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UTILITY OF DIFFUSION OF INNOVATION THEORY

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SOWING THE SEEDS OF INNOVATION: EXPLORING THE UTILITY OF DIFFUSION OF INNOVATION THEORY FOR CHILD AND FAMILY WELFARE PROGRAMS

Helen McLaren*, Christine Gibson, Fiona Arney, Dorothy Scott & Louise Brown

Introduction

The term, 'diffusion of innovation', was coined by Everett Rogers to describe the way that new ideas, products, policies, programs and even ways of working are 'communicated over time among members of a social system or organisation' (Rogers 2003:35). This paper reports on a research project that is applying this theory to explore the degree to which seven promising child and family welfare programs have spread across Australia. The rationale for this research is a desire to 'promote the uptake of innovations that have been shown to be effective, to delay the spread of those that have not yet been shown to be effective, and to prevent the uptake of ineffective innovations' (Haines & Jones 1994:1488). The paper begins by locating the project broadly within the child and family welfare arena before providing a brief outline of diffusion of innovation theory and the rationale for using it in the research design. It concludes with a discussion about some of the challenges faced.

Australian child and family welfare

Since settlement Australia has had a mixed model of welfare provision with government and non-government agencies being both providers and funders of social services. More recently the operational relationships between funders and providers have diversified, and membership of these categories has broadened to include business and quasi-government bodies. The provision and delivery of child and family services is constantly evolving. Different levels of public and policy attention may be focused on different issues at any particular time. It is perhaps unsurprising that lately more attention is starting to be given to managing the increasing demands for child and family services, particularly the associated costs. One way of minimising costs while maintaining service provision across this sector is to eliminate areas of inefficiency or wastage. It appears that insufficient use is being made of innovative child and family welfare programs that appear promising and/or have demonstrated their effectiveness. If this is indeed so, then it is a wasted opportunity to maximise returns from the significant investments of time, money, expertise and knowledge that have been made in the development, implementation and maintenance of such innovations.

Diffusion of innovation theory

'Diffusion of innovation' theory evolved from applied research in agriculture and rural sociology. The principles of the theory have since been used in a range of disciplinary fields (Greer 1977; Haider & Kreps 2004; Musmann & Kennedy 1989; O'Neill, Pouders & Buchholtz 1998; Rogers 2003). More recently, there has been greater emphasis in the field of human services on commercialisation, efficiency and effectiveness

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in the implementation of strategies, policies and practices. Predominantly in education and health, this has given rise to an interest in applying diffusion of innovation theory (Salveron, Arney & Scott 2006).

Diffusion of innovation draws on a range of perspectives from psychological, sociological and organisational theories (Salveron, Arney & Scott 2006). Initially, literature tended to be separated into explorations of the characteristics of innovations, the stages through which innovations pass and the characteristics of people and organisations involved along a continuum of diffusion (Cain & Mittman 2002; Cockburn 2004; Rogers 2004). Many theorists continue to speak of stages of the diffusion process as being an appropriate lens through which to view the influence of interrelationships between the characteristics of the innovation, individuals, organisations and environment (Bowen & Zwi 2005; Dobbins et al. 2002; Fluere, Wiefferink & Paulussen 2004; Greenhalgh et al. 2004; Osganian, Parcel & Stone 2003; Rogers 2003). Nutley, Davis and Walter (2002) suggested that the conceptualisation of the diffusion process has moved away from a linear model because social, political and service contexts make diffusion a non-linear, complex and unpredictable phenomenon.

Very few studies are known to have applied the theory to the social services arena, so there is little evidence of its usefulness for child and family welfare. We assume, as did Brown (2007) in the UK, that diffusion of innovation theory may be useful to illuminate the facilitators and inhibitors of program spread in this field. So we asked: ‘Are the factors that might influence diffusion within the child and family welfare sector able to be identified and, if so, how can they be successfully applied to facilitate the spread of innovations?’

Research design

Our study is employing a mixed-method research design that involves micro-analysis of the implementation and evolution of seven promising child and family programs in UnitingCare Burnside (Burnside), a NSW non-government welfare organisation. In addition, the extent to which these programs have spread across Australia is being traced. The next stage will examine the contextual conditions that may have facilitated or inhibited the diffusion of these innovations.

The seven programs (overseas and locally developed) were selected by Burnside as they appeared to address significant issues, they appeared promising in their original form, others had expressed an interest in implementing them and there was sufficient evidence to consider their utility (Schorr 2003). Historical case studies of these innovations were developed from archival data, other organisational documents and from semi-structured interviews. Analysing the implementation and evolution of these programs involved situating the case studies in their broader socio-political and economic contexts.

