Comparative Approaches to Program Planning

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John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
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To the courageous planners who are willing
to risk the hard thinking necessary
to design human service programs that will
truly better the world for us all
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Preface

One of the basic assumptions of the rationalist school is that decisions precede an action, a belief that has entered popular folklore in the exhortation: “look before you leap.” This is, of course, good counsel. But suppose you don’t know how to leap? The inability to leap or, more generally, the ability or inability to implement a decision is rarely taken into account in the process of decision analysis.

—John Freidmann and Barclay Hudson, Knowledge and Action: A Guide to Planning Theory

GENERAL APPROACH TO THE BOOK

“Program planning” is a construct that can make complex situations more manageable. In a world in which change is a constant, program planning approaches that provide an illusion of being in control may be comforting. In fact, the certitude of knowing how to plan something from beginning to end is a desired skill set for those who want to “look before they leap.” This certitude is designed by professionals who want to demonstrate that they have something to offer and who might want to be hired as a program coordinator, grants writer, or manager. Many a professional has carried a copy of a plan or grant proposal with them to a job interview to demonstrate their ability to design a program.

Based on our understanding of students’ aspirations and needs, for years we taught program planning with the assurance that if a goal could be established, and if measurable objectives could be articulated, then somehow or some way their program designs could be implemented in a reasonable manner. Yet many programs
that looked doable on paper were anything but doable in real life. Even though our graduates' facility with "logic models" wowed employers and even potential funders, when it came to implementation many were often surprised to find that program designs did not always unfold in the envisioned manner. In fact, we learned in this process that excellent, precise, evidence-based designs could win accolades from professionals and funders, but that the process of enacting plans revealed unexpected gaps and barriers for staff tasked with implementation. Ironically, while some funded programs were not always creatively designed for addressing complex situations that needed alternative approaches, staff of community-based programs that appeared to work could not always articulate why and how their programs did work. They could not discuss their planning experiences in terms that could be grasped by exacting professional audiences. Our challenge, then, became to prepare our students to think and talk in the established language of program planning, as well as offer them alternative ways of planning, thinking, talking, and surviving. They needed to be facile at entering the established world of program planning while also knowing when to use different approaches. Most of all, they needed to recognize that there was no one best way to plan. With this came a necessity to accurately assess the situation for which they were planning and, from that, determine the appropriate approach for the circumstances at hand. To accomplish this, we had the stimulating challenge of determining how to impart the needed knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Our students have told us that we have been able to meet the challenge.

Therefore, we decided to write this book with the purpose of comparing and contrasting different ways of program planning. We do so out of a belief that there are multiple ways of knowing, and that there are multiple ways of planning and doing. Because these ways are different does not make one superior to others, and
we have found that recognizing that there are differences can be freeing. It allows the purpose of the planning process to drive the methods used, rather than the methods driving the design. This goes a long way toward facilitating professional program planners in acquiring resources for planning and having increased flexibility for functioning in varying social, economic, and cultural settings.

Our book is geared to future program planners in master’s programs in social work, public administration, nonprofit management, public health, community psychology, applied sociology, human services, and related fields. It may also be useful in required senior-level courses on large systems change offered in baccalaureate programs. In social work, community psychology, applied sociology, and human services programs, where many students expect to perform “direct service work,” it can increase understanding of direct service programs. Courses in program planning, macro social work practice, program evaluation, organization practice, policy implementation, and related subjects will benefit from using this book for creating expanded applications of program planning strategies, tactics, and skills.

Reasons for all practitioners to become familiar with the skills offered in this book will be central in the pages that follow. All practitioners both impact and are impacted by programming at some stage in their direct service delivery work. They are also sometimes alienated by the language and techniques of traditional planning, thinking that planning has nothing to do with their efforts in relationship building and problem-solving with their clients. We believe that an alternative, nonlinear approach to planning that takes into account intuition and serendipity and creatively capitalizes on complex circumstances is sure to make sense to many students who are turned off by more traditional, prescriptive planning approaches.
We are aware that some people prefer to have a greater sense of order, and that they believe there is a preferred way to plan a program, through precise, linear thought. For these planners, linear reasoning is a priority. This book is designed to show that nonlinear (sometimes called nonrational or circular) thinking is not only useful in reasoning, but that it supports an alternative type of interpretive planning called an emergent approach.

