

Meaning-Making and Client Empowerment: The Basic Needs Incentive Model

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Abstract

Client empowerment program designers often find it difficult to induce long-term change necessary to produce significant client outcomes. Authors propose that program failure may arise from diverging self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986) and basic needs (Maslow, 1998) contexts that cause a meaning-making gap between program designers and their clients. To bridge this gap, clients may be recruited and retained in empowerment programs via the proposed basic needs incentive model. This paper presents the development of a basic needs incentive model in three parts. First, authors conduct a rigorous experimental investigation into causes of client empowerment program failure for difficult-to-change low-income populations. Secondly, authors identify strategic (long-term) and tactical (short-term) elements of successful programming for low-income clients and document the program innovation process. Third, success of a field trial of the basic needs incentive model is documented, with unexpected positive consequences. Measurable and significant outcomes were obtained by leveraging clients' interest in immediate gratification as a means to gain compliance in a previously unpopular behavior-change program. Implications for diffusion of the basic needs incentive model are of interest to public servants at all levels of government and international agencies, academics, consultants, students, and citizens interested in improvement of the public sector programs.

Keywords: diffusion, innovation, program, public program, program design, low-income, homophily, heterophily, change agents, utility, PNM, ACORN, low-income activism, client empowerment, basic needs, incentive.

Meaning-Making and Client Empowerment: The Basic Needs Incentive Model

Programs designed to empower low-income clients to break their poverty cycle can suffer from low recruitment levels and high failure rates. Paradoxically, these programs are unpopular among those whom they seek to help. Yet programs that offer immediate gratification to low-income clients such as free food, help with utility bills to avoid disconnection, and help with rent to avoid eviction, are overwhelmed with applicants and program managers are unable to serve all who apply.

Program designers are often perplexed at low-income clients' difficulty in succeeding at empowerment programs such as education and career training. Diffusion scholars describe such lagging as typical of low-income people. Rogers (2003) described this group as *laggards* because they seldom or never adopt a new idea. The question asked in this study is "why?" This paper proposes that where one is located on the hierarchy of needs affects the meaning or hierarchy of values that one assigns to assistance program opportunities. For "haves" who have their basic food and shelter needs met, acquiring *means* of avoiding want (education or job training) are highly valued. But when one's basic needs are not met, then acquiring food or shelter becomes more immediate and important than acquiring long-term skills through education or job training. According to Maslow (1998), short-term and immediate basic needs, such as food and shelter, must be fundamentally met before one is able to consider longer-range prospects such as education or job training. It may thus be argued that effortful long-range programs are alien to those who are struggling to meet basic needs, that they do not believe in their own self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986) to attain long-term goals. *Self-efficacy* is defined as one's belief in one's own ability to perform in a certain manner or attain certain goals. Long term goals are outside the meaning-making context of those whose daily lives are preoccupied by their drive to satisfy basic needs.

Without consideration of clients' preoccupation with obtaining basic needs, program designers ranked effortful and longer-range programs as of highest value for low-income clients. Program developers in the present study ranked client empowerment programs as more desirable than "quick fix" programs such as free food and free rent because client empowerment programs offer a long-term outcome that can help clients break out of their poverty cycle. Yet the present study found client empowerment programs, associated with delayed gratification, to be unpopular and undesirable among low-income clients. For example, in the present study, at seven food bank waiting areas, 1,767 low-income clients largely ignored long-term empowerment program brochures. The ignored brochures offered job training, rehabilitation, and education. When the researchers tracked what clients did with these brochures, of those few empowerment brochures that clients removed from the display, most of them were discarded, crumpled, stepped upon, or tossed into the parking lot with tire tracks over them. The disregarding of the long-term empowerment brochures was taken to be a sign that the programs they represented were not valued by the food-seeking clients.

This paper proposes that diverging program valuations between low-income clients and client-empowerment program designers arise from diverging self-efficacy, basic needs, and thus diverging meaning-making contexts. Low-income clients assign value based on easiness and immediacy of acquisition—a small effort and short time horizon. On the other hand, program managers who design empowerment programs expect clients to value effortful and long-term

programs because of their desirable program outcomes. Program designers and managers may not understand why few clients value and succeed in long-term empowerment programs.

Program designers' perplexity at the rationale for their clients' failure may be explained by muted group theory (Ardener, 1975; Kramarae, 1978). Muted group theory suggests ways that, in the dominant social culture of the program designers, clients' short-term time horizons, constricted due to their preoccupation with satisfying basic needs, may not be recognized or understood. Muted group theory indicates that clients' voices, motivations, valuations, and meaning-making frameworks, largely based on hunger, are muted or silenced because their reasoning does not conform to a dominant culture in which having enough to eat is a given

Communication theorists have long held that one's cognitive schemata (Kelly, 1955) or meaning-making foundations are influenced by one's context. Meaning-making foundations that develop around messages and institutions may have a seemingly straightforward value for one group but a different value for another group (Mead, 1934; see also Pearce & Cronen, 1980; Philipsen, 1992; Tannen, 1990; Searle, 1995; Wood, 1998). The current study discusses how an unequal environmental uncertainty context may contribute to divergent meaning-making and divergent program evaluations between the "satiated" versus those they wish to help, the "hungry."

