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## **Toward "Good Enough" Services to Inaptly Served Families and Children: Barriers and Opportunities**

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# Toward "Good Enough" Services to Inaptly Served Families and Children: Barriers and Opportunities



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- Rosenfeld, J.M. **Learning from Success - How to Forge User-Friendly Social Work.** RR-310-97.
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## **Abstract**

The present paper draws attention to ways in which the goodness of fit between social services and their clients, both in the present and the past, determines the extent to which services are successful - in the sense that clients experience them as helpful and as furthering their well-being, and that there is objective evidence of improvement in their situation.

To provide an initial conceptual framework for exploration in this area, a number of terms are introduced and defined. These include "inapt service", "inaptly served families", and "good enough services".

It is contended that biases that promote inaptness, in the areas of policy, organization, practice, and research and evaluation, have contributed to the proliferation and perpetuation of inapt services. As a basis for further reflection and for efforts to transform "inapt" service systems into ones that are "good enough", twelve such biases are discussed.

Finally, premises and directions for action that promote such transformative efforts are suggested.

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# 1. Introduction

In a recent seminar and in a subsequent publication - *Out From Under* (Rosenfeld, Schon and Sykes, 1995) - an attempt was made to learn from the successes of projects in Israel that work with and for families with young children whom others had considered beyond help. For the purposes of the seminar, projects were considered "good enough" if they had (1) fostered relationships of mutual trust between workers and family members; (2) had a positive impact, over time, on those with whom they worked; and (3) not caused, as far as could be known, any negative effects.

The process of joint reflection with the professionals involved in these projects, brought to light a contrast between the ways in which they worked, and the work that took place in other social services. What seemed most special about these practitioners and their projects was their ongoing search for, and development of, practices and organizational arrangements that were highly sensitive to and responsive to the people whom they wished to help. The product of this effort was a much better "goodness of fit" between the service and the client than that achieved by services whose operations tended to be dictated by factors other than responsiveness to clients - such as theoretical orientations or organizational norms - leading them often to be less than helpful from the perspective of service recipients.

Putting the spotlight on successful programs brought into focus a factor which turned out to be essential to project success: recognition of past service shortcomings and of the effects of repeated failure of service transactions upon service providers and consumers. This phenomenon turns out to be critical especially for projects working with those for whom services in the past have been particularly unsuccessful.

This focus on the quality of the relationship between the services and the family is a distinct departure from a tendency in social services to give up on or to blame families: Failure to serve becomes acceptable when its cause is perceived as residing in character traits of the families, (e.g. "unmotivated", "resistant", "dysfunctional", "uncooperative", "chronic", "pathological" or "multiproblem"). This acceptance, however, prevents providers from engaging in a search for alternative modes of helping families whose need for service is greatest.

In order to promote such a search, we wish to introduce and explore the implications of two terms that distinctly focus on the provider-consumer relationship: "inapt" services (or "inaptly served" populations), and "good enough" services. After defining these terms and exploring the characteristics that predispose families to be inaptly served, a conceptual framework will be presented for understanding societal "biases towards inaptness" that have contributed to the proliferation of "inapt services", and that continue to support their operation. Finally, we

will propose directions for action which might provide opportunities for bringing about the proliferation of services that are "good enough".

The assumption underlying these proposals is that the onus for providing "good enough" services rests with the societies in which inaptly served families and children live. According to this assumption, it is the task of policymakers, administrators, and service providers to invent, consolidate, disseminate and support services in which workers are oriented towards accompanying and supporting these families in their journey towards a better future.

## **2. Initial Definitions**

The term "inapt" service is used here to describe a lack of fit between what a family needs and the outside help which is provided. This lack of fit has two primary components, each of which derives from the absence of a dialogue between the provider and the family about what would be helpful:

- 1) The provisions allocated (e.g. monetary transfers, short-term therapy, child care, etc.) are not those which the family finds helpful.
- 2) Provisions are transmitted in a way which is insensitive to cultural and interpersonal differences in the ways in which people are able to be helped (Krumer-Nevo, 1996).

We have chosen the term "good enough" services for depicting services in which there is a dynamic process of achieving and maintaining a goodness of fit between what a family needs and the provisions provided, on the one hand, and the relationships through which they are transmitted, on the other. Goodness of fit can only occur when services are provided through a process of ongoing dialogue between providers and recipients, a dialogue which leaves room for both participants to affect each other, i.e. to bring their experience and expertise to bear in defining goals and the processes through which they are to be attained. When there is such a goodness of fit, consumers of services are likely to experience the service as being helpful and as furthering their well-being.

One final aspect of "good enough" services has been described elsewhere (Rosenfeld, 1997) as the practice of "unconditional connecting": the process of accompanying others in their process of emergence from exclusion and defeat, without making one's presence conditional on mutuality, reciprocity, one's own personal gain, or on one wielding power over the other.



### **3. Characteristics of Inaptly Served Families**

It is our observation that certain characteristics predispose groups of families to be served inaptly by their society's service organizations and providers. These characteristics are:

- 1) a tendency to be *excluded* from mainstream societal participation;
- 2) the experience of multiple, ongoing, and oppressive *life burdens*;
- 3) extended families and communities to which they belong can not or do not provide required supplementary resources.

#### ***Exclusion from the Mainstream***

Certain population groups tend to be excluded from mainstream societal participation, some on the basis of their color, religion, or citizenship; others because they are poor or homeless; and still others in response to their exhibiting behaviors perceived as alien or unmanageable, as with the mentally ill or developmentally disabled. There is frequently little contact between members of these populations and those in the mainstream. To the extent that there is contact, it tends to be mediated by the operation of prevalent stereotypes vis a vis these population groups.

