Older Adults' Participation in a Jewish Community Center*

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"CENTERS are good and older people should" is the prevailing ideology in social gerontology, retirement planning programs and sponsors of older adult leisure time services. The sales pitch is insistent and persistent from many sources, including Jewish community centers.

The expansion of existing programs and/or proliferation of new ones may connote the "pull" of the Center's services whereas, all too often, it is an adaptation to the "push-out" from prior social and economic institutions and roles.

Almost all Centers can point to a linear relationship between funding or service expansion and membership or attendance. Membership figures may show geometric, perhaps even exponential, rates of growth in relatively short spans of time.

What does this mean? Does maximum participation imply maximized satisfaction? A resounding "no!" emerged from a study of older adults' satisfaction with their participation in a Jewish community center located in a large urban metropolis.
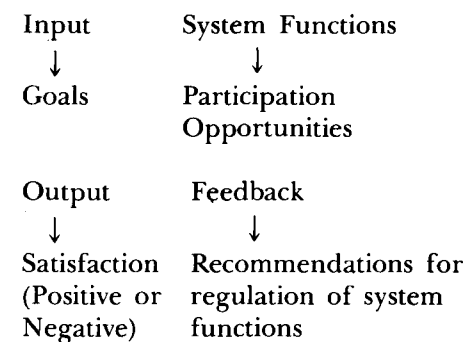
Research Objectives

The purpose of this empirical study was to measure the degree and sources of consumers' satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with the participation products offered by suppliers of services in a Jewish community center. The perceptions of the older active members and staff concerning the active members' participation in the Center provided an

empirical basis for exploration of the appropriate policy, planning and program issues.

A basic assumption of the study was that high congruence of perceptions between staff and members demonstrated staff's high responsiveness to active members' participation goals, satisfaction and participation problems. Low congruence between them denoted the opposite.

The major questions of the investigation may be described in systems terms:

Input	System Functions
↓	↓
Goals	Participation Opportunities
Output	Feedback
↓	↓
Satisfaction (Positive or Negative)	Recommendations for regulation of system functions

Or, in conceptual terms:

"Goals" were treated as *expectations* of satisfaction, prior to participation.

"Participation" referred to members' *activity opportunities,* which were channelled toward implementation of their goals.

"Satisfaction" represented *positive actualization* of members' participation objectives.

"Problems" measured *negative realization* of members' participation goals.

"Recommendations" provided staff and members a vehicle for expression of *change strategies* in areas of policy, planning and programming.

Methodology of Study

The Park Jewish Community Center (a pseudonym) was one of two Centers with the most advanced prototypes of service to older adults in this major metropolitan area. Assessments by professional informants in city and state agencies, written materials and direct observation of several Centers provided the basis for this judgment.

The sampling design included all of the direct service staff and 100 active members. "Active members" were defined as those who had attended at least half of the scheduled meetings of a group during the month prior to the field work. (For the balance of this presentation, "members" will be equivalent to "active members").

Data collection strategy involved, (1) individual face-to-face interviews, of about an hour, with direct service staff and members, (2) observation of group activities, (3) analysis of organizational documents: statements of organizational goals, program reports, schedules, newspapers, bulletins, etc.

Ultimately, 20 staff served as respondents and 107 members were interviewed. This included 60% of the 176 active members. However, there were 577 members in the Center. It *is* somewhat surprising to note that only 30% of the paid membership could be considered as "active," according to the defined criteria. An analysis of the relatively low participation of 70% of the membership would provide additional data concerning members' satisfaction with their participation.

Over one third of the potential members' sample refused to be interviewed, primarily for lack of time, poor health or general disinterest.

The field work was performed by four interviewers and the researcher-writer. "Interviewer bias," i.e., the mean of the percentage of differences

between the findings of the interviewers and the researcher was less than 10% for all respondents.

As a reliability check, the researcher re-interviewed the first respondent of each interviewer. Partial or full agreement between the interviewers and the researcher ranged from 72-78%. Note that this was done early during the field work when the interviewers were new at their work.

The data analysis consisted of frequency distributions, percentage tables and cross-tabulations. The approach was one of "indication," i.e., a descriptive presentation of the data, as to the main trends and their relationships.

No tests of significance were performed as almost all of the staff were contacted (95%) and all of the members were reached.

For lack of space, background information regarding the Center will be omitted. As to the respondents, the Center staff was predominantly a native-born, married, Jewish woman, under 65, who was a college graduate. The modal member was a widowed Jewish woman, over 65, who was born in Europe. Her highest educational level of achievement was a high school diploma or less.