Fichman and Kemerer (1993) have proposed that diffusion programs are prone to temporal *assimilation gaps*, or lags between program designers and their target population, that are due to a combination of: (1) differences in anticipated returns to adoption (temporal gratification orientations, in the present study; cf. Arthur, 1988), and (2) substantial knowledge barriers impeding adoption due to the cognitive complexity of the social innovation (Attewell 1992). This latter impediment addresses the perceived complexity of the empowerment program and the perceived barriers to adoption from the standpoint of the target population.

Background: Need for analysis of meaning-making in program design

If valuations of low-income clients diverge from the value assumptions of program designers, then this may be one cause of empowerment program failure. Rogers (2003) discussed how a sociocultural, environmental, or meaning-making gap, between message senders and message receivers can cause diffusion to fail. Without considering the differences between sociocultural systems or meaning contexts of program designers and their intended audience, the failure of empowerment programs remains perplexing. In communication research, people with different sociocultural contexts are sometimes referred to as coming from different speech groups. Even if they speak the same language they may belong to different speech groups if the meanings or values they assign to the same topics are different.

Section 1: Investigation into Causes of Empowerment Program Failure

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1 is that *Low-income clients' choice patterns for solving informational uncertainty will show that they come from a different speech (meaning-making) population than program designers.*

Hypothesis 2 is that *Low-income clients' choice patterns for solving informational uncertainty differ in at least one critical dimension (such as values, priorities, disposition of resources, attitudes toward planning for education or work) from mainstream cultural assumptions of a hierarchy-of-values.*

Hypothesis 3 is that *Low-income clients' choice patterns show preferences for short-term, immediate and tangible solutions to basic needs and a lack of preference for solutions requiring long-term commitments and intangibles.*

Methods

The first section of this paper describes how authors conducted an experimental investigation into causes of client empowerment program failure among low-income populations, a problem that perplexes program designers. Researchers asked program designers to list and rank low-income client assistance programs. Researchers then designed pamphlets or brochures for each of the assistance programs. The brochures, similar to each other in design, were placed in brochure displays located in seven food bank waiting areas. Clients took brochures on public assistance programs in which they were interested. Researchers performed daily counts, replenishment, and rotation of brochures to discover which assistance program brochures clients took the most, thus which assistance programs were ranked of highest value by the food bank clients.

The researchers designed the present study to avoid several confounds (1) divergence in literacy levels (Rogers & Ratzan, 2001), (2) face-saving (Ting-Toomey, 1990) deception, and (3) muted group issues (Ardener 1975; Kramarae, 1978). Easy-to-read one and two-word brochure titles such as "Rides" (transport) and "Free Food" controlled for literacy divergence. Additionally, keeping content in the brochures simple (restricted to lists of addresses and phone numbers for public services) controlled for low levels of low-income clients' literacy. The behavioral methodology chosen for the present study was designed to reduce face-saving deception while allowing for the exploration of clients' valuation of potentially stigmatizing assistance programs such as drug and alcohol rehabilitation and domestic violence intervention. *Face-saving deception* occurs when one hides one's needs due to a wish to maintain a good image in front of others. Brochure displays were set up so that if a client needed and took a brochure on a stigmatized topic such as drug rehabilitation, others would not notice. The client was not publicly embarrassed and so had no incentive to *not* take the brochure if they wanted it. Thus the count of brochures taken was a more reliable measure of client interest in drug rehabilitation than a face-to-face interview question. A client would have been more likely to deceive the interviewer. Muted group issues were controlled by an unobtrusive study design with the lowest possible face-to-face researcher-participant interaction level. Clients, muted by shyness, did not need to speak about their needs in order to receive the assistance information on various programs that was offered in the brochures.

Study Population: Participants in the present study were both the food secure (program designers) and the food insecure (their low-income clients), individuals who experience a level of environmental uncertainty so great that they repeatedly skip meals in order to meet other needs such as shelter or childcare. According to a study by America's Second Harvest (1997), 97.5 percent of persons in food lines live in a household where at least one person works during the year although not regularly. Household income is insufficient to meet basic needs. According to anecdotal information from a call center employee who sometimes shares his lunch, most of the workers in Albuquerque call centers are food insecure. They eat once per day or less often due to an inability to meet basic needs. Ninety-five percent of call center employees, like food bank clients, possess high school education or below, change jobs frequently and work at low-paying, low-skill jobs (Second Harvest, p. 156-157). Food insecurity is the most insistent dimension of the Low-income clients context. Food insecurity is

pernicious among the low-skilled working class, but is often hidden to avoid embarrassment.

The study exposed 1,767 persons in the target population. From that population 741 brochures were chosen. The high 42 percent response rate indicated that the issues investigated were of importance to the target population and therefore a strong measure of preferences. The study was conducted at seven geographically and demographically distributed food pantries in Albuquerque, New Mexico (a Salvation Army suburb location, an inner city pantry, two church food banks, an inner city Women and Infant Childrens' food program, an inner-city veterans' food bank, and an upscale suburb food bank—all clients of a wholesale distribution food bank, Roadrunner Food Bank) for a period of one week.

Recruitment: Respondents were recruited passively. Respondents are typically exposed to various program information displays in food pantry waiting areas. For the study all such program displays were removed and replaced with the specially-prepared study brochures. A person was recruited as a respondent when they took a brochure from the display. The participants remained anonymous. Because client program information is typically available in food pantry waiting areas, the university Human Subjects Review Board ruled that the subjects did not need to know they were participating in a study. Participants were thus blind to the study. Participant responses were measured by type and number of brochures missing at the end of the day, and other artifacts of interaction with the display such as brochures thrown away, crumpled, stepped on, or run over in the parking lot.

