Needs Assessment and Community Development:

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Needs Assessment
and Community Development:
An Ideological Perspective

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ABSTRACT. Many practitioners of the social sciences have fostered the value-free, apolitical and ahistorical character of their disciplines. This position distorts the real perception that should permeate the theory, methodology, techniques and practices of the social sciences. This paper, by examining the method of needs assessment, focuses on the undesirability of preserving this point of view. Needs assessment is discussed as a political process for the organization, mobilization and consciousness-raising of groups and communities.

Community development is a process which, through conscious-ness-raising, promotes and utilizes human resources, leading to the empowerment of individuals and communities so that they can understand and solve their problems and create new circumstances for their livelihood. As part of this process, needs assessment may be utilized as a central method to facilitate the modification of social systems so they become more responsive to human needs.

At the individual level, community development promotes psychological growth and enhancement by channeling energies into self-help projects and through the genuine participation of individuals in those decisions that affect their lives. The basic assumption that underlies this reasoning is that most human beings can solve their problems when they obtain access to resources and create alternatives. The emphasis is on their strengths and their development (Rappaport, 1977).

Awareness of problems and of change possibilities is achieved by

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raising an individual's consciousness from its current or real level to its possible capacity. Real consciousness is defined as an individual or groups' understanding of reality at a given time. Possible consciousness is the maximum understanding that can be achieved by an individual or group according to its material circumstances at a given historical moment (Goldman, 1970).

Consciousness-raising includes critical judgment of situations, the search for underlying causes of problems and their consequences, and an active role in the transformation of society (Ander-Egg, 1980). It is an awareness of human dignity and is essential in the exploration of the relationship between the social order and human misery and in the discovery of the shortcomings inherent in our society (Freire, 1974). It facilitates individual and collective participation in building a new and less oppressive social order, thus affecting the general well-being of the population by enhancing the relationship between individuals and society. Needs assessment is valuable in the consciousness-raising process, because any social movement should start from and respond to the felt needs of the population, in other words, their real consciousness.

Community development can foster consciousness-raising through the involvement of individuals in change efforts. Community development activities need to be grounded in a specific political commitment that responds to the liberation of the powerless groups of society. This does not ignore the participation of the powerful in the maintenance or change of the present social order. It does, however, require a personal and professional commitment to the oppressed because of the mission of prevention—understanding and relieving human suffering.

Contrary to this view, many social scientists have fostered the value-free, apolitical, and ahistorical character of their disciplines throughout several decades (Moscovici, 1972; Weimer, 1979; Zuñiga, 1975). This position, which may be referred to as "the myth of neutrality," distorts the real value-laden and political nature of theory, methods, and practices and thus serves to alienate us from ourselves and others (Ander-Egg, 1973). It creates divisions and distrust within our ranks and resentment from those that participate as "subjects" or recipients of our work, feeling used, manipulated and misunderstood. Thus, it is necessary to examine this myth which has resulted in the social sciences serving the dominant groups of society.

The "myth of neutrality" has reasons for its existence. In some

cases it has been sponsored by individuals who clearly believe in it, but in most cases, it has been accepted inadvertently by social scientists. One of the ways in which this occurs is by considering objectivity and neutrality as synonymous and inseparable concepts which are highly desirable in social scientific endeavors.

Those that hold that neutrality and objectivity must go together state that social scientists should not take political stances toward the object of their studies because this will hamper their research efforts (Myrdal, 1969). To them objectivity is defined as the capacity to study facts as they occur, without adhering to previously formed opinions and judgments and with the willingness to abandon positions that are proven false, inadequate, and unsatisfactory (Ander-Egg, 1977). Neutrality, its inseparable counterpart, is defined as a valueless stance before the objective reality (Martí, Note 1).

It is said that if researchers are not neutral, they cannot be objective (Martí, Note 1). This does not ring true as both concepts are different and clearly distinguishable, and while the pursuit of objectivity is desirable and necessary, the search for neutrality is not only impossible, but unwarranted. Objectivity is desirable because its definition implies the existence of defined values and positions which one is willing to change when an examination of reality requires it. Neutrality is impossible because every activity takes place in a particular political context.

