



Marci Ybarra on the Administrative Burdens of Research in Non-Profit Settings

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Marci Ybarra, University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration

Hosted by Dave Chancellor

Chancellor Hello and thanks for joining us for the Poverty Research and Policy Podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I'm Dave Chancellor. This is our May 2019 podcast episode, and we're going to be hearing from Marci Ybarra who is an associate professor at the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago and an IRP affiliate. Ybarra visited us at IRP in the fall of 2018, and gave a seminar talk about the idea of research as administrative burden. And by administrative burden, she's referring to a concept developed by Pam Herd and Don Moynihan, in which they argue that it's not just government policies that matter, but the way those policies are administered. So, the forms, the questions, the documentation, the paperwork that stands between people and the programs and benefits they're trying to access. But Ybarra says we should think about how these same concepts apply when it comes to the growing use of research in nonprofit settings.

Ybarra We have a lot of information on, of course, administrative burden put forth by Don Moynihan and Pam Herd. It's an incredibly useful framework, but it focuses on interactions between citizens and states as coercive and potentially a power imbalance between clients and the folks that they're seeing. So my observations in nonprofits are actually not that different from that except that these are not state agencies administering services, they're nonprofits. With the ever growing increase in nonprofits receiving government money, government funds, I would argue that lots of nonprofits, for some of the program that they have, look very similar to what you might see in a government or a state agency deliver, like a welfare to work program or something of that nature. And so some of the similarities are in service delivery and then of course workers and what their responsibilities are. Another similarity is in the use of things like benchmarks right, where to be considered successful, particular outcomes have to be made. And so that is very similar in nonprofit settings in terms of not only with government funding, but I would also say with donor funding, that donors increasingly expect impact for the dollars they're donating to nonprofits if it's used in the spirit of conducting research, right? There's absolutely a growth in the chatter I would say in the nonprofit world including their donor base and philanthropy in general, about randomized control trials being of course the gold standard in allowing us to isolate the effects of a particular program. And so I think that that has become fairly ubiquitous in those circles and has contributed to the proliferation of data in that regard and studies in that regard in nonprofit settings. So I think there's an overlap with administrative burden in nonprofit settings that previously may have been overlooked, but I think it's important to consider.

Chancellor I asked Professor Ybarra to remind us what a randomized control trial is and what it might look like in the nonprofit context we're talking about here.

Ybarra Randomized control trials are studies in which an intervention is selected and so the work I do is usually an intervention to dampen poverty in some way and increase work, increase income. Stabilize families economically in some way. And so what ends up happening is, this is just a general example, let's say you're an agency and you want to do a randomized control trial on the effects of financial coaching on savings and so you have 100 people who agree to be in the randomized control trial. And 50 of those folks are assigned to the financial counseling and the other 50 are not. So one is considered the treat-

Ybarra, continued ment group because they're receiving what we call the treatment of financial counseling and then the other group does not receive the treatment, but they also aren't withheld from any other services, usually, that the agency might offer. So what that allows researchers to do is, number one, if folks are randomly assigned, then we should be able to control for any differences between the groups, right. That's something we're always concerned about, is that a result is just a reflection of very different groups, comparison groups. The randomized control trial, you don't really have to worry about that if randomization is done well. And then the second reason is because we don't worry so much about differences between treatment and control groups, it allows us, all else equal, to isolate the effects of the treatment, so in this case financial services. So you compare some kind of an outcome between the treatment group and the control group, so in this example, I think what you might want to examine is did the treatment group save more in a year than the control group? That would be an effective way to measure financial coaching or services in some sense.

Chancellor Yet, in the last few years, some scholars -- notably Angus Deaton and Nancy Cartwright in a Social Science and Medicine article from 2018 -- have suggested caution in both the use of and interpretation of RCTs. And Ybarra says some of the cautions are particularly relevant when we think about how people are recruited to participate in these studies.

Ybarra So if you need to recruit 100 people into a financial services RCT and you talk to 1000 people before you get 100 people to agree and then you randomize of course at selection, it's great because the 50 people who are the control group and the 50 people in the treatment, we think that there's likely little difference and we can measure program effects. But it doesn't tell us about the 900 people who said no, right? And so there's some concern about the limited generalizability of randomized control trials in the sense that the expectation is if they're successful, the societal good impact they'll have. If we're replicating based off of samples that we think are not necessarily representative of folks we would like to help, then there may be some troubles with it. And then other folks, and I don't include myself in this, but I think it's an interesting area to consider, is what are the ethical realms around this, and I've seen this in the agencies that I've worked in, where workers are sitting with clients, some of them have children and they press a button for randomization, they've in that small time gotten to know the family a little bit and the family is randomized into the control group. And it's not uncommon to hear workers tell that's one of the toughest if not the toughest part of my job, is I get to know this family, I think they would tremendously benefit from the services and I think they're not going to get them, and that's really hard.

Chancellor And Professor Ybarra says that the increased focus on measurement in these settings can also shift incentives for workers and agencies themselves as they compete for limited funds from donors.

