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An assessment of a medium sized community based funding organization's alignment with SPEC principles

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Mescia, N., & Evans, S.D. (In Press). SPEC Check: An assessment of a medium sized community based funding organization's alignment with SPEC (Strengths, Prevention, Empowerment and Community Change) principles. In I. Serrano-Garcia, M.F. Rodriguez, D.P. Jimenez, & J.R. Olivio (Eds.), *International Community Psychology: Community Approaches to Contemporary Social Problems Vol. II*.

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*The authors would like to thank Hector F. Guadarrama for his professional translation services.

Abstract

Fifty Three program funding contracts were investigated in a local human service funding organization to examine levels of helping practices based on theories related to the SPEC model of community well-being. Results indicate this funding agency is generally operating within a preventative, strengths-based framework that focuses on individuals and experts in program delivery to affect change. Budget allocation was also identified as a means to elucidate where this funding agency directs its resource dollars. Results indicate new disparate findings from what the organization members and administration purported to believe. Further qualitative analysis is needed to locate and identify more salient themes that help to explain these results, particularly when they are counter to the organizational mission.

Keywords: Organizational learning, Community practice, Well-Being, Funding, Human services

Compendio

Cincuenta y tres contratos de programas financiados fueron investigados en una organización de servicios humanos para examinar el grado en que las prácticas de ayuda de estas agencias están basadas en las teorías del modelo "SPEC de bienestar comunitario. Los resultados indican que esta agencia de financiamiento opera generalmente dentro de un marco preventivo, basado en las fortalezas el cual se se centra en las personas y los expertos en la ejecución de los programas para generar cambios. La asignación del presupuesto fue identificado también como un medio para dilucidar donde esta agencia de financiamiento dirige sus dólares. Los resultados indican nuevos hallazgos dispares a los que los miembros de la organización y la administración supone creer. Mayor análisis cualitativo es necesario para localizar e identificar los temas más relevantes que ayuden a explicar estos resultados, sobre todo cuando van en contra de la misión de la organización.

Human Service Organizations, Values and SPEC

Frameworks provide lenses through which to understand and assess organizational and community practice. Unfortunately, community-based human service organizations often lack frameworks to help guide their thinking and action (Delpeche, Jabbar-Bey, Sherif, Taliafero, & Wilder, 2003). Human service organizations face pressure internally and externally as they try to balance struggles of political pressures, human and capital resources, prevailing cultural norms and the specific needs of the communities and individuals with whom they aim to serve (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010). In one example, funding awards have guidelines for service delivery that may naturally vary in fit with the philosophy of human service organizations. These organizations must then balance the prescriptive mandate of the resources with the actual service delivery to the people who comprise the community. Too frequently, these and other complexities leave organizations without a clear and consistent conceptual framework that guides critical decision-making and practice (Evans, Hanlin, & Prilleltensky, 2007). Yet, through all of these complexities, human service organizations and their funders ultimately make choices on how to invest their time and money in communities. For example, they can focus more on treatment or more on prevention, or more on individuals who are hurting or more on the root causes of people's problems. These "practice ideologies" (Hasenfeld, 2010, p. 18) or assumptions organizations make about attributes of clients and nature of social problems provide rationale for decisions about organizational practices.

Prilleltensky (2005) proposed the SPEC framework as a way to conceptualize community practice through four complementary intervention domains: (a) capabilities, (b) temporal, (c) participation, and (d) ecological. This framework is based on the premise that community-based human service practice can be most effective when focused on *strengths* more than deficits,

prevention rather than treatment, *empowerment* over treating people only as clients, and *community change* instead of only seeking change in individuals and families (see Figure 1). The SPEC framework offers a conceptual model of integrative practice that has real utility for human service organizations and their funders. Through critically reflecting on their human service and funding practices through the SPEC lens, organizations can illuminate the values choices they make when deciding what to do or what to fund. Ideally, this illumination will lead to decisions to better align practices to promote strengths, prevention, empowerment and community change.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