Major Findings

In the analysis of goals and satisfaction, the following categories were utilized: (1) "ego maintenance," i.e., mental stimulation; creative expression; opportunities for achievement, service, decision-making; (2) "interpersonal relations," mostly with other members; (3) "problem-solving," i.e., resolution of difficulties concerning use of time, finances, escape from problems; (4) "enhancement," i.e., general enjoyment, opportunities for recreation or fun.

The categories of "disengagement," "reward" and "sex" were explored and dropped, for lack of an adequate number of respondents.

Input into Center System: Members' Goals for Participation: Staff and Members' Report

The primary function of the Center was defined as "problem-solving" concerning the use of time by over ¾ of the staff and about ⅔ of the members. These were definitions of the *Center's goals*, i.e., its function or task as provider of service.

Members' *goals for Center participation* were assessed, as follows: Interpersonal relations were cited as the ranking objective for members' participation in the Center by over ¾ of the staff and over ½ of the members.

Interestingly, members' *goals for group participation* differed, regardless of group type. "Ego maintenance" was the paramount goal for members' group participation, according to about 4/5 of the staff and 3/5 of the members.

Already, disparities emerged between perceptions of the Center's goal in providing service, members' goals for Center participation and their goals for group participation. Note that three types of goals were mentioned: use of time-problem solving; interpersonal relations; ego maintenance.

System Function/Process: Participation Opportunities

In this study, participation was viewed as a measure of members' potential opportunities for realization of their salient goals: interpersonal relations and ego maintenance.

General Center Participation (Member Self Reports Only)

About ⅔ of the members were involved in recreation and socialization groups, the largest participation category. The second ranking group categories included about half of the members. They mentioned involvement in creative expression groups and unorganized activities (informal conversations, television, card-playing, meals, reading).

General Group Participation (Staff and Members' Reports)

Socialization activities predominated within all group types in the Center, according to over 90% of the staff and members. The second ranking participation categories within a group were (1) creative expression and education (according to ⅔ of the staff), (2) recreation and education (according to over ½ of the members).

Interestingly, more members than staff reported unorganized activities within the group — 69% of the members and 55% of the staff. Perhaps, staff reported less unstructured, independent, member-initiated activity to highlight their indispensable quality in keeping members "busy."

Again, discrepancies appeared between staff and members concerning their perceptions. These incongruencies carry great weight insofar as they represent behavioral descriptions of activity types within the group, which might be expected to coincide. What, then, may one expect of less tangible evidence?

Center Social Integration (Member Self Reports Only)

The quality of members' interpersonal relations, i.e., their social integration or cohesiveness within the Center, was measured on the basis of the number of people known under specified conditions of social intimacy.

The presence of 1–5 "close friends" at the Center was reported by over ¼ of the members. Over ½ of them mentioned 1–10 "close friends."

Of course, much depends on individual, subjective definitions of a "close friend." It may be anyone who shows some kind of personal attention, considering the sense of loss and desertion often expressed by older people. Or, indeed, a "close friend" *is* a trusted and reliable *confidant* and helper.

Over 10% of the membership reported that he/she had *no* close friend. If the "very high" category of "21 or more close friends" is added, on the assumption that such inflated claims are designed to hide the reality of *no* close friend, then, 27% of the members indicated that they had no close friends at the Center!

Considering the goal emphasis on interpersonal relations and the extent of socialization activity at the Center, this was an important, unanticipated finding. And yet, 82% of the members had reported eight years or more of Center participation!

It is true that physical aloneness and/or social isolation may produce a search and participation in a social environment, such as a Center. However, social contact does not necessarily produce social cohesion or a sense of relatedness, as shown by the members' responses.

Decisional and Management Participation

Group decisional and management participation were viewed as measures of members' potential opportunities for realization of their ego maintenance goals.

Decisional Participation (Staff and Members' Reports)

A consistent pattern was evident of variations between staff and members' perceptions with respect to (1) members' *actual* decisional activity, assumption of decisional roles, participation in specified types of decisions; (2) Members' general *interest* in decisional participation and aspirations for involvement in specified decision types.

More of the staff (90%) than members (39%) reported decisional *activity* by members. By contrast, more members (84%) than staff (70%) expressed *interest* in decisional participation.

