4. Evaluation of a Program Involving Multiple Community Agencies*

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The experiences of evaluating the degree of coordination among 23 community social welfare agencies participating in a juvenile delinquency demonstration have led to several generalizations about the problems of doing research when the units of analysis are complex organizations and the focus of the research problem is on the actual social situation. More specifically, the focus is upon the development of evaluation research on the coordinating activity of a demonstration agency and the existing community agencies participating in the demonstration, whose programs are to be coordinated. The demonstration agency was developed by the community agencies in response to and funded by the President's Committee on Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Development. The focal issue was to develop and demonstrate programs in a target area to further youth development and prevent juvenile delinquency by a large scale action program. Although evaluation could have been made by the demonstration agency's research staff, they felt that the study of coordination activities could be best evaluated by an outside, uninvolved social scientist. The present remarks are based on the experiences, then, of the outside social scientist, a university affiliated sociologist, brought in to evaluate changes in interorganizational coordination by the demonstration program. For the researcher, evaluation of multi-agency coordination provided an opportunity to add to the rather limited knowledge about interorganizational relationships, that level of analysis which focuses upon the relationships between organizations and takes whole complex organizations as the basic units for analysis.

For the past two years we have been engaged in a study of a community welfare system and our specific concerns have included inter-agency coordination and conflict, adaptation and change, power relationships, and specialization. All of these concerns have placed us in the relatively uncharted area of interorganizational analysis. This is not meant to suggest that the area has been totally ignored, nor that no significant work has been done. A small number of significant studies have been done, mostly by the community organization people in the field of social work. These, however, have generally focused on some limited aspect of interorganizational relations without consideration of the complexity of the total situation in which the relationships occur. As a result of this unstructured situation, the major portion of the two years of the study has been devoted to developmental and exploratory research. Employing an eclectic approach at the outset of the study, we are now in the process of developing a more specific analytical framework as we closely observe the dynamics of the demonstration and the welfare system of the community. Thus, while this paper should be viewed as a tentative working-paper, several major issues pertinent to both researchers and actionists have evolved from these experiences. The present paper is an attempt to specify and elucidate these generalizations.

* Revision of a Paper Presented to the 1966 Annual Meetings of American Sociological Association September 1, 1966, Miami Beach, Fla. This study was supported in part by the Welfare Administration, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Washington, D.C., Grant No. 268–6–159.
in the hope that other researchers will be able to more easily overcome or avoid the obstacles and add to our sparse knowledge about interorganizational relations.

First, however, several other problems need to be briefly pointed out, since they complicate interorganizational analysis. These are problems encountered in all evaluation of action programs, and problems encountered in any study of actual social situations. Most of these result from the paradox, for the social scientist, of attempting to apply rigorous scientific techniques to the study of actual social situations. It should be realized, however, that the community at large is the place where most sociological theory can be tested.

The problems encountered during the first two years of the study can best be described in terms of the usual procedures of conducting sociological research. Namely, 1) delineation of the problem and conceptual scheme, 2) isolation and operationalizing of variables and their measurement, 3) delineation of study populations and gaining cooperation, 4) coordination of data collection for comparability of results, 5) avoidance of a narrow and sterile approach in analyses, interpretation, and presentation of findings. Analytically, these problems are separated in this paper into those that are common to all evaluation research, and those problems which seem to be specific to interorganizational research. As will become evident, this division is somewhat arbitrary and the parts are not mutually exclusive since the overlap of items is great and placement in one section rather than another would depend on the point of view of the author. In addition, many of the problems and issues raised by doing this type of research differ from other types of research in degree rather than in kind. Full exposition and assessment of the points raised in this paper will have to await completion of the study. In other words, the present paper is tentative in that it is based on preliminary findings and the first two years of a four year study.

Evaluation Problems

Starting with design, evaluation research on action programs is perhaps the most difficult type of research to carry out and assess adequately. The logic of evaluation research is simple and straightforward. On the surface, it would seem that the evaluation researcher is concerned with four basic categories of data, 1) the client population of the action program, 2) the goals of the action program, 3) the action strategy or type of treatment, and 4) the effects or impact of the treatment upon the client population. This simplified four-part model for evaluative research is, unfortunately, highly idealistic. More specifically, it may be said that the evaluation researcher is concerned with what appears on the surface to be an example of the standard experimental design. On closer observation, however, the researcher becomes aware that, at best, the design is a static group comparison possible at the shortest time. Not only are the confounding extraneous variables present and difficult to assess, but manipulation of the experimental variable is beyond the control of the researcher.

Although the researcher retains control and responsibility for the choice