

DISCUSSION

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I am indebted to Alan Meyer and Stanley Bigman for a most instructive and thoughtful presentation of problems faced in the evaluation of narcotic addiction control programs. What I am about to say is in no way intended to detract from the value of their case but rather to raise some questions about further generalization that their paper suggested to me.

From a methodological point of view I wonder what, if anything, is unique about evaluations of narcotic addiction control programs. Are there methodological problems which are specific to the evaluation of such programs or, if not specific, are at least more serious, troublesome, or pronounced there than in other kinds of evaluation research? Are there special practical problems in the execution, administration, and official or public acceptance of evaluation research in these programs that are not found in others? This line of analysis, if followed, would enhance our appreciation of the distinctiveness of evaluation efforts in this problem area. But better still, once certain features of evaluation research in this field are identified and examined they may highlight certain formal methodological problems that can be found in similar if not identical shape in evaluation research in other fields. Some illustrations follow.

A common problem faced in evaluation research is specification of the temporal aspects of effects. The program is to achieve certain effects within some period of time. Now consider, for the sake of an example, that one of the goals of a narcotic addiction control program is to get addicts to abstain from the use of narcotics, or detoxification. For how long must a former addict abstain from the use of narcotics before he constitutes a successful case in the evaluation of the program -- a few months, a few years, forever? Here we have an unusual set of circumstances by which each failure, that is, each case of return to the use of drugs, becomes readily apparent as a black-mark against the program while each success remains dubious, a potential failure until the end of the temporal cut-off point (by extremely harsh criteria, until the day he dies!). By contrast, evaluations of many other types of campaigns, e.g. getting out the vote, disbursing information, or getting people immunized, work with relatively fixed time limits within which the program's effects are contained. Each success within the time period is clear -- the man votes, he improves his knowledge about the topic, he comes to a clinic for a vaccination. If there is any uncertainty, it lies on the side of undetected cases of success that appear, because of imperfect information, to be failures. Is this problem of an open-ended time dimension unique to narcotics program evaluation or are there similar instances in other areas of evaluation research? If there are, how have

they been solved and what are the methodological implications?

A second common problem in the conceptualization of effects during evaluation research, as described by Hyman and others (1), is the need to specify the locus of effects in terms of regions and sub-regions. By regions we mean whether the goal of the program is to affect the individual, an aggregate of individuals, a group, a total community or society, or some combination of these. Sub-regions might specify, for example, whether the effects are in terms of overt conduct, values, opinions, attitudes, motivation, interests, information, or some other phenomena. Insofar as narcotic addiction control programs have as one of their goals the detoxification of the individual, then the locus of effects is individual conduct. But it is a very special kind of conduct, ceasing one kind of illegal behavior. Evaluation research in this instance faces serious ethical and methodological problems in attempting to obtain data about the individual which make him liable to legal punishment. Again this problem may be encountered in a class of evaluation studies, e.g. delinquency programs or criminal rehabilitation, in contrast with evaluations of such positively sanctioned activities as adult education, citizenship training, public information campaigns, and the like. I will not go into the matter of ethics. Considering only one methodological issue, we are faced here with the need to insure what Suchman (2) calls "subject validity." How can the researcher minimize the respondent's understandable reluctance to disclose information that he regards as harmful, even legally incriminating, to himself? Comparisons of various attempts to achieve high validity in this field and in others would be instructive.

One more example of problematic dependent variables: the authors suggest that a new rehabilitation-based model of narcotic control programs stresses "improved social and psychological functioning and improved physical health within the limits of chronic disability (i.e. without regard to whether the patient or client is on or off drugs)." From a research viewpoint I find this goal as unclear operationally as are many others. It would be useful to hear just how such goals are to be translated into concrete measures that permit evaluation of successes and failures. Also it would be instructive to discuss the methodological implications of this new goal. It seems to imply the need for at least a before-and-after experimental design, probably also a longitudinal one involving continuing measurements. Question: just how much change in social and psychological functioning and physical health, separately or in combination, is necessary to qualify as significant improvement? And for how long must such change persist?

In conclusion I have two comments which time does not permit me to develop here. First, it seems imperative that we learn more about the factors that affect the utilization of evalua-

tion research findings, whether in narcotics addiction control programs or others. Second, I agree wholeheartedly with the authors that the evaluator must be free to act as a professional scientist rather than as a technician (or data analyst) under the control of others, if evaluation research is to fulfill its promise of useful, scientific contributions to the rational understanding and planning of social action programs.

REFERENCES

1. Hyman, Herbert H., and Charles R. Wright, Evaluating Social Action Programs, in P. F. Lazarsfeld, W. H. Sewell, and H. L. Wilensky, eds., The Uses of Sociology, New York, Basic Books, 1967.
2. Suchman, Edward A., Evaluative Research, New York, Russell Sage Foundation, 1967.