Interpretive planning translates different ways of knowing and understanding into the “doing” aspects of planning human service programs. Linear planning models can be compared with alternative, nonlinear approaches, and it is possible to assess the costs and benefits of each approach. Ideas about when differing approaches are used most effectively are offered here as a guide for program planners faced with situations that do not always resemble the clean, clear opportunities for which rational, prescriptive planning is usually discussed. Ways to systematically approach messy situations (e.g., when you are called on to begin to plan in the middle, not at the beginning, of a project; or when you are asked to help in situations in nontraditional or non-Western cultures with differing approaches to logic) will be addressed while applying reasonable ways of assuring and accounting for quality in human service programming, regardless of the context. Our emphasis is on planning and design, with implementation and evaluation of the results of planning also recognized. This is a flexible conceptualization of the planning process that can be useful regardless of the culture, mission, or goals of the human service setting or organization within which planning occurs. Through different approaches, alternate ways of knowing are introduced into planning processes, facilitating programs targeted to meet needs in traditional or alternative contexts.
ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The book is composed of six chapters, successively building both understanding and competence for good program planning. End-of-chapter discussion questions and exercises focus on skills development derived from material in each chapter. Practical application of planning concepts is made through real-life case examples intended to be of help in thinking about the issues and the way they are presented, and to assist those not yet engaged with the challenges and opportunities of complex problem-solving in program planning. A glossary is offered to aid thinking along the way and to clarify our use of terms.

Conceptually, we examine two types of planning based on different worldviews: rational and interpretive. These worldviews are joined by two approaches to planning: rational planning, which is tied to what we are calling prescriptive approaches; and interpretive planning, which is connected to what we are calling emergent approaches. Throughout the book we refer to problem-solving as a process that can be undertaken through prescriptive approaches, in which a goal is predetermined, or through emergent approaches, in which plans unfold in an unpredictable manner. We have carefully chosen our terms, in hopes that they will provide the reader with viable conceptual frameworks and languages in which to communicate about program planning.

In Chapter 1, we introduce the possibility that the need identification for a social program intervention may come from choices raised by different ways of conceptualizing an opportunity or problem, that there are choices in program design. Some of these choices are strongly cognitive, but others have affective and power dimensions. Through an exploration of the difference between a line and a circle, Chapter 2 also seeks an evenhanded understanding of the differences in these choices and the processes by which
programs are designed and planned. This subsequently takes us into how to know and understand differences between induction and deduction and positivist/rational and interpretivist ways of knowing. We think aspects of rational and nonrational thought (as opposed to irrational thought) are at the basis of the acceptance of both traditional and nontraditional ways of planning. Through the discussion of induction and deduction, as well as positivist and interpretivist ways of knowing, we present in detail the different assumptions that are part of linear and more circular thinking problem-solving processes and how those differences are important to the planning process. While these different notions may be based in rational and nonrational thought processes, the intent is to distinguish both from irrational thinking.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the elements that constitute a program; it introduces planning terms and identifies categories of stakeholders that will appear throughout the text. Here we describe how programs differ from projects, services, and policies. The various sources of needs identification and the programming ideas developed to meet those needs are discussed. The chapter also emphasizes that social programming is dependent on authorizing and funding sources, from policy enactment to needs assessment to government or other funder mandates to grassroots demands, all of which reflect how differently programs can be thought about, designed, and planned.

Chapter 3 is devoted to traditional rational program planning, based on the prescriptive approaches such as planned change and logic models. Building on the work of well-known scholars in planning and administration, we review the logic model that moves from needs assessment and problem analysis through hypothesis development, goals and objectives setting, and designing programs that are monitored and evaluated using traditional methods. The pros and cons of using prescriptive approaches are introduced, as
are the specifics of how these approaches work and in which situations they would likely be most valuable.

Chapter 4 focuses on interpretive program planning, based on emergent approaches to problem-solving. To date, textbooks on program planning have focused on rational planning and prescriptive approaches, stopping there, assuming that program planners would not need alternative models and might not draw on creative, fluid aspects in their work. Using an interpretive view of planning, the chapter outlines a collaborative, less reductionistic, approach to decision-making in program planning. Politics, goals, problems, solutions, and political reasoning and pragmatic thought focus and guide the reader into opportunities and challenges of using an emergent approach, as well as the specifics of how it works and in which situations it would be valuable.