Data-Gathering Procedures: Researchers gathered data (counted, replenished, and rotated brochures) when the food pantries were closed to clients, hence researchers and respondents did not come into contact, increasing the reliability of the measure. Clients need not be reticent about which brochures they took because they remained anonymous. The researchers noted artifacts of client interaction with the displays, such as brochures that were tampered with or crumpled and replaced in the wrong receptacle or those brochures tossed to the ground inside the waiting room or outside in the parking lot. Each day the researchers replenished missing brochures and rotated the brochures' positions to avoid clients' spatial selection bias (Berger & Christophi, 2003). *Spatial selection bias* occurs when clients naturally prefer items located in a certain area such as the upper right corner of a display. For example, items in upper right corners of grocery shelves are restocked more frequently than other items due to shoppers' spatial selection bias. Randomized rotation patterns were employed on different sites and days to randomize brochure placements. This procedure was repeated at seven sites during a Monday-through-Friday five-day period.

Unit of Analysis

The unit of data-analysis was one brochure. One brochure taken indicated one unit of interest in the assistance program that it advertised.

Measurements

Data were gathered from: (1) the *food secure* (program designers, the "haves"), and (2) the *food insecure* (low-income clients, the "have nots"). Program designers ranked brochure face issues (topics) and approved brochure designs as representing these face issues of critical interest to low-income clients. Low-income clients ranked face issues by the number of each brochure they chose. Their responses were measured daily by the number of brochures chosen from an eight-brochure display accessible in a low-income clients-only environment. Their taking any one of eight, or any combination of eight, brochures signaled the respondents' choice. The dependent measure is the number of brochures taken ($n = 741$).

Hypothesis 1 supported: Hypothesis 1 is that low-income clients choice patterns for

solving informational uncertainty will show that they come from a different speech (meaning-making) population than do program designers. It is supported. The test of Hypothesis 1 was comprised of eight individual t-tests. T-tests are a measure of difference. The total of 741 “brochures taken” were divided into 40 site-day totals representing the low-income clients choice rankings. Low-income clients site-day totals were then converted to z-scores and expanded into 80 dummy variables, ten for each brochure, in order to conduct an independent samples t-test against the 80 responses from the ten Program Designers on the same face issues (topics) for each of the eight brochures, with ten data points per brochure.

The program designers derived significantly different meanings, as evidenced by their valuation, than did their clients, when evaluating usability of the various programs. Each t-test (n=10) compared the difference between low-income clients valuations of the programs versus Program Designer rankings on one of the eight program brochures. Hypothesis 1 is supported. Low-income clients meaning-making paradigm as shown by choice patterns for solving informational uncertainty show them to come from a different population than do program designers for seven of the eight brochures (Rides t1 = -1.16, *p* = ns; Substance Abuse t2 = -12.51, *p* = .00; Bills t3 = 2.12, *p* = .02; Walk t4 = 3.59, *p* = .00; Investments t5 = 16.69, *p* = .00; Jobs t6 = 1.85, *p* = .04; Food t7 = 2.71, *p* = .00; Domestic Violence t8 = -26.23, *p* = .00).

Hypothesis 2 supported: Hypothesis 2 is that low-income clients *choice patterns* for solving *informational uncertainty* differ in at least one critical dimension (such as values, priorities, disposition of resources, attitudes toward planning for education or work) from dominant cultural assumptions of presence of a baseline of hunger satiation in a hierarchy-of-values (Maslow, 1998). Whether one’s hunger is satiated affects the meaning that one assigns to topics or program opportunities. For “haves” who have their basic food and shelter needs met, acquiring *means* of avoiding want (education or job training) are highly valued. But when one’s basic needs are not met, then acquiring food or shelter becomes more important than acquiring long-term skills through education or job training. Hypothesis 2 is supported. Analysis of data from Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 3 shows that the low-income clients choice patterns for solving cultural informational uncertainty diverges significantly in at least one critical dimension from mainstream cultural assumption of a hierarchy-of-values. In fact, the other two hypotheses point to a major divergence evident on two issues that are critical to the success of client empowerment programs: long-term planning and deferred gratification. The data for Hypothesis 1 show that low-income clients diverge significantly from Program Designers on seven of the eight face value rankings, which include long-term planning and gratification deferment. Hypothesis 3 shows that low-income clients do not favor long-term planning and gratification deferment, which Program Designers ranked highest in importance. Instead, low-income clients favor short-term tangible gratifications. This means that low-income clients’ choice patterns for obtaining answers to their questions (informational uncertainties) are different, come from a different understanding or meaning-making, and construe meanings of programs differently than do the program designers. Such differences indicate the two groups are not only opposite, but that the meaning-making of one group is *alien* to the other.

Hypothesis 3 supported: Hypothesis 3 is that low-income clients choice patterns show preferences for short-term, immediate and tangible solutions to basic needs and a lack of preference for solutions requiring long-term commitments and intangibles. It is supported. Low-income clients choice patterns show a high incidence of preference for short-term and immediate solutions to basic needs and a low incidence of preference for choice of solutions requiring long-term programs.

A box plot was chosen to illustrate the data because box plots reduce the information in the data to two axes: how many brochures were taken (Y) and which kinds of brochures were taken (X) by low-income clients. In statistical language it can be said that the dependent variable (Y) was a measure of incidence of brochure choice. The independent variable (X) was a dichotomous grouping of three categories: (1) long-term (gratification deferment), (2) short-term (immediate gratification), and (3) neither (see figure 1).