Why do such inconsistencies appear? Twenty per cent more staff reported members' actual participation over members' participation interest. Does this mean that 20% of the members were taking part in decision-making under duress or with low motivation?

One doubts that, considering the voluntary nature of association in the Center and in any group. More likely, a staff bias has entered in the guise of adherence to the self-determination ideology of social group work, the dominant professional group in Jewish community centers. In addition, the organizational goals stated by the Center's executive emphasized the encouragement of members' self-sufficiency and responsibility.

The data points in the direction of greater interest in decision-making on the part of members than actually occurred. Recall that 84% of the members expressed interest in decision-making although 39% reported actual participation — a variation of 45%!

What types of roles did members undertake in their decisional activity? In what types of decisions were members involved within their groups?

Staff over-estimated members' voting activity by 27% (94% of staff to 67% of the members). In addition, staff over-reported members' roles as proposers of action by 40% (83% of staff to 43% of the members). By all accounts, there was less member participation and autonomy in the preliminary stages of decision-making, i.e., initiation of suggestions and collection of information, in defining choices for alternative courses of action.

Two types of decisions dominated members' participation. Members were

involved in Center program planning decisions according to 88% of staff and members, i.e., time and place of activities, program content and arrangements, food service, etc. Decisions concerning policies and procedures were mentioned by 61% of staff and members, i.e., schedules, fees, space, dietary laws, etc.

Staff and members perceived general low interest on the part of the membership to expand their current decisional participation. Staff over-estimated members' interest by 26%–40% staff to 14% members.

Note that 90% of the staff reported that members were involved in decision-making. Yet, 40% of the staff indicated that members would be interested in additional decisional participation.

It is true that staff might believe that members who were involved in one decision type might prefer involvement in four decision types. However, the consistent pattern of staff's excessive claims concerning members' decisional participation, as compared to members' reports, rendered more plausible the spuriousness of staff's original assessment of members' decisional participation. This appeared to reflect staff's eagerness to impress the interviewer and/or the executive, in conformity with organizational expectations.

These findings regarding decisional participation disclose potential low satisfaction for those members who would prefer to assume decisional roles in the Center, 84% of the membership. It is difficult to envision realization of members' ego maintenance goals through decisional participation when only 39% reported such involvement, at a relatively low level, at that.

Thus, participation, achievement, time utilization and interpersonal opportunities were lost as a result of members' minimal participation in var-

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ious phases of significant decisional processes.

Group Management Participation

Despite the claim by staff that all members were involved in group management, only 70% thought that members enjoyed this type of involvement. The same pattern was evident with members. Almost 90% reported management participation although slightly over 50% expressed a preference for such activity. Note that management participation included financial management of Center and group monies (dues, contributions, fees for special events, party and gift expenses); membership recruitment; membership welcome; contacts with absentees; program resources; food service; room arrangements.

What types of management tasks did members perform? The same items were mentioned by staff and members, although in different rank order. According to staff, 90% of the members were involved in room arrangements and 85% in membership welcome. However, 72% of the members reported membership welcome (a disparity of 13%) and 67% spoke of room arrangements (a variation of 27%).

Sixty-five per cent of the staff claimed that group finances were managed by the members. However, only 18% of the members mentioned this, a difference of 47%. Acquisition of program resources (speakers, films or written materials) was rated as the lowest type of management participation by staff and members, about 5%.

Non-participants' aspirations for specified management tasks were examined. Staff discussed membership welcome (100%) and food service (86%) as the two ranking aspirations for members who had not undertaken any prior group management. Members expressed their interest in future

involvement in membership welcome (67%) and recruitment (58%) tasks.

Membership welcome was first rank for staff and members. However, 33% fewer members than staff reported it. Twenty-five per cent more members than staff expressed interest in membership recruitment. A far lower aspiration for food service tasks was articulated by members than staff, only 33% of the members discussed this, a difference of 52%.

Apparently, the assumptions of staff concerning the cultural and emotional significance of food to older people accounted for their perceptions of members' aspirations for food service tasks. However, members aspired to the interpersonal potential in membership welcome, recruitment and contacts with absentees. Participation in these interactional management tasks may be associated with members' interpersonal goals for Center and group participation as well as the lack of real social integration in the Center.

Hopes of increased companionship and friendship may be entertained by members who have recruited relatives, friends, neighbors and/or former co-workers for Center membership. These individuals would represent known sources of interpersonal satisfaction and would require less emotional investment by older adults who have been depleted of significant affective ties by retirement, death or mobility.

