



香 港 中 文 大 學
社 會 研 究 中 心

Action Research in a
Social Service Agency Workshop

Ai-li S. Chin and Robert Chin

SOCIAL RESEARCH CENTRE
THE CHINESE UNIVERSITY
OF HONG KONG

Suggested citation:

Chin, Ai-li S. and Robert Chin. 1972. *Action Research in a Social Service Agency Workshop*.
Hong Kong: Occasional Paper No. 7, Social Research Centre, The Chinese University of
Hong Kong.

THE CHINESE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

SOCIAL RESEARCH CENTRE

"Action Research in a Social
Service Agency Workshop"

Ai-li S. Chin & Robert Chin

Social Report & Social Study No. 2

ABSTRACT

Ai-li S. Chin and Robert Chin
"Action Research in a Social Service Agency Workshop"
Social Report & Social Study No. 2
Social Research Centre, The Chinese
University of Hong Kong, 1972

Action research as a form of knowledge-building for practical action is briefly defined. Short descriptions are given of the "values interview," the "open panel," the "living questionnaire," and role playing as applied to Board-staff relations in a Hong Kong Social Service agency. Two types of evaluation are reported and discussed. Finally, the research team summarizes what it has learned from this particular case of action research.

23 pages

May, 1972

ACTION RESEARCH IN A SERVICE AGENCY WORKSHOP

Ai-li S. Chin and Robert Chin

Early in 1972, a team of four Research Fellows* from the Social Research Centre (SRC) conducted a workshop for a social service agency on improving intra-organizational relationships and communications. The team designed, with representatives of the agency, a series of semi-structured group situations and inter-group interactions in order to generate behavior, opinions and attitudes from different parts of the organization so that its members (and secondarily the SRC team) can better understand the present shape of relationships in the organization and make improvements for the future. The purposes of the design may be separately stated as follows:

1. to sharpen self-perceptions by participants of their own attitudes and values,
2. to reveal mutual perceptions of goals and needs of sub-groups,
3. to clarify patterns of interactions between sub-groups,
4. and to facilitate change in the above areas so that improved communications and relationships may obtain.

ACTION RESEARCH

Before describing the actual procedures and outcomes, it is useful to state the background of the approach brought to the situation by the SRC team. More importantly, it is necessary to show how "action research" as employed by the SRC team is an approach arising out of the theory and practice of behavioral science, and how it is capable of creating the pre-conditions for desired change. Action research, in other words, is an instrument for shaping a self-learning situation for members of an organization.

* The team consisted of the following Research Fellows of the Social Research Centre: Robert Chin, Professor; Ai-li Chin, Lecturer, United College; Ambrose Y.C. King, Lecturer, New Asia College; Fai-Ming Wong, Lecturer, Chung Chi College, all of the Sociology Board of Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Why action research? Because it is a form of knowledge-building which is closely tied to action requirements. There is the perennial problem that the activities and results of research must be meaningfully related to the practical situation for action and change. Yet, as methodology for research improves and proliferates, the gap between systematic knowledge and operating knowledge is increasing rather than decreasing. Sometimes, the very language used in reporting research or the conceptual framework for organizing data seem unnecessarily obscure for the practitioner and policy maker. Furthermore, research is usually time-consuming, and often by the time findings are written up and implications for action derived, the practitioner has moved on to other questions. This psychological and intellectual distance between the client and the usual kind of researcher poses a difficult problem. Finally, the research may be seen as playing a "superior" role with respect to the practitioner, and information possessed by the latter may be ignored or judged as not credible. The practitioner in turn may be reluctant to accept research data as "valid" or relevant for him.

The behavioral scientist tries to cope with these issues via different methods. First, there is an increasing appreciation of the actor's "definition of the situation," of his construction of his social reality. This is the "phenomenological approach." Then ways must be devised to take account of different actors in the same situation having different definitions of the situation. Secondly, attempts can be made to narrow the time-gap and psychological distance by involving the actors themselves in the research activity and by showing them that the data collected are "their data" and the decisions for action are their decisions. Thirdly, instead of sacrificing the richness and complexity of a particular "case," the specific individual, or the fullness of a concrete problem in the effort to generalize, the behavioral scientist can learn from typical cases or "ideal types." On-the-spot action research embodies some of these principles; it emphasizes not so much the traditional type of research design or research findings but rather what can be learned by creating and observing specified group processes in concrete settings.

What then does action research actually attempt to do? It attempts to use concepts in behavioral science to select the focus around which data is to be gathered. It uses "research techniques" to generate data openly in the group setting and to invite participants themselves to share their experiences and their constructions of social reality, and to take responsibility for action and change. These actions aim toward (1) collecting information about self and others, (2) recognizing one's own assumptions and the role they play in the "problem", (3) observing and reporting changes in perception of self and of others on the basis of the generated data, (4) learning to manage differences and conflicts, and (5) acquiring a sense of potency in coping with the problems. And of course it is hoped that participants will "see" for themselves possibilities for future action or for new group arrangements, new or revitalized relations or organizational procedures.