The long-term category brochures offered a face value of deferred gratification and no basic needs rewards. The three brochures in this category were (1) Domestic Violence, (2) Substance Abuse (brochures 1 and 2 require gratification deferment via investment of time and effort in participation with a long-term program and sacrifice of change of behavior patterns and the attendant risk of uncertainty before a payoff is seen, (3) Investment Advisors (requires gratification deferment in the form of savings). Long-term solutions requiring gratification deferment in order to receive long-term rewards were represented by the brochures in this category.

The short-term category brochures offered a face value of immediate gratification with tangible basic needs rewards. Free-of-charge immediate receipt of benefit was offered as a result of an easy-to-fulfill action: Free food, free bill paying, and free immediate-level jobs, such as the work today and get paid today variety (some hidden job training programs were included inside the brochure but were not available on the face of the brochure and did not contribute to the brochure's face value.)

The "neither" (neither long term nor short term) brochure category in figure 1 below, included two brochures whose face value could not easily be classified as either deferred or immediate gratification. The brochures in this "neither" category were (1) "Rides" (a mixture of deferred or immediate gratification categories—this brochure was the only brochure that showed no significant difference in ranking between the low-income clients group and the Program Designer Group. Results of the t-test that supported Hypothesis 1), and (2) "Walking Tour of University of New Mexico" (this brochure offered no tangible reward, other than curiosity gratification.)

Although the Rides (transport) brochure listed free immediate sources of rides for Medicaid patients, seniors and disabled persons, it is also not included in the immediate gratification category because services offered are not available to the general low-income client population. The Rides brochure also offered a list of mechanics offering low-cost car repairs, which required payment of large sums of money and financial planning. The repair services and some of the rides were not free. Low-income clients choice patterns indicated the Rides brochure was more popular than the "walking tour" brochure but post-hoc Tukey HSD test results indicated that the differences in low-income clients versus program designer rankings on Rides were not significant ($F [1,8] = -7.86, p = \underline{ns}$).

Clients Prefer Short-term Low-effort Assistance

Highest preference shown for immediate gratification of basic needs

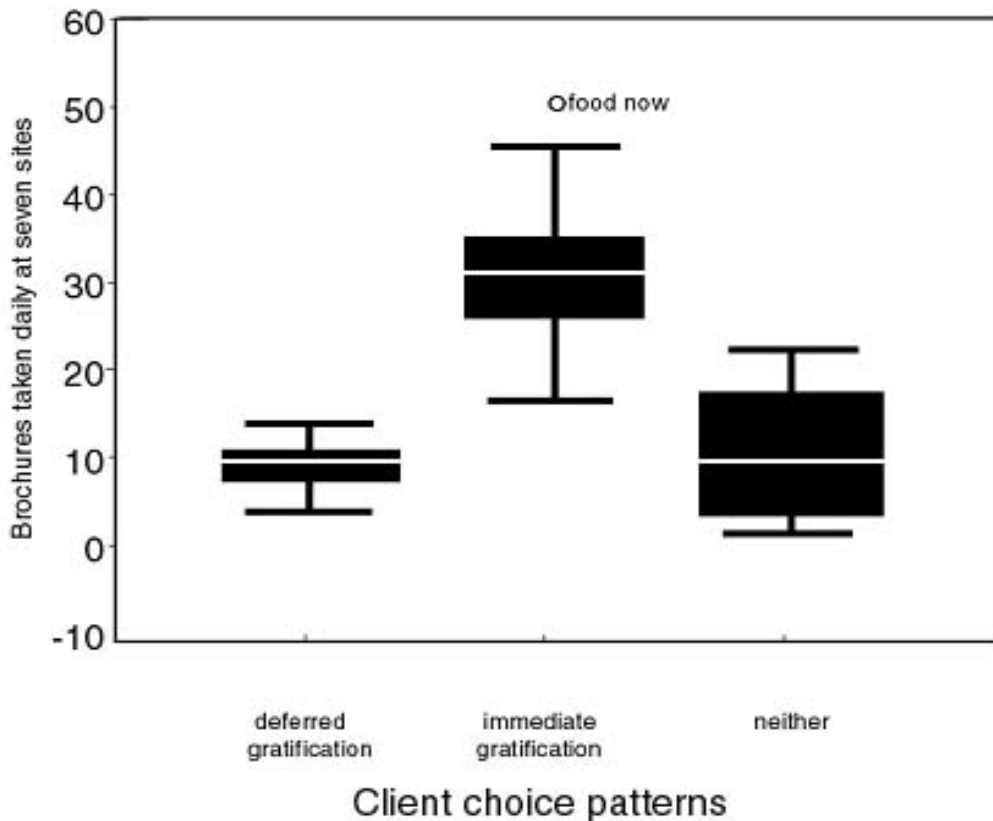


Figure 1: Box Plots: Low-income Clients' Preference for Immediate Gratification

Section 2: Documentation of the Program Innovation Process

In this section authors identify strategic (long-term) and tactical (short-term) elements of successful programming for low-income clients, beginning with a documentation of the program innovation process. Author Everett Rogers often asked innovators including, author Medina “Where did that idea come from?” He asked, “What triggered the idea? From where did you borrow the idea? Who was doing something similar?” He sought to know how the innovator had reinvented, how the innovator adapted established practices or ideas to fit a new circumstance.

