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Enhancing the Influence of Psychologists on Public Policy

Will More of the Same Do It?

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Contents

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Introduction

For the past 25 years, I have been involved in efforts to develop and evaluate data-based and value-based systems of care for children with serious mental health challenges and their families (Stroul & Friedman, 1986; Friedman, Best, Armstrong et al., 2004; Huang, Stroul, Friedman et al., 2005). Having received my training in clinical psychology in the 1960s, this effort to work with local, state, and federal policy-makers to implement effective systems of care as one part of a multi-faceted effort to enhance the social and emotional well-being of children has clearly called on me to expand on the competencies and knowledge that I had gained through my training.

This article presents some of the lessons that I have learned about how psychology as a discipline can make a greater contribution to policy and system change. It builds largely on my experience with systems of care, an approach that has become official state policy in almost all states (Evans & Armstrong, 2003), and that serves as the foundation for a federal grant of over $100 million per year, operated by the U.S. Center for Mental Health Services (Blau & Fisher, 2005; Holden, Friedman, & Santiago, 2001).

During most of this 25 years I have served as Chair of the Department of Child and Family Studies, a large interdisciplinary department embedded within the Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute (FMHI) of the University of South Florida. FMHI is a dynamic and progressive organization with the exciting mission of developing and disseminating knowledge that will strengthen service systems, and improve outcomes for individuals with challenging behavioral health problems.

Within FMHI is an APA—approved pre-doctoral clinical psychology internship program, which has been in operation since 1984 (Weinberg, 2003), and which is highly unusual in providing for interns a policy rotation that is integrated with their clinical training. Through my participation as a policy mentor for interns, and as a participant in interviewing candidates for internship, I have had an opportunity to learn about the graduate experience of students from around the country. As part of my preparation for this article, I informally surveyed recent interns to get their recommendations about how to enhance the contribution of psychologists to public policy, and I thank them for their thoughtful comments.

The focus of this article is specifically on how as a field, psychology can more effectively prepare graduate students and conduct its own research so that it can strengthen its contribution to policy. This builds upon the very important mission of Division 37, the Division of Child, Youth, and Family Services, to promote the application of psychological knowledge to advocacy, service delivery and public policies affecting children, youth, and families (Bottoms, 2005). This article will briefly discuss training in policy and systems issues, interdisciplinary training and research, a systemic perspective, and research issues. The focus is not so much on strategies for translating psychological research into policy. Rather, the basic issue addressed is whether doing more of the same by psychology as a discipline will accomplish the goal of having a greater influence on policy, and, if not, what types of changes need to be made.

Training in Policy and Systems Issues

A first step towards enhancing the influence of psychologists in policy would be to provide more direct training on policy and systems issues in graduate school. Reports from recent graduates of Ph.D. programs in psychology indicate that most current programs offer no courses on policy and systems issues, and very little overall exposure to such issues. There are some programs that allow students to take such courses from other departments if they take the initiative to do so, and some programs that go even further and offer opportunities for joint degrees in policy-relevant fields such as public health. The inclusion of a greater focus on policy in graduate training is consistent with the recommendations of a national Task Force on the preparation of psychologists to work with children and families (Roberts et al., 1998)

If we as psychologists are to prepare a new generation of psychologists who are ready to make a significant contribution to policy, there are at least three areas that should be emphasized. First, students should study the research on policy development and implementation (Elmore, 1987; Friedman, 2003; Longest, 1998; Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1981) so that they can gain both a practical and scholarly understanding of the field. This should include a focus on strategies for achieving significant system change.

Second, students should study policy analysis and evaluation techniques so that they are prepared from a methodological perspective to be leaders in the development and implementation of data-based policies. When dealing at the macro level with complex, real-world systems, rather than at the micro-level with specific interventions for particular children and families, the opportunities are few and far between for researchers to use experimental designs, and there is some question about whether such designs are appropriate, even if the opportunity is there (Victora, Habricht, & Bryce, 2004). Yet the service systems and policies that exist in our communities and states represent the key independent variables and the laboratories for those interested in policy at the macro level, making it important that psychologists understand policy analysis and evaluation techniques.