One of the common forms of action research is to use "situational activities" to allow participants to provide data, including feelings, in a problem-solving context. A basic step in this form is developing the ability of participants to "hear" this data, that is, this kind of information-attitudes-feelings, including those about the self, and to respond to them. A main feature of action research is the recognition that the relationship between the researcher and the participants is a collaborative one, both in planning and in execution. During part of the proceedings, participants become at the same time the researcher and the "researched". The traditional role of the researcher is transformed into that of creating situations or exercises to "allow" valid data to come forth.

In this project with the service agency, we elected a situational approach which includes human relations exercises and group processes. In light of the collaborative approach, part of the SRC team met and talked with some of the service agency planning group. Due to shortage of time, it was not possible to have as much joint planning as we liked. During the workshop, more on-going joint planning sessions were held -- one at the end of the first evening to plan for the next day, and another after lunch the second day to plan the afternoon activities. In this fashion, the action research kept in touch with the flow of events and stayed close to the development of the case, modifying the original design as conditions emerged.

The Social Research Centre had an additional interest in this workshop since the Centre had conducted a conventional-type research project for the parent organization of this service agency. The SRC Director thought it appropriate to use this workshop as occasion for a feedback session. With this purpose in mind, the service agency director prepared a summary of the Centre's original research report for distribution at the workshop. It should be noted, however, that the agency had altered many of its policies since the time of the earlier research. Nevertheless, the SRC team hoped that this action research would be another mode of directly reflecting back some of the earlier findings to members of the agency.

DESIGN AND ACTIVITIES

The history and design for the workshop, and the actual procedures as they were carried out were as follows:

The agency participants may be divided into three functional groups: the Board, the staff and the administration. (For most purposes, the latter two groups are collectively referred to as the staff, and members of the parent organization are included in "Board".) The themes of the workshop, as originally stated by the Board-staff planning committee, were: "The role of the agency in this changing society," and "interdependence of Board/Staff/Administration."

Initially, some agency representatives came to the SRC with a specific question on one item of its prepared workshop agenda. In the course of the conversation, it became clear that the Social Research Centre could offer experienced personnel to take a more active role of leadership in the workshop. By mutual agreement, the SRC became involved in the last stage of the planning and decided to send a team of four to help conduct the workshop along with members of the agency. This phase therefore involved establishing credentials of the SRC team and winning acceptance by the agency planning committee. From this point on, the team did most of the designing and interim reviewing of the process with the collaboration of agency representatives.

Goals of the Social Research Centre in becoming conductors of the workshop as presented to the service agency representatives were as follows:

- a. To achieve further closure to the SRC-client relationship,
- b. To offer experienced leadership in human-relations type of workshops,
- c. To introduce a new kind of applied behavioral science technique to Hong Kong, in a multi-language/dialect setting,
- d. To learn from the experience, and
- e. To facilitate change.

After the conclusion of the workshop, SRC team would welcome a joint evaluation meeting or any other type of collaborative follow up.

First Two sessions - becoming acquainted and getting to the data

Attendance at the workshop was good, with Board to Staff Administration at about 1:2, but with lower ranks of administration under-represented.

The workshop began with a devotion period and two brief talks: by an invited speaker on recent trends in Hong Kong society, and by an administrative officer on the history and activities of the agency.

The first evening's two activities were designed to bring personal relationships closer. This arose partly out of discussions of the planning group and partly due to the inherent need for a good opening design. More concretely, the first activity was aimed at providing information about the staff to non-staff members (Board and parent-agency representatives), followed by a "fish-bowl" meeting for the Board (and others) to "derive implications" of the information they gathered.

The first activities consist of a small group interview situation in four dialect/language groups: two in Cantonese, one in Mandarin and one in English. These groups were further divided into sub-groups of 3 persons each, with a Board member interviewing one of the two staff members and the other staff member observing. Interviewers were given a brief list of questions as guidelines to discover the values and motivations of the staff member:

Why did you choose to work at this agency?

Why do you like this agency?

What parts of your potential are being used and what parts are not being used?

What is your personal viewpoint? your motivation? your philosophy?

At the end of the 15 minute interview, an observer made comments on the process, and the interviewer then "presented" the staff member to the rest of the dialect/language group.

This was a structured face-to-face relationship between pairs of Board and staff to promote a deeper (though one way) understanding of the kind of people who work for the agency. The assumption is that a deeper understanding of one person, plus reports of interviews of others, gives a Board member a better grasp of the staff than a more superficial introduction to many.