Simultaneously, a survey that incorporated standardised descriptions that captured the main elements of each of the seven Burnside programs was designed. The survey asked respondents whether they had heard of any of the programs under study, whether their organisation was using or had considered any programs that were similar, and the rationale behind program use, non-use and their considerations. Nationally a representative from each of 842 child and family welfare sites was invited to complete the survey. After a lengthy recruitment effort, 248 surveys were returned completed with 85% of the respondents agreeing to be re-contacted (McLaren, Gibson, Arney & Scott 2008).

A matrix of response variables from the surveys was used to purposively select a sample of participants for interview. Participants were chosen from each state and territory, from government and non-government organisations and those who either used or had knowledge of programs similar to the seven used at Burnside. It is hoped that the information gathered will help to identify how knowledge of innovative programs is communicated within and between organisations and the other processes involved in diffusion. Data are currently being analysed.

Discussion

Some early conceptual and methodological challenges, as well as field-specific issues, are presented below for discussion.

Conceptual challenges

It can be difficult to define innovation case studies post hoc. Who says they are innovative? As Rogers said, innovation is perceived as new by the unit of adoption so it doesn't matter if the idea is not objectively new. It is the perception that counts.

What evidence is available to show that the innovations themselves actually work? There is a long history of programs continuing within child and family welfare without any substantial evidence of their effectiveness (Tomison 2000). The question of whether the Burnside innovations work was at least partially answered by the documented evaluative research available on the seven selected innovations.

The complexity of the relationships within non-government agencies and between them and the government personnel and structures provides fertile ground for contextualising the term 'efficiency'. There appears to be increased pressure to do things more efficiently, yet there are countervailing pressures preventing efficiency from becoming the main driver in child and family welfare.

Methodological challenges

The messy and unsystematic interactions that create the world of child and family welfare practice make it difficult to delineate the impetus, direction and/or value of a change (i.e. innovation). This issue is partially addressed by accepting the current manifestations of the chosen innovations as the starting point (or baseline) from which to document as much as possible of their histories.

Identifying organisational (and program) boundaries is difficult! Some largish entities (e.g. church operated service agencies) have multiple sites or divisions from which services are provided. People working in any of these may have experience and viewpoints that may not be representative of their organisation. Conversely, allowing diverse voices from various parts of an organisation to be considered may inequitably weight the findings. Attempts were made to address these difficulties by constructing the sample from child and family welfare delivery sites.

The effects of the slow pace of knowledge building in an organisation, sector and government, all with differing drivers, particularly values, must be recognised when constructing data collection instruments, collecting data and analysing them. Different levels of competition between organisations and between organisations (individually and jointly) and government are not necessarily conducive to an examination of the diffusion of innovations. The effects of power and authority both on driving acceptance or adoption and on creating the appearance of agreed or uncontested meanings must be considered.

Field-specific issues

There is pressure 'to do' rather than to diffuse. Child and family services are often staffed by practitioners who are largely driven by a desire to apply their particular expertise and interest. This means that there may be less energy available to fuel the roles of innovator or champion than in commercial fields where such roles are likely to be more visibly rewarded. It may also indicate that those practitioners who are not in direct service roles may be more able to fulfil such roles. However, as their constituencies are often highly localised, child and family welfare agencies generally do not have an organisational mandate to promote promising programs.

Historically, in child and family welfare it was assumed that good people with good intentions were doing good work. This is no longer sufficient and attention has shifted to, in particular, the measurement of

program outputs. Results that appear poor may lead to the service provider losing funds and/or face, either of which may negatively affect service users. It seems that for some practitioners the focus of the service system has shifted away from the provision of services to the regular collection of data about things such as client numbers, cost, duration and short-term effects. The imposition of fairly rigid service specifications may make it easier for funders to measure and compare results from across a number of sites. Such service inflexibility may not be in the best interests of providers if it restricts their ability to contextualise and refine real-world practice to meet client needs.

Conclusion

By documenting some of the history of the spread of innovations in Australian child and family welfare, we endeavour to contribute knowledge that may help build improved and sustainable ways of working with children and families. We continue with our exploration of the diffusion of the seven identified child and family welfare programs. We hope to discover aspects of the diffusion process that may not only be identified and harnessed to facilitate the spread of promising programs, but may also be used to inhibit the spread of less effective programs.

We hypothesise that, in child and family welfare, certain kinds of communication may form stronger platforms for diffusion than others. Any propensity to misallocate scarce welfare resources may be decreased if effective forms of communication are used to facilitate the spread of promising and effective innovations. Additionally, we hypothesise that government policy and funding support for innovation might not necessarily translate into taking promising child and family welfare programs to a larger scale. On the other hand, the development and/or adoption of innovations by non-government organisations is not necessarily recognised or rewarded by government, even when innovation is a current concept on the political agenda.

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