The SPEC Check—Capturing Human Service Organizations Values

The SPEC Check method was developed as a way to investigate the SPEC framework by working alongside practitioners, program-by-program, to reflect upon and rate program practices in each of the four SPEC domains. For example, program staff can generally reflect on whether or not their program practices are more strength-based or deficit-based, proactive or reactive. After each program has rated their practices on each of these domains, we can combine the results to get a picture of an organization's community practice as a whole answering the question: How are we spending our energy? Once organizations answer that question, they can ask another: Is this how we *should* be spending our energy? Ultimately, organizations gain the chance to see if their community practice is in line with their shared values. We believe that if we can help programs and whole organizations develop a picture of the value choices they are making in their practice, they will be in a better position to alter those practices to be more in line with their shared belief systems.

During the initial stages of development, our primary goal for the SPEC Check was simply to *develop a tool that would help us gain an accurate assessment of an organization's community practice through the lens of SPEC*. Through piloting the process we quickly learned that our simple rating tool was not sufficient for the task at hand. While it is fairly straightforward to assess program outputs and outcomes through evaluation strategies, it's more challenging to assess alignment with practice ideologies or principles such as strength-based, prevention, empowerment, and community change. People have different understandings of what these SPEC principles mean in the first place, and different beliefs about whether or not program practices reflect these principles. We also learned that the *process* of reflecting on and discussing each program through the lens of the SPEC principles helped us build a shared understanding of what these principles mean, and how they are or are not reflected in a given program's practices. People and organizations benefit from a reflective process that creates the organizational learning context through which members negotiate their different values, attitudes and perceptions (Suárez-Herrera, Springett, & Kagan, 2009).

Based on our early experiences, we developed a second goal for the SPEC Check: *To foster reflection, dialogue and learning about community practice*. While the initial diagnostic function of the process was important, the SPEC Check can also serve an educative or learning function. Like other forms of participatory evaluation (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998), the SPEC Check is an educational process through which program teams and whole organizations produce “action-oriented knowledge about their reality, clarify and articulate their norms and values, and reach consensus about further action” (Brunner & Guzman, 1989, p. 11). Our experience has been that community-based practitioners have few opportunities for reflecting on their community practice (Evans, et al, 2011). Critical reflection is important and requires program

staff to question, to challenge assumptions, to build shared mental models and to consider the broad range of issues related to their work in community. The SPEC check provides a structured process for program teams to think deeply together about their practice and about the alignment of that practice with organizational beliefs and values. This transformative agenda leads to a different type of learning, known as double-loop learning, through which the participants question existing frameworks underlying the organization's goals, strategies and assumptions (Argyris and Schön, 1978; Suárez-Herrera, Springett, & Kagan, 2009). This learning through communicative thinking and acting could lead to a process of planned change (Lick, 2006; Lines, 2005). In developing this participatory approach, we align ourselves with the values, orientation, and tradition of participatory action research (Kemmis, & McTaggart, 2000; Reason & Bradbury, 2006; Fals Borda, 2006). We also borrow ideas from collaborative evaluation approaches such as participatory evaluation (Brunner & Guzman, 1989; Cousins & Whitmore, 1998), empowerment evaluation (Fetterman, 2001; Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005) and the competing values approach to diagnosing organizational culture developed by Cameron & Quinn (2005).

Where our approach differs from traditional forms of participatory evaluation is the fact that we are promoting a particular set of values for community practice. We believe that community practice that is strength-based, preventative, empowering, and targeting change in community conditions can more likely promote well-being in communities (Evans, et al, 2011; Prilleltensky, 2005). Ultimately, the goal of the SPEC Check is to promote critical community practice by human service organizations. Critical community practice is “action based on critical theorizing, reflection, and a clear commitment to working for social justice through empowering and transformative practice” (Henderson, 2007, p. 1). SPEC provides a framework for

theorizing about practice and the SPEC Check provides the enabling structure for reflecting on and changing practice to be more empowering and transformative.