The Board members responded by taking the interview assignment quite seriously. Some tried to follow the guidelines faithfully, even literally, rather than inventing their own questions, some taking detailed notes on what they heard. At the end of this exercise, when participants were asked for comments on the interview situation, the interviewers felt they should have been given more time to prepare, and that the question on one's untapped potentials violated the Chinese sense of modesty and therefore difficult to answer. Some also felt that interviewing in front of a co-worker was a little embarrassing. Other thought the questions were too vague. The interviewees did not have particular complaints about the questions, but they wished they could get acquainted with more members of the Board.

The exercise achieved limited success. The lack of prior preparation was in part intended by some of the planners, though the interviewers might have been given more adequate briefing on the spot and given more explicit instructions to improvise their own questions. The objection to the small number of people interviewed could not have been remedied due to limitation of time.

Part of the dissatisfaction of the staff must be understood in terms of one side of the initial goal: personal acquaintance with the Board, individually and as a group. (The scope and persistence of this goal become gradually clear as the workshop progressed.) Participants also did not give full recognition to what was in fact accomplished in small groups. In one small group, for example, the interviewer began by saying she already knew the interviewee quite well. But at the end of the interview, she admitted learning something that she had not known before. (The Board, being older and more "Chinese", might have felt the "inappropriateness" of the questions more keenly, and might

also have felt that they were on public display as interviewers -- hence the meticulous care in following the guideline questions and in reporting literally.)

The 4 dialect/language groups, two Cantonese, one Mandarin, and one English, then came together and one Board member from each group formed a panel in the middle to discuss implications of what was revealed about the values and motivations of the staff. An empty chair was placed in the inner circle for anyone in the outer group to temporarily occupy if he wanted to make a point or ask a question. The assignment was to discuss how the agency can best make use of the human resources in terms of individual goals and motivation of the staff.

The total group liked the design, especially having the chair in the middle, which was occupied by several people in succession. Going to the chair to join the Board in the inner circle also provoked laughter, lightening the mood of the entire group. Board members discussed several programs of the agency, including the possibility of expansion, for instance from the usual kind of health care to preventive health care and health education. The other remarks on policy implications for the agency can be grouped into "positive" remarks and "negative" ones. More important of the former are that (1) the agency is "like a big family": everyone cooperates harmoniously, develops his individual ability, seeks self improvement and develops his personal philosophy of life; and (2) that the agency strives to serve needy children and adults, is "unbureaucratic," and has a "good, strong leader." Then several Board members spoke of their being "non-specialists", their lack of expertise as a group, and therefore their inability to initiate programs or even follow that of the agency. This part of the session took on the air of a self-effacing "confession" on the part of the Board. Then someone on the Board interpreted a staff remark as a "challenge" to the Board to doing something about their state of "confusion", supplying the word "MCC"* which later became a jocular theme in other sessions. At that time, however, this interpreted remark brought out much heated feeling: Some of the Board members felt attacked, and the original staff-member to whom the remark was attributed was embarrassed by the interpretation and the implied attack on the Board.

* "MCC", standing for mung-cha-cha in colloquial Cantonese, is used to describe someone who is confused when he should not be.

This ended the evening session, and the planning group, including the team, administration and staff representatives, met to evaluate the proceedings and plan or replan the program for the next day. Some of the planning group felt that the Board had humanized themselves in front of the staff, but had perhaps presented an image of incompetence and lack of cohesion. (Part of the self-effacing talk, it was explained, was really polite talk, but the question still remained as to how staff perceived it.) It was decided to schedule an hour-and-a-half to 2-hour unstructured session for Board members alone, to formulate Board goals for the agency for presentation to the total workshop. In the meantime, non-Board members met for a separate activity.

But before describing what went on in the separate Board and staff groups, it might be pointed out here that the evening design was first met with compliance from Board and staff. As the evening wore on and participants began saying what they really meant, compliance turned to greater involvement and active approval and appreciation of the methods. This was a high point of the day. The SRC team felt that during that evening they were being fully accepted.

Another observation of the team was that the staff had somehow viewed the Board as a cohesive group, a social group whose members shared common views or a common state of mind. The Board was further viewed as being separate and distant from the working staff and administration of the agency, being "superior" to the latter, as a staff member put it. In fact, Board members did not seem to the team to be a cohesive social group; they spoke two different dialects, Mandarin and Shanghai, and they represented different sponsoring organizations. They are, however, not native Cantonese-speaking, though most can understand it. Thus the fact that staff viewed Board members as a superior and cohesive group who did not live up to expectations of being experts matched up with regional/dialect cleavages and perceptions. Though the Board changed its self-image during the second morning, it was not clear whether staff changed its perceptions of the Board.

