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In mid-2008, IRP held a first-of-its-kind conference on "Measuring the Role of Faith in Program Outcomes: Key Conceptual and Methodological Challenges." Conference participants represented a range of faiths, faith-based and community organizations, government entities, and scholarly disciplines. The conference's focus on how the role of faith in program outcomes might be measured was informed by the work of poverty researchers who met at IRP during the spring semester of 2007 to discuss faith-based social service delivery. Group readings and discussions led to the planning and execution of the conference by Maria Cancian, Professor of Public Affairs and Social Work at UW–Madison and then Director of IRP, and Jennifer L. Noyes, IRP Researcher and Adjunct Fellow of the Hudson Institute. Support for the conference was provided by the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation. This issue of Fast Focus *is devoted to the organizers' key findings from conference discussions.*

Visit IRP's Web site at www.irp.wisc.edu/newsevents/conferences/faithbased.htm for a link to Jennifer L. Noyes's white paper that was distributed to participants in advance of the conference.

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Measuring the "faith factor" in social service program outcomes

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Since the early 1990s, three changes in U.S. social policy have contributed to an increased diversity of nongovernmental entities, including both faith-based and nondenominational nonprofit organizations, providing social services. First, the federal government has devolved some of its authority to state and local actors. Second, policy priorities have shifted from cash transfers to the provision of social services and programs that promote self-sufficiency. Third, there has been a new emphasis on measurable program outputs and new systems of performance feedback and reward.

Within this evolving context, policymakers and researchers have begun to focus on the role of faith-based organizations (FBOs). Although FBOs have a long history of providing social services in the United States using both public and private funds,[1] their participation has been further encouraged as part of this reorganization of social policy. This encouragement is reflected in legislation such as Charitable Choice provisions first embedded within the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 that allow FBOs to compete for government social services funds on an equal footing with other nongovernmental organizations. It is also reflected in administrative initiatives such as the White House Faith-Based and Community Initiative established by President George W. Bush and its successor, the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, established by President Barack Obama.

While research on the recent reorganization of social policy practice has generally focused on the transition to greater reliance on nongovernmental organizations for the delivery of social services,[2] the implications of increased reliance on FBOs specifically have not been adequately addressed.

Past studies have examined the scope, scale, and location of services provided by FBOs.[3] However, little research is available on whether the provision of services by FBOs—particularly those that go beyond the provision of basic material needs and encompass, for example, job training and education, alcohol and other drug abuse treatment, or youth mentoring—improves outcomes for participants compared to secular organizations and, in particular, whether any improvements can be attributed to a leveraging of religiosity and spirituality.

An important challenge is to determine the extent to which outcomes achieved by FBOs can be attributed to an organization's faith components rather than to other organizational or programmatic attributes, such as the content and/or structure of the services provided, the client selection process, client profiles and perceptions, and community relations.[4] Although some associations have been established between the religious character of social service programs and program outcomes, no definitive conclusions can be reached at this time. The main reasons for this are the difficulties in discerning which program components matter for service-delivery effectiveness. If faith per se is central to program effectiveness, then it provides an important justification for FBO involvement, and also raises issues of how inclusion of religion, or the "faith factor," can be incorporated into accountability and performance measurement systems.

For the most part, scholars and policymakers are forced to rely upon a few studies with limited information about program delivery, characteristics, and outcomes. To begin to address this void, the Institute for Research on Poverty held the "Working Conference on Measuring the Role of Faith in Program Outcomes." Its objective was not to provide a definitive answer to the question of why the delivery of services by FBOs might lead to different outcomes for individuals than if those same services were delivered by non-faith-based organizations. Rather, the goal of the working conference was to develop a shared framework for addressing this question by discussing how to define the faith factor; measure the role of the faith factor within an organization's provision of services; analyze the relationship between the faith factor and outcomes; and begin the development of a research agenda that employs a common framework.[5]

Defining the issues

To help establish a common framework, the conference brought together faith-based providers, current evaluators of faith-based services, and other experienced evaluators in an interactive setting designed to encourage the exchange of ideas and perspectives. The facilitated conversation was framed around four key questions:

What do we know about the extent to which service delivery by faith-based organizations leads to outcomes that may be attributable to the faith factor?

What is the intersection between faith and service delivery from the provider perspective?

How could the contributions of faith be measured?

Can a framework for measuring the role of faith in program outcomes be developed?

Confronting the evaluation challenge

Conference participants agreed that the question of whether it is possible to determine if the faith factor exists and directly influences program outcomes is worthy of serious study. However, participants also agreed that it will take time to build a body of knowledge adequate to address the question. Several key challenges that evaluators will have to confront were identified.

What are "faith-based" services?