Research Questions

This component of our three-year project in the greater Miami, FL area focuses on one human service funding organization and their current funding portfolio. Specifically, this organization is a community-based child and family services funding agency, whose primary mission is to utilize partnerships to effect community change on behalf of children and families. Whereas the larger SPEC study also investigates individual perceptions and organizational systems, this part of the study is focused on understanding the actual program-level practices as they relate to SPEC principles.

We are attempting to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the overall competing SPEC values identified by the staff and the administration?
2. What are the overall competing SPEC values when adjusted for potential resource allocation based on implicit values?
3. What is the representative amount of funding allocated by the Human Service Organization relative to SPEC dimensions?

Method

Design

For this research we employed a concurrent embedded mixed-methods approach (Cresswell, 2009). The researchers collected quantitative ratings data and then facilitated discussion groups with the same informants about these ratings. This method was utilized so that we could assess the programs from individual and group perspectives, giving us a comprehensive and more nuanced data than by employing either method alone. An additional benefit of this method was the promotion of communication amongst team members that often brought about new understandings of their roles and the programs that they administer. This method was time consuming, however, and required considerable logistical coordination.

Participants

The agency's program funding contracts were examined and included as one unit of analysis in this study. Fifty-three programs (total budget ~\$25 million) were sampled from 338 total programs. Sampling method employed a five-step procedure that included program impact area and budget allocation delineation before randomization to ensure a true representative sample. We were careful to try and include relatively equal proportions of funding streams and areas of need in an attempt to get an overall "snapshot" of agency resource allocation and community impact.

Instruments

The SPEC Check competing values survey (see Appendix A) was developed specifically for assessing the various SPEC dimensions. Each SPEC dimension (S-P-E-C) has two

corresponding statements that represent polar examples of the respective dimensions.

Participants were asked to allocate a share of 100 points between the two statements for each dimension, based on how much each statement is in agreement with their actual practice (ie. 60/40; 50/50; etc.). The SPEC Check was completed by participants individually prior to the interviews, and then the scores were discussed in the interviews.

Procedures

Couple interviews, lasting approximately 45 minutes each, were conducted with 2 personnel familiar with each project. First, each person completed the SPEC Check individually prior to interview. Next, during the interview, each person discussed his/her 100-point allocation for each statement of the SPEC dimensions. Then, if there was agreement in the values allocated, the score was recorded by the researchers. If the numbers differed between participants, researchers attempted to gain consensus scores from the two personnel by asking if they could determine one number that would represent both of their viewpoints. Consensus was reached ~50% of the time. If no consensus was reached, an average score was calculated for analysis by adding the two scores and dividing by two. The quantitative values were collected and audio recordings of discussion were collected and transcribed for further analysis. All participants gave informed consent and every attempt was made to ensure confidentiality, including coding of all data.

Analysis

Our overall descriptive quantitative raw data from the SPEC Check were first analyzed with SPSS to ensure normality. Next, we studied the five impact areas that were created by the agency to represent broad categories of service. Included in these areas are the 53 programs;

some examples of the areas are “parenting”, “health initiatives”, and “community support”. We changed the actual impact area names to maintain confidentiality. We did not include the impact area results here, but did report this back to the agency. Finally, we analyzed the overall data across the 53 programs in an effort to capture agency-wide dimensions of SPEC by determining the raw Mean differences in reported SPEC Check dimension scores.

We also considered agency dollar expenditures for each dimension of SPEC by “weighting” participant SPEC mean values by the individual contract budgets. We performed this function to symbolize the choices that the agency makes when deciding where to invest their money. Our aim was to provide general feedback to the agency about their resource allocation. We did not attempt a detailed budget analysis.

Results

We have categorized the results for each SPEC dimension, including the weighted figures. Also included in table 1 and 2 are the raw and weighed data for each SPEC dimension and their representative budgets.

Strengths versus Deficits

Overall, participants across the 53 programs rated their work two times more Strengths than Deficit based. These findings are congruent with the overall mission of this helping agency. When examining SPEC principles in relation to budget allocation, the Strengths/Deficits domain is practically equal, meaning that this particular agency devotes an equal amount of funding towards strengths and deficit based programs. Many participants within the organization purported a strength-based approach to working with clients and service providers.