The SRC team was aware of this language and dialect problem and tried to deal with it from time to time by the use of translation or summary in another dialect, especially when something "important" was being said. This procedure did not seem to disrupt things too much -- perhaps a group like this is accustomed to this awkward but

essential remedy -- though how much time should be done always remained a difficult question. As it turned out, some of the junior staff later did say that they missed some of the proceedings.

Session 3. Board Session

Next morning's design was to put the Board members together in a meeting by themselves (while the staff undertook a different activity), in order to consolidate their views and perhaps to arrive at a more positive statement of Board goals and functions. Several themes emerged from the 2-hour session. Board members stated their disappointment that on the previous day, staff members only mentioned positive sides of their operation; they wished more criticism of the operation of the agency could be brought out. Then last night's "challenge" to the Board was reiterated, but a member of the SRC team diverted the subject by an explanation of the difference between speaker's intention, listener's impression of the communication, and listener's interpretation -- all being versions of what "truly" happened; it is futile to try to "settle" the question of what "truth" was. The Board members then again described themselves as "non experts" and "not understanding" the Center's operations, calling themselves "rubber stamps." Here a turning point was reached when a new Board member pointed out that the Board did not have to be experts -- they should be leaders in setting the direction for the agency. Then the chairman gave a brief review of the history of the Board, pointing out how much better it is now and how seriously members do take their responsibilities -- coming to attend meetings and to discuss issues. Another member regretted that Board members were not informed about the by-laws of the agency -- a weakness of communications from staff to Board. Then a key member of the Board expressed her mixed feeling about what the Board should be like -- should it be led by the staff or should it be stranger and thereby running the risk of interfering with the effective work of the agency. By this time, the Board as a group had sufficiently recouped its own self image to be able to face the others with a more positive thrust. In winding up the talk, someone reiterated that he was a conscientious Board member, but that in truth he could not "bear any more" detailed responsibility.

In the course of making a summary of strengths of the Board for presentation to the total group, one or 2 additional points emerged in the Board's self image:

1. One person claimed that Board has contact only with the director,* and wished to have more direct communication with staff. Someone suggested encouraging lower ranks of the agency to write to the Board with complaints, but this idea was abandoned when organizational consequences of such steps were pointed out. The Board then emphasized the necessity of increasing communications along established lines, "like layers of management." Existing lines of communication were "not vertical enough," meaning communication with some "layers" of the agency was not good enough.
2. Board gets the impression that staff may perceive the Board to be "on top," but hopes that staff really does not think so.
3. Someone then rephrased the Board's duty as "chien-to cheng-tsa" 檢督政策 (to supervise policy), and articulated its spirit as je-li 熱力 (enthusiasm) and ai-hsin 愛心 (dedication). It hopes the staff also shares in this spirit, and in Christian love.

Session Four -- Staff and a "Living Questionnaire"

While the Board was meeting separately, the rest of the participants took part in the activity of "A Living Questionnaire." This design was intended by the planning group to generate some data by the staff and administration (later with the Board) for use in defining agency values and shaping future directions. Some attention was paid by the planning group to the nature and wording of the questionnaire items so that they represented real, locally relevant issues. Four alternatives were deliberately chosen to represent "good" values (see below), creating a difficult choice and a conflict situation. The activity aimed at crystallizing values and standpoints of individuals by "forcing" them to take a stand by choosing to "join" a position and discussing the reasons why. Thus inherent tension was built into the inter-relationship between the four groups.

* Someone else, pointed out later that there have in fact been more communication between Board and other parts of the agency.

Here is the basic procedure: The beginning of a sentence is put up for all to see but the four alternative ways of finishing the sentence are placed in four corners of the room. Participants are asked to go to the "station" which best represents their positions. Once there, each group is asked to sit and talk among themselves about the meaning of their choice. The emphasis throughout is on how each participant gives his own meaning to the wording, emphasizing the subjective definition of the position. After a few minutes, someone in each station is asked to tell the large group why he or she is there. Then the participants are asked to dialogue across stations, with emphasis on how each position is heard and understood by others. The design at this point often provokes joking and laughter as each station challenges others as to the "whys" of the other stations. Sometimes the conductor of the activity prods the group to become more direct and less intellectualizing. For example, such further questions may be asked: "Yes, and what does this mean for you personally?" "Are you surprised to see so-and-so at that station?" "Do you think someone should be in some other place?" This activity is a technique for eliciting rapid, public responses to central issues, with opportunities for mutual questioning and probing. It is a highly involving activity for several reasons: physical moving around in the room, opportunity for a small number of similar-minded people to reinforce one another, the inter-personal and inter-group quality of the dialogue, and the serious-humorous atmosphere. Obviously several processes may underlie the choices: some deliberately choosing an unpopular position, others going to the popular one; some choices were made so as to not leave one person alone, etc. etc.

