over time, added significance to the former's statement. "The old politics of stabilty are disappearing," he declared, and Lubbell foresaw a series of struggles for political visibility and power (p. 6). Both men were anticipating the neo-populism of today, a time when we are witnessing acts of civil disobedience among farmers traditionally regarded as some of America's most conservative, law-abiding citizens. Current resistance to mortgage foreclosures by banks and the Farmers Home Administration follows on the heels of bitter protests staged by members of the American Agricultural Movement in Washington, D.C. during the latter half of the 1970s.

Implementation

New programs entail new priorities—and compromises involving trade-offs between what is and what might be. Growing awareness of scarce resources and their influence on decision making reflects that axiom. In a 1972 publication, Sarason [9] anticipated problems encountered today by advocates of human services.

> When one observes the creation of settings devoted to direct human services (schools, hospitals, clinics, colleges, universities, institutions for the so-called mentally retarded, the aged, and delinquents, new societies, and the plethora of programs for poverty groups) the myth of unlimited or even adequate resources rather than the realities of scarcity dominates thinking. One should not expect it to be otherwise because to face the reality of scarcity forces one to examine alternatives which conflict with cherished values (p. 101).

Recommendations for Evaluation Practice

One of the most controversial authorities in the field of evaluation and measurement asserts that "the very idea of evaluation is coming to know the worth of the program, partly through subjective judgment." Later, Robert Stake [11] declares that improvement of evaluation research is hindered by opposition to the use of subjective research methods, with undue reliance on "formal routines" of testing and measurement (p. 45).

In contrast, Page (8) noted:

> As established today, evaluation is very weak in measurement, if not actively hostile to it. Yet measurement is the gold core of good evaluation: a science-based system of sophisticated fact-finding, with a vast array of good instruments and tested, provable procedures (p. 45).

The concept of a disciplined approach serves as a bridge between their viewpoints. Page is willing to accept subjective judgment by "giving it an appropriate role within a discipline of applied science" (p. 47); Stake responds by noting there are

> disciplined qualitative-research behaviors, particularly apparent in the work of a competent historian or ethnographer, but also apparent in the clinical behavior of certain teachers and other practitioners in the field (p. 47).

In the author's judgment, the issue of personal and professional credibility of researchers and evaluators will become increasingly important as efforts are made to link information, objective or subjective, to decisions regarding allocation of resources. Based on studies performed in a rural Illinois county during the early years of the past decade, Hoke (2) offered the following guidelines.

> Work in the field calls for more reliance on interviews, descriptions and, ultimately, judgments than experimental researchers are wont to accept. The task of building generalizations (predictions) on a foundation of examples collected and assembled inductively exerts its own price, makes its own demands... Consequently the physical, intellectual, and ethical requirements were even more significant (p. 88).
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> I deliberately chose to make little use of the phone: conversations and discussions on important issues, in my opinion, require face-to-face exchanges. Part of this belief, admittedly, is a personal uneasiness about intruding into people's lives without giving them a chance first to react to me (p. 88).
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> It was quickly evident to me that an open display of honesty was essential for my relationships with high school students. Almost ruthless honesty was demanded through-out the year, particularly during the trying weeks of collective bargaining (p. 89).
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> A climate of trust and openness is not the only essential for working in the field. An ability to adapt to local conditions without sacrificing personal and professional integrity is vital (p. 89).
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> My experience in Effingham left me with the indelible impression that knowledge of value systems: mine, others', the schools', can be acquired only through long hours of observation, discussion, and reflection (p. 90).

Summary

Today, we are faced with major discrepancies in the relationship of needs to availability of services. Communities in which the closing of neighborhood schools is becoming an annual event are hard pressed to cope with requests for services geared to the needs of an older population, such as nursing homes, public modes of transportation, different forms of recreation. Furthermore, the call for more accurate and comprehensive needs assessments may be misleading: human services are very susceptible to demands, to demands spawned by unique—and often unexpected—situational influences. Frequently these sources are located outside the boundaries of local jurisdictions, and even the most enlightened leadership is unable to anticipate their impacts. We are likely to

witness a search for "the community of solution" as complex problems test traditional forms of civic action.

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