One key challenge that any evaluation effort will need to address is how to determine whether an organization, or the services delivered by an organization, is "faith-based." A simplistic secular/faith-based dichotomy is not sufficient to categorize the extent to which *any* organization might incorporate faith in the provision of services. Participants identified key complexities that future evaluations should explicitly address:

- Secular organizations as well as faith-based organizations exist along a continuum in the degree to which faith and/or religion is implicitly or explicitly expressed in the provision of services.
- Different faiths have different world views and thus vary in their moral logic and cannot be classified as similar in their approach to service provision.
- The extent to which faith and/or religion is implicitly or explicitly expressed in the provision of services may vary by unit of analysis (e.g., intervention, staffing, program, organization).
- The extent to which faith and/or religion is implicitly or explicitly incorporated into the provision of services may vary by the type of service provided (e.g., the provision of shelter to a homeless individual versus the enabling of personal transformation for a drug addict).

How does context influence the role of faith?

A second key challenge is the need to consider the influence of broader contextual factors on the role of faith within an organization or program. These contextual factors include but are not limited to broad cultural norms through which faith and religion are commonly interwoven with secular practices within a given community. This could result in, for example, a secular organization or program incorporating faith as a by-product of the general culture (e.g., opening meetings with a prayer). It could also result in a program participant being exposed to faith in settings outside of the organization

or program being evaluated, with this exposure potentially having an effect on outcomes.

How does faith intersect with service delivery?

Closely related to the context challenge is the third key challenge: the need to understand and analyze the intersection of faith with the delivery of services. Based on a lengthy conversation about the ways in which this interaction may occur, it was agreed that any effort to measure the role of faith in the provision of services needs to clarify where and how the interaction occurs. Is faith, for example, part of the intervention (e.g., attendance at services), reflected in the manner in which the service is provided (e.g., by members of a religious faith or congregation), or incorporated as an additional component that enhances but does not replace essential service components (e.g., a spiritual support group in addition to methadone treatment)?

How does the interaction of faith and service provision affect desired outcomes?

Finally, any evaluation effort needs to take into consideration how the interaction of faith and service provision affects a program's selected outcomes of interest. In addition to focusing on meeting the immediate, material needs of an individual, a provider or program may also be seeking broader outcomes in its relationship with a program participant, such as helping an individual find his or her life purpose or assisting an individual in developing a sense of self-esteem. The relationship between these broader outcomes and how and where faith and religion are incorporated into the delivery of programs and services needs to be explicitly addressed in any evaluation effort.

The conundrum of relationships

A central concern of conference participants was whether, even if an evaluation addressed the enumerated challenges, it would be possible to separate the role of faith per se from the role of relationships in program outcomes. Several participants stressed that the nature of the relationship between the service provider and the individual participant was a key influence on program success. If a critical variable is the quality of the relationship, yet the quality of the relationship is somehow influenced by faith, can the two be separated?

Some of the faith-based providers at the conference emphasized the role and motivation of the service provider and the effect of that role and motivation on relationships with program participants. The providers said that a key difference in their delivery of services was the motivation of their staff to serve and to adopt a supportive and caring attitude toward participants, regardless of the participants' circumstances and disposition. Nonprofit secular providers at the conference were quick to point out that secular organizations employ many staff persons with this same motivation, but conference participants generally agreed that secular organizations are more likely to limit the extent to which staff members express their personal religious beliefs and motivations in their interactions with clients.

Opportunities and directions for continuing research

Potential next steps toward determining whether it is possible to know if the faith factor exists and, if so, whether the faith factor makes a difference, include the following:[6]

Draw on relevant existing theories and research in parallel fields – Researchers with broad knowledge of other disciplines suggested that significant insight might be gained by drawing on existing theories and research in parallel fields, such as social work, organizational culture, and social capital. This would be particularly important in any effort to understand the role of relationships, and what enables quality relationships, in the personal transformations that many FBOs seek.

Develop a more robust theory of personal change – Closely related to drawing on existing theories is the need to work toward a theory of personal change that is interdisciplinary. Is programmatic success somehow predicated on individual transformation? If so, is individual transformation more fully enabled through the incorporation of faith? What other organizational and environmental factors may come into play?

Test the hypotheses for why faith may affect outcomes one at a time – Several different hypotheses exist concerning why faith might make a difference in program outcomes. Rather than develop an overall "grand theory" of why and how faith makes a difference, these hypotheses could be tested one at a time. For example, one hypothesis is that people of faith behave differently in their delivery of front-line services. If this is true, then an effort can be made to measure the beliefs and behaviors of front-line workers with similar job descriptions to see if the clients of those who are informed by faith have different outcomes from those who are not informed by faith.