Welfare states generally provide some level of services to such excluded populations. But the organizations that serve these populations tend to be staffed and run by people of the mainstream who are not acquainted with the experiential worlds of the people whom they serve. In order to succeed, professionals who work with these populations must engage in an ongoing struggle to bridge the gap between their two separate worlds - without which their interactions with the families whom they are trying to serve tend to be marred by reciprocal or unilateral misperceptions and misunderstandings. Hence, unless the actual provisions and the manner in which they are offered are attuned to each family, services are bound to be and remain inapt.

#### ***Multiple, Ongoing, and Oppressive Life Burdens***

People differ in relation to the burdens that they carry in life. Some people, "victims of circumstance" (Towle, 1987), are faced with particularly oppressive life situations. For example, some people are born into families that lack the resources or capacity to care for them, or that actively abuse or neglect them; others are born with disabilities or genetic defects. Still others are exposed to natural or man-made disasters, or experience the incapacitation or death of persons with whom they are connected.

Families that are most likely to be inaptly served are those who bear not one but multiple, ongoing, oppressive burdens, each of which separately would tax the ability of any human being to cope. When these burdens are combined and become "chronic", the families and their coping resources are overwhelmed and exhausted. Having become incapacitated to

struggle on their own also diminishes their ability to acquire the resources required to cope and do more than survive.

***Extended Families and Communities to Which They Belong Can Not or Do Not Provide Required Supplementary Resources***

The families, who bear overwhelming burdens with meager resources at their disposal, depend upon the agents of society to provide them with the resources they require. The provisions required may be concrete resources such as income, food, or housing; or a range of psychosocial supports and services, in the areas of health care, day care, rehabilitation and treatment. When families and communities can not or do not take care of those members who face hardships such as those described above, these members are left unbuffered from their plights, facing alone overwhelming life situations.

While resource limitations in societal budgets certainly contribute to inadequate service provision, it is the factor of the families' social exclusion that contributes most to service inaptness. When professionals relate to the families via cultural stereotypes and professional definitions that unilaterally define them, the families are rendered powerless to affect the relationships through which these provisions are rendered. They then face two unsatisfactory alternatives: to take what they are offered, however "inaptly"; or to reject outside help, and to find, or not find, alternative ways to survive.

It is important to emphasize that the characteristics discussed here define not the families, but rather the circumstances within which they must find their way in life. Perhaps the people themselves should best be characterized as "survivors"; a term that gives recognition to the strength and inner resources required to "merely" survive when life and society have been particularly harsh.

#### **4. Social Biases that Perpetuate Inaptness**

The proliferation of inapt services for families has been perpetuated by a variety of biases operating in four dimensions:

- 1) professional practice,
- 2) service organization,
- 3) social policy,
- 4) research and evaluation.

This section will delineate several such biases in each of the above dimensions. This analysis is presented not as a criticism of what has been, but as an attempt to offer conceptual tools that can provide those who attempt to grapple with the challenge of transforming "inapt" into "good enough" services with leverage for effective action. By focusing on each of these areas



it should become possible to tease out factors that, if consciously and deliberately addressed, could contribute to the success of such efforts.

It should be noted that this analysis is an attempt to explicate a number of broad generalizations about trends. For every trend, obviously, there are exceptions. Elsewhere (Rosenfeld, 1997), an effort has been made to address the important learning that can be derived from these real world exceptions.

#### **4.1 Biases in Professional Practice**

Provisions allocated by social policies and organized by service frameworks, are transmitted by service practitioners, usually professionals, who deal directly with families in need of service provisions. There are three biases in prevalent professional practice that perpetuate inaptness.

- Focus on limitations rather than on possibilities;
- Transfer of modes of practice beneficial for mainstream clients, to families who are inaptly served;
- Professional socialization toward emotional distance in relationships between service professionals and their clients

##### ***Focus on Limitations Rather than on Possibilities***

One of the primary texts shaping professional discourse and practice in the human service fields in recent decades has been the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manuals (most recently the DSMIV, 1995). These handbooks have provided generations of therapists with a "scientific" framework for identifying and labeling different forms of psychological disorders. In the words of Barnard (1994):

We [have been] encouraged to perceive everyone we come in contact with as having some disorder, or if not in clear evidence, as having some sophisticated way of disguising their various deficits (p.136).

Indeed, much of professional practice has been shaped by the almost exclusive focus on damages and problems, on the one hand, and by a frequent failure to recognize and cash in on the strengths, resiliencies, and resources which families and children have developed in the course of their lives, on the other.

This bias promotes a shared despair between service providers and recipients, and dissuades both parties from moving "beyond despair" (Polanski, 1973), to where there is hope. Because professionals focus on limitations rather than on possibilities, they encourage maintenance

of the quasi-stability vested in unsatisfactory situations, and discourage efforts to explore and venture into what has never been.

An alternative perspective on how to respond to limitations, one based on an understanding of a "recovery process", was recently expressed by Patricia Deegan, a psychologist recovering from schizophrenia (1995):

Being in recovery means that I know that I have certain limitations and things I can't do. But rather than letting these limitations be an occasion for despair and giving up, I have learned that in knowing what I can't do, I also open upon the possibilities of all the things I can do (p. 10).

Services for inaptly served families that focus on problems and their removal are inapt when they lack a vision of these families' developmental possibilities. In order for these services to become "good enough", their practitioners must develop the capacity to look beyond the family's present situation and to perceive potentials often hidden even from the families themselves, which they then help family members to actualize.

***Transfer of Modes of Practice for Mainstream Families, to Families who are Inaptly Served***

Over the past several decades, the most widely described and implemented modes of practice - such as psychotherapy, family therapy, and parent education - have been developed in the context of work with mainstream individuals and families with interpersonal difficulties.