For this particular workshop, three topics were chosen, each with four stations: first was personal identity, second, the motivations and satisfactions of the working staff, and third the desired direction of change for the agency. This session was conducted in Cantonese, with almost all discussions in Cantonese. There were rapid interactions and spontaneous expressions. The signs for the stations were written both in Chinese and in English.

For the first topic on personal identity, the sentence began with "I am a" and the four stations were marked "Chinese,"

"Christian," "social service worker," and "human being."

我是一個：“中國人”，“基督徒”，“社會服務者”，“人”

(The results were: 13 chose "I am a Chinese," 7 chose "I am a Christian," 6 chose "I am a social service worker." and 2 chose "I am a human being.")

Intra-station discussion and cross-station dialogue followed.

The second sentence and its set of four stations were: My work is: "witness for God," "effective," "copied by others," and "personally gratifying."

我的工作：“為神證道”，“有效用”，“有領導作用”，“給我滿足”。

And the results were respectively 6 persons, 5, 5, and 12.

The third series of stations was done with Board members joining in.

The total group was asked to choose whether the service agency needed

"to be more religious," "to be more pioneering," "to get more local HK\$," or "to broaden scope of service."

“應更重宗教”，“應更作服務界的先鋒”，“應更為本地支持”，“應擴大服務範圍”。

Thus the total community of the agency was encouraged to merge into one and collectively choose goals for the future, blurring the separation

between Board and staff. As it turned out, Board members did scatter

themselves among all four stations, but the majority of the staff identified themselves with the station emphasizing "pioneering."

The station for local support was chosen by the smallest group, but the explanation was offered that the dollar sign suggested too narrow

a definition of "local support" and was therefore too uninteresting a goal to strive for. The station stressing the religious direction

had roughly the same number of adherents as that stressing an increase in the scope of social services. The popularity of the "pioneering"

orientation confirmed earlier indications that staff morale and staff values were built around the self image as a leader and innovators

among Hong Kong social service agencies.

At the end of the "stations" activity, after discussion and cross discussion, participants were asked to come to the middle of the room if they believed after all that the various "needs" of the agency were not mutually incompatible but otherwise to remain at their stations. In other words, after the three rounds of enforced division, the group was invited to give physical expression of unity

if they felt so inclined. Everyone came to the middle ending in a huddle, accompanied by some laughter and release of tension. This move created a warm, light-hearted atmosphere to end on.

Session Five -- Board Reporting

After the morning coffee break, the total workshop was again assembled to hear the Board report on its earlier meeting as a Board. Aside from summarizing the role of the Board and its strengths, and reiterating its spirit of dedication and Christian love, the Board representative also turned around to describe the staff as "MCC": Is the staff confused as to what it expects of the Board? "Tell us what you want to know of the Board." "Perhaps staff wants to know too much of the Board."

The total group was again divided into 4 language/dialect groups to talk about mutual perceptions of "mcc" between Board and staff. Some new points which arose were: 1. weaknesses of communication within staff, 2. unchanged staff image of the Board -- that it is "big," that it sits "behind close doors," and "How interested is it in our work?" and 3. the wish on the part of some staff to sit on Board meetings. Some specific gaps in communication were also mentioned: ignorance of new staff about Board members, and vice versa.

It is useful here to pause and take note of the significance of this matter of "mcc." This Cantonese colloquial expression is an uncomplimentary one with slightly derisive overtones. The first appearance of the term in session two brought out some nervous laughter from the group as well as a strong denial that it represented the meaning of the original remark. Gradually, however, various other participants, including members of the SRC team, picked up the term, often in a jocular vein though sometimes half in earnest. It was as if the group was trying to bury the original "hurt" by joining in and making light of a divisive word, thus in a way legitimizing the attack of one sub-group against another. Yet the persistent appearance of the term indicated that perhaps it had revealed some sensitive spot in inter-group relations within the agency. The whole phenomenon of "mcc" might be called the emergence of "group culture,"* and the

* "Group culture" refers to a series of events and their meaning which are created and shared by members of a group.

natural course taken by the term "mcc" in the workshop might be viewed as the group's tendency to reveal its underlying problem. Having come out in the open, and given a supportive rather than destructive group atmosphere, the sting was softened and the specific charge was transformed into a milder form, incorporated into more general problems.

As the discussion on Board functions or staff-Board relations proceeded, a new need was expressed by one or two staff members: to know Board members as persons, including their personal philosophy. This was in a way a reiteration of the earlier wish to know the Board as a body, only now the emphasis shifted to the personal and individual level. This illustrated the partial success of the previous sessions in introducing the nature of the Board to the staff, but it also points to the fact that some staff members were still not satisfied with the input of new information and the efforts of the Board to clarify its relations with the staff.