Third, students should be knowledgeable about the policies that serve as the foundation for the mental health field and related fields. It has been striking in recent years that significant reports have been issued, such as the first-ever Surgeon General's Report on Mental Health (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1999), and the report of President Bush's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health (2003), and yet students report never having heard of these reports. The Inter-Divisional Task For on Children's Mental Health Care, an effort of eight APA Divisions, has done an excellent job and called for "a comprehensive, sustainable, collaborative system" (Saywitz & Nabors, 2005, p. 7). As pointed out earlier, most states have formal policies calling for the establishment of such multi-sector systems (Evans & Armstrong, 2003). Yet, with the exception of a small group of universities, there is very little focus on such systems within graduate programs in psychology.

A key issue is how to translate the New Freedom Commission into real and meaningful change at the practice level.

Multi-Disciplinary Training and Research

The report of an advisory group to the National Institute of Mental Health (2001), on the one hand indicates that no other disorders "damage so many children so seriously" (NAMHC, 2001, p. 1) as mental health disorders, and on the other hand declares that the insularity of many of the disciplines involved in clinical practice and research is a major impediment to progress. The first recommendation of this group is for the development of interdisciplinary research networks in child and adolescent mental health.

McGregor (2004) distinguishes between monodisciplinary, multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary research and practice. She points out that while each approach has something valuable to offer, there is an important need for bringing multiple disciplines and perspectives together when addressing complex social and policy issues.

Division 37, in its mission statement, specifically indicates its commitment to a multidisciplinary perspective (Bottoms, 2005). It is noteworthy, however, that again despite the expression of the value and importance of bringing disciplines together, such experiences within graduate training programs appear to be the exception rather than the rule. It is not unusual for graduate students to have a faculty member from a discipline other than psychology serve on a thesis or dissertation committee. But there are few opportunities for students to engage in extended discussion and dialogue with their counterparts in other disciplines and with faculty mentors from other disciplines.

An exception to this has been programs within several universities in North Carolina that have brought faculty and students together from a great variety of disciplines for interdisciplinary training in systems of care (Arbuckle & Herrick, 2005). In North Carolina, they have gone beyond this to include parents of children with serious mental health challenges in the classroom not only as occasional guest lecturers but also as co-instructors. Here at FMHI we are in the process of developing, in collaboration with several other universities, a master's degree program in child and adolescent mental health with a strong system of care and interdisciplinary focus (MacKinnon-Lewis, 2004).

McGregor (2004) indicates that in multidisciplinary efforts there tends to be one "root" discipline which turns to other disciplines for help in solving a problem while in interdisciplinary work, there is a more comprehensive and interactive dialogue between members of two or more disciplines. Interestingly, in recent years a focus has shifted toward "transdisciplinary" scientific efforts, which seek to develop "new hypotheses for research, integrative theoretical frameworks for analyzing particular problems, novel methodological and empirical analyses of those problems, and, ultimately, evidence-based recommendations for public policy" (Stokols, Fuqua, Gress, 2003, S22). McGregor observes that transdisciplinary research is being conceptualized partly as an extension of interdisciplinary research, and partly as a new form of learning and problem solving that not only goes beyond traditional disciplines but goes beyond academia to include perspectives of a wide range of people.

The call for new approaches such as this is not to diminish the contribution that psychology has made. It is to indicate, however, that if the contribution of psychologists to addressing *complex policy and social issues* is to be enhanced,

In those communities where a broad range of services are offered, and families are provided with choice, there have been dramatic changes in the configuration of services that are offered, accompanied by very encouraging outcomes.

and if psychology's expressed commitment to interdisciplinary approaches is to be actualized, then there is a need to reach out at the graduate training and at the research level to other disciplines.

Systemic Approach

Significant contributions to macro-level policy require an understanding of how complex systems operate. This is particularly clear in children's mental health where numerous service sectors and various levels of government are involved (Huang, Stroul, Friedman et al., 2005). The study of complex systems is a new field of science, operating under names such as complex adaptive systems (Agar, 2004; Plsek, 2001), systems dynamic modeling (Sterman, 2002), and complex systems (Bar-Yam, 2004). The common component of these approaches is a recognition that systems are composed of numerous parts or components that interact in complex and non-linear ways that result in collective behavior that cannot be inferred from or explained by studying the components in isolation of each other. Senge (1990) has included "systems thinking" as a key component of learning organizations. He has noted that the traditional approach to problems has been to fragment them into pieces, and that such an approach is not effective with complex problems. Plsek has defined a complex adaptive system as "a collection of individual agents that have the freedom to act in ways that are not always predictable and whose actions are interconnected such that one agent's actions changes the context for other agents" (Plsek, 2001, p. 313), and has indicated that the real power of a system lies in the way that the parts come together and are interconnected to fulfill some purpose.