These forms of intervention turn out to be of very little use for individuals in inaptly served families, especially when offered in isolation from other services and supports (Schorr and Schorr, 1988; Rosenfeld, 1993). Nonetheless, perhaps because human service professionals are most familiar with these conventional modes of practice, these are the ones most commonly provided. Schorr and Schorr (1988) describe this phenomenon:

When the family's more immediate needs make the quest for internal psychological change seem like an unaffordable luxury, and when the terms for obtaining therapy... exceed the family's organizational resources, psychotherapy is least likely to be helpful. Nevertheless, it is often the only intervention offered to families in distress.

Conventional parent education..... is another intervention that is often quite irrelevant to socially isolated and otherwise seriously disadvantaged parents. The mother who needs the most help with parenting - because she is alcoholic, depressed, or under serious economic stress, or perhaps was profoundly neglected during her own childhood - is unlikely to find the information offered by most parenting classes very useful (p.261).



Using inappropriate modes of practice in work with inaptly served families sets up professionals and families for inevitable failure. When the inappropriateness of the intervention is neither recognized nor acknowledged, families and professionals make sense of the "unhelpful" encounter by blaming one another or by insisting that the intervention was helpful, even if the family members do not think so.

To act in this vein has its cost. When failure is attributed to family members, it reinforces their already substantial sense of being no good and the professional's negative perception of them and of other similar families. When the family castigates the professional, it becomes ever more despairing of the possibility of outside help. Finally, when professionals believe that their practices are helpful when they are not, they will continue to practice as before rather than learn what they might do differently, here and now.

### ***Professional Socialization toward Emotional Distance in Relationships between Service Professionals and their Clients***

Professional training of service professionals generally includes socialization to a particular form of relationship with service recipients that is considered to be "professional". Thus Pecker (1995) found that beginning social workers in social welfare bureaus were socialized to keep an emotional distance from clients. Those that strove to develop caring and egalitarian relationships with clients were given prompt and clear feedback by both peers and supervisors that their approach was "unprofessional". The reasons given for this judgement varied: "You're too identified with the client"; "You're too close to her"; "You're acting like a friend, not a social worker".

The underlying rationale for maintaining a professional distance derives from the predominant epistemology of professional practice that Schon (1983) calls "technical rationality". According to this notion, knowledge for practice consists of instrumental know-how and becomes "professional" when it is grounded in systematic - preferably scientific - knowledge.

Professionals are thus seen as experts whose access to and training in a core of systematic, scientific knowledge equips them with preferred modes of action that can be particularly effective when applied to certain types of problems.

Since professional expertise aspires to be grounded in science, professional action tends to be modeled on the activities of scientists. Hence, like scientists doing experiments, professionals are trained to maintain an emotionally detached stance toward the objects of their interventions. It is this detachment that presumably enables them to assess situations and outcomes objectively and without personal bias.

Authors who have either studied or participated in efforts to help inaptly served populations (e.g. Schorr and Schorr, 1988; Lew, 1989; Walker, 1995; Briere, 1993), have noted that this type of "professional" relationship simply does not work for people who, on the basis of their life experience, have very good reason to mistrust those who would help them. As Schorr (1993) notes, "relationship issues turn out to be particularly important among marginal people who have given up on helping systems". It is more than likely that for these people a very different type of presence is required from workers.

It should be noted that all these - the focus on limitations rather than on possibilities, the transfer of available practices and the maintenance of distance - are just some of the professional practices that undermine efforts to effectively help the inaptly served.

## **4.2 Biases in Service Organization**

Recognizing that certain populations require and are entitled to publicly-sponsored service provisions, societies have recourse to a variety of organizational frameworks through which to transmit them. These frameworks, and the ways in which they are organized and managed, inevitably have important impacts on the persistence of inaptness of service provision.

This section will describe three organizational biases that perpetuate inaptness that have contributed to the development and proliferation of inapt services:

- Institutional acceptance of inaptness as unavoidable;
- Lack of contexts which enable workers to effectively address the practice-related burdens that accompany their jobs;
- Prevalence of services that are problem-focused rather than people- or family-focused.

### ***Institutional Acceptance of Inaptness as Unavoidable***

"Good enough" service requires that service providers be oriented towards learning from the families what it is they need and how they can best be helped, and then devising a service response which will be uniquely adapted to each particular family.

This type of service provision is in contradistinction to the familiar situation in which providers approach service transactions armed with a set of relatively standardized, fixed responses at their disposal which they apply to extremely diverse situations. Inevitably these solutions will be good enough for a certain proportion of client families, and inapt for the rest.

Often inaptness is institutionalized and becomes part and parcel of organizational cultures. This occurs when workers are encouraged to do their best with the resources that are allocated to them, and not to take responsibility for devising solutions that go beyond existing limitations. When what is available is insufficient or inappropriate, however unfortunate it



might be, this does not become a cause for pressure for innovation within the service, or for a search for alternative pathways.

Yet inaptness can be transformed only if providers are given the freedom and authority to innovate in the field, if they are encouraged to succeed where others have failed, and if there is room for challenging resource allocation decisions that leave workers emptyhanded in their efforts to respond to their client families. Since such conditions would challenge if not undermine the hierarchical bureaucratic structures within which services are generally embedded, efforts to bring about their introduction often face insurmountable obstacles.

***Lack of Contexts which Enable Workers to Effectively Address the Practice-Related Burdens that Accompany their Jobs***

Front-line human service workers who work with inaptly served populations regularly face extraordinarily painful human situations. Stevenson (1992) relates to this phenomenon in her article on social work intervention to protect children:

Every time good work is done in child protection cases, the workers are exposed to the suffering of the children or their families. This suffering comprises different elements. There is a hurt child; a child who is ambivalent about her/his parents; hurt parents, sometimes themselves in conflict; parents who are ambivalent about their children.... The worker has to absorb and manage [all this] internally if he/she is to be helpful (p.29).