After the food bank research had been analyzed, Medina considered the findings over several months. Rogers recommended that Medina return to the program designers and ask them to interpret the findings. During a conversation with the Salvation Army program designers a consensus was reached that low-income clients, as a whole, over-subscribed to

immediate gratification and low-effort programs and under-subscribed to longer-term and more effortful client empowerment programs. One manager complained that their free food and Christmas toys programs were oversubscribed and suffered from long waiting lists. He said, “We don’t have the resources to serve everyone who applies. We don’t like turning people away, but how can we determine who should receive the help and who shouldn’t? We just accept the first ones to apply even if later applicants are needier and more deserving.”

Over the next year, Medina contemplated the idea that Salvation Army sought a way to identify which clients to help. During that year, Medina learned that Sharon Rogers at Public Service Company of New Mexico, a public utility, had a client empowerment weatherization program (a do-it-yourself insulation workshop) for low-income clients that was chronically undersubscribed. The utility had held numerous workshops with few or no attendees. The people who lived in the draftiest homes, low-income people, those who could benefit the most from the workshops did not respond to flyers, advertisements, or billboards. Medina identified the weatherization workshops as more effortful, more time-consuming, and more delayed gratification than free food and toys programs.

Medina considered, “What if Salvation Army used weatherization workshop attendance as a prerequisite to receiving free food and Christmas toys? Wouldn’t that increase attendance at weatherization workshops and decrease waiting lists for free food and toys at Salvation Army?” Medina first approached the Salvation Army about the idea since they had expressed an interest in finding a way to decrease their waiting lists. Salvation Army program designers were enthusiastic. They said, “The utility could hold weatherization workshops in our meeting hall.” Medina then contacted Sharon Rogers at the utility. The utility did not want to be the reason that some clients did not receive food or toys. Medina argued that a prerequisite program was a means of weeding out those clients unwilling to help themselves, or those clients whose need for the assistance was not as great. With some reservation, the utility met with the Generals in charge of the Salvation Army and together they tentatively agreed to try a pilot program. The result was that the weatherization workshops became so full of low-income clients that extra workshops were scheduled. The Salvation Army was able to serve those who wanted and needed their help the most and their waiting list for free food and toys programs diminished.

The program innovation process was a result of (a) observations of opposite needs (too many clients at Salvation Army, too few clients in weatherization workshops), (b) connecting the relationships between immediate and delayed gratification to the two programs, and (c) using the popular program as an incentive to gain recruitment and participation in the unpopular client empowerment program. The strategic (long-term) element of the program design was the weatherization workshop, a client-empowerment program. The tactical (short-term) elements of the program were the free food and free Christmas toys programs.

Section 3: Success of the Basic Needs Incentive Model

As discussed in the previous section, the findings from the empirical study were used to create an innovative approach to recruiting clients for an empowerment program for low-income people. The field trial was successful in several unexpected ways. Low-income clients discovered they were empowered to lower their utility bills. Their utility bills were so lowered by weatherization that clients effectively “earned” \$141.2 per hour for attending the PNM weatherization workshop (see figure 2). Low-income clients viewed the weatherization empowerment program as so desirable that they brought their friends, neighbors, and relatives

to the weatherization workshops. Salvation Army's Christmas waiting list became manageable. PNM had fewer utility shut-offs for nonpayment. This partnership became the first of many successful partnerships between PNM, the Salvation Army, and other low-income client-serving organizations. Although the early adopters of the weatherization program, the first clients, were difficult to recruit, once they received the benefits they became change agents for their peers and the adoption curve grew rapidly.

Additionally, the innovative program partnership also had favorable unintended consequences among several public-sector organizations. This program design diffused from New Mexico to Texas utilities, and turned PNM's relationships with low-income advocacy groups around 180 degrees. The same low-income advocacy activists who threw rocks in PNM's windows eight years ago in protest to utility rates now join forces with PNM for press conferences and legislative lobbying.

The paper discusses the success of the basic needs incentive model, a hybrid program in increasing enrollment for a previously unpopular client-empowerment program. Those clients who were incented to enroll in the hybrid program met a certain level of qualifications: they had a rental or owned a home (they were not homeless) and they usually had children (they were successful at caring for a family). What happened to those Salvation Army applicants who were homeless or destitute with no homes to insulate? These clients were not turned away. They were referred to other charitable programs designed to meet their more extensive needs.

Discussion

Assimilation Gaps

Program designers are often perplexed at the difficulty of low-income clients to succeed in empowerment programs such as education and career training. Fichman and Kemerer (1993) have proposed that diffusion programs are prone to temporal *assimilation gaps*, or lags between program designers and their target population, that owe to a combination of: (1) differences in anticipated returns to adoption (temporal gratification orientations, in the present study; cf. Arthur, 1988), and (2) substantial knowledge barriers impeding adoption due to the cognitive complexity of the social innovation (Attewell 1992). This latter impediment addresses the perceived complexity of the empowerment program and the perceived barriers to adoption from the standpoint of the target population.

In support of Fichman and Kemerer, the present study found that low-income clients as a group assign diverging and opposite values and therefore diverging and opposite meanings to issues that program designers know are important in helping them to rise out of poverty. If program designers design programs whose messages assume ability to function in a long-term planning and delayed gratification environment, then those programs will not attract low-income clients.

