

Social Change Perspectives

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INTRODUCTION

Any kind of program is designed to bring some form of social change. Likewise, the Rural Clean Water Program (RCWP) in the Saline Valley area was initiated in 1980 to deal specifically with the problem of water pollution caused by agricultural practices. To increase the agricultural productivity, despite on-going soil erosion that leads to soil nutrient depletion, farmers these days have widely used traction devices, chemical fertilizers, pesticides and high yielding crop varieties. This intensification of agriculture, however, have had some undesirable side effects like the deterioration of water quality in many rural areas. The Saline Valley area was one of the twenty one pilot areas chosen in the U.S. to encourage more environmentally sound agriculture practices.

SOCIAL CHANGE PERSPECTIVES

Social change theories viz diffusion-adoption, communication-persuasion were used to rationalize the decisions of the individual farmers in the Saline Valley Project (SVP). Although the theories are very much inter-related, they are discussed separately solely for the sake of clarity.

DIFFUSION-ADOPTION PARADIGM AND THE SVP

Diffusion-adoption deals with explaining a social change brought about by the spread of new ideas and technologies.

Rogers and Shoemaker, propose a theory with a three step diffusion process. First is the invention, which is the process by which new ideas are created or developed. The next step is the diffusion process - how the new ideas are communicated to a particular social system. In the SVP, the participants as well as the non-participants in the program were found to know about the project and the idea. The final step of the adoption process consists of the consequences which result from the new technologies or ideas. In the SVP, adopters as well as non-adopters seemed to be not sure about the consequences of the soil conservation practices.

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Burch and Burch-Minakan proposes an "S-shaped" pattern of successful adoption, "A few adopters at the outset are followed by a rapid increase in numbers and finally by a tapering off after nearly the total population has adopted the innovations." Innovations may be adopted at variable rates, they add. In the SVP, Burch and Burch-Minakan's thesis of "S-shaped" pattern of successful adoption did not seem to hold. There did not seem to be a strong correlation between the earlier adopters and the followers. Many of the adopters seemed to have adopted the soil conservation practice because of their own self interest in the conservation rather than following the footsteps of the earlier adopters as suggested by the authors.

Finally, the authors explain four types of exchanges which may be involved in diffusion process. They are technology exchanges (which occur cross-culturally), rules exchanges (which occur between social strata), rules exchanges (which occur between different organizations) and exchanges in values (which occur between individuals). Lynd notes that consumer goods and lifestyles "trickle down" from the upper to lower strata of the society. Rules exchanges, as is true with technological exchanges, will be adopted only if they allow the more efficient continuation of routine practices. Value exchanges are the most difficult to achieve since they question the standards for which many people would go so far as to die trying to preserve them. In the SVP, it was evident that farmers in the area were being asked to not only employ the new technology available, but also rethink their views on the importance of soil conservation.

Goss, what he calls the "classical diffusion model" argues that in order for diffusion attempts to be successful, a change agent must rather concentrate on sociological (macro) variables and that consequences should be viewed as the "ultimate dependent variables." He lists institutional constraints - for example, credit availability and structural differentiation - a state in which people with larger accumulation of the valued commodities in society have easier access to innovations, as examples. In both cases, the individual characteristics of the farmers were less determinate than social structural factors.

Rothman presents a list of generalizations drawn from Everett Rogers' literature review of works on diffusion. Some of the generalizations are innovativeness in a target system: (i) is inversely related to the extent that a target system adheres to traditional norms (ii) is directly related to its socio-economic status (iii) is directly related to previous positive experience and inversely related with negative experience (iv) is directly related to the extent that it feels a need to change. Most of these generalizations were evident in the SVP.

Diffusion theorists suggest that in forming a perception of an innovation and its characteristics, an adopting unit's immediate concern is the innovation's relative advantage and how its adoption and use will be superior to the practice or idea it supersedes, according to Pitt.

In the SVP, this thesis seem to hold. Some of the non-adopters of the soil conservation practices did not seem to perceive the relative advantages of the "no-tillage" practice. Farmers perceived that the soil conservation involved high costs. They felt that conservation practices adversely affected profitability.

On the other hand, there were adopters who seemed to consider the non-pecuniary values that contribute to overall well-being of farmers than the economic profitability.

