

PREVALENT DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES' CLIENT SATISFACTION: A RESEARCH AND PRACTICE NOTE

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Abstract: This successive cross-sectional or panel study evaluated the City of Windsor's Department of Social Services, specifically, the Special Services and Children's Services Branches from 1990 to 1994. Their programs were assessed with quantitative (consumer satisfaction questionnaire, CSQ-8, score range = 8 to 32 [Larsen, Attkisson, Hargreaves, & Nguyen, 1979]) and qualitative (e.g., open-coded queries about what they liked most and least about the social services they received) measures of client satisfaction.

Résumé: Cette étude consécutive a pour but d'évaluer le Département des services sociaux, ville de Windsor, et en particulier les directions dévouées aux services spéciaux et au bien-être des enfants. La période de scrutin comprend 1990 à 1994. Les programmes ont été évalués utilisant des indices soit quantitatifs (questionnaire pour déterminer la satisfaction au niveau consommateur, CSQ-8 compte = 8 à 32 [Larsen, Attkisson, Hargreaves, & Nguyen, 1979]) soit qualificatifs de satisfaction au niveau consommateur.

■ The principle of including clients' opinions when evaluating human service programs would certainly seem to be of unquestioned importance to most such agency administrators and practitioners. Evaluation designs that lack this critical component may be methodologically rigorous, using very precise quantitative measures, but at the same time they will be devoid of rich qualitative data based on clients' personal experiences. The significance of this principle is underscored in the publicly funded social assistance arena because consumers of social services typically cannot express their dissatisfaction by going elsewhere to "purchase" services that will better meet their needs. This study's idea-generation began

in 1988 with the (Windsor, Ontario) Commissioner of Social Services' mandate to incorporate procedures for the collection of needed qualitative data on client satisfaction.

CLIENT SATISFACTION

Studies of client satisfaction have sampled predominantly from among the users of psychiatric and other allied mental health services (Burlow, Sweeney, Shear, Friedman, & Plowe, 1987; Byalin, 1993; Kotsopoulos, Elwood, & Oke, 1989; Loff, Trigg, & Cassels, 1987; Sabourin & Gendreau, 1988) as well as health care services (Garber, Brenner, & Litwin, 1986; Hall & Dornan, 1990; Schwab, Smith, & DiNitto, 1993); three of these were accomplished in Canada. No previous study has assessed satisfaction among the users of Canadian social services per se, although there have been many related Canadian and U.S. studies of general social work, family service programs, and child protection services (Gorey, in press). Using an array of client or consumer satisfaction measures, consistently high satisfaction ratings have been observed across all of these service domains, ranging from 65% to 99% "satisfied" or "very satisfied." Although such positive reports would be encouraging to any service, they ought to be interpreted with caution for a number of reasons: (a) potential selection bias—there may be a tendency for such survey respondents to be those with the most favourable opinions of the service (Gorey, Rice, & Brice, 1992); (b) potential information or social desirability bias—there may be a tendency for some service consumers to respond in ways that they believe are desired; and (c) a lack of assured confidentiality may tend to potentiate the effects of both selection and information bias. The present study hopes to validly answer qualitative questions about client satisfaction with social services by first providing some measure of control for such potential methodological problems.

METHOD

Sample Selection

The Special Services Branch of Windsor's Department of Social Services served as this study's accessible population. In accordance with the commissioner's mandate, it had evaluation procedures in place by January 1990. This branch's mission is to support general assistance clients with social services that may meet some of their needs

other than income maintenance. It comprises the following nine programs: Work Activity, Employment Support, Municipal Employment, Co-Location, Homemaker, Home Support, Parental Support, Rest Home, and Social Work. The Children's Services Branch was also sampled; its mission is to support general assistance clients with children, endeavouring to meet some of the specific needs of children, other than income maintenance.

A monthly random sample of clients were mailed the brief program evaluation questionnaire, which was found to take less than 10 minutes to complete among 50 pilot-tested clients. Client participants of programs with a termination date were sent the questionnaire during the program's last quarter. Those participating in programs without a termination date were sent the evaluation instrument three months after their file was closed, whether they completed the entire program or dropped out. A consent form, assuring them of the data's confidential use, was also enclosed with the questionnaire. Their name and address were not attached to the stamped envelope that they were given to facilitate ease of anonymous responding. Over the five-year course of this successive cross-sectional study (1990–1994), 1,421 of the 4,267-client sample returned the evaluation questionnaire (response rate = 33.3%), which is typical of response to similar surveys in the mental health and health care fields (*Mdn* = 38%, ranged from 28% to 95%).

Measurement of Client Satisfaction

The client satisfaction questionnaire (CSQ-8) was used as one measure of client satisfaction with social services (Larsen, Attkisson, Hargreaves, & Nguyen, 1979). It is a brief (eight-item), easy to administer measure of client satisfaction, with known psychometric properties from previous use in mental health research (Gaston & Sabourin, 1992; Weltzien, McIntyre, Ernst, Walsh, & Parker, 1986). These studies found it to be a highly reliable or internally consistent measure (Chronbach $\alpha = .93$), as did this one ($\alpha = .92$). As for its construct validity, it has been found to be essentially unassociated with social desirability (Gaston & Sabourin, 1992; Sabourin et al., 1989). Averaging their findings, socially desirable responding may account for only one percent of client satisfaction variability ($r = .10$, $r^2 = .01$, NS). Computed across its eight service assessment items (quality, appropriateness, need met, amount, refer friends, refer self, effectiveness, overall) from 1 “very dissatisfied” to 4 “very satisfied,” the CSQ-8 has a theoretical score range from 8 to 32.