If low-income clients are forced into programs with long-time-horizons without guarantee of short-term basic needs, the programs will fail, the low-income clients will fail, and both will fail. Rogers (2003) found that the length of the event horizon can have implications on adoption thresholds. This is why long-term deferred-gratification programs aimed at low-income clients need to contain a short-term basic-needs gratification incentive component.

On balance, perceived complexity, discussed here as decreased self-efficacy, is negatively correlated with perceived advantage and compatibility, and therefore with probability of adoption (Sia, Hock-Hai, et al., 2004; Rogers, 2003). Similarly problematic is the all-too-

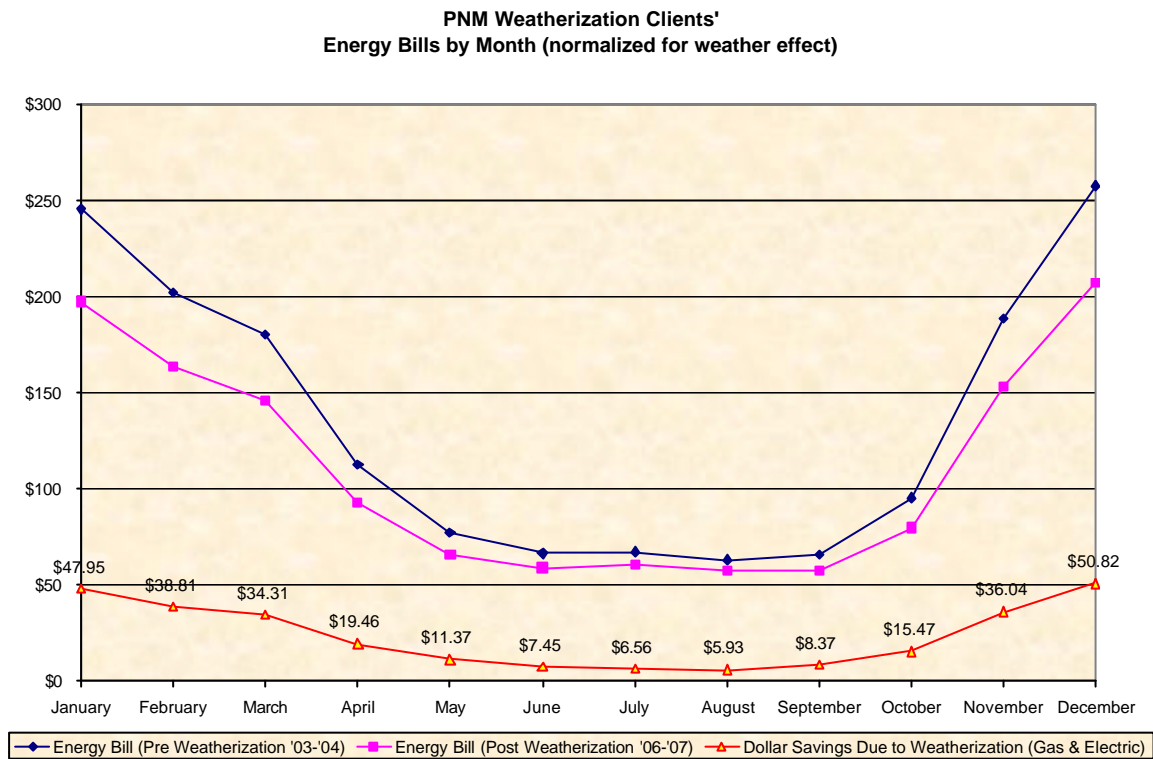


Figure 2: Low-income clients’ savings after weatherization.

common failure to sufficiently or adequately communicate the rationale for programmatic interventions to client groups or communities targeted by the given program.

Low-income clients’ choice patterns show preoccupation with short-term, immediate and tangible solutions to basic needs and a disdain or at least an attitude of “not-in-my meaning-making context” toward solutions requiring long-term commitments, gratification deferment and intangibles. The diverging valuations and meanings, the valuation dissonance, between program designers and low-income clients demonstrated in this study may explain the opposing and otherwise inexplicable low-income clients’ resistance to deferred-gratification programs institutions such as higher education and job training, which are foundational in empowering clients to rise out of their poverty cycles. This study found that diverging meaning-making contexts of program developers versus their target population are associated with diverging rankings of desirability of programs. Program designers ranked client empowerment programs most high in import for low-income clients. Low-income clients ranked client empowerment programs lowest in import and attractiveness.

Low-income clients favor short-term tangible gratifications related to their position on the lowest basic-needs survival rung of Maslov's (1999) hierarchy-of-needs model: food and shelter. Low-income clients, who like anyone must prioritize how they spend their time and energy, choose basic needs and instant gratification over long-term programs simply because so much of their time and energy is spent securing those short-term gratification of basic needs. They have little time left over to pursue long-term deferred gratification goals such as education. The very long-term goals that program developers know are necessary in order to stabilize and rehabilitate low-income clients who are enmeshed in chronic poverty situations: mental health, substance abuse and domestic violence rehabilitation are not of interest to low-income clients due to the immediacy of the survival context in which they live. The low-income clients "have-nots" live on the other side of a socio-economic wall and it is this wall of unmet basic needs that inverts their valuations and meanings from those held by "haves."