Stevenson notes that in service settings in the area of child protection, issues of accountability and procedures tend to be emphasized, while the confused and troubled feelings of the workers are usually bypassed. Thus front-line workers are rarely supported in ways that enable them to cope with the extreme emotional, intellectual, and practical stresses they are exposed to in their jobs. Even regular and competent supervision, which is increasingly a rarity, tends to be embedded within a hierarchical context, a context that makes it risky for workers to address their own vulnerabilities and the ways in which these are affected by the stresses and strains of their work.

***Prevalence of Services that are Problem-Focused Rather than People- or Family-Focused***

The problem-focused organization of service delivery inevitably requires the compartmentalization of social realities that in turn facilitates and encourages the proliferation of divisions, each with separate responsibilities for different social problems. Consequently, as one moves down the service hierarchy, units relate to more and more specific and boundaried aspects of larger problems.

This formal organization of service provision mandates each service agency to relate to only certain problems or issues that arise in the lives of families that it serves. For problems that

lie outside its mandated boundaries, families are referred to a different sector, elsewhere in the system. This procedure, however plausible on organizational charts, is not responsive to the needs of these families and perpetuates inapt services.

When this is the case, families can easily fall into the cracks between service divisions and receive no services at all, either because their problems fail to meet the criteria of any one service division, or because service agencies continuously, and even legitimately, "pass the buck" and refer families elsewhere.

Similarly, in order for multiple agencies to be effectively involved with families whose problems cross agency boundaries, the efforts of workers from each agency must be guided by a degree of interagency coordination that rarely occurs.

Finally, when a worker represents interests and constraints imposed by the larger organizational system, their primary concern is not necessarily to do what is best for the families. In the words of a mother recently interviewed (Sykes and Goldman, 1996):

When you turn to a social worker there are always constraints. She won't do the best thing for me. She'll tell me all the reasons why she can't do what's best. No social worker ever offered me something that would be good for my child without it being connected to all kinds of constraints, budgetary or otherwise.

The institutional acceptance of inaptness as unavoidable, the inadequate support for workers burdened by the strain of their work, and the focus on distinct problems rather than on the persons plagued by the problems, are only some of the interconnected features of most service organizations which are bound to contribute to the inaptness of service provisions to those families and children.

### **4.3 Biases in Social Policy**

Social policies establish and communicate social priorities through the determination of what societal resources will be made available and to whom. We have identified three biases which have contributed to the likelihood that policy decisions will perpetuate inapt service provisions:

- Biases against the advisability of investing in the families;
- Frame conflicts that prevent the resolution of social policy controversies that affect these families;
- Non-participation of the families - as consumers - in decisions about service provision.



### ***Biases Against the Advisability of Investing in the Families***

There is ample evidence which shows that it is possible to succeed when serving inaptly served families and children. One of the most persuasive studies in this area is Schorr and Schorr's *Within Our Reach* (1988). Their basic premise is that since many effective and replicable programs have been developed for inaptly served families, it is in society's interest to invest in them on a much broader scale. In the words of the former Chairman of the American House Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families, Representative George Miller of California:

What you found is what this Committee found, and what we keep finding over and over again: when it comes to services for kids and families in poverty, where it is done in a first class fashion, it succeeds beyond our wildest dreams. And everywhere we've tried to do it on the cheap, everywhere we've tried to cut a corner, we end up spending money with no appreciable results (p.293).

One way of accounting for the failure to invest in these families by establishing "first class" programs may be the persistence of unacknowledged biases on the part of decisionmakers. These biases predispose decisionmakers to view such solutions as counter to the public interest. Among these biases are:

- 1) The belief that certain families or populations are "beyond help". According to this belief, the more these families are helped, the more help they will require. It is argued that helping them would deplete society's resources, which would then become unavailable for other social priorities.
- 2) The belief that while such families can consume social resources, they cannot produce them. This belief reinforces a major curse of the lives of families that live in exclusion - that they have little opportunity to contribute to society (Rosenfeld, 1989). It confounds thinking about the ways in which they might contribute, and blocks the search for and opening up of avenues for such contribution.
- 3) The belief that inaptly served families are somehow responsible for their fate. Accordingly, they not only do not deserve to be bailed out of their troubles, but providing them with generous public assistance is actually doing both them and society a disservice because it creates incentives for them to remain irresponsible. This belief creates blindness to both the objectively heavy burdens that these families bear, and to their often heroic struggle and efforts to meet their overwhelming responsibilities.
- 4) The belief that inaptly served families pose dangers to society. The higher incidence of crime, violence, substance abuse, teen pregnancies etc. among these families is seen as evidence that they are somehow inherently bad. Hence, not only must they not be helped,

they must be actively excluded, controlled, and distanced to prevent them from harming the rest of society. Families are perceived as dangerous, and their positive attributes remain unseen by those around them.

Enumerating these biases does not make them disappear. However, reflecting upon them could be a first step towards challenging their validity, exploring their irrational origins, and analyzing their effects on specific policy decisions. This would open the way to considering alternative beliefs that could contribute to the development and proliferation of good enough services.

*Frame Conflicts that Prevent the Resolution of Social Policy Issues that Affect these Families*

Schon and Rein (1994) write that disputes about certain social issues, which they call intractable "policy controversies", are immune to resolution by appeal to facts. When such controversies present themselves, opposing parties employ different strategies of selective attention or inattention. Disputes of this kind arise particularly around such issues as crime, welfare, abortion, drugs or poverty, all of which have relevance for many of the families which are inaptly served.

