

The Discovery of People

THE LONG-SUSPECTED presence of people was the focal plane of a Conference on Human Behavior and Environmental Health held at the Fels Institute of Local and State Government, January 24-26, 1961, Philadelphia, jointly sponsored by the city of Philadelphia, the American Public Health Association, the National Sanitation Foundation, the University of Pennsylvania, and the Conference of Municipal Public Health Engineers.

To sharpen the focus, William C. Gibson, professor of public health engineering, University of Michigan, asserted there are values simply in developing the concept that social factors count in environmental programs. This was the objective, explained Walter Snyder, National Sanitation Foundation, of arranging this meeting of persons responsible for environmental programs with distinguished social scientists to discuss typical case histories of administration and to analyze the social processes. Gibson cited the equation used by George B. Darling, x plus y equals z , in which x represents technical knowledge, y the social process, and z the solution to environmental challenges. In this equation, Darling attached the highest importance to y .

When the social scientists were asked, "How can you help us to get people to do what we want them to do?" the question was rejected as improper. The function of the social scientist, they explained, is to ask the administrator whether he is right in what he wants people to do, to help him in perceiving the nature of the social processes.

Considering that public health is itself a social science, there was broad agreement with Frank Elder, APHA engineering associate, that "All of us have been practicing social science . . . for many years."

Place for Social Scientist

Rapporteurs for the several discussion groups at the meeting also found general agreement

that there is a place in the health department for a specialist in the social sciences. A variety of specific duties were suggested, including "a happy medium between research and consultation"; both formal and informal education in social sciences for all employees; preparing a primer on identifying and dealing with specialized elements of the community; helping the agency to define and delineate its image for the community; advising on social aspects of administration, including communications; and advising on timing, interagency relations, psychological implications, semantics, and values in agency plans.

There was broad but not universal agreement that the specialist in social sciences should have a staff rather than an operating function, apart from research; that "initiative for utilizing social science must come from the top executive of the health department"; that the social scientist would provide information on strategy, rather than technical knowledge; and that his duty is to "recognize and identify and not to attempt to give answers on how to do the job."

As put by Emil Tiboni, community hygiene chief for Philadelphia, the conference indicated the need to be alert to social implications before taking action, and to have available the resources to deal with the social dimension in public health practice, as and before conflicts become manifest. It was asserted that professionals of the highest competence and experience, not only in social sciences but in a variety of disciplines, should be consulted in the planning stages of health programs.

Rather than use the social sciences to support established objectives, health agencies were advised to learn how to take people as they are and still help them.

Environmentalists and social scientists present both agreed that there are many opportunities for acting in concert to recognize public needs and provide indicated health services.

Ward H. Goodenough, associate professor of anthropology, University of Pennsylvania,

stressed that it is necessary to consider at least six classes of environment: the health worker's perception of the professional environment; the community environment; the same two environments as the common citizen sees them; and the two as they may appear to a detached professional, presumably a social scientist.

At one point in the conference, the discussion of the professional's working environment developed into a review of the barriers which separate various disciplines in the health department, with suggestions for their coalition. Goodenough suggested that it would be desirable if those directly engaged in fieldwork could expect to attain as "clinical specialists" status and rewards comparable to those earned at headquarters, but he doubted such status would be possible unless the identification of the fieldworker with a special discipline could be broadened to encompass the whole field of public health. In the model he described of a health agency sandwiched between the pressures of a central power and the resistance of a democratic population, he emphasized the importance of the fieldworker in achieving the adjustment between the localized interest and the general interest.

Strategy and Sandtraps

In one of the sessions, a strategy of attack on the social factors in a program was summarized as: identifying the groups of interest, analyzing the power structure of the groups, influencing the centers of power, and with the aid of a few allies demonstrating the value of the proposed action.

In another session, the conferees discussed the sandtraps which lie in the way of effective analysis of the social process. High on the list was the assumption of omniscience, so that there is no questioning of the social situation or the rectitude of the program. Almost as high was the assumption that we live in what John Webster called a "mist of error," so ignorant that the opportunity for a rational course seems closed.

The tendency to generalize easily about social processes was felt to do too little justice to the subtlety, complexity, and mobility of the social process. At the same time, effective action can

be hobbled, it was felt, by too elaborate an approach without regard for the value of the idea or the possibility of a simple direct plan. It was suggested that the complex studies might be frustrating, while the feasible ones might be illuminating.