To balance the standardized quantitative measurement approach resulting from use of the CSQ-8, the following three qualitative queries were presented in an open-coded format: (1) Name one thing that you liked most about the service; (2) Name one thing you liked least about the service; and (3) Do you have any other comments or suggestions about the service you received? Clients' responses to these questions were content analyzed and summarized according to concepts that have been hypothesized to be important predictors of service satisfaction in the related fields of health care and mental health research (Aday & Andersen, 1974; Greenfield & Attkisson, 1989; Hsieh & Kagle, 1991; Reid & Gundlach, 1983; Russell, 1990). Responses were grouped by positive or negative characterization of service acceptability, availability-accessibility, and effectiveness; and changes over time were observed (1990–1991 vs. 1992–1994).

Methodological Strengths

This study's overall response rate of 33% potentially limits the validity of its findings. However, this singular limitation is balanced by a number of methodological strengths used to control for potential selection bias: a large random and anonymous sample; a satisfaction measure uncorrelated with socially desirability; and specifically invited critical or negative commentary. Moreover, response rates did not differ significantly between years. So any bias that may intrude in the longitudinal analyses will probably be relatively constant over time, and therefore is unlikely to have a potent confounding influence on this study's central findings.

RESULTS

Sample Description

The demographic profile of the client sample seems indicative of special services accessibility to young adults needing employment opportunities or those with young children; the majority were females (60.8%). The typical client has never been married (43.7%) and has one child ($Mdn = 1.0$ child, range = none to 10). As for socioeconomic status, clients typically have some high school education but have not graduated (53.6%), and most of them are not currently employed (72.4%). The average client has received assistance from the Department of Social Services for one year ($Mdn = 12$ months, range = 4 to 240 months), and a significant proportion of them (27.1%) have received assistance for more than two years. This descriptive

finding again seems consistent with the Special Service Branch's mission to serve those with severe barriers to employment. Finally, female clients may generally be categorized as more socially and economically vulnerable than their male counterparts: fewer of them were married (9.1% vs. 30.7%), and more were divorced (20.8% vs. 10.6%), separated (15.7% vs. 7.6%), or widowed (12.8% vs. 3.2%); fewer of them were childless (24.0% vs. 56.1%); and they have typically received public assistance longer than men ($Mdn = 18.5$ vs. 12 months); all $p < .05$. Those most in need of employment-related supportive services may be single mothers. It seems that the Branch targets them well; nearly a third (29.4%) of the female client sample was so categorized, but few of the single men claimed to be fathers (3.3%).

Client Satisfaction

Clients' score distributions on the client satisfaction questionnaire (CSQ) are displayed in Table 1. Categorically, they were quite satisfied with the social services provided by the Special Services Branch of Windsor's Department of Social Services; nearly all of them (89.0%) may be described as "satisfied" to "very satisfied" with the services provided (scored 20 or higher on the CSQ). Furthermore, a trend was observed indicative of increased client satisfaction over time; their average CSQ score increased significantly between 1990-91 ($M = 25.0$) and 1992-94 ($M = 26.6$), $p < .01$. This between-group difference converts to an effect size metric of 62% (Cohen's U_3 [1988]). The U_3 statistic adds an intuitively appealing interpretation of programmatic change or practical significance. For example, in this case it means that nearly two-thirds of the clients who received social services during the period of time from 1992 to 1994 scored higher on the CSQ than the average client who received service from 1990 to 1991. It was also observed that the prevalence of "very satisfied" (CSQ score of 26 or higher) clients has increased by approximately 25% (1990-91, 49.8% vs. 1992-94, 62.5%; prevalence ratio [PR] = 1.26), and the prevalence of "dissatisfied" (CSQ score of less than 20) clients has decreased by nearly 50% (PR = 0.59), both $p < .01$.

Qualitative Evaluation

Content analysis of clients' open-coded responses are displayed in Table 2. First, over this study's entire five-year data-collection period, of those clients who voiced an opinion about the effectiveness of the benefits or services they received or staff members they worked

with, nearly all (85%) said that the program effectively met their needs; this overall finding did not change over time. Enhanced positive client commentary centred on the availability, accessibility, and acceptability of Branch staff members, and also upon access to the facilities. Staff member acceptability pertains to the way in which services are offered (e.g., are the Branch workers empathetic and respectful?). Positive client comments in this category increased significantly (14.8% vs. 19.3%, $p < .01$), while negative comments diminished concomitantly (9.9% vs. 6.1%). It also seems that there are currently more staff available in a more timely fashion. Taken together, more recent client views of staff effectiveness seem to be approximately two-fold more positive than their earlier assessments (4.7% vs. 7.9%). Client commentary on facilities focused nearly

