

PERCEPTIONS OF CENTER ROLES

The previous discussion represents the picture of the *actual* role of the neighborhood centers as they have appeared through our research investigations. At this point, however, it would be interesting and instructive to note how different participants in the war on poverty perceive these centers. The most dramatic difference appears between clients' perceptions and those of the administrators and board members.¹ The clients' ideas about what the center is supposed to do are overwhelmingly service in orientation. In their view the purpose of the center is to help people by providing them with the services they need. The idea of organizing the poor to help themselves is not very prominent in the clients' perceptions. This seems to be especially true in the larger cities. On the other hand, when the views of the administrators and board members are examined, the community action function of the center becomes considerably more conspicuous, and relatively speaking the service function idea declines in importance.

This contrast between the perceptions of the client types and administrator types is perhaps to be expected. After all, from the point of view of a poverty client the problem of no job or a sick spouse or an alcoholic brother is hardly something to be resolved by "organizing the poor to help themselves." Yet, by the same token, the administrators' perspectives provide a picture of countless cases of unemployment, ill health, alcoholism, etc., all bound together in a reinforcing network sometimes called the "culture of poverty." To attack such a complex horror armed only with the weapons of individualized service is hardly a tactic that inspires confidence and optimism. Of course, it should be noted here that the kind of community action generally envisioned by the administrative types is not that which threatens the political establishment. In fact, to forestall any such development it is common for the political establishment to try to control the poverty program in the community. Wherever this has occurred and been successful, the neighborhood center programs are almost exclusively service in character with only the tamest kinds of community action in evidence, such as fix-up and paint-up projects.

The perceptions of one other category of OEO participants should be noted before we leave this discussion. These are the public and private agency personnel—the school people, the welfare people, the public health people, the family service people, etc. An examination of their responses to the question of what the functions of neighborhood centers are reveals a very strong service orientation.² This is to be expected. They are, after all, presumably expert servicers. Community action is not only far removed from their routines and interests; it is probably regarded as a bit of a threat, if it is contemplated at all.

In concluding this discussion one final observation might be made which distinguishes welfare agency people from other agency people. There is in the large cities a clear tendency for welfare people to see the center as a place in which clients receive service. On the other hand, non-welfare agency people in large cities clearly see the center as a referral point with actual service being provided elsewhere. One might speculate that this differential perception simply reflects differences in the experiences the several agencies have had in dealing with a poverty clientele.

CENTER ORGANIZATION

It will be recalled that at the beginning of this discussion on the role of the neighborhood center the point was made that the legislative mandate underlying the whole community action program is extremely general and vague. This situation has given rise to an interesting organizational problem involving the neighborhood centers and various established service agencies in the community. Essentially the problem is this: the neighborhood centers are usually *highly unstructured* focal points for service agencies that are themselves *highly structured*. What this means is that a variety of traditional agency routines, regulations, and policies are being brought to bear on an enterprise that has no clearly established ways of dealing with them. In this kind of organizational vacuum it is not surprising to find different functionaries trying to hammer out a *modus operandi* and in the process, frequently creating great stresses and strains. Indeed, it is our belief that a good deal of the trouble attributed to personality factors can be traced to this unsettled organizational situation. Where structure is vague and ill-defined, personality factors have opportunities for free expression not normal-

¹ See Appendix III.

² Ibid.