While it was obvious that information in itself often fails to produce the indicated action, the conferees were warned against discounting its value completely. Eventually, it was felt, the truth sinks in as it becomes effectively distributed, explained, and understood. Whatever value may be assigned to the subconscious, the status drive, selfish economic interest, social pressure, tradition, habit, or obsession, it was conceded, some element of rational behavior may persist. At the same time, complete reliance on information and education was counted as another trap.

The failure to consider timing was also mentioned. On the one hand, emergencies require prompt action without regard to the niceties of protocol. On the other, certain moves need to wait upon the readiness of those concerned, for whatever mental, technological, or economic adjustments are needed.

Western cultural traditions, with overtones of evangelism or the expectation of perfection, were said to trap the unwary into discounting the values of the opposition.

The tendency to speak of "the public" was deplored for obscuring the model of interacting social alliances, shifting around a hierarchy of pack leaders.

The social scientists themselves were cautioned against neglecting technological and economic factors in their analyses, and were asked to bear in mind that the social process in itself is not an academic exercise but a game that is usually played for keeps.

Experience abroad was cited in respect to the importance of speaking a language that is understood by the multitude, with understanding and regard for the values of those who "may not have as much confidence in statistics as we do."

For those accustomed to appraising all situations by physical measurement, it was submitted that a descriptive analysis, a model of relations within a program, may be as helpful as a set of statistics, that it was not always

practical to demand data on a social situation. As to the data, conferees were urged to be mindful of the need to validate information and to keep it current as the program moves along.

Although it was conceded that people are far more likely to support a program which they feel they have helped to develop, conferees were also alerted against the hazards of inviting the help of those who are ill-prepared or who are inevitably hostile. In this connection, several expressed the view that, since fluoridation did not require the active participation of the common citizen, it ought not to be referred for approval by the uninformed.

As these points, separated from their context, seemed somewhat like lines for Polonius, it was urged that they be related to real rather than hypothetical cases.

Donald Young, president, Russell Sage Foundation, observed that all the discussions he heard at the conference dealt with several familiar conflicts. The conflict of interest, usually the personal or individual interest against the collective interest, was one. Another issue, a conflict over costs, was to be figured not only in dollars but in competing values or mere convenience. Such conflicts occur, he said, with respect to obesity, seat belts, cigarettes, household poisons, and venereal disease, for example. The conflict of authorities also entered many public issues, he said, because the acceptance of one usually implies the rejection of others. In this conflict, he noted, those authorities with an idea to offer are usually at a disadvantage relative to those who offer a pill or some other concrete recommendation. But he concluded optimistically that as knowledge grows it becomes more specialized and detailed and more likely to provide specific and concrete recommendations, which are less susceptible to conflict than a general approach.

Specific issues raised by Gibson as a key-note related to the methods of changing patterns of behavior, the sacred cows in traditional health programs, and the relationship of social leadership to the wishes and values of the masses.

Social Frontier

Both P. Walton Purdom, Philadelphia's director of environmental health, in his introduction, and Herbert Bosch, professor of public health engineering, University of Minnesota, in his summary, emphasized the point that major environmental programs have technical solutions which are barred by the inability to overcome social and political obstacles. In effect, they said, the social sciences are a true frontier of environmental health.

Bosch asserted that the responsibilities placed on public health agencies by the evolving technology are such that environmental services will need every scientific discipline available. Noting that in the history of public health, before the specialists arrived, much was accomplished without refined knowledge, he compared the current work of sanitarians in the social sciences with the achievement of controlling typhoid fever before there was a science of bacteriology. But he observed that the task of carrying on a health program which includes social sciences does not raise the same questions as the employment of a specialist in social sciences in a health department.

He noted that if employees of a health agency are to have more training in social sciences, other forms of training may have to be reduced or the time of training extended. He also stated that the social scientist, to function in public health work, must learn about public health, again with a choice of lengthening the course of study or dropping other subjects. Such a trained person, he thought, could be effective not only as a staff adviser but possibly also in the major operational activities of an agency: enforcement, education, and service. Social scientists, he observed, are working now with engineers, sanitarians, and physical scientists on environmental programs, and are finding a place in the structure of health departments as well as ties of mutual interest and sympathy with other members of the staff.

NOTE: Publication of the full proceedings will be announced by the Philadelphia Department of Health.