Ybarra The agency, the administrators, the workers, end up feeling that pressure to perform and have successful outcomes and results, part of it, and I of course mention this in my talk today, is driven by the need and the desire to develop or maintain organizational legitimacy. Increasingly the case that nonprofits need to diversify funding streams, want to be competitive, want to be innovative. They want to be rigorous, and that's all part of organizational legitimacy. Doing research, including randomized control trials, falls into that bucket of ways to, in the marketplace of nonprofits, become legitimate.

Chancellor The evaluation Ybarra draws on for this work was centered at a large southwestern U.S. nonprofit, and she was leading the qualitative portion of the evaluation.

Ybarra And so I was going to use two methods. The first one would be participant observation, so observing caseworkers, administrators, and clients -- of course with their permission -- this was all covered by the IRB, to watch just the everyday practices of the office. And that what you're trying to get a sense of is what's on paper as the reported intervention, and then what's going on day to day, and then how well do those two things align. So there's the kind of treatment fidelity issue. And then the second piece of it is, you're trying to understand how much workers and administrators and, to some extent clients, are internalizing these processes and interactions in a way that may or may not influence the program and the treatment they receive from the organization side and then what their outcomes might be. And

Ybarra, continued then the second method were interviews at a few different points in time with all staff and administrators, because I was going about once every three months or so to the agency. So trying to get some retrospective feedback on what was occurring while I wasn't there. And then of course what they thought would happen in the future. And so the interviews were used to mainly understand what had happened in the interim, but also how workers were -- their perspectives on an increasingly ratcheted up program model and by that, I mean benchmarks were tighter and outcomes were measured more frequently and they knew this and so on the one hand, workers internalized that as burdensome, which I'm sure it is. On the other hand, researchers need that in order to be able to adequately measure what outcomes are. Some of this is about conflict between researcher needs in order to effectively evaluate a research program and workers' needs in terms of how they feel about the burden of tracking data and collecting information from clients and having meetings with them that perceive to be less important than actual engagement around substantive areas.

Chancellor And Ybarra says that one of the reasons she was interested in working on this project was that the agency had worked hard to bring on workers who weren't just excited about the program itself, but about the research aspect that was going on too.

Ybarra When I interviewed the workers for the first time, it was about a month or so after the program started and I asked them what were some of the things that attracted you to this program? And almost all of them said "the research part -- because I've worked in human services or social services or something similar to that and, you know, I think I do good work, but we have no capacity to measure it so I'm never sure if what I'm doing is just something that is wisdom based that we passed on to one another works, and it was exciting to me to think about working in a program where we would actually know, we would actually know what was effective." So, it certainly wasn't the case of workers kind of coming in and having a pessimistic view of the program at all, or the research, the tracking of data, the entering all of the notes. Those things are burdensome, but from the research side, I'm not certain that there's much we can do about that in order to get the data that we need.

Chancellor In addition to all of this record keeping and data tracking, Ybarra found that the administrators of the program were really invested in building organizational legitimacy -- like she talked about earlier -- through innovation, but there were costs to that.

Ybarra And so organizational legitimacy being built around the idea that the organization was using cutting edge methods that -- and it wasn't cutting edge methods for the sole of using cutting edge methods, it was that these methods are going to be the thing that was helpful in solving poverty and that that was imposed on the workers and internalized by them as, this is another thing I have to do. We already have multiple components of this intervention and the more that administrators try to innovate, the more that gets added onto my plate and I cannot handle what's on my plate already. So definitely a conflict between the desire to innovate and innovate rapidly and the ability of workers to keep up with the intervention that was going on. The second thing I learned was that even in a model in which there was weeks and weeks of onboarding and training about what the intervention would look like. What the research aspect was, right? All of the training invested, was that it was clear after the first round of interviews that there were some surprises about what it actually looked like to do. And so that spoke to me as not just on the organization side, right. Clearly the organization didn't communicate always effectively with the workers, but I would say that the researchers on the project, including myself, likely didn't communicate with the organization about what it would mean to do this work in the real world, in real time. And so I think there's a real opportunity there for researchers and organizations to have a much more collaborative relationship on how to conduct rigorous research in these settings, and what it means for agencies and workers so that they'll be adequately prepared. I think the last thing you want in a very expensive ongoing randomized control trial are unhappy workers. So I think that would help offset that.

Chancellor Professor Ybarra says that besides having more collaboration between the researchers and organizations in these settings, researchers engaged in program evaluation should also look beyond treatment

Chancellor, con- adherence and other more traditional implementation measures.
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Ybarra I think that the model is difficult because what I found to be important drivers of the model and outcomes were unrelated to treatment adherence. It was related to organizational characteristics and factors like the push for legitimacy, which wouldn't necessarily be captured in a traditional program implementation framework. So I think thinking beyond that to also include organizational culture and shifts over time. I think the other part of it is on the research side is, developing a conceptual model for what capacity looks like -- what characteristics of organizations suggest that they have the capacity to field a complicated, a complex RCT with multiple arms? And that includes, thinking of it from that framework, likely means an agency with large revenues, space, the technology to track -- I mean, the data they got -- the organization I worked with, it had a new data system and so of course there were costs of learning that to be able to track everything. And not all organizations had moved to that, right? So I think understanding, having a better understanding of organization size and capacity relative to what that might mean for the kind of research they are able to participate in will be useful.

Chancellor _____
Thanks to Marci Ybarra for talking about this work with us.

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