Schon and Rein explain this phenomenon in the following way:

We see policy positions as resting on underlying structures of belief, perceptions, and appreciation which we call frames. We see policy controversies as disputes in which the contending parties hold conflicting frames. Such disputes are resistant to resolution by appeal to facts or reasoned argumentation because the parties' conflicting frames determine what counts as a fact and what arguments are taken to be relevant and compelling. Moreover, the frames that shape policy positions and underlie controversy are usually tacit, which means that they are exempt from conscious attention and reasoning (p. 23).

Thus, as a result of these unrecognized frame conflicts, issues that are most pressing for inaptly served families are also among those that are most resistant to resolution. Participants in the policymaking process repeatedly find themselves unable to communicate with one another meaningfully so as to arrive at new and more adequate perspectives.

Policy efforts that aim to contribute to the well-being of these families can succeed therefore only if ways are found to promote a different form of policy discourse, one which explicitly reflects on the frames that underlie policy positions. Only through such frame reflection might these "intractable controversies" be transformed into the basis for mutual exploration and learning.



### ***Non-Participation of the Families - as Consumers - in Decisions about Service Provisions***

Inaptly served families, by virtue of their dependence upon public assistance, are particularly vulnerable to policy decisions regarding rules and regulations, laws, prohibitions, entitlements, and modes of resource allocations that often have extremely adverse effects on their well-being.

Yet these same families have little or no voice in or influence on the decisionmaking process at either national or local levels. Policy decisions tend to be shaped by politicians, service bureaucrats, and organized interest groups. Even if the families chose to insist on their participation, due to their life circumstances, they lack the resources, know-how, and interpersonal connections needed to make this participation effective.

However, people in the societal mainstream tend to know little of the experiential worlds of the excluded. Only the excluded themselves hold the knowledge as to what service provisions they genuinely need, and what leads them to perceive a service provider as helpful. Hence, without special and deliberate efforts to engage them in a process of collaborative inquiry, the decisions made about them and their needs are bound to perpetuate services that are inapt rather than good enough.

Awareness of the powerful negative contribution of biases, of intractable policy controversies, and of excluding families from forums in which policy decisions are made that impact upon them, points to a need to reconsider the processes through which these policies are derived. Such rethinking could hopefully lead in the direction of changes that would contribute to the development of "good enough" service provisions for inaptly served families.

## **4.4 Biases in Research and Evaluation**

### ***Families Not Recognized as Gatekeepers to Knowledge***

Researchers who wish to study issues relevant to inaptly served families can only rarely work on their own. In order for their research to be meaningful, they must often devote considerable energies to gaining access to multiple sources of funding, developing cooperative relationships with service bureaucracies charged with serving the families, and gaining the trust of professional and lay leadership in the specific communities who give them access to the families themselves.

Organizations and their representatives have their own values, interests, and agendas which they expect to be addressed in return for their support of research projects. These representatives are, thus, gatekeepers whose cooperation can open the door to resources needed by the researcher, and whose opposition can block the way to progress in the



research. During the design and implementation of any such study, researchers must attune themselves to and sensitively address the needs and concerns of these gatekeepers.

In the effort to gain the acceptance and cooperation of the various gatekeepers, the recognition that the families themselves are the ultimate gatekeepers is too often missed. Only through learning about *their* experiences, perceptions, and understandings, can researchers learn what they and others like them need and how they can best be helped.

While the families, as objects of research, may not have the power to prevent studies from being carried out and reported upon, they *do* have the power to provide or withhold what only they know. They, who have so much reason to be mistrustful of the motives of those who come to study them, have to be acknowledged as gatekeepers who need to be understood and catered to because it is they who hold the key to much of the knowledge that research seeks to generate.

#### ***Paucity of Research that Contributes to Practice with Inaptly Served Families***

Very little of the research relevant to inaptly served populations is designed in ways that render them useful to practitioners struggling to do their best within the constraints and complexities of field practice. Instead, research is typically oriented to academic audiences, or to members of the policy community.

By definition, academic research is designed to contribute to the development of a basic understanding of social phenomena. It tends to be couched in terms of "normal social science" (Schon, 1996), with analysis of associations of multiple variables, and attempts to predict and explain their variance. This may well serve the policy community in its attempts to promote rational decisionmaking about how the allocation of societal resources might be better targeted - using mapping of the prevalence of a defined problem in specific populations, or evaluating the effectiveness of alternative interventions.

These forms of research, however, do not address the requirements of practitioners who need research that is derived from the exploration of their practice, and that is "practitioner-friendly". Such research is couched in a language that is easily connectable to practice, and that illuminates for practitioners working with inaptly served families the underlying assumptions, theories of action and actionable knowledge that would actually guide them in their work.

#### ***Evaluations Too Rarely Utilized as Learning Opportunities***

Three major groups - funders, project managers and staff, and consumers of services - could benefit from the learning opportunities provided by program evaluation, but for various reasons this learning rarely takes place to the extent that it might.

*Funders*, because of their need for evaluations in order to make and justify funding decisions vis a vis alternative allocations of funding, seek to employ "rational", "objective" instruments that will give them data for comparison across projects. They may not be inclined to grapple with other aspects of a project, critical to its development, that do not fit into their requirements. These include, for example, conflicts of interest among involved parties, or the "multiple, conflicting, and evolving purposes that are discovered only in the course of carrying out a program" (Schon and Rein, 1994).

Evaluations can provide *project managers and staff* opportunities for learning how they could be more effective and user-friendly. This learning opportunity, however, is frequently missed because:

- 1) evaluation is generally equated with criticism, which can lead to defensiveness among staff;
- 2) project staff are dependent to a certain extent for their job security upon the decisions of project evaluators, also leading to defensiveness.
- 3) evaluators and project staff view the same activities from different frames of reference, frequently leading to conflict and a mutual sense of being misunderstood.