So at lunch time, an attempt was made to answer this new need and to balance the previous one-way introduction of staff to Board members by asking some staff member at each table to make an informal introduction of a Board member, including if possible humorous characteristics. The staff proved to be masters at this and many humorous sidelights turned out about Board members. All entered into the spirit of fun. Toward the end of lunch, department head spontaneously got up to introduce other, especially more junior members not previously introduced to the total group.

Session Six

In the afternoon, while the combined workshop had some learning-communication games led by some agency staff members, the joint planning group met to decide upon procedures for the remaining session. Much was on the agenda for the last block of time. The decision was try to do several things: (1) to hold a brief discussion of the feedback based on the summary of the previous research report, (2) a short role play, (3) a chance to work on concrete suggestions for future action, (4) summary-analysis of issues by the SRC team, and (5) a brief evaluation of the workshop and its methods. A devotional service was scheduled to conclude the two-day program.

The summary of research finding prepared by the agency director did not provoke much discussion, because the information was not new to most participants and because much of the findings, it was said, had already been taken into account in the intervening period since the study.

A role play scene was designed to allow the agency, that is Board, administration and staff together, to confront an outsider in the form of a funding source for expanded agency programs. Three persons were asked to be Board members and to make an appearance before the funding group to explain the service agency and to justify its request for funds for a day care centre. The assembled group helped define the roles of the funding group -- one was to be a financial specialist critical of such programs, one was to be an all-out opponent of the agency, and one was to be a technical specialist on day care centers. The audience was asked to define the roles so that they can invest into them whatever attitudes they wanted to see displayed and encountered. Obviously, some caricaturing and humorous aggression took place. The "Board" was not differentiated.

Soon, the discussion swung to the presentation of an overall image of the service agency. Everyone was behind the "Board" in its effort to defend this image. Those who played the role of the Board evinced pride and identification with the agency staff and its programs. Some boisterous interaction, including caricaturing, lightened the atmosphere. When individuals were later asked what they learned about this role play, many said they saw how all joined together against the outsider, especially when the outsider was a hostile one. This was indeed the purpose of the role play.

Session Seven -- Transfer to Future Action

A sober discussion followed as to how to manage the problems of Board-staff relations and what future action to take. Who was to do the follow-up and how was continuing contact among Board/staff/administration to be maintained? Three or four items were discussed and cast into action terms.

When the total group reconvened, discussion centered around residual or latent needs or persistent tensions. One such was the reiterated need to know each Board member individually, personally.

As this need was expressed overtly only by one or two members, it was not clear how many others shared in this feeling. At this point, a member of the SRC team gave a piece of direct feedback. He had been developing a growing impression that some of the staff continued to want to know Board members. He asked the staff: "Why do you want even more contact?" "Do you wish to 'swallow' the Board?" "What need of yours is to be served by this increased knowledge?" Then as he pursued with questions, some of the latent needs of the staff turned up. As articulated by the SRC team leader, some of the nagging unvoiced questions might have been: "Does the Board appreciate us?" "Is the Board proud of us?" and "Can we influence the Board?" About this time, some Board countered with the statement that he saw no reason for anyone to have personal knowledge of all Board members, and that he felt there were communication channels between Board and staff. An administrator of the agency then spoke up and said he assumed shared responsibility with the others in administration, being in the middle of the transmission belt for information and images in both directions. The sincerity of the statement was not lost on the audience. By this time, a few of the underlying issues and tensions were becoming clearer and a way was being pointed out for some concrete steps toward improvement.

Wrap-up

Because the time was near for the workshop to end, the leader of the team undertook to summarize and analyze the communication and interrelation between different parts of the agency as he saw them during the two days.

He described the existing situation in terms of three kinds of creative tensions. These creative tensions, he stressed, should not be viewed as pathological but rather as opportunities for organizational growth and innovation. The first area of creative tension revolves around the question: shall the total service agency including the Board, be a differentiated organization with specialized parts and distance between them, or shall it be one community, one big family? The latter way of looking at the total organization, he said, stems from the religious tradition of a "personalistic" type of fellowship that over-rides organizational roles, hence it would be natural for members to search to realize this ideal.

The second area of creative tension is the intrinsic tension between a progressive, highly professional agency and its Board. The relationship can be compared with that between seasoned troops and gentlemen amateurs -- the latter is kept running trying to keep up.

The third kind of creative tension is the question of sources of change. Where is the ferment located? Is it among the staff? in the Board? or in the administration? Or is it found equally in all three places? Furthermore, there can be different kinds of creativity. We need to turn out attention not only to innovating specific programs in which the agency can have some justifiable pride but also to innovating new patterns of relating between individuals and between groups within the agency for maintaining a forward thrust.