Together, Chapters 3 and 4 outline the details of the traditional planned change or logic model approach based on rational thought and the more interpretive methods of an emergent approach to planning based on nonrational thinking. Both chapters use a critical lens to discuss when each approach is most useful, so that in Chapter 5, the reader can engage in an assessment of both the costs and benefits of each approach in order to develop the skills necessary to determine when and how each works best. The comparative aspect of the textbook is pursued in Chapter 5. We invite readers to critique the two planning approaches, based on what they learned in Chapters 3 and 4, helping them to clarify the questions that should be asked and answered in determining when each approach works best. We also elaborate on critical thinking and ethical decision-making, and explain how to assess the unintended consequences of planning choices in program implementation and evaluation. Examples from practice experience are used to compare the different approaches.
Using a global, culturally sensitive perspective on the program planning process, Chapter 6 assists the reader in exploring the sociopolitical benefits of having more than one approach to planning, regardless of cultural context or organizational tradition. In this chapter, we briefly return to the philosophy of science dialogue introduced at the beginning of the book as a way to choose appropriate responses to cultural needs, so that the planner can demonstrate skills in cultural competency. The goal is to signal the possibility of considering an alternative way. Our hope is that the reader will take advantage of the opportunity to consider and evaluate alternative planning approaches and not assume that some situations only reflect a lack of competence for engaging in planning. Chapter 6 is intended to assist the reader in identifying consequences of cultural context aspects of planning and recognizing both the challenges and possible benefits of embracing alternative approaches for successful program planning.

The material in this text is intended to help readers manage the difficulties of teaching and learning a linear process of planning while they are experiencing the serendipitous, sometimes nonlinear, nature of the human service environment. It also helps them address planning in a systematic way when the actual process is not strictly a linear one. All of us should all want to encounter, manage, and enjoy planning in varying cultural settings, and compete positively and effectively in a global human service marketplace in which designing culturally sensitive programs means being able to adapt to the ways of varying cultures. It should also aid us in creating and maintaining human service organization cultures that continually evolve standards for operationalizing cultural competence within our organizations (see, for example: NASW, 2001; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001).

At the beginning here, we indicated that, conceptually, program planning may be employed to cast an illusion of being in control of a
process that is often not as linear as it is often conceptualized. Professionals can be comforted by that illusion, as we have at times. In this book, we hope to convince the reader that comfort can also come from recognizing the inevitabilities of difference and from having a repertoire of skills to be used as needed, rather than using only one established way. In our classes, students are heard to exclaim, in effect, "This is hard, and my head hurts!" Our response is usually something like: "This is not an easy cookbook approach, and your head is hurting because you are thinking so hard. If program planning were easy, it could be done without skills, and you wouldn’t be in school. If you master the variety of program planning skills allowing you to work in diverse situations, then you will make a real difference in the real world of social program design and implementation." Thus, we hope the following pages will make your head hurt in good ways!
Acknowledgments

We are indebted to colleagues and former students around the country and in various parts of the world who have talked and debated with us throughout the years about program planning. We are especially indebted to colleagues and former professors who have guided us and who are the real pioneers in writing the books on program planning that have provided incredible insights into the planning process. We are particularly thankful for Peter M. Kettner who has always supported our efforts to push beyond rational approaches, to Roger Lohmann, Edward J. Pawlak, Donald E. Chambers, and Bob Vinter who taught us or worked with us on program planning in the early days. We appreciate as well the efforts of a number of anonymous reviewers who provided careful and thoughtful assessments of our ideas, including Felice Davidson Perlmutter, Kathy Byers, Paul D. McWhinney, and Jon E. Singletary.

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continual support and for your enthusiasm when we chatter about what we are writing.

Most of all we thank our students and our graduates/community practitioners who have inspired us to write this book. It is through the many classroom experiences we have had with you that we have truly learned what it means to plan for practice. You have asked the tough questions and helped us conceptualize what alternative planning would look like when we did not have textbooks to guide us. Your willingness to push the envelope has provided us with rich examples of what can happen when one trusts emergence.

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Our romance with deliberate strategies has blinded us to the reality that all strategy is a pattern in a stream of actions involving both intensions and emergence.