*Consumers of services* have much to gain from and to contribute to evaluations that would enhance the capacity of services to be helpful to them. But in order for this to happen, they must know that their opinions are valued and that evaluators are truly interested in their authentic perceptions of the services and how they are provided. Yet in reality consumers - unaccustomed to having their opinions on such matters taken seriously, dependent upon services, and unsure that what they say will not cause them or their children damage - may not always share their true perceptions.

If evaluation is to be used as a tool to develop "good enough" services, ways must be found to create a common language of evaluation. This would entail creating learning contexts and processes in which each participant contributes from his own perspective, recognizes the limitations of his perspective, and seeks to enhance and broaden it by struggling to understand the different but equally valid perspectives of others.

In summary, modes of research and evaluation have been biased toward inaptness in the following ways: research projects, whose choice has been biased by processes external to the families, are of little relevance to the families and the practitioners who serve them, while evaluation efforts have too little regard for the perspectives of the families and of the practitioners who know them well. Far less common have been modes of research and evaluation in which practitioners and families are full partners in the coproduction and coevaluation of practices and organizational structures, and which are driven by a shared desire to develop "good enough" services for families who have been inaptly served.



## **5. Transforming "Inapt" into "Good Enough" Service Systems: Some Guidelines**

So far this article has introduced the concepts "inapt" and "good enough" services, described characteristics of the populations that have tended to be "inaptly served" by social services, and provided an overview of the "biases to inaptness" that have contributed to the development and proliferation of "inapt services" for these populations.

While recognition of the prevalence of inapt services and of their social and cultural embeddedness may well engender a sense of the futility of efforts to produce change, our own efforts are an attempt to address this challenge and provide clues and directions as to how one might proceed towards transforming inapt into good enough service systems. It may be worthy of note that the emphasis here is on *transforming existing systems rather than creating new ones*. This rests on the assumption that in the face of the prevailing exclusion of inaptly served families, their well-being depends on being as much as possible within, rather than parallel to or outside of, universal service systems.

The following sections first clarify four general premises for action which might guide those interested in engaging in the transformation of inapt systems, and then present a series of more specific directions which transformative action might take.

### **5.1 Premises for Action**

Efforts at transforming inapt into good enough services should be guided by the following four interrelated premises:

#### ***Premise #1: Actions have to be multidimensional***

In order to transform existing inapt into good enough service systems there must be a readiness to address, and to launch, in a coordinated and well-targeted manner, innovative initiatives on all of the dimensions described here - i.e. policy, organization, practice, research and evaluation. Concurrent and complementary strategies may produce first reciprocal effects and then synergies providing the impetus towards transformation.

#### ***Premise #2 Successful practice as a point of departure for action***

Traditionally, attempts to address issues connected with the provision of services have tended to assume that practices are derivatives of policies and that they need to adapt to prevailing organizational structures. However, if inapt services are to be transformed into good enough services, both the provisions provided the families (derivatives of policy) and the relationships through which they are transmitted (derivatives of practice paradigms), need to be reconsidered in light of the types of practice perceived as helpful and furthering the families' well-being. Identification of provisions and practices which are good enough for

inaptly served families is thus a precondition for consideration of the question of what are the kinds of policies and modes of organization which facilitate good enough services.

***Premise #3: Congruence between policy, organization, practice, and research***

While the four dimensions - policy, organization, practice, and research - are clearly interrelated as described here, professionals working in each dimension tend to develop in ways that promote persistent divisions between them (Laws and Rein, 1996). These divisions lead to incongruencies between dimensions that perpetuate inaptness.

The development and proliferation of good enough services are optimized when these divisions can be discerned and deliberately addressed, as part of a process of promoting increasing levels of congruence between those engaged in policy, organization, practice, and research. If relations between dimensions are to become synergetic, shared goals, values, and language need to be developed. An example of such an effort is the work of the "International Initiative" (Nelson, 1993).

***Premise #4: Readiness to discover and generate new constructs for action***

Forging good enough services means transforming prevailing inapt ones. To do so means introducing new frames of thinking, i.e. generating and exploring the implications of social constructs that depart from the prevailing ones, described above - some of which are deeply embedded in the popular, intellectual and professional cultures.

To do so requires a readiness for being at the crossroads between constructs and concepts, i.e. for engaging in a process of discovery rather than of application. The intellectual reorientation which this requires can be guided by the ideas of Schon and his colleagues. This refers to the stance of the "reflective practitioner" who reflects in and on the course of his action (Schon, 1983); to the shift from a Model I mode of learning to a personal and institutional mode of learning based on Model II (Argyris and Schon, 1996); to the ideas of "frame reflection" and "design rationality" (Schon and Rein, 1994); to the notion of developing "rigorous case-based research" (Schon, 1996); and to the reintegration of research, policy, and practice (Laws and Rein, 1996).

In each of these instances, Schon and his colleagues place predominant constructs in larger contexts, explore their limitations, and propose alternative constructs which might pave the way for outcomes that have previously been elusive. One feature that all of these orientations have in common is that only through the development of collaborative, trust-based relationships between partners that bring different perspectives to bear on a situation, is it possible to generate new ideas and constructs that illuminate previously unseen opportunities and possibilities for action.



## **5.2 Directions for Action**

On the basis of these premises, we shall now explore five directions for transforming inapt into good enough services. Some of these directions are currently in the process of implementation in our work, and others are derived from earlier sections of this paper. The sequence in which these directions are presented does not imply a recommended sequence for implementation. Nor is any claim being made that these directions are exhaustive of all possibilities. We see them as a preliminary list of mutually reinforcing foci for action.