Sterman (2002) has noted that understanding complex systems requires mastery of concepts such as feedback, stocks and flows, time delays, and nonlinearity, and points out that often attempts to solve persistent problems end up ineffective because of a failure to understand the multi-directional, dynamic, interactive relationships between components of a system, and the time delay between causes and effects. Langhout (2003) has proposed a continuum of research that extends from that which is particularistic and specific to that which is holistic and pattern focused. Clearly there is a value in research at both ends of this continuum, and at intermediate points within it. The challenge for psychology again, is not to abandon that which it does well and which has been valuable, but to expand its theoretical, conceptual, and methodological base to include a stronger holistic, pattern focused, and systemic focus, and to expand its collaborative network for purposes of better being able to contribute to the solution of complex problems.

There is no single way in which to suddenly introduce or strengthen the practice of family choice, and there is likely to be active resistance if not passive inertia in a field that has always been expert-driven.

Research

Research on complex systems and problems is difficult at best. The task of even describing systems and communities is daunting, and the task of assessing the impact of particular interventions at multiple levels and in multiple sectors is especially challenging. Yet, if significant progress is to be made in addressing important social issues, this type of research must be undertaken.

An example of this is the multiple efforts around the country to determine how to accomplish the vision of the President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health to "transform" the current system into a more effective system (President's New Freedom Commission, 2003). Such an effort would be greatly facilitated if there were a strong research base on strategies for achieving large-scale, system-level transformations. Together with colleagues both inside and outside of academia, we have struggled to try to assess the knowledge base for system transformation, and determine how to further develop that knowledge base, and we have found that it calls for using a wide range of research approaches.

On a smaller scale, but still at a macro level, we have recently developed a framework for implementation of effective systems of care (Friedman, 2005). Many of the factors in this framework are not easily measured, and the connections between the components of the framework, which may be the most important element, are even more difficult to measure. Yet if progress is to be made in implementing effective systems of care, such research is important.

These are examples of policy and systemic issues that do not lend themselves to easy study, or to the exclusive use of the traditional research methods that psychologists have relied upon. We have found ourselves relying more and more on mixed methods of research, including more ethnographic and qualitative methods, and certainly more holistic and pattern focused methods, as described by Langhout (2003). These approaches have not provided easy answers although they have been helpful. Nor have our collaborators from other disciplines offered easy answers. However, if as psychologists we are not to dismiss these complex issues as being beyond systematic study, if we are instead to accept them as important issues that are worthy of careful study, then we have to come up with methodological solutions that can be used so that policy can be as data-based as possible, and can be evaluated as thoroughly as possible.

Back as far as 1980, Patton has indicated that social and behavioral research needs to move beyond debates about which research methods are best. He notes that, "the issue of selecting methods is no longer one of the dominant paradigm versus the alternative paradigm, of experimental designs with quantitative measurement versus holistic-inductive designs based on qualitative measurement. The debate and competition between paradigms is being replaced by a new paradigm—a paradigm of choices. The paradigm of choices recognizes that different methods are appropriate for different situations" (pp. 19-20). In talking about research and scholarship on promoting wellness, Kelly (2000) has noted that while psychology's research tradition has been dominated by empirical investigations with tests and scales and experiments, "the Wellness scholar adopts new directions and listen to the stories of persons as they describe the people, occasions, and events that have made it possible for them to become more socially developed, competent, and effective in their coping" (Kelly, 2000, p. 112-113).

Kelly (2000) goes on to describe the research enterprise as a pluralistic process

The concept of family choice should be promoted within other efforts at system development. There needs to be developed, in collaboration with juvenile justice, education, and child welfare sectors, strategies that are practical and meaningful within their mandates and structures.

that uses a range of methods and data sources in order to best understand the phenomena of concern. Clearly, if psychology is to make the contribution that it is capable of making to creating more effective policy, then additional attention needs to be given to moving to expand its repertoire of research methodologies.

Summary

Psychology, as a discipline, has made enormous contributions to understanding human development, and to creating interventions that can assist at the level of the individual child and family. However, if psychology is now serious about moving to address policy at the macro level, and to addressing persistent, serious, and complex social problems, then more of the same by itself is not likely to get the job done. It is recommended that psychology build on its traditional approaches by adding more training in policy-related issues for graduate students, by increasing interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary training and research, by integrating the principles and concepts of complex adaptive systems within research and training, and by diversifying research methods to allow careful study of important policy and systems issues.

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