Establish collaborative efforts between researchers and practitioners – Faith-based service providers would like to gain a better understanding of whether and how the inclusion of faith contributes to improved outcomes for various populations under various conditions. An experienced researcher noted that this type of research requires "patience, flexibility, and humility." The potential exists that, in working together, progress can be made toward unravelling the complexities inherent in this type of evaluation.

Conclusion

The Institute for Research on Poverty's working conference on "Measuring the Role of Faith in Program Outcomes" was convened to begin to address gaps in knowledge about whether and why the faith factor might improve social service program outcomes. Faith-based providers, current

evaluators of faith-based services, and other experienced evaluators in attendance all left with a better shared understanding and an articulation of the elements of FBO service delivery that require evaluation. They identified the development of a shared set of evaluation questions and related concerns as an important first step in measuring the role of faith. Additional research in this arena may be fruitful for learning the contribution of the faith factor in social service program delivery. ■

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[1]R. A. Cnann, *The Newer Deal: Social Work and Religion in Partnership* (New York: Columbia Press, 1999); J. Gruber and J. Hungerman, *Faith-Based Charity and Crowd Out during the Great Depression*, Working Paper 11332, National Bureau of Economic Research: Cambridge, MA, 2005; T. Tirrito and T. Cascio, Eds. *Religious Organizations in Community Services: A Social Work Perspective* (New York: Springer Press, 2003).

[2]See, for example, the research summarized in C. Heinrich, "A State of Agents: Third Party Governance and Implications for Human Services and Their Delivery," *Fast Focus* No. 1–2008, Institute for Research on Poverty: Madison, WI, 2008.

[3]See, for example, D. A. Bositis, *Black Churches and the Faith-Based Initiative*. Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies: Washington, DC, 2006; Cnaan, *The Newer Deal*; L. Monteil, *The Use of Public Funds for the Delivery of Faith-Based Human Services: A Review of the Research Literature Focusing on the Public Funding of Faith-Based Organizations in the Delivery of Social Services*, the Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy, Rockefeller Institute of Government, New York, 2003; J. D. Scott, *The Scope and Scale of Faith-Based Social Services: A Review of the Research Literature Focusing on the Activities of Faith-Based Organizations in the Delivery of Social Services*, the Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy, Rockefeller Institute of Government, New York, 2003; S. R. Smith and M. R. Sosin, "The Varieties of Faith-Related Agencies," *Public Administration Review* 61 (2001): 651–670.

[4]S. R. Smith, J. P. Bartkowski, S. Grettenberger, *A Comparative View of the Role and Effect of Faith in Social Services*, the Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy, Rockefeller Institute of Government, New York, n.d.

[5]Issues in the following three broad areas were specifically not addressed during the working conference: (1) legal issues, including whether using public tax money to subsidize charitable activities of religious organizations violates the First Amendment provision separating church and state, and whether religious groups that accept public funds can make religiously based employment decisions (see, for example, I. Lupu and R. Tuttle, *The State of the Law 2006: Legal Developments Affecting Partnerships between Government and Faith-Based Organizations, the Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy*, Rockefeller Institute of Government, New York, 2006; (2) religious autonomy, including whether receipt of public funds will have a secularizing effect on religious organizations (see, for example, Bositis, *Black Churches*, and M. Gibelman and S. Gelman, "The Promise of Faith-Based Social Services: Perception versus Reality," *Social Thought: Journal of Religion in Social Services*, 22 No. 1 (2003): 5–23; and (3) capacity, including whether FBOs, particularly congregations and those at the grassroots, lack the experience or infrastructure to undertake such activities as managing multiple funding streams or providing accurate financial reports (see, for example, C. J. De Vita and S. Wilson, *Faith-Based Initiatives: Sacred Deeds and Secular Dollars*, the Urban Institute, Washington, DC, 2001. A broader concern is whether FBOs have the professional capacity to deliver long-term development aid as compared to short-term emergency assistance (see, for example, Scott, *The Scope and Scale of Faith-Based Services*).

[6]Heidi Rolland Unruh, Director, Congregations, Community Outreach, and Leadership Development Project, provided the author with her conference notes, which were an invaluable reference in summarizing the opportunities identified at the working conference.

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The purpose of *Fast Focus* is to provide supplemental coverage of poverty-related research, events, and issues between issues of *Focus*, and to acquaint a large audience with the work of the Institute by means of short essays. Full texts of *Fast Focus*, *Focus*, IRP Discussion Papers, and Special Reports are available on the IRP Web site at www.irp.wisc.edu.

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Edited by Deborah Johnson.

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Working Conference:
Measuring the Role of Faith in Program Outcomes
Institute for Research on Poverty
Madison, WI, April 24–25, 2008

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* Participants' positions are from the time of the conference and may have subsequently changed.

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