

Human Service Planning and Change Agency

Wolfensberger was very familiar with the dismal conditions of institutions and believed that change was necessary and possible, and that the concept of Normalization was a key to such change. He was one of the few and first (at least in North America) to believe that mentally retarded people, even the most impaired, could grow and develop. He wrote about the “developmental model” and its related positive assumptions and principles for implementing it, and taught the Developmental Model as part of his Normalization and Social Role Valorization training events. (See sections on on the Developmental Model, Normalization and Social Role Valorization).

In his research position at the Nebraska Psychiatric Institute in 1964, Wolfensberger came to strongly disagree with the fundamental rationales and prevailing ideas of the predominant and dehumanizing model of institutionalizing people with mental and physical impairments. In order to combat and change the institutional paradigm, Wolfensberger and allies developed and adapted human service planning concepts and broader change agency strategies. According to O’Brien (2011), Wolfensberger consulted the social change and leadership literature and began to form and test in action his theories of what he called “change agency.”¹ One major such strategy was their creation of the “Eastern Nebraska Community Office of Retardation,” or ENCOR, a comprehensive multi-component and coordinated community-based human service system headquartered in Omaha, Nebraska (USA). By the mid-1970’s, ENCOR became a place where it was possible to see the positive effects of a comprehensive system of services that combined family support, integrated early education, individually supported employment and work stations in industry, an array of small residences specialized to provide a range of supports to meet individual needs in ordinary housing, including an apartment living program, and a set of specialized initiatives, such as a program for legal offenders with mental retardation, both of which were, at the time, radically new concepts in the field.

Another of his major change agency strategies to guide the development of emerging community service systems, such as ENCOR, was the creation of *PASS* with Linda Glenn (Wolfensberger and Glenn (1972, 1975). *PASS* (an acronym for *Program Analysis of Service Systems*) is an instrument to evaluate the likely impact of a service’s physical, social, and administrative features on its recipients’ age and culture appropriate treatment and interpretation, developmental growth, and social

¹ At the time, the term “change agency” was somewhat unusual. Wolfensberger (2012) notes that it evolved from “change agent,” probably in the 1950s; then the term “change agency” was used on rare occasions in the 1960s; and that “change agency” was coined yet later, probably in the late 1960s. In fact, he was one of the first people to make the term “change agency” more widely known. (Wolfensberger, 2012)

integration, as well as its degree of specialization to meet the most important service needs of the people it serves.

O'Brien (2011) states that Wolfensberger's 1972 book, *The Principle of Normalization in Human Services*, made clear his intention to lead a process of social change to develop community settings and adaptive service practices that would significantly improve the lives of mentally retarded and other impaired people and their families, as well as contribute materially to the longer term process of making deep positive changes in the social perceptions of such people. He was willing to test his theories by putting them into practice at the provincial, state, and local levels. Between 1971 and 1973, Wolfensberger was a visiting scholar at the National Institute on Mental Retardation in Toronto, Canada, where he revolutionized thinking about human services and used his "change agency" strategies to teach a new generation of human service leaders and potential leaders in both the US and Canada.

In 1973, Burton Blatt, the head of the school of Special Education at Syracuse University, invited him to accept a professorship there, and to establish an entity from which he could further develop and teach his ideas. It was no mistake that the name Wolfensberger gave to the institute he created and directed at Syracuse University had the word "change agency" in its title - *The Training Institute for Human Service Planning, Leadership and Change Agency*. During the 1970s, Wolfensberger regularly taught (among things) an intensive six-day workshop on "Planning of Comprehensive Community-based Human Service Systems." In effect, this entire workshop was dedicated to both the principles of change agency and to what an adaptive service system would look like if it were established or transformed according to these principles.

Wolfensberger (2012) describes his concept of change agency as:

"When we are confronted with something that we deem to be sub-optimal or wrong, and that is within the scope of being made un-wrong or at least better by humans, then many of the action-oriented strategies that may be embraced by different people who want to see a change come about fall into three broad classes.

- One class of strategies is to speak boldly and frankly about what is wrong or inferior, why so, who (if anyone) made it that way, and what should be done about it, and to do all this even if nobody will listen, and even if one will be put to death for speaking up. One might call this the prophetic paradigm of change agency.
- The second approach consists of thinking through what it might take to gain people to one's side, and to win their support for a course of change presumably to the better, either by persuading them about what could be

done, or by enlisting them on one's side in a course of action even if they do not agree with it. One might call this the ordinary change agency paradigm.

- The third major strategy is to virtually—or even literally—wage war against what one thinks is wrong or inferior, and to do so regardless of the odds one faces. One might call this the revolutionary paradigm of change.” (p. 281-282.)

Wolfensberger (2012) stated that in human services “there has been little of the revolutionary mode, but there has been quite a bit of debate between the ordinary change agency and the prophetic strategy.” (p. 283.)

According to O'Brien (2011), one theme that defined Wolfensberger's early years was the planning and implementation of comprehensive community service systems, such as ENCOR. Wolfensberger developed the above-mentioned six-day workshop on the idea of planning and implementation of a comprehensive community service system. He conducted this training across the United States and Canada mainly during the late-1970s. This intensive workshop included wide ranging lectures on the multiple elements of planning and change agency, the nature, structure, and array of services necessary to the composition of comprehensive service systems, as well as the review and critique of actual human service planning documents.

Wolfensberger remained convinced that these planning and change agency concepts were entirely valid, but eventually stopped teaching them as “when he judged that social dysfunction has grown so strong that the conditions for implementing and governing an effective service system have been weakened to the point that it is almost infeasible to do so.” (O'Brien, 2011, p. 79) Even more important was Wolfensberger's recognition that a much higher priority for him was to teach about and to encourage people to respond in morally coherent ways to the growing threat of what he called “deathmaking of unwanted and socially devalued people.” [See sections on Moral Coherency and Deathmaking.]

Although Wolfensberger's teachings on change agency and human service planning were valid and largely accepted by almost every one to whom these were taught, it proved nearly impossible in the prevailing socio-culture context to put them systematically and comprehensively into place at least not on any large scale. However, we have seen elements of them implemented here and there albeit in a scattershot manner: smaller and more normative settings and grouping sizes, service accountability mechanisms, closure and replacement of institutions by community-based (residential, vocational, educational, etc.) services.

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References

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