Table 1
Satisfaction of Special Services^a Branch Clients

Client Satisfaction	Percentage Distributions		
	Total Sample ($n = 1,421$)	1990-1991 ($n = 629$)	1992-1994 ($n = 792$)
Questionnaire Score*			
8-13 'Very dissatisfied'	3.2	4.5	2.3
14-19 'Dissatisfied'	7.8	9.9	6.2
20-25 'Satisfied'	32.1	35.9	29.0
26-32 'Very satisfied'	56.9	49.8	62.5
Mean* (Standard deviation)	25.9 (5.18)	25.0 (5.38)	26.6 (4.89)

Note. Categorical descriptions of client satisfaction are based upon a simple quartile breakdown of the questionnaire scores. Client satisfaction was not found to differ significantly for the years 1990 and 1991 nor for 1992 through 1994.

^a Home Support: in-home chore program for clients who are older or physically disabled ($n = 200$, 14.1%), Children's Services: support general assistance clients with children ($n = 190$, 13.4%), Work Activity: assistance with employment preparation and job search strategies ($n = 171$, 12.0%), Rest Home: lodging and nursing home residences ($n = 171$, 12.0%), Parental Support: legal and other assistance for clients separating or divorcing ($n = 161$, 11.3%), Municipal Employment: purchase of service arrangement with the Unemployment Help Center ($n = 149$, 10.5%), Employment Support: employment counseling and extensive pre-employment intervention ($n = 144$, 10.1%), Homemaker: household financial, homemaking, nutritional, and like skills counselling ($n = 98$, 6.9%), Co-Location: coordinated employment assistance between the Canada Employment Centre and the Department of Social Services ($n = 82$, 5.8%), and Social Worker: client assessment, crisis intervention, brief counseling, and referral ($n = 55$, 3.9%).

* 1990-1991 versus 1992-1994 categorical [$\chi^2(3) = 26.38$] and between-group mean comparisons [$F(1,1419) = 31.85$] are both statistically significant at $p < .01$.

exclusively on access problems pre-1992; one of every 25 clients complained about the inadequacy of the telephone system (e.g., "I can never get through. The line is always busy"). The Branch's installation of a new system effectively solved the problem; all such comments disappeared post-1991.

Client critical commentary tended to focus on issues of the availability, accessibility, and acceptability of benefits and services. Consistently across time, approximately one of every ten clients experienced problems related to service availability or access. They generally voiced concerns with the following issues: waiting-lists, cheque delays, office locations and hours. Also, positive comments pertaining to the acceptability of benefits and services were observed to diminish significantly over time (7.8% vs. 4.4%, $p < .01$). This trend seems to be basically reflective of some clients' not surprising dissatisfaction with the amount of assistance received.

Table 2
Content Description of Clients' Open-Coded Qualitative Assessment of Benefits and Services, Staff Personnel, and Facilities

Assessment Categories	Percentage Distributions			
	1990-1991		1992-1994	
	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
Benefits and Services				
Acceptability*	7.8	7.4	4.4	8.8
Availability-Access	7.8	9.2	8.8	8.8
Effectiveness	23.4	3.1	21.1	2.6
Staff				
Acceptability*	14.8	9.9	19.3	6.1
Availability-Access*	0.8	3.9	6.1	3.5
Effectiveness*	4.7	2.6	7.9	1.8
Facilities				
Acceptability	0.8	0.0	0.9	0.0
Availability-Access*	0.0	3.9	0.0	0.0
All Responses*	60.1	40.0	68.5	31.6

Note. Based upon a content analysis of 2,426 responses (1,074 during 1990-1991 and 1,352 from 1992 to 1994) from 1,421 clients on three queries: (1) Name one thing that you liked most about the service (87.2% responded); (2) Name one thing you liked least about the service (68.4% responded); and (3) Do you have any other comments or suggestions about the service you received? (56.0% responded). Also, nonspecific responses related to general satisfaction (11.1%) and responses pertaining to other than the services used (8.2%), such as general comments about Canadian society, political parties, and so on, were excluded.

* $p < .01$.

DISCUSSION

This large panel study favourably evaluated the social services offered in a mid-sized Canadian city. It found that clients' level of satisfaction with social services has increased significantly over the first half of the 1990s, as has their belief that such services effectively meet their identified needs. These trends seem to have mirrored the political will of the times; as social programming enjoyed greater capital investment, consumers have taken note of the beneficial effects. Increased funding and consequent staffing of social service programs and concomitant staff development, specifically for special programs designed to serve those with severe barriers to employment, seem to be directly related to consumers' assessment of them as more available, accessible, and acceptable. For example, during this study period, typical program benefits increased by 20% and significantly more staff with a minimum baccalaureate of social work degree (B.S.W.) were recruited. Whether these positive trends continue remains to be seen. The proposed funding cuts currently arriving on a changing political tide may be expected to erode the gains observed in the early 1990s; social services may in fact become less effective. This study's evaluation model, now routinely used by Windsor's Department of Social Services, will be used to empirically track client satisfaction in the months and years ahead.

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