Hybrid Program Leverages Client Meaning-Making Orientation

The basic needs incentive model, a hybrid program, leverages client time-horizon myopia and limited self-efficacy vocabulary to effect positive change. For example, an instant-gratification entitlement to free food and toys was employed as an incentive to increase enrollment in an unpopular and effortful empowerment program, a public utility weatherization workshop. In the weatherization workshop, clients learned to apply insulation to their homes, were given supplies, and became empowered to lower their utility bills. The hybrid program was a success. Low-income clients, who previously eschewed the utility's weatherization workshops, now participated based on the immediate-gratification incentive of free food and toys. They changed their energy use behavior over a longer time period by learning and enacting new behaviors, weatherizing their homes. Clients found they had the power to lower their utility bills. Client enthusiasm was contagious. They became change agents, inviting neighbors and relatives to weatherization workshops.

The present study suggests that program designers investigate cost-benefits of increasing program development budgets to include guaranteed basic needs in return for an enrollment commitment. Low-income clients populations are attracted to basic needs guarantees. Basic needs incentives and other tangible short-term rewards (Caudron, 1997) may increase enrollment in client empowerment programs where high-commitment cognitive-intensive higher education is the requisite for entry and success (Carnevale & Desrochers, 1999; Murphey, 1999) and enable extension of low-income clients constructs through the socio-economic wall and into the same meaning-making context of program designers, a context that is capable of valuing intangibles, long-term planning and gratification deferment.

Diffusion scholars describe such lagging as typical of low-income people. Low-income clients are slow to adopt new ideas that do not provide immediate gratification. In a sense the program proposed in this paper is a forcing of a new culture or new meaning-making upon the low-income client. Forcing clients to adopt a beneficial behavior by offering basic needs incentives is not a new idea. In the Grameen bank model, "clients were required to commit to the 16 principles and to work in groups," limiting their individual autonomy and engaging in long-term behavior change in exchange for some immediate gratifications (Glor, 2005). There is another example of a successful, though forced, empowerment program enrollment that depends upon basic needs incentives. Low-income clients from many culture have been attracted for thousands of years to education and work training programs based on the appeal of free housing and free food, a guaranteed job in military service for those with no skill. Additionally, travel benefits are obtained by volunteering into military service. Low-income youth, seeking adventure, and satisfaction of basic needs surrender autonomy and allow themselves to be

“forced” into a new cultural mold. By setting pre-conditions related to basic needs, military program designers have, for thousands of years, forced clients into participating in long-term programmatic benefits such as learning self-discipline, teamwork, civic responsibility, time and resource management skills, and how to participate effectively in a complex social organization.

The present study uses the same approach of basic needs satisfaction as an incentive to enroll low-income clients into behavior-changing and long-term client empowerment programs. Although in the present study the weatherization workshop example does not engage participants for years of education and training, as does the military case, the present study does show that low-income clients can be induced, via basic needs incentives, to participate in otherwise under-subscribed empowerment programs. Cooper and Zmud (1990) view program implementation as a process involving both innovation diffusion and the later adoption of shared values, through the creation of spanning and articulating sending and receiving mechanisms. The basic needs incentives span the gap between program designer and client valuation of the empowerment program to tap into the motivational dispositions of target populations.

The client is initially drawn into enrollment due to basic needs incentives. With basic needs incentives clients can be inducted into cross-cultural social innovation efforts where shared valuation systems, at the onset, are not necessary (Rogers, 2001). There are two actions that are simultaneously occurring in the enrollment of a client into an empowerment program: (1) the incentive or bottom-up adoption, and (2) the diffusion or top-down spanning of different values such as diffusing or inculcating a higher valuation of education and job training among those who previously did not value education and job training. The diffusion literature, largely initiated by the work of Rogers (Rogers 2003, Rogers & Shoemaker 1971) and developed by others (e.g. Cooper & Zmud 1990, Lai & Mahapatra 1997), has addressed the relation between implementation and adoption. Rogers regards implementation as but one step in the diffusion process, occurring when an individual adopts an innovation or puts it to use. In this context, diffusion is strongly related to implementation over time, involving timing and sequencing decisions and the length of the event horizon can have implications on adoption thresholds.

This thesis is further developed by Kwon and Zmud (1987), who specify six temporal stages: initiation, decision, adaptation, acceptance, routinization, and infusion. Along these lines, Bass (1969) proposed an epidemiological model for the forecasting of consumer durable sales driven principally by initiation and contagion invoked by advertising campaigns. Cooper and Zmud build an implementation model that turns on Rogers' postulate of mutual causation in innovation-diffusion between the *sociocultural organization* of senders and that of adopters, i.e., cross-culturally-directed diffusion of innovation (Rogers, 2003).

One of the lessons learned from the present study is that social program implementation requires close attention—with regard to communication strategies—to cultural, cognitive, meaning-making and specifically motivational differences among target populations, as well as, implicitly, program officers and those populations. Failure to acknowledge the importance of cultural affinities in social program innovation is a close predictor of program failure. *Homophily* (isomorphism, similarity), *heterophily* (difference, distance), and *cultural affinity* versus *cultural distance* in program interventions involve both micro- and macro-cultural dimensions of communications about the given innovative intervention (Rogers & Agarwala-Rogers, 1976, p.10).

The key elements of the model here proposed, when program interventions incorporate insights from the diffusion of innovations and communications literature may be graphically

summarized as follows.