Oral Evaluation

Two evaluations were conducted: one during the Wrap up via a rapid verbal flow of data from participants, and the other by means of open ended written answers to questions posed by the staff on strengths and weaknesses of the workshop procedures.

As a windup and an on the spot way of tapping, individual evaluations of the retreat program and mood of the group, the team leader asked for a one word response to the following questions:

1. When the invitation came for the retreat, I felt
Some of the words were: good, curious, it would mean a lot of work, obligation to come
2. At the end of the first devotional program, I felt
Someone answered that he was frustrated because the speaker used Mandarin and he did not understand.
3. I thought the acquaintance interview was
Some said "beneficial," "difficult," and "uneasy"
4. After the panel discussion of the Board on implications for policy formation, I felt it was
Some said it was "revealing," "exciting," and "honest." Other felt "on the spot," or that there was "not enough time."
5. As for reactions to the Living Questionnaire, here were some of the words used: "exciting," "warm-up," "interesting," and "no restraint."

6. About the Board report and the 4-group discussions, some of the reactions were: "less fun," "less excited," "serious," "superficial," "too general," and "disappointing."
7. After-lunch activities meant for some: "fellowship," "fun," "interesting," and "relaxing."
8. As for the last session, reactions covered a wide range: some expressed their mood in Chinese, mostly Cantonese, and others in English: ("B" or "s" in parentheses indicate Board or staff reaction.)
useful, beneficial (s), controversial (B), educational (B), tension (B), 好 (good) (B), very good (s), 必須 (necessary) (s), friendship (s), 好鮮 (fresh approach) (s), 特別 (unusual) (s), 明白多 (increased understanding) (s), honest (B), special (s), incomplete (s), uneasy (s), 很好 (very good) (B), stimulating (s), 認真好嘢 (truly good) (B), confused (s), and Western (B).

The advantage of tapping these instantaneous reactions to the sessions was spontaneity and the sharing of private sentiments about these public events. This step also opened up opportunities to quickly deal with misunderstandings or tensions should they be serious or widespread. But since reception by the majority of the participants appeared to be favorable, the team leader brought this portion of the workshop to a close.

Concluding Session

The Director of the Agency and the Board Chairman each made brief comments about the workshop, the SRC team, and the general atmosphere. After this, there was a devotional service and a talk by a member of the clergy. This ended the two-day workshop.

Written Evaluation

The service agency passed out evaluation sheets at the conclusion of the workshop to all participants. The written responses may be summarized as follows:

1. In assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the workshop, a majority of the responses were positive. Some thought the program was "varied," "stimulating," "dynamic," "effective," or "exciting." Others approved the process because it was "light," "not so serious,"

or "relaxing." Still others spoke of the method as "involving," "innovative," and "thought provoking." They said that the design "drew out participants' feelings," or was "useful in getting out what's on one's mind." Someone commented that he "learned a great deal without realizing it during the process." These comments added up to a vote of approval to the leadership of the SRC team and to the belief that the workshop opened up lines of communications and paved the way for improved relationships.

2. On the side of weaknesses, the problem of language occupied some attention. Concern was also expressed that not enough participation came from the younger staff members. More serious was the feeling expressed by several that the program was "too tightly scheduled," "too confusing," or "not deep enough." The quick tapping of attitudes, goals or images apparently left some members feeling breathless and unrequited. The same pace and heightened atmosphere which some found exhilarating proved to be too tense for others. The looseness of structure and lack of rigid pre-planning was also new to this group and led to some sense of confusion. A few attributed this to inadequate planning. A more serious problem was the fact that some of the agency members recruited as co-leaders were not fully integrated into the planning group and perhaps felt somewhat lost or useless. Likewise, some members who came looking for positive or specific conclusions were disappointed. They did not realize that this method was intended to be open-ended in "solutions," that it was up to the organization and its members to find their own new direction out of the experience. Then a few also found the sessions "sometimes very embarrassing," or "too Western" or needing adaptation to Chinese culture. Perhaps these few found the revelation of mis-matching in perceptions and of conflicts uncomfortable. One member commented that "the climate should be harmonious and without the smell of dynamite." Though this opinion was restricted to one or two, it sensitized the team to the question of tolerance for disharmony.

The comments were on the whole very thoughtful and supportive. The negative ones were also made in a constructive spirit.

REACTIONS OF THE SRC TEAM

Members of the SRC team were very gratified at the way the workshop went, though they regretted the lack of time and the resulting rush to cover the agenda. They found agency members to be most responsive to this approach which was novel to them and challenging. The willingness and good humor with which they went through the sessions contributed greatly to the success of the workshop.