—Henry Mintzberg, as paraphrased in Getting to Maybe: How the World Has Changed

Chapter Outline

Lines and Circles as Planning Metaphors
- A Brief History of Lines and Circles
- Science and Reason
- Positivism versus Interpretivism
- Rational and Nonrational Thought
- Rational and Nonrational Problem-Solving and Decision-Making

Planning Theory: Both Lines and Circles
- Examples of Planning Approaches
- The “Surety” of the Line and the “Tentativeness” of the Circle

A Conceptual Framework

Summary

Discussion Questions
Assumptions upon which the chapter is built:

- Reason can be linear and nonlinear (or circular).
- Circular reasoning, sometimes called nonrational thought, is different from irrational thought.
- Both rational and nonrational thought have a basis in the history of decision-making and planning.
- Both rational and nonrational thought bring strengths and challenges to the program planning process.

Practitioners have many different experiences with planning programs. Starting new programs from the beginning is often the task of founders, and provides a unique set of creative challenges. Many programs are inherited, making it necessary to simultaneously redesign or make changes at the same time that one is carrying out current plans. Smaller organizations may have only one program, which means that planning the program is organization-wide, whereas within larger organizations various programs are units representing a range of sizes. These programs are siblings within a larger setting. Public programs are typically mandated by law and come with various regulatory strings attached. Yet other programs come to life from the grassroots up, being designed to address felt needs. Programs come in all sizes and forms, and some are considered models, demonstrations, or pilots as various constituencies watch to see if and how they “work.” Others are planned as replications of existing or earlier efforts. Programs can be described as being mainstream, alternative, hybrid, direct service, advocacy, and a host of other terms.

Thus, planning programs is not one unique set of activities that move in one specific way. For example, in a study of fourteen social programs, Goldberg (1995) found that no single approach to practice could be found and that “effective programs were developed with a variety of methods” (p. 614). We see program planning as an
unlimited number of possibilities for creative thinking. For example, have you ever been in a situation in which someone said, “We’re spinning our wheels,” yet in the process something new and interesting emerged? What was that about? Conversely, have you ever participated in something that was highly planful, in which a very specific set of goals and objectives was guiding the effort, but it simply did not work no matter how close one stuck to the plan? In the former situation, “spinning our wheels” is a metaphor for going in circles. In the process new ideas were emerging even though it felt redundant and unfocused. In the latter situation, having a detailed plan and placing it over a changing context might have meant that no one (no matter how skilled) could have preidentified how things would unfold. The program planning process unfolds in different ways, depending on its unique context. One approach does not fit all situations. We believe that both are useful and that the skilled practitioner must learn when to use different approaches. Both can be based on evidence in a world that is smitten with evidence-based practice. As you will see, the evidence used may be somewhat different in what, where, and when data are collected and analyzed.

Over a period of years a case management project was funded by a large private foundation. A health administrator, a social worker, a physician, and a nurse collaborated in responding to the request for proposals (RFP) to evaluate the project. There were eight project sites around the country, all of which had received funding to implement their case management interventions in physician practices in their respective locations. Each site was embedded in highly respected health care systems with dedicated, competent staff. The evaluation team began traveling to each site to assess these projects—each designed within its specific contexts. Each had measurable objectives, and on paper every project looked feasible. However, given local preferences, different practitioners performed case management.
Some were nurses, others were social workers, some were physician assistants, still others were nurse practitioners, and some had mixed disciplinary teams. Every site used a different assessment tool, based on the current instruments used in its health care environment. The work location of the case managers were different, given that some were colocated in physician offices, others were in adjacent buildings, and still others were in a central location from which they moved between physician offices on a regular basis. As the evaluation team interviewed various participants in these projects, it became increasingly clear that the projects were “apples and oranges,” and the interventions were not the same, even though all were doing case management. Each project had its own culture, structure, and norms of intervention.

The team recognized that each project had to be evaluated based on its own objectives, not the overall objectives of the foundation because the projects were really not comparable. This was fine; but what they soon realized was that each project had its own challenges. A few were moving toward their objectives in what seemed to be a consistent way; however, the majority of sites were in constant flux given the changing nature of the health care field. Staff came and went; physician practices merged; patients’ needs shifted; interorganizational relationships changed—and on and on. Original objectives became obsolete as project needs altered. Further, patient input during the intervention revealed a whole set of needs that had not been originally identified. Yet the foundation held the projects accountable to the original plans they had proposed in their grant applications because that was what the projects had contracted to do. The evaluation team had difficulty remaining detached. In fact, every time the team made a visit and asked questions, new issues and concerns emerged about how a project had or needed to change to make it responsive to patient needs.