Prevention versus Treatment

Prevention is noted as core to the mission and the work of most participating organizations and is the central theme of our participating agency. Participants rated their programs as slightly more than 1.5 times more strength than deficit oriented and the proportion increased to two times as great when related to budget allocation. Most participants within the organization also agreed with this assessment when reflecting on their own work, indicating their strong belief in the mission of the agency to prevent problems that will ultimately minimize difficulties later in life for their clients.

Empowerment versus Disengagement

Study participants were asked about the level of voice and choice community members have in the programs intended to serve the community. Results indicated that programs relied heavily on staff or professionals for their service delivery and did not engage community members a great deal in this process. This gap was even greater when weighting this dimension by the various program budgets. Staff often noted the heavily prescriptive nature of their program implementation that relied on teachers/tutors or health professionals to deliver their services.

Changing Community Conditions versus Individual

The data suggest that ecological understandings of problems by agency staff are not necessarily matched with the services that they deliver. Participants rated their programs as three to five times more individual focused than community change focused with both weighted and raw data considered. While participants often spoke of their programs as targeting change in the

community, their programs often target the individual members with a belief that this approach will affect community change in the future.

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

[INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Discussion

Overall, based on the SPEC framework and subsequent SPEC Check analysis, this funding organization appears oriented towards funding programs that are strengths-based, and focused primarily on prevention. This is not surprising given the types of programming, mission and community need this agency serves, which are largely children, youth, and family associated. Our analysis also reveals that most programs funded by this agency tended towards practices that were, expert-driven - viewing their constituents only as recipients of services, and individually focused. This information proved to be very informative for the organization, particularly the analysis of their funding in the individual/community dimension. Most of their dollars are being invested in approaches that serve or change people, not community conditions. The organization's mission and values, in part, reflect a desire to fund organizations to advocate and work towards changing community conditions that serve to negatively impact clients; yet, this is not their funding practice as reported by the individuals who manage the actual programs. This is a clear example of funding practice that does not match their espoused philosophy. This information provided this organization with urgency for change.

In addition to the descriptive findings from the SPEC Check, the process of this participatory research has lead to interesting and beneficial aspects for this organization. When

asked to reflect on this process, quite often participants stated that they enjoyed the experience and learned a great from their colleagues. They often lamented the inability for their own teams or colleagues to discuss and critically analyze their funding practices in this way. Most also noted a desire to continue these meetings and reflective practices outside of the research study parameters.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this brief report. Firstly, we added descriptive quantitative data for the purposes of this paper that only partially identifies and describes SPEC practices. There is much qualitative data to yet analyze and a more detailed and thorough analysis will help further elucidate some of our findings and help us to draw conclusions from our study. Next, we only sampled the funding agency perspective on these programs. Since this is a funding agency, it would be interesting to conduct the SPEC Check with the actual program personnel in the field as a validity check of the funding agency's perspective. Also, we sampled 53 out of over 300 programs. Perhaps a larger number of programs investigated would allow us to statistically compare the programs and the impact areas that the agency uses to categorize their funding. This project is ongoing and we intend to continue our analyses and incorporate qualitative methods to enrich our findings. In addition, we are also attempting to visit a sampling of program managers in the communities to assess their perspective on SPEC.

Conclusion

We do not assume that high values for each of the SPEC dimensions are, or should be, the goals for all programs that funding agencies support. The scope of community challenges requires a variety of approaches to meeting needs and solving problems. However, we are interested in the shifting the overall emphasis of human service funding and ultimately human

service practice. If an agency only spends 25% of its funding dollars on programs that address community conditions, what does that say about the organization's theory of change? Moreover, if *all* funding in communities is weighted towards serving and treating individuals using traditional program approaches, is that enough investment to create the kind of change that is needed? Ultimately, it is up to each agency to determine the appropriate blend of funding that reflects the principles of SPEC and other value choices in human service funding. Based on the results from this and other evaluations, we have confidence that the SPEC Check can be a useful tool for reflecting on funding practices and can assist funding agencies in aligning values and practice.