If the political nature of the social sciences is recognized and accepted then an explicit definition of social scientists' values is necessary. It is our position that this value stance must be characterized by a commitment to the disadvantaged and powerless groups within a given society. This commitment is to the abandonment of a spectator role and the activation of a professional's mind and art to the service of a cause (Palau, Note 2). This cause should be the significant transformation of inequities in society which implies activism, risk, initiative, and a willingness to fight for clearly defined points of view.

To summarize, needs assessment is an integral part of community development, the process of consciousness-raising. It implies a political commitment which undermines the traditional view of a neutral science and a firm commitment to the exploited, underprivileged and powerless groups in society.

This paper will show that needs assessment is a political process that can be conceptualized as a tool for the organization, mobilization and consciousness-raising of groups and communities. This im-

plies (1) that the diverse uses of needs assessment methods be placed on a continuum, ranging from the perpetuation of control and the maintenance of the social system to the achievement of radical social change; (2) an emphasis on multiple techniques of needs assessment that facilitate collective activities, leadership development, growth of organizational skills, and participation of community members in interventions within research (Irizarry & Serrano, 1979); and (3) the belief that it is necessary to examine ideologies and values as they influence objectives, the selection of needs assessment techniques, intervention strategies, conceptual frameworks, and the utilization of obtained data.

NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Purpose

Needs assessment is part of a process used to plan social service programs (Pharis, 1976; Siegel, Attkinson, & Cohn, 1977). It is used to determine the problems and goals of the residents of a given community to assure that an intervention will respond to the needs of the population that is being sampled (Warheit, 1976).

The purposes that sustain the use of needs assessment methodology can be placed on a continuum (Table 1) according to their political roles. Towards the top of Table 1 are purposes that foster system maintenance and control; towards the bottom are ones that promote social change and consciousness-raising. Social system maintenance and control efforts include those activities which are carried out to maintain and/or strengthen the status quo. They also include first order change efforts which alter some of the ways in which the system functions but not the ideology on which it is based (Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974). Radical, or second order, social change efforts imply consciousness-raising and structural and functional alterations.

In consonance with these definitions, the very bottom of the continuum shows needs assessment as a mechanism used by community residents for participation and control in decision making. Needs assessment becomes a technique that facilitates second order social change.

The very top of the continuum lists purposes that foster system maintenance and control, including those that are used to obtain ad-

Table 1

Continuum of Needs Assessment Purposes

Political Role	Purpose
Control System Maintenance	- Guarantee the economic survival of service programs - Respond to interest group pressures - Provide services required by communities - Program evaluation - Program planning - Public policy decision-making
Social Change	- Measure, describe, and understand community life styles - Assess community resources to lessen external dependency - Return needs assessment data to facilitate residents' decision-making - Provide skill training, leadership, and organizational skills - Facilitate collective activities and group mobilization - Facilitate consciousness-raising

ditional funding for already established community programs (Siegel et al., 1977) so as to guarantee their continuation. In the middle of the continuum, but still focusing on maintenance and control efforts, are included purposes such as (a) planning for decision-making and program evaluation (Murell, 1976); (b) gaining additional input toward personnel recruitment; (c) describing, measuring and understanding different aspects of community life (Siegel et al., 1977); (d) determining discrepancies between residents' and professionals' points of view (Ronald, Titus, Strasser, & Vess, Note 3); and (e) obtaining knowledge about community resources so as to link these to agency services.

In analyzing this continuum it is important to notice that most

needs assessment efforts are directed towards consumer satisfaction and agency survival. These are legitimate and necessary goals; however, if technique development is limited to these goals, it will be incomplete and unsatisfactory. Needs assessment methodology, if it is to respond to a commitment to the powerless and to the fostering of social change, must (a) emphasize techniques that, singly or in combination, facilitate grouping and mobilizing people; (b) foster collective activities; (c) facilitate leadership development; and (d) involve residents in the entire research process. These characteristics are essential so that the technique can facilitate consciousness-raising.