The non-participants in the SVP also seemed to be heavily influenced by some of the "successful" neighbouring farms who were not participating the conservation tillage. This finding emphasizes the geographic proximity and the use of finformal communication channels to the adoption behaviour. The non-participants seem to be heavily influenced by the neighbour's behaviour.

In the SVP, adoption seemed to be directly linked to the farmers' perceived need to change. Adoption of soil conservation methods is characteristic of farmers who consider soil erosion a serious problem. Of course, the opposite is also true, and some farmers do not feel threatened by soil erosion.

COMMUNICATION/PERSUASION THEORIES AND THE SVP

There are several theories of communication/persuasion that apply to SVP. The "ability theories" of Janis and Hovland are very much applicable to the SVP. Communication receivers have four abilities. These abilities affect how a person reacts to a particular message that is new to him/her. The first ability is the ability to pay attention, which allows for exposure to a new idea or program. Exposure can be achieved in several ways. It can come about involuntarily, through public media, public contacts and experience. A person who have the "ability of attention" goes beyond exposure, as it deals with a person's valuation of the information to which he/she is exposed.

In the SVP, people seemed to have the ability of attention and they are exposed to the program. The channels by which people were exposed to the program were through personal contacts with the extension agents, newsletters, newspapers, neighbours and peers.

The second ability is that of comprehension. Comprehension means that the communicators and receiver are experiencing the same information. It also refers to the accurate understanding of the message being conveyed. In the SVP, many people read newsletters or advertisements and also were contacted by the change agents and the SCS personnel about what the results of such a project could mean to them: economic advantages, savings in new equipments, environmental protection or increased production. The comprehension theory did not seem to be a valid proposition in the SVP. There seemed to be the divergence between the communicator and the receiver in relation to experiencing the same information. Such weak link in the communication process of the project can be seen as a barrier to adoption.

The third ability is the ability to anticipate information which allows a receiver to look forward to future communication and to understand underlying messages.

The fourth is that of evaluation. Evaluation can only occur after the message has been received and comprehended. In the process of evaluation the listener decides whether or not the information is useful or not.

In the SVP, both the anticipation and evaluation thesis seemed to break down. Most of the members of the farm community seemed to be unclear as to whether or not the information is useful. Comprehension was a problem while anticipation was nil.

McGuire also discusses five principles of influenceability. The mediation principle refers to mediation by a set of variables. The compensation principle says that some mediational variables have opposing effects and therefore may cancel each other. The situation weighing principle allows an individual to account for external situation at hand when evaluating a new idea. The confounding principle cluster the different variables together. The interaction principle accounts for individual differences of personality, ability and understanding. These five principles all interact to determine how an individual is influenced in the adoption of a new idea.

In the SVP, the compensation principle and the situation weighing principle seem to apply. Some people seemed to decide not to act because they were uncertain about the project benefits as compared to the project costs. However, some others acted upon the project they were familiar with the situation when evaluating the idea of soil conservation.

The Social Judgement Theory of Serif and Holland discuss that judgement are dependent upon one's situation more than just the information received. The degree of ego involvement is also important.

In the SVP, peoples' individual situations affected their degree of involvement in the program. Ego also seemed to play a vital role. Farmers for whom independence is an important part of their self-concept did not welcome the restricted and directed information by an agency. To the degree that people saw financial and environmental benefits accrued from the SVP, they participated.

Festinger's theory of cognitive consistency state that people behave in manners that reinforce their values or beliefs. Dissonance occurs between behaviour and values, tension and stress occur, and this is relieved by either a change in values or an alternation in our behaviour pattern. In the SVP, the dissonance element was clearly visible among some of the farmers. Thus, to avoid the negative experiences with a government agency, caused by dissonance, they avoided the participation. Some of the farmers just did not seem to overcome the dissonance of taking part in the government sponsored program and still be independent.

CONCLUSION

The social change theories that were discussed relate very much to the project's implementation. They seemed to apply in the Saline Valley Project. Although the early indications were that the project is meeting with some success in improving the water quality in the area, several factors are hindering the ultimate effectiveness of the Rural Clean Water Program. The program has not been able to bring about the desired social change in the Saline Valley area. As with many programs that are designed to bring about some form of social change, the SVP has goals which remain unfulfilled.

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