### ***Direction #1: Promoting "field laboratories" for developing, documenting, and evaluating good enough services for inaptly served families***

Good enough projects within current systems can only flourish if they are supported financially and organizationally without the need to compromise on those crucial aspects that make them work. Such an uncompromising stance, while unrealistic with regard to an entire system, may be attainable in certain well-defined territories.

Those working within existing service systems who wish to move towards good enough services for inaptly served children and families, can begin by establishing projects that will serve as "laboratories" or "greenhouses" for developing, documenting, and evaluating good enough projects. This strategy is based on an assumption that collaborative operation of a number of such "R&D laboratories" is bound to have a cumulative and reciprocal impact on the services that operate in their environment, as other professionals and population groups learn through their example about what good enough service is and how it can be developed.

Such "laboratories" already exist within some service establishments. Good examples are the programs Yachdav and Orion in Israel (Rosenfeld, Schon and Sykes, 1995), initiated and supported in the ways described here by innovatively inclined senior officials within the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs.

### ***Direction #2: Learning from success: Explicating and disseminating what works***

Successes are accomplished even under inauspicious conditions. These exceptions create valuable opportunities for learning about what it takes to succeed and as such constitute the leading edge for the development of good enough services.

Rosenfeld (1997) describes three sources for "learning from success": 1) professionals and others reflecting on their action; 2) studies of the resilient; and 3) effective partnerships between professionals and clients. In each case, the main challenge is to explicate what it is that has worked and to present it in actionable terms, i.e. in a language which allows one to apply and to disseminate it.

There are various modes for engaging in such work. Here we shall only refer to that nascent but growing body of literature from our own work that describes one way to extricate actionable knowledge for inaptly served families and children from projects that have succeeded in helping them (e.g. Rosenfeld, 1989; Rosenfeld, Schon and Sykes, 1995; Sykes and Goldman, 1996, 1997; Rosenfeld and Tardieu, 1997; Rosenfeld, 1997; Nowik and Sykes, 1997). In each of these efforts detailed collaborative case documentation was used to create the basis for engaging in a learning process which uses joint reflection.

In this process, project workers, family members, researchers, decisionmakers and others engaged in a project, as well as others from related fields of endeavor, convene to reflect together on documented cases. Each participant brings to bear his own relevant experiences and perspectives, for the purpose of generating new learning and arriving ultimately at formulations of factors that have contributed to success that can be generalized and applied in other situations.

Learning seminars of this type have multiple benefits. First, they generate rich documentation of service options that have been field-tested. This includes detailed descriptions of local contexts that others who would learn from the projects can compare to their own situations, to discern the extent to which the former needs to be adapted or "reinvented" so that it responds to their specific context of work.

Second, the "inventors" and heads of such projects who reflect together about each others' projects are given the opportunity to see their own projects from a broader perspective, and to recognize both the commonalities that underlie "good enough" projects for any population and local context, as well as the ways in which each project is unique in response to its specific population and local context.

Finally, such "learning from success" provides a training ground for participants in reflection that will contribute to their ability to serve as partners, consultants and resources to others working with different populations or in different geographical areas.

***Direction #3: Ferreting out examples of inaptness as points of entry for exploring good enough alternatives***

Argyris and Schon (1996) note that nearly all organizations are characterized by defensive learning systems that promote self-protective postures on the part of their employees. Indeed, in many services, failure is rarely acknowledged and, if it is, it is as a means for blame and sanctions, and rarely as a means for developing more effective alternatives for action.

In contrast, the open, organization-wide acknowledgement of inaptness of service can open the door to learning about contextual factors that preclude the possibility of the provision of good enough services. To move beyond what is and has been, to explore alternatives, to



generate and explicate what *is* good enough, requires an ambience for conjoint learning or the coevolution of action. Such learning requires the creation of opportunities for conjoint reflection that enables all the participants, including those served, to use what has gone wrong as a point of departure for considering and experimenting with action possibilities that had been outside their previous frames of reference.

One example of this is a project named "To be a 'Good Enough' Parent: Towards a Partnership between Public Health Nurses and Parents of At-Risk or Neglected Infants and Toddlers" recently implemented in Israel (Rosenfeld and Levi, 1998). In this project, nurses in Well Baby Centers were provided with opportunities to reflect on their transactions with families with whom they felt stymied. Challenged by the opportunity to move beyond their limits, participants engaged in a process of recognizing the limitations of former practices with regard to these families, and of identifying, conceptualizing and implementing more fitting approaches.

This process was facilitated by involved but non-partisan persons from outside the organization who "joined" the nurses at their workplaces, honored their perspectives, concerns, and wishes, and indeed their and their clients' dormant aspirations. A similar project has now been launched with social workers in social welfare bureaus serving families with children whom they have not been able to serve before.

***Direction #4: Establishing forums for promoting the pragmatic resolution of policy controversies***

Professional and academic disciplines tend to develop on separate tracks, often lacking dialogue with and feedback from other related disciplines. Schon (1983) and Schon and Rein (1994) document the divisions that have separated practice, research, and policy, and the deleterious effects that this has had for each. Over time, each discipline has developed its own frames based on its particular perspectives, and has struggled to establish its primacy over other conflicting frames derived from other perspectives.

If progress is to be made in responding to pressing social issues, these frames must be acknowledged and reflected upon, as a basis for using more inclusive frames that make room for the unique contribution and perspective of all participants. According to Schon and Rein (1994), this cannot happen when, as in academic discourse, such policy controversies are abstracted from the situations in which they arise. It is only possible to address them effectively when they are struggled with in the context of the "fruitful mire of an actual policy arena".