Finally, we also believe the *process effects* of the SPEC Check can make explicit the goal of *building organizational capacity for organizational learning and intentional change*.

Evaluation theorists have long recognized the potential for participatory forms of evaluation to foster collective learning and development (Cousins & Earl, 1992; Patton, 1998; Preskill 1994; Preskill & Torres, 1999). We recognize that if done well, and integrated into organizational routines, the SPEC Check has the potential to promote a sustained attitude of critical reflection. The process helps build a capacity, not only for critical analysis and critical reflexivity, but also for critical action. Like other forms of participatory evaluation, the SPEC Check helps develop an appreciation and acceptance of evaluation, and the development of skills associated with the act of systematic inquiry. Donaldson, Patton, Fetterman, & Scriven (2010) recently emphasized the critical need for evaluators to possess and be trained in facilitation and communication skills in order to engage the clients, particularly the stakeholders, in the work. When facilitated well, and made part of organizational practice, we have confidence that the SPEC Check could be a useful tool in community-based human service organization learning and evaluation.

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Table 1

Comparison of Overall Means and Standard Deviations of SPEC Dimensions and Weighted SPEC Dimensions. (N = 53)

Variable	Mean	Weighted Mean	Standard Deviation
Strengths	68.0	46.0	29.0
Deficits	32.0	54.0	
Prevention	62.0	67.0	23.0
Reactive	38.0	33.0	
Empowerment	38.0	28.0	29.0
Detachment	62.0	72.0	
Community	17.0	25.0	22.0
Individual	83.0	75.0	

Note: M and SD scores rounded to nearest whole number. Weighted Mean = SPEC values (by %) x program budget, then summed, and then calculated as a proportion of total budget.

Table 2

*Representative Amount of Funding Allocation Relative to Identified SPEC Dimensions
(Total Budget ~\$25,000,000)*

Variable	Weighted Mean	Funding (in US Dollars)
Strengths	46.0	12,000,000
Deficits	54.0	14,000,000
Prevention	67.0	17,000,000
Reactive	33.0	8,000,000
Empowerment	28.0	7,000,000
Detachment	72.0	18,000,000
Community	25.0	6,000,000
Individual	75.0	19,000,000

Note: Weighted Mean rounded to nearest whole number. Dollar amounts rounded to nearest million.

Appendix A: The SPEC Check

SPEC Check

Contract Name: _____ Contract #: _____

Please check the box that best describes your involvement or role in the contract named above.

Administrator/Department Director Contract Manager other _____

Instructions: In each of the sections, split 100 points between statement "a" and statement "b" to demonstrate your beliefs about the balance of program activities FOR THE 2008-2009 CONTRACT YEAR.		Now
S	a. This program/project <i>builds on the pre-existing strengths and assets</i> of clients or constituents.	
	b. This program/project <i>focuses on diagnosing problems or shortcomings</i> that exist in clients or constituents.	
Total should equal 100		100
P	a. This program/project <i>works proactively to prevent problems</i> from emerging for clients or constituents.	
	b. The program/project <i>treats or serves clients or constituents who are already experiencing serious problems or challenges.</i>	
Total should equal 100		100
E	a. This program/project works to give clients or constituents <i>voice and choice</i> in decisions that affect them.	
	b. This program/project <i>relies on staff or professionals to speak or make decisions</i> for clients or constituents.	
Total should equal 100		100
C	a. This program/project works to provide clients or constituents with needed <i>services, treatment, training and/or supports.</i>	
	b. This program/project works to <i>address the "root causes"</i> of problems (policies, systems, community conditions, etc) that affect people and the community in adverse ways.	
Total should equal 100		100

Notes/Comments:

(Adapted from Prilleltensky, 2005)

Figure 1: The four dimensions of SPEC (strengths, prevention, empowerment, and community change) presented on a continuum with their respective categorical domains.