Categorization and Evaluation of Techniques

At present there is a great diversity of needs assessment techniques. In some instances it is suggested that different techniques be combined focusing on diverse kinds of interventions (Aponte, 1976; Pharis, 1976; Siegel et al., 1977). Others suggest that only one technique be used with one line of intervention preferred (Clifford, Note 4; Evans, Note 5; Zautra, Note 6). In order to respond to the goals of organization, mobilization, and consciousness-raising in communities, the multiple techique approach is more desirable since a more precise view of reality is obtained. More data is gathered which will vary quantitatively and qualitatively, thus providing a thorough appraisal of community needs. Another reason for the combined use of techniques is that their limitations and deficiencies can be balanced. However, it is also important to study how each individual technique contributes to the goal of greater mobilization.

Needs assessment techniques can be grouped in three different categories defined by the contact they provide between the researcher and community residents. This contact is extremely important as it may be used to foster collectivization, mobilization, leadership development, and resident involvement (Ander-Egg, 1980; Sanguinetti, 1981), characteristics that are essential to a new focus on needs assessment goals.

No contact with participants. In this category, techniques permit no relationship between the intervener and the participants. These techniques are rates or percentages under treatment, social indicators, social area analysis and dynamic modeling (Kleemeir, Stephenson, & Isaacs, Note 7; Bell, 1976; Murell, 1976; Pharis, 1976). In general terms, these methods try to determine community

needs by utilizing qualitative and quantitative data from several sources, such as demographic records and other social indicators. They are based on the assumption that community needs and problems that appear in official statistics are representative of community problems. The major limitation of the "non-contact with the participant" techniques lies in their absolute lack of direct mobilization potential. Since the residents are not involved in the needs assessment project—in fact, it can even happen without their knowledge— their involvement in social action efforts is not to be expected.

Contact with the agency or community. The "contact with the agency or community" category includes observation (Ander-Egg, 1978), service provider assessment (Kelly, Note 8), key informants (Pharis, 1976), behavioral census (Murell, 1976), surveys (Clifford, Note 4; O'Brien, Note 9), nominal groups (Delbecq, Van de Ven, & Gustatson, 1975), and community forums (Kleemeir et al., Note 7) among other techniques. The interaction that these techniques allows for takes place basically through three means: observations, interviews, and group meetings.

Observation facilitates interaction by the observer's mere presence in the setting. Interviewers interact individually and in groups with community residents, service providers, or other key informants to directly obtain data. This interaction takes place openly, as in community forums, or in a more controlled manner, as in nominal groups.

Key informants, nominal groups, community forums, and surveys respond to the goals of mobilization and consciousness-raising in the community. The first three techniques encourage community input by eliciting residents' discussions and introspections about the collective nature of their problems and needs. They serve to strengthen communication networks in the community and they facilitate the process of program planning. Survey techniques share some of these qualities if the survey is constructed, coordinated, and administered by community members. This process generates great involvement and knowledge and the ready acceptance of results by the rest of the community (Sanguinetti, 1981).

The nominal group technique has these, and other, advantages. Because of the structured nature of its process (Delbecq et al., 1975), it (1) maximizes the amount, diversity, and quality of the problems and alternatives proposed; (2) inhibits the control of the group by a few vocal persons (Siegel et al., 1977); (3) allows conflicting opinions to be tolerated; (4) fosters creativity; (5) facilitates

attention to the contributions of marginal group members; and (6) emphasizes the role of needs assessment as the basis for program creation and planning. These four techniques have the highest mobilization potential.

Combined techniques. This category includes convergent analysis (Bell, 1976), community impressions (Siegel et al., 1977), community meetings/surveys (Kleemeir et al., Note 7), and others. Convergent analysis techniques include techniques of service utilization, social indicators, and surveys. Each technique is used with a specific objective in mind and it is expected that, overall, the information offered by the techniques should give an estimate of those persons whose needs are not being satisfied.