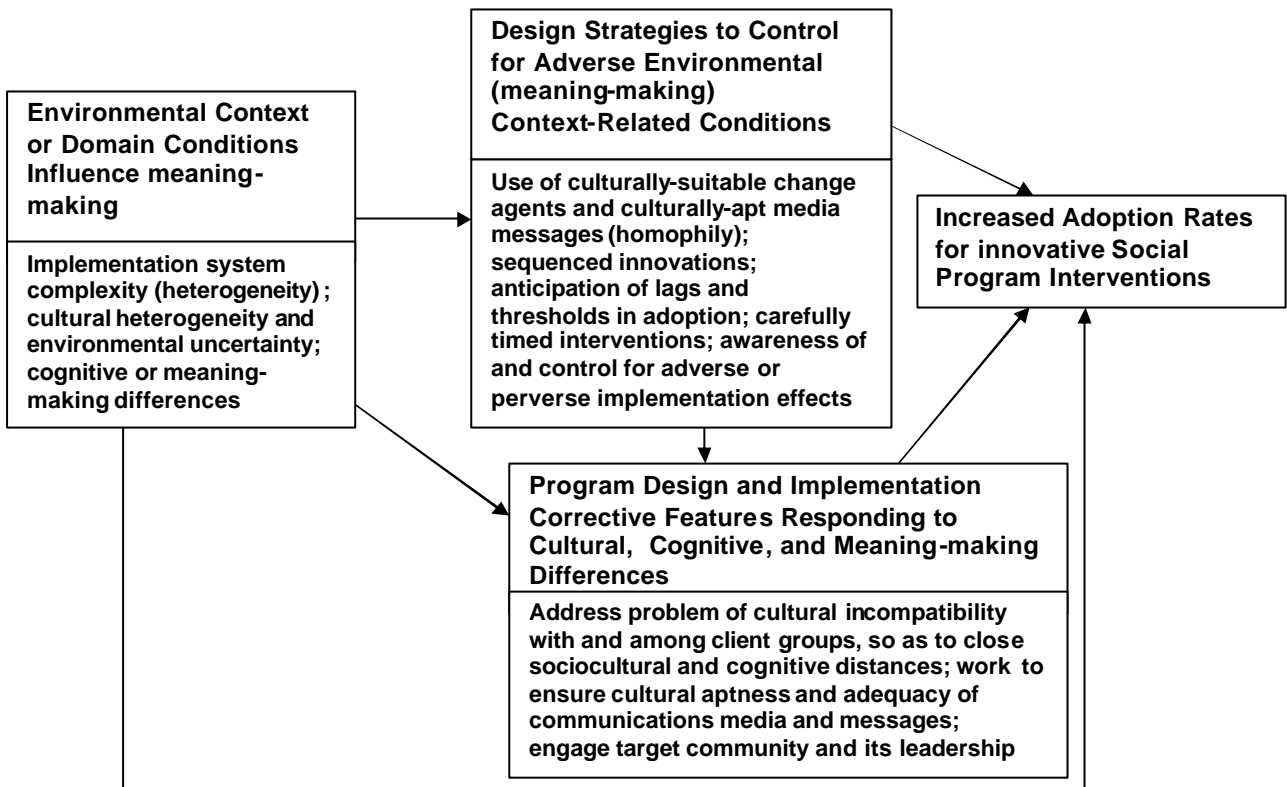


Figure 3: Basic Needs Incentive Model (lines indicate paths of causation or influence paths)

Adapted from the *Conceptual Model of Innovation Adoption* developed by Sasithorn Phonkaew, in “Propensity for Innovation Adoption : Integration of Structural Contingency and Resource Dependence Perspectives” *ABAC Journal* Vol. 21 No.1 (January-April, 2001).

Culture connotes community, and, as demonstrated in the PNM weatherization workshop diffusion, communication is easier within than across communities, so that capable *boundary-spanners* may be regarded as essential in bridging communications, especially in the context of social program interventions that engage culture-bound differences in motivational outlook. The sum of the preceding investigation and analysis is that awareness of cultural differences—taken to include cognitive and motivational differences—between program officials and client groups, as well as among members of program-targeted groups, is essential to the successful design and implementation of innovative social programs.

Peer Change Agents

Low-income clients became peer change agents when they recruited their peers to enroll in the previously unpopular weatherization workshops. Clients’ changed views toward the weatherization empowerment program were infectious. Because clients viewed the weatherization empowerment program as desirable they brought their friends, neighbors, and

relatives to the weatherization workshops. Salvation Army's Christmas waiting list became manageable. PNM had fewer utility shut-offs for nonpayment. Peer change agents can thus cause a chain reaction in a system that not only affects their immediate peers but the economics of the system in which they are embedded.

The deployment of change agents to initiate and direct social program marketing campaigns, render an innovation diffusion and adoption process more predictable (Gladwell, 2002). When the low-income clients became change agents then uncertainty was decreased for their similar others or peers. Further, when peers adopt and promote a new idea then there is perceived relative advantage of adoption, compatibility, and complexity (from the perspectives of client peer groups as potential adopters of social program interventions.

Implications

The present study offers policy insights for client empowerment program innovations in other regions of the United States and the world. The basic needs incentive model, a hybrid program, makes use of client time-frame myopia and limited self-efficacy vocabulary as an incentive, a tactic that enables a new strategy in low-income client empowerment program design. International agencies, academics, consultants, students, and citizens interested in improvement of the public sector using client empowerment program planning may find the hybrid program useful in that it utilizes clients' priority to satisfy immediate gratification of needs as an incentive to induce client enrollment in longer-term and more effortful programs that can yield significant and measurable outcomes.

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