Thus, decisional and management opportunities could offer potential mechanisms for ego maintenance, member gratification and institutional expansion of membership and services.

In addition, opportunities might be created for amelioration of practical problems which deter members' participation. For example: 83% of the members expressed interest in decision-making regarding transportation arrangements for members. On

the one hand, participation opportunities could serve as ego maintenance channels for interested member decisioners and managers. On the other hand, services could be provided for other members who need transportation services to facilitate their participation in the Center and the general community. Also, a more selective utilization of professional manpower could be effected with respect to overall priorities of the organization.

Output (Positive): Members' Satisfaction with Participation

Ninety-four percent of the staff and members thought that members were satisfied with their group participation.

What were the primary sources of satisfaction? "Enhancement," i.e., general enjoyment, was cited by 75% of the staff as members' most important source of satisfaction with general group participation. However, interpersonal relations were reported as the main source of satisfaction by 52% of the members.

It appears that the concept of "enhancement" was rooted more in the personal background characteristics of the staff than their organizational roles and functions. Perhaps, this dominant response was a wishful projection of the staff's own retirement in the future, i.e., a passive "good time" without responsibility.

Staff perceptions of members' primary satisfaction with the group, i.e., enhancement, were contrary to *their* stated views of members' goals for participation, i.e., interpersonal relations (for Center participation) and ego maintenance (for group participation). Both of these are indicators of engagement and activity.

Ego maintenance was defined as the primary sources of members' satisfaction with decision-making (64% staff; 80% members) and with group man-

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agement (71% staff; 81% members).

Interpersonal relations were discussed as the secondary source of satisfaction for decision-making (36% staff; 29% members) and for group management 57% staff; 29% members). Enhancement was mentioned by very few staff and members (about 8%) for decision-making satisfaction. Interestingly, 21% of the staff spoke of enhancement with respect to group management and 26% of the members did so. There is only a 3% difference between members' responses for enhancement and interpersonal relations as the basis for their satisfaction with group management. Can it be that members enjoyed management tasks because of the interpersonal elements in some of the tasks?

These findings suggest that, indeed, greater attention must be given to opportunities for decisional and management participation in order to facilitate ego maintenance and interpersonal satisfactions.

In general, partial realization of members' goal expectations was the norm. Members' interpersonal goals were actualized more than any of the other objectives, although on a limited basis, for only 57% of the members. Ego maintenance goals and satisfaction were matched for 29% of the members.

It seems that each of the goal categories with general connotations, "enhancement" and "problem-solving," might be linked to interpersonal satisfaction. About 35% of the members mentioned enhancement and problem-solving goals and then indicated satisfaction from interpersonal relations. Perhaps, they began their participation in a general, unfocused way, to pass the time and to have a good time. Ultimately, their participation goals centered on interpersonal gratification through their involvement in socialization activities.

Thus, the stated degree of members' satisfaction is misleading as to members' expressed sources of satisfaction. An analysis of the associations between goal expectations and sources of satisfaction, participation opportunities and sources of satisfaction as well as measures of social integration provide more meaningful and useful data. This requires a systematic process of charting members' goals, participation opportunities and sources of satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

Output (Negative): Problems with Center Participation

Members' problems with participation were measured by staff and member perceptions of the reasons for members' irregular attendance and/or termination.

Ninety per cent of the staff and members mentioned some problem with Center participation. "External factors" emerged as the single most important difficulty, according to approximately ⅔ of the staff and members. "Interest level" was reported by 30% of each group, i.e., level of interest in participation. Note that "external factors" dealt with members' difficulties which originated outside the center. For example: transportation, health, finances, family relations, living arrangements, etc.

Similarly, according to staff and members, 85% of the members experienced some barrier to group participation. The members considered external factors and interest level almost equally, about 45%. However, almost ⅔ of the staff referred to external factors and almost ⅓ discussed interest level.

More specifically, yet, participation opportunities were expressed as the major obstacle to management participation by 55% of the staff and 38% of the members. External factors were close behind for the members (33%)

though they dropped in importance for the staff (only 10%).

Consider the shift in the members' responses concerning problems with Center and group participation. It may be difficult for a member to arrange transportation to the Center, in the first instance, i.e., to deal with an external factor with respect to Center participation. Once at the Center, the member may be more concerned about the lack of interesting activities or group experiences.