Community impressions and community meetings/surveys have several common elements. The former include the techniques of key informants, data revision, and community forum. The latter includes the first two steps in addition to a survey, allowing the data to be validated and permitting additional verbal input from participants. Although all these techniques require a lot of energy and effort, they are the best alternative in the needs assessment process because they combine high mobilization potential with the more traditional criteria of representativity, validity, and reliability.

Criteria to Judge the Adequacy of Techniques

Given the diversity of techniques, it is necessary to develop specific factors or criteria that should be considered in judging the adequacy of a technique. Some authors have examined this issue and have proposed criteria for the selection of techniques. These criteria include: the nature of the problem, the skills of both the researcher and the participants, available resources (League of California Cities, 1979), representativeness, the specificity required of the information (Murell, 1976), and the amount of political risk that the sponsoring group desires to tolerate (Aponte, 1976).

Although all these criteria are useful, additional criteria should be considered if the needs assessment effort is to contribute to community organization and mobilization. These criteria are presented in Table 2 and contrasted with more traditional views. The following dimensions are used as a guideline for this comparison: the goals, sources, content, and processes of the assessment.

A major distinction between the two sets of criteria is their goals. One set emphasizes prevention and promotion and the awareness of the collective nature of needs. The other works from a remedial

Table 2

Suggested Criteria to Evaluate the Adequacy
of Needs Assessment Techniques

	Criteria	
Dimensions of Needs Assessment Process	Criteria that foster mobilization	Traditional Criteria
Goals of Assessment	Prevention and Promotion	Treatment
	Awareness of collective nature of needs	Individual focus
	Encourage collective action	Foster dependency on external resources
Source of Input	Community residents Marginal groups	Service providers Total population
Content of Assessment	All perceived needs Internal community resources	Assessment of needed services
Processes of Assessment	Facilitate community involvement and control of process	Assessment carried out by "experts"
	Facilitate face to face interaction between intervener researcher and participants	Lack of community participation Interaction highly controlled by scientific standards
	Data belongs to participants	Data collection and future planning controlled by agencies
	Planning and collective action carried out by intervener-researcher and participants	

perspective which focuses on the individual and on fostering dependency on external resources. The impact of these differences is most noticeable in the assessment process since a collective focus requires a collective intervention and an individual focus does not.

An evaluation of previously mentioned techniques according to the community organization and mobilization criteria appears in Table 3. As can be seen, key informants, surveys, nominal groups and community forums are the most adequate techniques. It is important to stress, however, that no single technique can be seen as valid for all times and circumstances; therefore, they should be

Table 3

Evaluation of Needs Assessment Techniques According to their
Potential for Mobilization, Organization and Consciousness-Raising

T e c h n i q u e s

Criteria	Social Records	Computer Use	Observation	Social Indicators	Dynamic Modelling	Systems Model	Surveys	Key Informants	Forum	Nominal Group	Service Provider Assessments	Behavioral Census	Key Persons
Obtains information from community residents							X		X	X			X
Obtains information from marginal groups	X						X		X	X			X
Achieves change in services provided			X				X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Facilitates identifying a wide range of needs		X	X	X			X		X	X			
Facilitates development of internal resources								X	X	X		X	X
Control of information by residents			X	X			X	X	X	X		X	X
Oriented toward prevention			X						X	X			
Collective view of problems									X	X			
Committment to residents' participation in general									X	X			
Committment to residents' participation in research													
a. data collection							X		X	X			
b. instrument construction							X		X	X			X
c. data analysis							X		X	X			X
d. data returns									X	X			X
Fosters Relationship between residents and intervener								X	X	X			X
a. more time together								X	X	X			X
b. dialogue								X	X	X			X
Facilitate collective activities									X	X			X
a. two or more persons									X	X			
b. two or more persons regarding common problems									X	X			
c. adding the discussion of possible solutions									X	X			
d. initiate collective action									X	X			

tailored to the particular situation in which the needs assessment is conducted.