What did the SRC team learn? First of all, they learned that as social scientists, to directly immerse themselves in a concrete situation and to experience limits of practical action, was always a humbling experience. Their intellectual, theoretical and research knowledge about organizations and intra-organizational relations became more informed through experiencing this particular organization. Second, they learned that this new way of engaging in action research seems to have much potential for effective use in conjunction with other modes of systematic research. Third, they learned that action research can be adapted to the Chinese setting, but that one must be on the alert for cultural factors and national differences in reactions. Language and linguistic usage need to be refined. Lastly, members of the SRC team learned about themselves as individuals, about their own team relationships, about their relationships to others, and about others. They feel grateful to the social service agency for sharing their personal and organizational realities with them.

More specifically, the team learned the following about the application of action research in a Chinese organization such as this agency: 1. One cannot rely on open feedback to indicate the extent of the language barrier or the clarity of explanations. As one participant wrote in his written evaluation: "Those without English should not be made to feel inadequate or put on the spot to admit they don't understand what is going on."

2. The toleration for open conflict or even lack of harmonious relations may be lower. Depending on the "modernity" of the organization or the orientation of its members to introspection and open discussion, members may see the unearthing of underlying issues variously as effective or disruptive.

3. Flexibility of structure and tightness of schedule may leave some people feeling uncomfortable.

In addition, the team worried about imposing a group structure upon the workshop in setting up group activities. As far as possible, the team planned these activities on the basis of briefings as to the "natural" or existing groups and "real" issues. Still, one cannot escape the responsibility of further crystallizing more group boundaries and group differences in the very effort to deal with the problems. Thus the Board/staff cleavage might have been accentuated or at least made public in the effort to deal with the inter-relationship. This is an inescapable dilemma.

A Note on language groups and their meaning

The fact that this is a multi-language ("language" to include dialects) workshop presented special problems and special concerns to the planners. There were participants who speak English with some understanding of Chinese, there were those who speak Chinese with some comprehension of English. Among the Chinese-speaking people, some speak Mandarin, some Shanghai dialect, and the majority speak Cantonese, each with varying degrees of ability to understand the other dialects.

The simplest level of the problem was of course one of translation. How much to translate and when to translate without consuming too much time and without causing too many interruptions? As things worked out, the more important instructions and proceedings were translated, mostly from English into Cantonese and from either Chinese dialect into English. Obviously, not everyone was satisfied. Some of the Cantonese speaking participants missed some of the discussions in English, while the non-Cantonese speaking members missed the subtler points in Cantonese.

The design of sub-groups took into account as much as possible the existence of language/dialect groups. Foremost concern was to put participants at ease in their native speech group and to maximize the communication of messages and their connotations. This of course meant transmitting small group discussions to other language/dialect groups, thus losing some of the flavor.

The difficulty of working across language barriers is more than the loss of meaning. Sometimes it is the change of meaning in translation or even the accretion of meanings, often unintentionally. The appearance of "mcc" may have been such a case: a round-about statement in English became transformed into a Cantonese colloquial expression by a non-Cantonese speaking person.

The more interesting (and hazardous) observations and interpretations are those having to do with language groupings and their meaning - how do language groups overlap with other social groupings, what are some of the mutual perceptions and images, and what are the resultant interactions?

The most obvious language difference was that between the Board and staff/administration. The Board members are almost all Mandarin or Shanghai speaking while the staff and lower ranks of administration are nearly all Cantonese speaking. There is first of all the tendency of the Cantonese-speaking group to lump the "other" group into one undifferentiated group: the "Shanghai speaking" Board. Secondly, the Board is sometimes perceived as belonging to a social set, an in-group with shared attitudes and values. In fact, Board members have different organizational networks and do not necessarily see one another outside Board meetings. Third, Board is sometimes spoken of as "superior" or "on top". While in formal organizational terms, the Board does set over-all policy and assume some leadership position, the fact that "Shanghai speaking" groups do enjoy some prestige in Hong Kong because of their know-how in modern industry and business enterprises adds a subtle, social dimension to their organizational status. How much any of these factors actually operated in the perceptions and interactions is impossible to determine. One could only raise these points for consideration.

Secondly, language grouping overlaps with "local"- "outsider" groupings. Although several of the non-Chinese speak very good Cantonese and some of the Chinese are handicapped in one or more dialects, still ethnicity may play some part in conjunction with language barriers in creating group cleavages. How much do these factors play in perceived flow of information from Board to staff and from staff back to Board again? How much do they have to do with the fact that the persistent need of the staff to "know" the Board were voiced largely by the "outsiders".

And finally, since the main proceedings of the workshop were conducted in English, how much did the negative reactions have to do with a feeling of being "left out" and how much of it with the content itself? Such words as "difficult," "confused," "Western" and "incomplete" could have more than one meaning.

All these are speculations. They are meant to point to area of inter-group relations which may cut across organizational tables but which operate to complicate or obscure some of the issues of communications and interrelations.