Feedback: Staff and Members' Recommendations for Change

About 43% of the staff made *any* recommendation with respect to innovation (new services), expansion (additional units of current service types) or change in delivery of *Center* services (methods of providing current services). However, 95% of the staff did make recommendations concerning the *group* for which they were responsible.

Note that the majority of the direct service staff was involved less than five hours a week with Center-related activities. Possibly, their perceptions were limited to the individuals and circumstances which were pertinent to their group, rather than the total organization. Also, there were no structured, formal opportunities for ongoing communication and planning by the entire staff group concerning the Center-as-a-whole.

A far smaller proportion of members than staff made *any* recommendation concerning innovation, expansion or change in service delivery in the Center, 23%. This was also true of members' recommendations concerning group participation, 43% vs. 95% of staff.

Staff may have been reluctant to suggest any innovations as they were content with a familiar organizational framework and/or fearful of less of

employment or prestige, if their views became known to the executive.

Many members seemed reluctant or fearful to make any recommendations as if any wish for change represented indirect criticism. This was exemplified by a respondent who said, "No criticism; no suggestions." Others suspected leakage of confidentiality and adverse reactions from the Center staff. Some members felt that they could not exercise any real influence on Center policies, anyway. Others expressed an unquestioning attitude toward existing arrangements and procedures. Still others were genuine about their satisfaction with the current operations.

On the whole, incremental changes were suggested by the staff and members. The primary recommendations were directed toward (1) policies and plans of the Center (i.e., general policies, budget, program content, membership recruitment and retention, information about Center services); (2) provision of additional services (mostly creative expression and education). Improved participation opportunities and physical setting were mentioned also, though by fewer respondents.

Changes in policies/plans were the overriding recommendations, also, with respect to group participation, on the part of staff and members.

Interestingly, neither staff nor member respondents mentioned as a problem or as a recommendation the lack of congruence between staff and members' perceptions concerning members' participation and satisfaction!

Recommendations

1. The Center should develop a continuous, purposeful, open network of communication, i.e., interpersonal dialogues on a formal and informal basis, between the Board of

Directors, administrative and direct service staff and members regarding participation goals, opportunities for their realization, participation problems and their resolution.

In addition, a systematic, periodic survey should be conducted within the Center to pinpoint members' changing interests and to solicit members' suggestions for improvement of current operations. These recommendations should be implemented.

2. A complete, up-to-date information system should be developed for documentation of members' characteristics, past and present interests and affiliations, attendance patterns, membership terminations and reasons for termination.

3. A formal, systematic orientation and in-service group training program should be instituted at the Center. Group meetings of part-time direct service staff should be held to permit consideration of organizational issues beyond the specific group assignment. Opportunities for ongoing evaluation should be developed.

4. More small group opportunities are indicated that emphasize interpersonal relations and foster quality of relationships rather than the quantitative approach of the mass social and recreational groups. Interpersonal relations should be directed toward social integration rather than superficial contacts which spell loneliness within a crowd.

5. With respect to ego maintenance, a more extensive and sensitive placement and orientation process is indicated, notwithstanding prior efforts in this direction. A diagnostic intake procedure and process should be standardized routine for all newcomers. A review of participation patterns should be instituted with "old-timers."

In addition, a greater repertoire of significant decisional and managerial role opportunities should be made available to interested members.

6. Developmental and therapeutic services should be integrated within the Center. Linkages with community institutions should be developed, on an ongoing basis.

Postscript

A recent visit to the Center and interviews with top-level administrative staff revealed a number of changes instituted or being developed since the field work. Many were based on utilization of the study findings and its recommendations.

For example: a greater emphasis on continuing education for members, as students and teachers, through cooperative programs with city and community colleges; social action efforts, with special attention to members' needs and problems in the areas of personal finances and health; development of new services; a structural reorganization of service on a geographic base, rather than a building orientation; diagnostic intake; improved referral mechanisms; cooperative planning and program efforts with other organizations; utilization of membership with welcome of new participants, especially the depressed or disabled.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Center organizations should not be fooled by older adults' capacity for acceptance or tolerance of limited satisfaction opportunities from their "participation contract" with Jewish community centers. Staff must look beyond older adults' platitudes,

excessive or inappropriate praise or even, their continued participation.

Older people are not necessarily satisfied with available community resources, including Jewish community centers. The array of choice opportunities is *so* limited for older adults in the community that an open door with other people just about guarantees participation! As a result, they may not expect lofty standards of efficiency or effectiveness — let alone compliance with their "satisfaction contract."