While the "fruitful mire of an actual policy arena" presents potential opportunities for frame reflection, for creative policy design, and for the development of relationships of mutual trust



among key actors, such optimistic outcomes are rare indeed. Most efforts at dialogue between parties to policy controversy are at best barren, and commonly explosive.

Progress in this area perhaps awaits both the development of meta-models that provide perspective on competing frames, as recently developed by Namir (1996), and the emergence of a cadre of professionals with the skills necessary to facilitate such potentially explosive processes. According to Schon and Rein (1994), who advocate the development of a "reflective policy practicum", such professionals would need to be skillful at reflecting on the frames that underlie differing positions, at inventing policies and practices that synthesize elements of conflicting frames, and at contributing to the development of the kind of mutual trust that is necessary to sustain frame-reflective inquiry in situations of controversy.

***Direction #5: Creating partnerships with those who have been inaptly served to learn and apply lessons from their experience***

Recognition of the burdens carried by those who tend to be inaptly served brings into greater focus the tremendous strength required in order to merely survive under such difficult circumstances. This shift in perspective makes possible a transformation of the ways in which society relates to the inaptly served. They can be seen as people who not only take from society, but who, as a result of their life experience, have much to give - to themselves, to each other, to professionals, and to society at large.

Thus, for example, Pecker (1995) found that social workers in one good enough program for mothers of children at-risk noted their newfound ability to perceive strengths in the women that had previously gone unrecognized. Workers spoke of how much the women contributed to one another, as well as of the strength, satisfaction, and motivation that they themselves derived from their relationships with them.

Other programs go even further. They utilize or employ former clients whose expertise derives primarily from their having "been there" - whether survivors of childhood abuse, perpetrators of family violence, people with mental illness or addictions, parents of children with disabilities, etc. - and having successfully emerged (e.g. Dixon, Kraus and Lehman, 1994; Fisher, 1994; Giaretto, 1989; Sykes and Wylie, 1996). Such former clients often serve as sponsors who form mentoring relationships that complement and supplement the work of professionals.

Indeed, people who have survived and "come out from under" their previous burdens can give voice to the experience of the person struggling with those same burdens, and can provide clues as to what they did and what others might do to achieve this positive outcome. Services would have much to gain by beginning to recognize and employ the expertise of such survivors. If they are to do so, they must begin to actively seek them out, encourage

them to make their voices heard, document the lessons of their experience, and generate channels for them to contribute to service development and provision.

## **6. Summary and Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to draw attention to ways in which the goodness of fit between social services and their clients, both in the present and the past, determine the extent to which services are successful - especially in the sense that clients experience them as helpful and as furthering their well-being.

A number of terms have been introduced and defined, in the hope that they will provide an initial linguistic framework for exploration in this area. These include "inapt" service, "inaptly served" families, and "good enough" services.

It was contended that biases that perpetuate inaptness, in the areas of policy, organization, practice, and research and evaluation, have contributed to the proliferation of inapt services and continue to support their operation. Twelve such biases were discussed, as a basis for further reflection and for efforts to transform inapt service systems into ones that are good enough.

Finally, four premises for action and five directions for action were delineated which, we believe, can separately and together, contribute to transformative efforts.

The contents of the present article while, on the one hand, theoretical, are informed both by practice and organizational experience, and by our present efforts to promote such transformative change in different service systems in Israel. It is our hope that the analysis sets a new and generative frame for thinking about relationships between services and their various participants, one which strikes a responsive chord with others engaged in such work, and which encourages and guides others who would take up the challenges and opportunities which are an inherent part of this journey.



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# ג'וינט-מכון ברוקדייל

## "והיינו הולמים": לקראת שירותים "טובים דיים" עבור משפחות וילדים

יונה מ. רוזנפלד ♦ ישראל י. סייקס

ד ו ח מ ח ק ר



## ג'וינט-מכון ברוקדייל מהו?

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המחקר במכון מתבסס על גישה בין-תחומית. במכון חמש יחידות עיקריות:

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- ◆ קליטת עלייה
- ◆ מוגבלות
- ◆ המרכז לילדים ולנוער



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## תקציר

מאמר זה מצביע על האופנים השונים שבהם "טיב ההתאמה", בהווה ובעבר, בין שירותים חברתיים לבין לקוחותיהם, משפיע על מידת הצלחתם של השירותים. הצלחה זו באה לידי ביטוי במידה בה הלקוחות חשים שנעזרו ושהשירותים תרמו לרווחתם; וקיומן של עדויות אובייקטיביות המעידות על שיפור במצבם של הלקוחות.

בתחילת המאמר מוצגים ומוגדרים מספר מונחים המהווים בסיס למסגרת מושגית שבאמצעותה ניתן לבחון נושאים אלה. מושגים אלה כוללים: "שירות לא הולם", "משפחות שקיבלו שירותים לא הולמים", ו"שירותים טובים דיים".

המאמר טוען שהטיות בתחום המדיניות, ההערכות האירגונית, הפרקטיקה, המחקר וההערכה תורמות להתפתחותם של שירותים "בלתי הולמים" ולהתמדה בדפוסי מתן שירות "בלתי הולמים". שתיים עשרה הטיות מסוג זה נדונות במאמר על מנת לקדם את הדיון בתכנון ויישום של שירותים שהם "טובים דיים".

לבסוף, מוצגים מספר הנחות יסוד וכיווני פעולה, שביכולתם לקדם מאמצים להפיכתם של שירותים מ"בלתי הולמים" ל"טובים דיים".



## תודות

המחברים מבקשים להודות לאנשים אלה על הערותיהם המועילות על הטיוטות הקודמות של מסמך זה: ג'ק חביב, טלל דולב, חנה כץ, הארולד ריצימן, דונלד שון, שמעון שפירו וארנון ברון. תודה גם לטרי בנינגה על העריכה הלשונית.

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