NEEDS ASSESSMENT
AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Irizarry and Serrano (1979) have developed a model, Intervention within Research, which integrates needs assessment into a community development approach. It uses needs assessment as its meth-

odological foundation and the concept of problematization as its ideological guideline (Freire, 1974). Problematization, our translation for the term *problematización,* refers to the process whereby consciousness-raising takes place. If the latter is seen as the goal, then problematization involves the different strategies whereby it can be achieved.

The model conceptualizes the processes of intervention and research as simultaneous and interdependent. It also assumes that all phases of the model should be permeated with explicit ideological inputs that lead to consciousness-raising.

The objectives suggested for this model include: (1) the creation of collective efforts to solve community problems as defined by community residents; (2) the achievement of individual and group participation in the analysis of social reality; (3) the creation of grass-roots organizations; and (4) the development of political skills among participants, resulting in their increased involvement in public affairs.

The model includes four phases. The first phase, familiarization with the community, includes a review of all written and statistical material regarding the community, and several visits to the same. This approach provides knowledge regarding the community's history, its structures, and the processes which facilitate the intervener's entry into the community. It should emphasize the early identification of key persons in the community through informal communication or through more structured means.

The second phase, which arises from a later revision of the original model (Martí, Note 1), is characterized by the creation of a core group that must be composed of both key community persons and interveners. This core group has planning, coordination, and evaluation responsibilities throughout the entire process of intervention within research.

The creation of this core group has positive psychological and operative repercussions. Since the group is formed with community people, a more effective dialogue can take place. It is also possible to increase their commitment and guarantee the group's continuance in this way. In addition, the key person can acquire skills through modeling or training that will be useful to future community work.

One of the most important tasks of this group is the direction and coordination of the needs assessment. This begins with the core group taking an active role in evaluating the relevance of the different needs assessment techniques to their particular community.

The group's next step is the consideration of alternative actions to develop an effective propaganda campaign to inform residents of the needs assessment. In this effort it is essential to obtain the support of other organized groups in the community.

The core group should direct the needs assessment process per se as well as the process of returning the analyzed data to community residents. This can be done through letters, individual visits, group meetings, or community assemblies. The method used will be determined by the needs assessment technique previously used, by the number of participants it entailed, and by the number of human resources available. The data should be returned promptly and should be explained in simple terms.

The third phase, formation of task groups, includes group activities suggested by the needs assessment. In this phase, short and long term goals are defined and further action plans developed. To carry out these activities an organizational structure must be created. It is suggested that for this purpose a general community meeting should be held where task groups are formed around the needs assessment priorities. This general meeting should be planned and conducted by all participants with the support and guidance of the core group.

In addition to the task groups, workshops and other social, cultural, educational, and recreational activities must be fostered. Workshops should concentrate on the development of skills so as to help community groups deal effectively with outside forces that rally against their efforts. Some possible topics for the workshops are leadership, skills to deal with service agencies, interpersonal communication, propaganda, and organizational skills. Particular attention should be given to internal group processes so that the task groups decision-making will improve, their leadership struggles diminish, and their cohesiveness increase. We believe that this last characteristic is particularly important and that both the workshops and group tasks should emphasize cohesiveness.

The last phase in the model, involvement of new groups, is initiated after some of the short and long term goals of the task groups are achieved. This involves the development of new goals which should help in bringing together other community groups. The steps described should be repeated in a cyclical manner because needs change throughout the process and the community may develop other goals and interests.

CONCLUSION

This paper has presented an alternative ideological framework to evaluate and direct needs assessment efforts. It has also presented a model for its use for community development. Community residents can and should control intervention within research efforts that directly or indirectly involve them and scientists should facilitate this control. If some of these changes are incorporated into current needs assessment efforts, scientists will be more responsive to the people to whom their major efforts should be directed.

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